

*Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy.* Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin, eds.

Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 59.1. Leiden: Brill, 2019. xxvi + 442 pp. Open access e-book; hardcover €164.

*The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy.* Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxii + 366 pp. + color pls. \$45.95.

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These two exemplary studies explore religion in the domestic settings of Renaissance and early modern Europe. Both spring from the same European Research Council Synergy Grant, under the direction of Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, coauthors of *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy*. Participants in the larger grant enterprise cross-pollinate the two volumes as researchers, authors, or both. These publications illuminate new approaches to Roman Catholicism, focusing specifically on the relationship between early modern homes and churches, a topic that until recently was dominated by scholars of Protestant Europe. Innovative chapters in these volumes map the connections between domestic settings and public worship spaces, charting unexpected directions of influence and change. These interdisciplinary books uncover the domestic world through sophisticated analysis of visual, material, archival, and printed sources. Their rich illustrations and evocative writing make some selections as useful for graduate and undergraduate teaching as for scholars of religion focusing on the domestic sphere.

The overarching goal of both volumes is to uncover “what it meant to be Catholic in early modern Italy” (241), as Irene Galandra Cooper summarizes in her essay on the Agnus Dei in *Domestic Devotions*. What Catholic meant seems to have been as profoundly shaped by domestic devotions as by worship in churches. Michele Bacci’s fascinating study of devotional panels claims that Christian icons were displayed and venerated in the home since antiquity, especially in Byzantium. Byzantine panels of Mary and the infant Jesus were often copied or appropriated piecemeal by artists producing for domestic consumption in Italy. During the thirteenth-century conflict between Lucca and Pisa and the late medieval Italian wars, such icons were looted from the private houses of enemies for public use in the town of the victors. A similarly fruitful line of inquiry is the ex-voto, which Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser examine as an object of generative exchange between the domestic and the public spheres. As emblems of thanks to a saint for assistance, ex-votos ranged from simple wax figurines to detailed painted panels (sometimes with textual commentary) illustrating the danger navigated through saintly intercession. Garnett and Rosser insist that rather than ego documents, such panels illustrate how “a family drama becomes, through the pious act of one of its participants, the material of a collective devotion” (57). House fires, children falling from windows, near deaths in childbirth, even the occasional

successfully evaded crocodile graced walls dedicated to the Virgin Mary or the saints, revealing “a continuous loop of devotional energy” (60)—a spiritual circuit that the clergy seemed powerless to interrupt.

Readers trepidatious about the formulations *public* and *private* will be intrigued by several essays, including Stefano Dall’Aglío’s study of domestic devotion to Girolamo Savonarola (despite his execution for heresy) and Giorgio Caravale’s essay on the church’s failed attempts to regulate private devotions. By the sixteenth century even Cardinal Robert Bellarmine observed that “whether it is permitted to venerate a non-canonized person, I answer that the private cult is permitted but not the public one” (385). As Dall’Aglío’s study underscores, the traditional direction of sacralization has been characterized from church to home, but the church hierarchy also recognized domestic dedications in Catholic devotions and saint making. Homemade spiritualities, in other words, were integral to Italian piety, whatever the clergy’s objections.

Remi Chiu’s evocative treatment of singing in the home during plague has eerie parallels to the recent Covid-19 lockdown. During the 1576–78 Milan epidemic, singing penitential psalms was coordinated from household to household, to street processions limited in size for fear of spreading the disease. Michael Brody’s examination of religious subjects on majolica, Sabrina Corbellini’s analysis of religious reading, and Zusanna Sarnecka’s study of domestic nativity scenes, including colorful and practical nativity inkstands, all speak to the proliferation of texts and objects driven as much by domestic demand as by Tridentine church authorities. Other essays open new perspectives on the role of noble churches and oratories in Sicily (Valeria Viola); the unexpected juxtaposition of family portraits in intimate proximity with sacred images in Venice (Margaret Morse); and the role of textual *brevi* in the safe delivery of women from the perils of childbirth (Katherine Tycz); to describe only a few innovative offerings in this volume.

In the background, foreground, and center stage of many of the consoling and (it was believed) efficacious domestic rituals was Mary, the vessel through which the sacred Word became flesh as the nativity inkwells and the Byzantine-inspired panels proclaimed. The remarkable coauthored volume, *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy*, explores in exquisite detail the home as a battleground between the devil and the Virgin Mary, where typically the victory belonged to the Mother of God. In a world where everything from children running with scissors to demonic temptations fell under her purview, Mary was the divine intercessor par excellence. The scholar Erasmus found absurd Mary’s multitasking interventions—a gendered observation perhaps to be expected from a man secluded in the quiet of his study. Ordinary believers found her ubiquitous activity no more implausible than other Catholic theologies, as the explosion of Marian printed images, painted panels, and innumerable recitations of the rosary explored in this volume make clear. The popular Renaissance version of her life emphasized homeless childbearing, breastfeeding a distracted toddler, teaching

him to read, and following him to an untimely death. This narrative related well to the kinds of domestic celebrations and routine losses experienced in Italian homes.

*The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy* will appeal to students and scholars seeking a synthetic approach to the various facets of domestic religion. Its authors' expertise in diverse fields—Abigail Brundin, literature; Deborah Howard, art and architecture; and Mary Laven, history—provide the foundation for a sophisticated and substantive interdisciplinary study. The volume also deserves praise for its geographic reach, which focuses on three underexplored areas of Renaissance Italy: the Terraferma, or the landed territory of the Republic of Venice; the Marches, an eastern region facing the Mediterranean Sea; and the city of Naples, the European metropole with the highest population in 1500. Its findings from over two dozen archives underscore the potential of research teams to examine “the ways in which laypeople experienced and embodied religion through their relationship with the material environment of their own homes” (119). Their efforts uncover fragments ranging from unique rosaries to wolves' teeth, devotional objects sold by apothecaries, and the lost spiritual treasures in the accounts of pawn shops. Critics called them “trumperies” and “trifles” (125), but these objects were clearly meaningful for those who treasured their “aesthetic properties . . . capacity to activate the senses,” as well as “an intense and embodied style of devotion” (146).

By focusing specifically on the Renaissance, rather than early modernity in general, the study successfully showcases its primary research in the context of voluminous secondary research from other areas of Italy, including Florence, Venice, and Rome—to name only a few places included in this synthetic approach to domestic religion. A chapter focusing on miracles and another on thresholds map the fluid boundaries between household holiness and larger religious trends, including the church's continuing emphasis on miracles. *The Sacred Home* fruitfully engages with other interpretative problems of the tumultuous sixteenth century. It offers persuasive evidence that despite attempts by the Roman Catholic Church to root out heresy and superstitious practices, sixteenth-century Italian homes created space for popular religious beliefs and rituals, not all of which accorded with doctrine. A close analysis of printers in Vicenza and Naples, and of broader trends in vernacular religious texts, reveal what must have once been a vast output of popular religious materials. Eyeing their profits, printers responded to the spiritual interests of readers, even of modest incomes. The popularity of religious texts suggests growing domestic interest that could not have been orchestrated by the church alone. The explosion of visual imagery provocatively analyzed in the chapter “The Devotional Eye” suggests a similar trend. Brundin, Howard, and Laven ably bring new research into dialogue with recent historiography on the domestic sphere, making a persuasive case that neither religions nor believers can be effectively understood without attention to “a special place in the divine cosmos” (312): the home.

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