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RENAISSANCE PROFANATIONS:  
RELIGION AND LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF AGAMBEN

Julia Reinhard Lupton

Christmas wars,<sup>1</sup> priest holes,<sup>2</sup> jewtowns,<sup>3</sup> suspect saints,<sup>4</sup> and bare ruined choirs<sup>5</sup> have become increasingly familiar monuments on the scholarly landscape of the English Renaissance. Uneven development, missed encounters, imperfect suppressions, and uncanny returns have displaced or modified national narratives of Protestant ascendancy; in this massive redistricting project, moreover, the porous, self-reflexive catacombs of literature extend sanctuary to freshly conjured memories of confessional diversity, recusant terror, state-sanctioned martyrdom, and crises in conformity. Thanks to the rise of anthropological and materialist approaches to religion, scholars are more likely to engage a range of media, performance practices, and ritual objects in the search to variegate our picture of religious life and thought as well as the different shapes and possibilities for secularization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> And it's not all historicism. The "religious turn" in critical theory and philosophy, which includes or addresses work by such figures as Derrida, Marion, Lubac, Schmitt, Kantorowicz, Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Santner, has encouraged Renaissance scholars to pursue questions of religious expression, confessional conflict, and post-religious forms of life via exegetical and philosophical frameworks that look to the early modern period for their points of departure, but spread their roots

and branches far wider than a purely contextual approach could adequately manage.<sup>7</sup> I would like to broach these questions by way of two paintings, one by Andrea Mantegna and one by Sandro Botticelli. Each takes up figures from Hebrew literature and puts them to new uses, freeing them from strictly typological Christian appropriations without dissolving them into a purely secular realm. If it seems odd to approach English Renaissance literature via two Italian panel paintings, let me note that a great deal of contemporary work in English studies is proceeding by way of Italian journeys, whether it's through the philosophy of Agamben, the Counter-Reformation writings of Borromeo, or the political inquiry of Machiavelli. My comments here are part of a broader effort to mount an approach both to religion and literature, and to Shakespeare and Italy, that is responsive to contemporary theory while remaining fully oriented by Renaissance texts and artifacts.

In a small panel painting by Andrea Mantegna, a tall woman in flowing Greek robes pores over an unfurled scroll, caught in intense verbal exchange with the turbaned, bearded man opposite her [Figure 1]. The painting is executed in grisaille—a monochrome technique meant to emulate in two dimensions the effect of a sculptural relief. The painting, identified by Paul Kristeller as depicting a sibyl and prophet in 1901, appears to solicit, even require, a typological reading. If for Paul, there is “neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 3:28), here Greek and Jew pore over the text of the Torah, discovering prophetic meanings that foretell the advent of Jesus as the Christ.<sup>8</sup> The pairing of sibyls and prophets in the architectural edges of churches would reach its apex in the extraordinary lunettes of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, which house Hebrew prophets, Gentile sibyls, and Old Testament ancestors in discrete frescoed cells. Yet Mantegna's *Sibyl and Prophet* begins to trace another route, opening onto a time besides typology. Although the image may have been designed for a private chapel of the Este family, Keith Christiansen speculates that our pre-Christian disputers probably carried on their conversation over one of the doors of Isabella d'Este's Studiolo in the Corte Vecchio of the ducal palace in Mantua (Christiansen 401). Several other grisailles by Mantegna were created in response to the tastes of Isabella, including two *Judith*'s and a *Samson and Delilah*. Bronzed grisaille paintings, like the bronze statuettes on mythological themes that developed around the same time, were designed for the private chambers and bedrooms of great courtly patronesses like Isabella d'Este. Some grisaille paintings were “reduced in scale and made portable for the more intimate cabinets popular in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with their assortment of cameos and coins, bronzes and classical busts, semi-precious stones, rare shells and pieces of marbles” (Christiansen 399). Such grisailles belong not so much to typological history as to natural

history, taken as the antiquarian and scientific collection of curiosities made by God, man, and nature, set beside each other in the drawers and shelves of a *Wunderkammer* rather than in a linear sequence of unfolding events. In *Sibyl and Prophet*, we encounter all shadow, no fulfillment—the legend without the map.

Linked in some ways to Mantegna's experiments with décor are the *cassoni* or marriage chests of Renaissance Florence. Designed for the wedding chamber, these boxes often bore scenes from the lives of famous women: heroic Jews or Gentiles, characters from medieval romance and novelle, but rarely heroines from the New Testament (Witthoft 43). The squared world of the *cassoni* records an Old Testament *besides typology*, by reading parallel antiquities—Hebrew and Gentile—for models of female virtue both consonant with Christian virtue and lying before or outside its dictates. Take, for example, the evocative panel produced in Botticelli's workshop of a bent figure mourning outside a city wall, face covered by dark flowing locks and the self-enclosing, self-consoling hands of grief [Figure 2]. Romantically dubbed *La Derelitta* in the nineteenth century, the scene was first identified by Edgar Wind as an image *not* of a lovelorn young woman shut out of her father's house, but rather as a portrait of Esther's Uncle Mordecai dressed in sack-cloth and lamenting the fate of his people before the Gate of the King.<sup>9</sup> Wind accurately deduced that the mysterious panel was one of a series of scenes from the life of Esther that would have originally adorned a Florentine marriage chest. The *cassone* tradition is stocked with images of Esther;<sup>10</sup> not unlike Mantegna's *grisaille*, the *cassoni* map the vibrant convergence of marriage ritual, domestic décor, vernacular feminism, and the reception of both Hebrew and classical political culture in the emergent public spheres of the Italian communes and humanist courts.

The chests themselves were modeled on Roman sarcophagi. Although the *cassoni* were destined for the marriage chamber of the new couple, they played an important role in the wedding itself; they were carried in the bridal procession that wound through the city streets from the paternal house of the bride to the abode of her new husband, remapping the streets of the city through the orchestrated yet riotous movement of persons, costumes, and props through them (Witthoft). Even peasant weddings activated abduction motifs: the groom is a bandit "raping" his bride and carrying her person and her profits off to his lair. Although it is sometimes said that the great secular art of Florence was born from these boxes, the *cassoni* cannot themselves be called secular in any straightforward way, since these thing-paintings existed as part of elaborate social scripts that played out deep mythic and ritual paradigms of rape and renewal, life and death.

These complex objects, approaching Old Testament themes outside the

organizing rhythms of typology and drawing their energy from both ancient stories and new urban and domestic spaces, model some of the new directions towards religion unfolding in Renaissance studies today. First, they give shape to a zone that is neither properly religious (belonging to the programs of church or chapel) nor fully secular (designed to grace the whitewashed walls of the modern museum). Giorgio Agamben calls this transitional region *profane*. Agamben defines profanation as the reclaiming for common use of sacred spaces and sacred times, a process he distinguishes from secularization. “Secularization,” he writes, “is a form of repression which preserves intact the forces that it . . . merely displac[es] from one realm to another. . . . Profanation, on the other hand, implies a neutralization of that which it profanes. . . . Whereas the first concerns the exercise of the power that it guarantees in referring it to a sacred model, the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and restores to common usage the spaces that it has seized” (*Profanations* 96-97). “Neutralization” should be understood here not as a dulling or homogenizing of religious function, but as a tactical effort to release the operations of official observance for new uses; thus lay-directed festivities, occurring in or outside the church, were said to “profane” the sanctity of the liturgy to which they attached themselves (Jensen 31). Festive culture is *profane* when it stays close to the ritual spaces it overruns; festive culture is *secular* when it becomes a matter of state business and official merriment. Following Agamben, we might say that Botticelli’s Esther chest begins to profane its subject by “restoring to common usage”—to domestic and communal celebration—the quotient of carnival carried in the Hebrew Purim story, and negated by its typological and secular appropriations.

Agamben’s book on St. Paul, *The Time That Remains*, illuminates the dynamic shadow world that unfolds between Mantegna’s Sibyl and Prophet. Agamben reads Paul not for the typological movement of sublatory translation with which the epistles became allied in the Christian West, but rather for what he calls “the time that remains”: the time left over by typology as well as the time remaining for action in the present moment. Paralleling post-war efforts in New Testament studies that aimed to qualify the anti-Jewish portrait of Paul inherited from Luther, Agamben focuses on the messianic character of Paul’s thought.<sup>11</sup> In Agamben’s analysis, messianic time is deeply affiliated with both Judaism and Christianity, yet ultimately belongs to neither; Agamben accuses the rabbis as well as the priests of foreclosing the messianic impulses for which they found themselves responsible. Agamben universalizes messianism not in the direction of mass conversion through the mechanisms of institutional religion, but rather via the existential and linguistic dimensions of Pauline thought.<sup>12</sup> If Mantegna’s painting is Pauline, I submit that it participates in a profane Paulinism akin

to Agamben's, as concerned with the creative repurposing of sacred space towards new uses (feminine, domestic, humanist, communal, charismatic) as it is with the correct interpretation of Scripture or the identification of Jesus as the Christ. Mantegna's Sibyl, unlike Michelangelo's typologically circumscribed prophets, is an exemplar of classical virtue and inspiration whose eloquence remains within grasp—as embodied in the closet-study of a humanist court patroness like Isabella d'Este.

The epistles of St. Paul, long presumed the cornerstones of Reformation theology, Christian antifeminism, and coercive universalism, have undergone major rereadings, both from within biblical scholarship and by critical theorists such as Agamben, the consequences of which are being worked out in various corners of Renaissance literary criticism and from a range of confessional perspectives. Perhaps closest in spirit to Mantegna's monochrome is Randall Martin's moving rendition of the Pauline elements in *Pericles*. Having established the centrality of Paul to the rhetorical education of Renaissance playwrights, Martin turns to Shakespeare's Marina as a figure who exercises a piety at once "rhetorical and charismatic." Martin uses contemporary feminist rereadings of Paul to reclaim the Epistles as proto-theatrical texts that house unexpected resources for a specifically feminine eloquence, and he demonstrates how Shakespeare tapped those resources throughout his oeuvre, from Adriana and Luciana in the Ephesian adventures of *The Comedy of Errors* to Paulina and Hermione in the late, great tableaux of *The Winter's Tale*. Seen in this light, Mantegna's sage and serious Sibyl comes to shadow Shakespeare's righteous Portia. The larger literary consequences of Martin's study lie in his insistence on the theatrical and rhetorical character of Paul's epistles, the active reception of that dimension by the humanists, and the multivalent, broadly nonsectarian flow of those features into the supple channels of Renaissance drama.

Whereas Randall Martin takes his bearings from contemporary New Testament scholarship, other critics are following the religious turn in critical theory, alongside new work in material culture and book history, in order to limn the religious and post-religious dimensions of Renaissance literature. In *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* Jonathan Gil Harris asks after "the time of the thing," using theoretical paradigms from Latour and Rifaterre as well as Agamben to imagine forms of exegetical temporality in a mode other than typological, and in objects other than classically textual. In a brilliant reading of John Stow's *Survey of London*, for example, Harris teases out the vicissitudes of a Hebrew inscription embedded in Ludgate, a piece of public architecture that becomes an uncanny "portal" between past and present, explosively linking Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish moments in a single urban space. Recall Mordecai weeping for the Jews outside his own

city gate in Botticelli's haunting *cassone* panel, the window at the top of the arched door opening its own portal into times beyond typology.

In a line that could be taken as an epigraph for the operations of profanation outlined by Agamben, Harris cites an "outlandish proverb" attributed to that master of seventeenth-century pastoral décor, George Herbert: "Every thing is of use to a house keeper" (*Outlandish Proverbs*, qtd. Harris 45). On the one hand, the housekeeper is the ultimate consumer, the steward of functionality, she who reduces every implement (and every pleasure) to its proper function. Yet the housekeeper is also an inventor and a bricoleur; she sees the doorstep hiding in the phone book, and the wedding feast lurking in the funeral baked meats. Her efficiency is improvisational, and her inveterate thriftiness makes her both the enemy of art and art's consummate mistress. (Necessity is the *step-mother* of invention.) To say that "everything is of use to the house keeper" is to allow objects to separate from their designated functions, to free them up for new applications in shifting scenarios of dearth and plenty, repression and retreat. In Harris's fine analyses, works of Renaissance literature themselves become profane vessels that remix and serve up narrative leftovers from the past, including biblical ones, for present uses—uses that become "literary" in their refusal to submit themselves fully to a single confessional identity or institutional instrumentalization.

In *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England* James Kearney examines the image of the book as a material object (codex, girdle book, fetish, trinket) in Reformation English literature. Like Harris, though with his eye on a different set of problems, Kearney attends to the remainders of Catholic and Jewish forms of textuality in Protestant representation; Kearney insists that the Reformation reiterated rather than resolved tensions at the heart of the Judeo-Christian project itself. (Paul's Epistles, I would add, are one of the tradition's most condensed repositories of those tensions, distilled to the point of toxicity.) Kearney, like Harris, is concerned not only with the temporal rhythms of hermeneutics, but also with the extent to which material things—beloved books, recycled stones, household stuff, Shakespeare's hair<sup>13</sup>—can counterpoint broader exegetical patterns with their own special heft and shine. Kearney, for example, might note that it is a scroll and not a codex that connects sibyl and prophet in Mantegna's monochrome, and he might argue further that Botticelli's *cassone* is at once a box and a book.

Perhaps one of the most fertile areas of new work in religion and English Renaissance literature concerns the Catholic question. In *Secret Shakespeare*, Richard Wilson argues that the playwright did indeed grow up in a Catholic household, where he was likely exposed to the most radical elements in

English recusant culture, yet ultimately drew back from the fatal zeal pursued by other young men in his circle. Wilson reads the plays both for traces of Catholic culture, and for the denial, submersion, or equivocation of that heritage in a posture of secrecy and self-withdrawal. Some of Wilson's most interesting analyses concern the haunted spaces of dissolved monasteries, replaced by public theaters such as Blackfriars and frequented by Catholic as well as Protestant theater-goers. Juridically, the monasteries were "liberties," legally outside the jurisdiction of the Crown; once expropriated, these lands often retained their deregulated status. A theater instituted in this uncanny region is not a *secular* theater so much as a *profane* one, in the sense I have tried to develop here: a theater of travesty and sacred parody, of mixed congregations and over-free assembly, a post-Eucharistic stage where communion and community found themselves in a constant state of revulsion and reinvention, as Jeffrey Knapp so beautifully demonstrates in *Shakespeare's Tribe*.

Although Kearney tells a largely Protestant narrative of nation-building through bookbinding while Wilson focuses on recusant counter-histories, both share with Harris and with Martin a sustained and creative attentiveness to the intertwined and over-determined legacies of religion and its discontents in Renaissance literature. The work of these and other critics are helping to disclose temporal rhythms, forms of objecthood, and ways of being in the world that exist just beyond the typological structures long associated with Pauline hermeneutics. What I am calling the Renaissance profane sets aside a zone for literature distinct from religion, yet at once richer and more creative, as well as more haunted and more transitional, than the word "secular" can adequately communicate. Etymologically, "profane" means "before [i.e. outside] the temple".<sup>14</sup> *Profanus* names the liberty outside the liberty, the liberty left over when the monastery and the synagogue have been expropriated or unbuilt; profanation turns the temple inside out, but without overturning or subverting it. The profane, unlike the secular, always retains its sacred edge, and thus can become the unlikely ground for new forms of sacrality when earlier ones have been destroyed, abandoned, or militarized. It's a place I like to call home.

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FIGURES

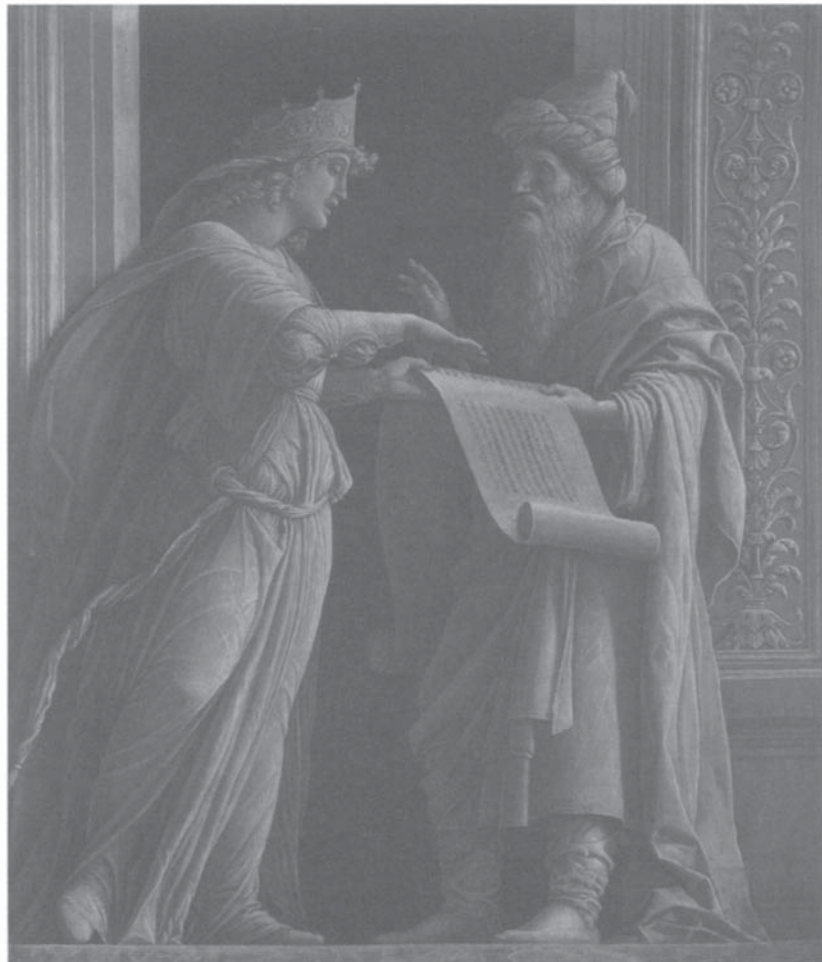


Figure 1: Andrea Mantegna, Sibyl and Prophet. Distemper and gold on canvas, c. 1495. Reprinted permission of Cincinnati Art Museum.

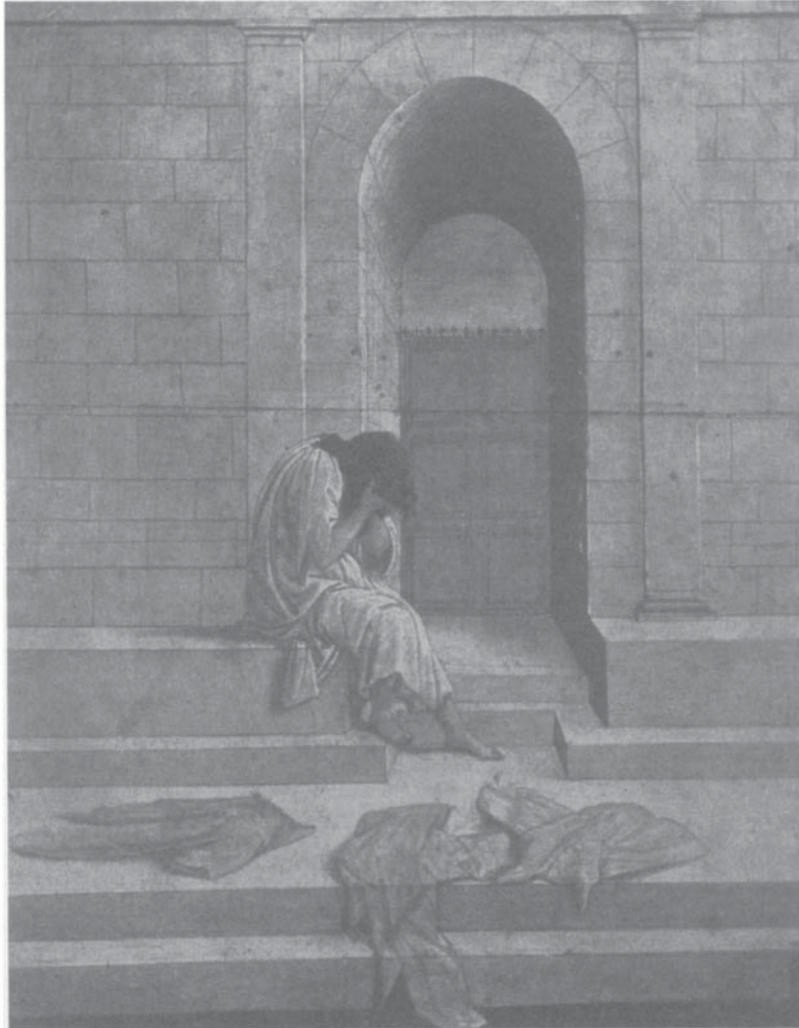


Figure 2: Sandro Botticelli, *La Derelitta* (or, *Mordecai before the Gate of the King*). Tempera on wood, c. 1495. Reprinted permission of Palazzo Pallavicini, Rome.

## NOTES

1. On calendar wars in Renaissance literature, see Jensen.
2. On priest holes and other features of recusant architecture, see Wilson.
3. On the presence of Jews in Renaissance London, see Shapiro and Adelman.
4. On martyr contexts in Reformation England, see especially Monta and essays by Alice Dailey on Foxe and Campion.
5. On the dissolution of the monasteries and revisionary historiography, see Duffy. He uses Shakespeare's bare ruined choirs as an allegory of religious nostalgia in his essay "Bare Ruined Choirs."
6. A forthcoming series of conferences at the Huntington Library beginning in December, 2009, co-convened by Ulrike Strasser and Christopher Wild, entitled "Theologies of Media," aims to approach the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as wide-ranging media revolutions.
7. There is a huge bibliography here. For the impact of critical theory on Renaissance studies of religion up to 2004, see the review essay by Arthur Marotti and Ken Jackson. See also the special issue of this journal, "Sovereigns, Citizens, and Saints," edited by Graham Hammill and myself in autumn, 2007.
8. Thus in Mantegna's *Circumcision of Christ*, 1462-70, the scene in the Temple is glossed by grisaille half lunettes, one featuring the sacrifice of Isaac and the other the giving of the Law by Moses to Israel. Jesus, we are meant to understand, prefigures his own sacrifice by submitting to circumcision on the eighth day, and he begins to fulfill and overcome the Old Covenant precisely by suffering its most carnal signature.
9. Before Wind, other identifications included Lucretia and Tamar (Piccoli 244). Michael Levey reviews the Romantic conception, citing one nineteenth-century description: "A young girl, guilty of loving not wisely but too well, has evidently been turned out of her father's house, to face the bleak world alone" (304). The echo of Othello's final speech is perhaps worth noting.
10. John Pope-Hennessy and Keith Christiansen reproduce an extraordinary Esther chest, painted between 1460 and 1470 (24-27). On both religious and secular appropriations of Esther, see the new study by Carruthers.
11. On Paul and Judaism, see for example E. P. Sanders, Daniel Boyarin, and Paula Fredriksen. For more bibliography on revisionary readings of Paul, see my review essay, "The Pauline Renaissance: A Shakespearean Reassessment." Key philosophical figures include Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou. In Renaissance studies, see especially the foundational study by Coolidge and recent work by Lisa Lampert, Lisa Freinkel, and Gregory Kneidel.
12. This existential element connects Agamben's writings on Paul to what may be his more familiar discourses on *homo sacer* and bare life, developed in Renaissance studies by, for example, Kuzner and Shannon.
13. See Harris, "Shakespeare's Hair."
14. *Oxford English Dictionary*, etymology of "profane."

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