

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Cussen, Bryan. Pope Paul III and the Cultural Politics of Reform, 1534–1549.

John M. Hunt

Volume 43, numéro 4, automne 2020

Spaces of Power of the Spanish Nobility (1480–1715)
Les espaces de pouvoir de la noblesse espagnole (1480–1715)

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076858ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36415>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hunt, J. (2020). Compte rendu de [Cussen, Bryan. Pope Paul III and the Cultural Politics of Reform, 1534–1549.] *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(4), 302–304. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36415>

Cussen, Bryan.

Pope Paul III and the Cultural Politics of Reform, 1534–1549.

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Pp. 208. ISBN 978-9-4657-2252-0 (hardcover) €89.

Pope Paul III, one of the last Renaissance popes, who paradoxically set the papacy on its path toward Tridentine reform, has received scant attention from scholars when compared to the more salacious Borgia and Medici popes, who have been the subject of many monographs and recent popular television series. This is a shame, since Paul III and his Farnese kin led lives equally as intriguing as the Medici. Paul III had a mistress, created petty duchies for his sons, and bestowed cardinal hats upon his relatives. However, despite being a terrible year for much of the world, 2020 looks to be good for Paul III. Not one but two monographs on his life have been published this summer. Guido Rebecchini has published a monograph with Brepolis on Paul III's urban planning and renewal in the years after the Sack of Rome (1527); Bryan Cussen's *Pope Paul III and the Cultural Politics of Reform, 1534–1549*, the subject of this review, contextualizes the pontiff's life in the culture of honour, humanism, and reform that informed his worldview.

Cussen's tome provides a much-needed biography of Paul III by examining the extant sources related to his life and pontificate. These include letters, bulls, and other writing that he produced both before and during his reign. Cussen also situates the Farnese pope in the culture of his age by examining myriad sources produced during his lifetime: humanist treatises, reform memorials, and funeral and conclave orations. Cussen argues that scholars cannot truly understand Paul III's career in the curia, his papacy, his diplomatic relations with the great Catholic powers of the Italian Wars, and his tentative steps towards reform without examining what honour meant to him and his elite contemporaries. Grounded in ancient and humanistic ideals, this culture of honour emphasized the needs of saving public face, performing duties as a prelate of the church, maintaining one's family in magnificence, and defending the dignity of the papacy from Protestant and anti-clerical attacks. These concerns prompted the pope to promote his family in ways typical of the Renaissance: securing benefices for familiars, promoting relatives to the cardinalate, and carving territory from the papal states to create the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza for his son Pierluigi.

This culture of honour, rooted in a traditional defense of church structure and theology, led to Paul III's muted reform efforts. Cussen suggests that the pontiff was never truly a reformer or a supporter of the *spirituali*, the reforming segment within the papacy. Rather, he placed the honour, dignity, and independence of the church and papacy as the crucial keystone of his policy, a traditional policy followed by previous popes. Hence, although he initiated the Council of Trent (1545–63), he was lukewarm about major theological and structural reforms. Yet, he was sensitive to the calls to abolish absenteeism and pluralism among the bishops, abbots, and lesser clergymen—despite his career being supported by such—since these abuses brought shame and dishonour to the church. Finally, his sense of honour impelled Paul III to steer a neutral course in the wars and hostilities between Francis I and Charles V during the third phase of the Italian Wars.

Taken as a whole, Cussen emphasizes that Paul III was a product of his age—a culture dominated by honour, tradition, and humanist morality. Cussen outlines this argument in eight chapters that span the life and pontificate of Paul III, although the main parameters of his thesis are outlined in the first half. The remaining four chapters seem to steer the reader away from his main point about honour, particularly the chapters on urban renewal, the Italian Wars, and the Turkish threat, which seem to tell a basic narrative without much argument. More attention could have been given to Paul III's interior life. It is true that he was a product of the elite and curial culture of early modern Italy. But what set Paul III and his papacy apart from other popes? Did Paul III's duties as cleric, cardinal, and pope lock him into a preconceived role without regard for individual experience? How did his self-fashioning set him apart from other cardinals and popes? Cussen could have engaged with these questions more vigorously.

There are some missing parts to Paul III's life and pontificate that could have supported Cussen's argument that honour played the dominant role. There is no discussion of the Salt War (1540) against Perugia, the contrasts between Paul III and the Roman barons, or his urban policies in general. Moreover, the assassination of his son, Pierluigi, and the controversy over the Duchy of Parma received only a few pages of analysis. A closer reading of the various pasquinades criticizing this episode of his life could have provided more detail about the roles of honour and fatherly affection in shaping Paul III's life. Instead, Cussen argues that the pope paid little heed to the "lower-class" gossip

of Pasquino, a problematic stance since the authors of these invectives were from the curial elite.

Despite these concerns, Cussen has done the field a service by providing an assessable account of Paul III's pontificate. The position of pope may have automatically crafted an identity for any man holding the office, but Cussen, considering his source limitation, does his best to reveal the pope behind the robes.

JOHN M. HUNT

Utah Valley University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36415>

Dzelzainis, Martin, and Edward Holberton, eds.

The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xxi, 822 + 17 ill. ISBN 978-0-19-873640-0 (hardcover) \$175.

Andrew Marvell (1621–78) never ceases to amaze—an effect that persists as you get to know him more. *The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell* arrays his life, major works, and afterlife in forty-three chapters. Marvell deserves a book like this: learned, weighty, well-edited, and well-printed. Leading authorities on Marvell—his biographer, his chronicler, and esteemed editors of his poetry and prose—lead the contributors. Most chapters achieve two goals: they provide the basic information expected of a handbook, and they say something new. The scholarship is up-to-date, flush with the latest advances in Marvell studies. With many overlapping topics, chapters complement each other. Contributors enjoy Marvell's wit, explicate his works, introduce his friends and family, and describe his reception through five centuries, in print and song.

The Marvell of the *Handbook* was a prudent fox, whose discretion cloaked his expression. He represented Hull in Parliament and represented England in embassies to Muscovy, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. His Latin was superb. He survived the English civil war and the vengeance of the aftermath. He kept excellent friends, lords and commons both, John Milton especially. Like Milton, he was a Cambridge man; like him, an outspoken spokesman for religious toleration and free speech.