

and if the ascription to him of the ‘Stanley Poem’ is correct, he had a touch of William McGonagall about him – on Earl Thomas, for instance: ‘That was a noble harte, liberrall and kinde, / And people will praye for him tyme out of mynde.’ His wife was herself a pedlar in linen, silk thread, and such commodities, borrowing money to make her own purchases and repaying it when her sales were complete. The scale of such an apparently small commercial enterprise is revealed by the fact that Sheale, on his way to repay the loans, was robbed of sixty pounds in gold while he was crossing the notoriously dangerous Dunsmore Heath. His account of the disaster, and the way in which he began to make up the missing money, is itself the subject of one of the Ashmole poems.

The book’s chapters cover Sheale and his audiences; the Stanley-related poems of the collection; a study of the manuscript itself, with an appendix of the contents; a detailed comparison of ‘The Hunting of the Cheviot’ and its twin ‘The Ballad of Otterburn’, and the ‘tyranny of the tradition’ that intervenes in the writing of historical ballads; the Tudor responses to the Cheviot ballads; and a final chapter that illustrates how the golden age of the minstrel has been located in the past since at least the twelfth century. Sheale may come after the time we customarily think of the medieval minstrel as dying out, but we have been wrong; and Taylor teaches us a great deal not only about him but about his kind.

Magdalene College  
Cambridge

HELEN COOPER

Alexandra da Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey’s Defence of Orthodoxy 1525–1534*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). x + 205 pp. ISBN 978–0–19–965356–0. £64.00.

This book’s thesis is clearly articulated and faithfully delivered. As outlined repeatedly, Alexandra da Costa’s main aim is to demonstrate the ways in which ‘the Abbey presented itself as part of the vanguard of the Church, fighting heresy with a threefold commitment to reformed spiritual leadership, vernacular theology, and the spiritual education of the laity’ (p. 1). The introduction delineates the material, namely eleven Syon Abbey works in some twenty-six editions, printed between 1525 and 1534, and written or translated by Richard Whitford, William Bonde, and John Fewterer. The first chapter provides an enlightening discussion of the complicated links among these Cambridge men. Thereafter da Costa systematically deals with the works produced (ch. 2), Syon *pastoralia* (ch. 3), reactions to Lutheran heresy (ch. 4), the so-called ‘great matter’ (ch. 5), and the meaning of contemplative and mixed lives (ch. 6).

The author’s incisive engagement reveals her thesis in a nuanced way (although of the eleven only seven texts command real attention, and unfortunately nothing is said about the extant copies). Her painstaking discussion of the authors and texts, particularly the different editions of Bonde’s *Pilgrimage of Perfection* and Whitford’s and Fewterer’s careful negotiations in the *Pipe of Perfection* and the

*Mirror*, guides us through the dynamic part played by the Syon brothers in the reaction and counter-reaction to the theological tumults and Henrician storms of the 1520s and 1530s. Sometimes the book would have benefited from a less 'thesis-driven' approach with its neat packaging of argumentation. In her laudably intense concentration on her material da Costa tends to bat away or ignore some 'troublesome' issues that might have given more texture to the book. She engages in unnecessary wrangling with Susan Powell over the extent to which various Middle English sermons printed in 1491 are Syon productions (pp. 11f.). Were da Costa to allow for an early Birgittine foray into print, it would provide a larger context and might also highlight further the part played by various abbesses in the promotion of printed works (something hardly considered, except for a few mentions of Elizabeth Gibbs and Agnes Jordan). The recurrent argument concerning Birgitta woodcuts as a marker of Birgittine works goes completely astray with her view that the 1516 printed life of Birgitta – a provable mosaic of Birgittine sources – may not be associated with such works (pp. 10f.). Likewise, it is significant that Richard Fox printed the translation of the Benedictine Rule in 1517 and so it is not perhaps a coincidence that Whitford does the same with the Augustinian Rule in 1518; the possibility that Whitford was Fox's chaplain raised on p. 122 is dismissed on p. 22 n. 3.

Yet this is a much better book than the unsatisfactory bibliography or index would lead one to suspect. In such a slim volume it is unclear why so many of the instructive works that the author has used to much effect (see, for example, pp. 100, 102, 119) are not included in either. There is only a very short (and partial) listing of 'Some Syon early printed books', a few manuscripts, and some other material with strange layout errors and misprints ('d'Avry' for 'd'Avray'; 'Volfin' for 'Volfing'; and so on). Da Costa has written a fine volume that is not only informed and convincing but also readable and lively; she does herself an injustice and her readers a disservice by not ensuring that the full range of her bibliographical material is evident to all.

University of Hull

VERONICA O'MARA

John Spence, *Reimagining History in Anglo-Norman Prose Chronicles* (York: York Medieval Press, 2013). x + 221 pp.; 2 plates. ISBN 978-1-903153-45-1. £55.00.

This book provides welcome consideration of a textual corpus which remains comparatively little explored: chronicles written in Anglo-Norman prose, composed from the reign of Richard I until the beginning of the fifteenth century. It begins with a survey of their prologues, enumerating the various literary strategies employed to present the chronicles as 'authoritative and valuable works of historiography' (p. 24). John Spence argues that the uniform absence of expressions of authorial modesty in these prologues is part of a 'rhetoric of confidence', which allows for the creation of 'distinctive accounts of the past' (p. 39). These accounts are subsequently discussed in three core