2012

Review of "Reconstructing Ashkenaz: the Human Face of Franco-German Jewry, 1000–1250", by David Malkiel

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St. Clare Expelling the Saracens from Assisi: Religious Confrontation in Word and Image

Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby .......................................................... 643

Before the Right to Remain Silent: The Examinations of Anne Askew and Elizabeth Young
Penelope Geng ................................................................. 667

“Those sanctified places where our Saviour's feet had trode”:
Jerusalem in Early Modern English Travel Narratives

Beatrice Groves ................................................................. 681

New Light on Antiparacelsianism (c. 1570–1610): The Medical Republic of Letters and the Idea of Progress in Science

Tilmann Walter ................................................................. 701

The Case of Thomas Gataker: Confronting Superstition in Seventeenth-Century England

Diane Willen ................................................................. 727

Book Notices ........................................................................ 750

Books Reviewed in This Issue ............................................... 754

Book Reviews ...................................................................... 763
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The Sixteenth Century Journal (ISSN 0361-0160) is published quarterly (April, July, October, January). Subscription rates: $75.00 per year for individuals inside the USA and $85.00 per year for those outside the USA; retirees and students (with copy of ID card): $45.00. Individual subscriptions include $20.00 for annual membership in SCSC. Institutions inside the USA pay $85.00, and those outside the USA pay $115.00. Periodical postage paid at Kirksville, MO 63501. Address all correspondence and changes of address to Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., Truman State University, 100 E. Normal Ave., Kirksville, MO 63501-4221 USA. Fax: 660-785-4480. Email: brammall@truman.edu. Web site: http://escj.truman.edu. Subscriptions begin in April. The Sixteenth Century Journal is a member of the Conference of Historical Journals (CHJ).


Body text is set in Adobe’s Minion Pro. Cover display type, ITC Korinna Extra Bold. Printed by Thomson-Shore, Dexter, MI, USA.


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Books Reviewed in This Issue

Reviewed by: Thomas Herron. ......................................................... 763

Walsingham and the English Imagination. Gary Waller
Reviewed by: Gordon Alley-Young .................................................. 764

The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law
Lyndan Warner
Reviewed by: Carolyn Corretti ....................................................... 766

Women’s Wealth and Women’s Writing in Early Modern England: “Little Legacies” and the Materials of Motherhood. Elizabeth Mazzola
Reviewed by: Andrea Janelle Dickens ............................................. 768

Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy: Practice, Performance, Perversion, Punishment.
Ed. Allison Levy
Reviewed by: Konrad Eisenbichler .................................................. 769

The Religious Culture of Marian England. David Loades
Reviewed by: David H. Kennett ....................................................... 771

Reviewed by: Katrina Olds ............................................................ 772

De cognitionibus quas habent daemones liber unus. Federico Borromeo.
Ed. and trans. Francesco di Ciaccia
Reviewed by: David Porreca .......................................................... 774

Servants of Satan and Masters of Demons: The Spanish Inquisition’s Trials for Superstition, Valencia and Barcelona, 1478–1700. Gunnar W. Knutsen
Reviewed by: Wendy J. Turner ....................................................... 776

Early Modern Religious Communities in East Central Europe: Ethnic Diversity, Denominational Plurality, and Corporative Politics in the Principality of Transylvania (1526–1671). István Keul
Reviewed by: D. C. Andersson ......................................................... 777

Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity: Melanchthonian Scholarship between Universal History and Pedagogy. Asaph Ben-Tov
Reviewed by: Lesley-Anne Dyer ....................................................... 779

A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages (1200–1500).
Ed. Ronald J. Stansbury
Reviewed by: Gary W. Jenkins ....................................................... 781

Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe.
Marika Keblusek and Badeloch Vera Noldus
Reviewed by: Tracey A. Sowerby .................................................... 782

Alfonso X, the Learned: A Biography. H. Salvador Martínez. Trans. Odile Cisneros
Reviewed by: R. N. Swanson ......................................................... 784
Books Reviewed

REVIEWED BY: Mirjam van Veen .................................................. 785

Trading Places: The Netherlandish Merchants in Early Modern Venice. Maartje van Gelder
REVIEWED BY: Jennifer L. Welsh ............................................... 786

The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village. Thomas Robisheaux

The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum. Christopher S. Mackay
REVIEWED BY: Whitney A. M. Leeson ....................................... 788

The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. Gary Waller
REVIEWED BY: Salvador Ryan .................................................... 790

REVIEWED BY: Ethan H. Shagan ................................................ 791

The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Poetry. Michael Schoenfeldt
REVIEWED BY: Patricia Warh ..................................................... 793

Jousting in Medieval and Renaissance Iberia. Noel Fallows
REVIEWED BY: Donald J. Kagay ................................................ 794

Savonarola and Savonarolism. Stefano Dall’Aglio. Trans. John Gagné
REVIEWED BY: Gary W. Jenkins .................................................. 796

The Lavish Lovers. Molière. Trans. David Edney
REVIEWED BY: Joan E. McRae .................................................... 797


REVIEWED BY: James H. Dahlinger, SJ ..................................... 799

Errance et cohérence: Essai sur la littérature transfrontalière à la Renaissance. Phillip John Usher
REVIEWED BY: Ayesha Ramachandran ...................................... 800

The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne’s Essays. Lawrence D. Kritzman
REVIEWED BY: Elisabeth Hodges .............................................. 802

La Violence: Regards croisés sur une réalité plurielles. Ed. Lucien Faggion and Christophe Regina
REVIEWED BY: Martine Sauret .................................................. 803

REVIEWED BY: Lowell Duckert .................................................. 805
Broken Harmony: Shakespeare and the Politics of Music.
Joseph M. Ortiz
REVIEWED BY: Bradford Lee Eden .................................................. 806

Royal Poetrie: Monarchic Verse and the Political Imaginary of Early Modern England. Peter C. Herman
REVIEWED BY: Melissa Siik ................................................................. 808

REVIEWED BY: James H. Dahlinger, SJ ........................................... 809

Ed. Madhavi Menon
REVIEWED BY: Michael Cramer .......................................................... 810

Du bien commun au mal nécessaire: Tyrannies, assassinats politiques et souveraineté en Italie, vers 1470–vers 1600. Renaud Villard
REVIEWED BY: Lidia Lanza ................................................................. 812

REVIEWED BY: Zinaida Chekantseva ................................................. 813

Thinking with the Church: Essays in Historical Theology. B. A. Gerrish
REVIEWED BY: Nancy van Deusen .................................................... 815

REVIEWED BY: Katherine L. French .................................................. 816

Art without an Author: Vasari’s Lives and Michelangelo’s Death.
Marco Ruffini
REVIEWED BY: Martha Dunkelman ................................................... 818

Il ritratto del vero governo del Prencipe (1552). Lucio Paolo Rosello
REVIEWED BY: Paul F. Grendler .......................................................... 819

Lex und Ius: Beiträge zur Begründung des Rechts in der Philosophie des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. Ed. Alexander Fidora, Matthias Lutzbachmann, and Andreas Wagner
REVIEWED BY: Thomas E. Morrissey .................................................. 821

Ed. Matthias Dall’Asta et al.
REVIEWED BY: Timothy J. Wengert ................................................... 823

Symbols of Power in Art. Paola Rapelli
REVIEWED BY: Christine Corretti ..................................................... 824

Sacred Possessions: Collecting Italian Religious Art, 1500–1900.
Ed. Gail Feigenbaum and Sybille Ebert-Schifferer
REVIEWED BY: Annemarie Sawkins .................................................. 825

Der Reichsvizekanzler Georg Sigmund Seld im Dienst der Kaiser Karl V. und Ferdinand I. Ernst Laubach
REVIEWED BY: Sean F. Dunwoody ..................................................... 827
The Thirty Years War: A Documentary History. Ed. and trans. Tryntje Hel ferich
Reviewed by: Martin W. Walsh .................................................. 828

Die Cosmographiae Introductio Matthias Ringmann und die Weltkarte Martin
Waldseemülers aus dem Jahre 1507: Ein Meilenstein frühneuzeitlicher
Kartographie. Martin Lehmann
Reviewed by: David J. Collins .................................................... 829

Enfances Regnier, Chanson de geste du XIIIe siècle.
Ed. Delphine Dalens-Marekovic
Reviewed by: James H. Dahlinger, SJ ...................................... 830

Zoologische Einblattdrucke und Flugschriften vor 1800. Vol. 6, Supplement. Ingrid
Faust, with the assistance of Klaus Bartelmeß and Klaus Stopp
Reviewed by: John Roger Paas ................................................ 831

The Textuality and Materiality of Reading in Early Modern England.
Ed. Jennifer Richards and Fred Schurink
Reviewed by: Nathan James Martin ........................................ 833

Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Ed.
Álvaro Baraibar
Reviewed by: Anna Reid ........................................................ 834

Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern
Mediterranean. Eric R. Dursteler
Reviewed by: Ambereen Dadabhoy .......................................... 835

Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the
Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe. Margaret J. Osler
Reviewed by: Gary W. Jenkins ................................................ 837

Vedere con gli occhi del cuore: Alle origini del potere delle immagini.
Ottavia Niccoli
Reviewed by: Anne Jacobson Schutte ..................................... 839

Raised to Rule: Education Royalty at the Court of the Spanish Habsburgs, 1601–
1634. Martha K. Hoffman
Reviewed by: Samuel A. Claussen .......................................... 840

Apelles am Fürstenhof: Facetten der Hofkunst um 1500 im Alten Reich. Ed.
Matthias Müller, Klaus Weschenfelder, Beate Böckem, and Ruth
Hansmann
Reviewed by: Heather Madar ............................................... 842

Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor’s Show
1585–1639. Tracey Hill
Reviewed by: Laura Branch .................................................. 844

The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank
Ed. Creston Davis
Reviewed by: Lesley J. Pattinson ............................................. 845

Paracelsus und die Bilder: Über Glauben, Magie und Astrologie im
Reformationszeitalter. Karl Möseneder
Reviewed by: Sergiusz Michalski .......................................... 847

Reviewed by: Katie L. Peebles .................................................. 848

La carità e l’eros: Il matrimonio, la Chiesa, i suoi giudici nella Venezia del Rinascimento (1420–1545). Cecilia Cristellon

Reviewed by: Christine Meek ............................................... 850

Spätrenaissance-Philosophie in Deutschland, 1570–1650: Entwürfe zwischen Humanismus und Konfessionalisierung, okkulten Traditionen und Schulmetaphysik. Ed. Martin Mulsow

Reviewed by: Ulrike Wiethaus .............................................. 851

Pedro Moya de Contreras: Catholic Reform and Royal Power in New Spain, 1571–1591, 2nd ed. Stafford Poole

Reviewed by: Aurelio Espinosa ............................................. 853


Reviewed by: Paul W. Knoll .................................................. 854

In assenza del re: Le reggenti dal XIV al XVII secolo (Piemonte ed Europa). Franca Varallo

Reviewed by: Brian G. H. Ditcham ....................................... 856

Castiglion Fiorentino fra XIII e XV secolo: Politica, economia e società di un centro minore toscano. Gabriele Taddei

Reviewed by: Christine Meek .............................................. 857

The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland. Alexandra Walsham

Reviewed by: Rudolph P. Almasy .......................................... 859

Reading Augustine in the Reformation: The Flexibility of Intellectual Authority in Europe, 1500–1620. Arnoud S. Q. Visser

Reviewed by: Jon Balserak ................................................... 861

Shakespeare and Biography. David Bevington

Reviewed by: Gül Kurtuluş ................................................... 862

The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser. Ed. Richard A. McCabe

Reviewed by: Cyrus Mulready ............................................ 864

Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: Plentitude of Power under the Visconti and the Sforza 1329–1535. Jane Black

Reviewed by: Nicholas Terpstra .......................................... 865

The Foreign Relations of Elizabeth I. Ed. Charles Beem

Reviewed by: Ted W. Booth ................................................ 867

Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430–1530. Laura Stokes

Reviewed by: Georg Modestin ............................................. 868
Books Reviewed

**Vision and the Visionary in Raphael.** Christian K. Kleinbub
Reviewed by: Linda A. Koch ................................................................. 870

**The Origins of Modern Welfare: Juan Luis Vives, De subventione pauperum, and City of Ypres, Forma subventionis pauperum.** Ed. Paul Spicker
Reviewed by: Linde M. Brocato ......................................................... 871

**Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany.** Jennifer Spinks
Reviewed by: Pernille Arenfeldt ...................................................... 873

**Paracelsus's Theory of Embodiment: Conception and Gestation in Early Modern Europe.** Amy Eisen Cislo
Reviewed by: Anna Corrias .............................................................. 874

**Sacred History and National Identity.** Jason Nice
Reviewed by: Katharine K. Olson .................................................... 876

**Public Execution in England, 1573–1868, 8 vols.** Ed. Leigh Yetter
Reviewed by: Jacob Selwood .......................................................... 879

**Essays on Giordano Bruno.** Hilary Gatti
Reviewed by: David Porreca .......................................................... 881

**Conquest, Tribute, and Trade: The Quest for Precious Metals and the Birth of Globalization.** Howard J. Erlichman
Reviewed by: Roger Louis Martínez-Dávila ...................................... 882

**Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World’s Most Coveted Masterpiece.** Noah Charney
Reviewed by: Maria Snyder ............................................................. 884

**Hermann Bote: Braunschweiger Stadtschreiber und Literat: Studien zu seinem Leben und Werk.** Herbert Blume
Reviewed by: Albrecht Classen ......................................................... 885

**La coexistence confessionnelle à l’épreuve: Études sur les relations entre protestants et catholiques dans la France moderne.** Ed. Didier Boisson and Yves Krumenacke
Reviewed by: Brian Sandberg .......................................................... 886

**Moral Play and Counterpublic: Transformations in Moral Drama, 1465–1599.** Ineke Murakami
Reviewed by: David Kathman .......................................................... 887

**Transformations of Memory and Forgetting in Sixteenth-Century France: Marguerite de Navarre, Pierre de Ronsard, Michel de Montaigne.** Nicolas Russell
Reviewed by: Ezra L. Plank .............................................................. 889

**Patristic Tradition and Intellectual Paradigms in the 17th Century.** Ed. Silke-Petra Bergain and Karla Pollmann
Reviewed by: Lawrence E. Frizzell .................................................. 890
Das Wormser Schisma der Augsburger Konfessionsverwandten von 1557: Protestantische Konfessionspolitik und Theologie im Zusammenhang des zweiten Wormser Religionsgesprächs. Björn Slenczka

Reviewed by: Christian D. von Dehsen 892

Correspondance du cardinal Jean du Bellay, vol. 4. Rémy Scheurer, Loris Petris, and David Amherdt

Reviewed by: Phillip John Usher 893


Reviewed by: Michael Wolfe 895

English Presbyterianism: 1590–1640. Polly Ha

Reviewed by: Ryan M. Reeves 896

Reconstructing Ashkenaz: The Human Face of Franco-German Jewry, 1000–1250. David Malkiel

Reviewed by: Magda Teter 898

The Bible in the Literary Imagination of the Spanish Golden Age: Images and Texts from Columbus to Velázquez. Terence O’Reilly

Reviewed by: Jessica A. Boon 899

The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland. Emma Wilby

Reviewed by: Janay Nugent 901

Images of Leprosy: Disease, Religion, and Politics in European Art. Christine M. Boeckl

Reviewed by: Larissa Tracy 902

Historia de la nueva Mexico. Gaspar de Villagrá. Ed. Manuel M. Martín Rodriguez

Reviewed by: Michael Vargas 904

The Copernican Question: Prognostication, Skepticism, and Celestial Order. Robert S. Westman

Reviewed by: Thomas F. Mayer 905


Reviewed by: Jerold C. Frakes 907

Figurations of France: Literary Nation-Building in Times of Crisis (1550–1650). Marcus Keller

Reviewed by: Erin Glunt 908


Reviewed by: Faith S. Harden 910


Reviewed by: Pauline Reid 911

Reviewed by: Jacqueline Rose ................................................................. 913


Reviewed by: Emma J. Wells ................................................................. 914

Out of Sorts: On Typography and Print Culture. Joseph A. Dane

Reviewed by: Eric J. Johnson ................................................................. 916

Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath. Alastair Minnis

Reviewed by: Larissa Tracy ................................................................. 918

Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages. Stephen A. Mitchell

Reviewed by: Jeffrey R. Watt ................................................................. 919

Collected Works of Erasmus: Controversies. Ed. James D. Tracy and Manfred Hoffman

Reviewed by: Andrew A. Chibi ............................................................. 921

The Poetry of Place: Lyric, Landscape, and Ideology in Renaissance France. Louisa Mackenzie

Reviewed by: Kendall B. Tarte ............................................................. 923


Reviewed by: Albrecht Classen ........................................................... 924


Reviewed by: Lesley J. Pattinson ........................................................ 926

Lady Jane Grey: A Tudor Mystery. Eric Ives

Reviewed by: Dorothy Potter ............................................................... 927

Protestants: A History from Wittenberg to Pennsylvania 1517–1740. C. Scott Dixon

Reviewed by: Kirsi Stjerna ................................................................. 929

Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus. Ed. Lloyd DeWitt

Reviewed by: Sara Nair James ........................................................... 930

The Book in the Renaissance. Andrew Pettegree

Reviewed by: Eric J. Johnson .............................................................. 932


Reviewed by: Jonathan Rinck ............................................................ 933

L’assassinio del Duca: Esilio e morte di Lorenzino de’ Medici. Stefano Dall’Aglio

Reviewed by: Irene Fosi ................................................................. 935

Metaphor and Shakespearean Drama: Unchaste Signification. Maria Franziska Fahey

Reviewed by: Drew J. Scheler ............................................................ 936
The Seven Deadly Sins. Ed. Richard Newhauser
Reviewed by: J. Patrick Hornbeck II .................................................. 938

Death and a Maiden: Infanticide and the Tragical History of Grethe Schmidt.
William David Myers
Reviewed by: Susan C. Karant-Nunn ................................................... 940

Catholic Particularity in Seventeenth-Century French Writing. Richard Parish
Reviewed by: Christopher J. Lane ...................................................... 941

Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting. Luba Freedman
Reviewed by: Shelley E. Zuraw ......................................................... 943

Re-Thinking Renaissance Objects. Ed. Peta Motture and Michelle O’Malley
Reviewed by: K. Michelle Arthur ....................................................... 944

Karlstadt and the Origins of the Eucharistic Controversy. Amy Nelson Burnett
Reviewed by: C. Scott Dixon ............................................................ 946

Reviewed by: Jon Balserak ............................................................... 947

The Wars of the Romans. Alberico Gentili. Ed. Benedict Kingsbury and
Benjamin Straumann. Trans. David Lupher
Reviewed by: Edmund P. Cueva ....................................................... 949

L’amitié entre princes. Bertrand Haan
Reviewed by: Brian Moots .............................................................. 950

Ptolemy’s Geography in the Renaissance. Ed. Zur Shalev and Charles Burnett
Reviewed by: Mark Rosen .............................................................. 952

Negotiating the Jacobean Book. Ed. Pete Langman
Reviewed by: Laura Endicott ........................................................... 954

Historical Interpretations of the “Fifth Empire.” Maria Ana Travassos Valdez
Reviewed by: Lawrence E. Frizzell ................................................... 955

Medicaea Medaeae. Luisa Capodiedi
Reviewed by: Marian Rothstein ....................................................... 957

Persecution, Plague, and Fire. Ellen MacKay
Reviewed by: Colleen E. Kennedy ................................................... 958


Reviewed by: Magda Teter, Wesleyan University

David Malkiel’s *Reconstructing Ashkenaz* seeks to challenge the prevalent perception of sharp cultural divisions between Jews of northern Europe, or “Ashkenaz,” and Jews of the Mediterranean world, mostly the Iberian Peninsula, or “Sefarad.” To argue that the divisions were not as stark, Malkiel focuses on several themes: martyrdom, obedience to rabbinic authority, and interactions with non-Jews. The traditional, though now increasingly challenged understanding of the culture of Jews in northern Europe in the medieval and later periods has stressed their insularity, piety, and readiness for martyrdom. Sephardic Jews, on the other hand, were considered culturally more open to outside influences, balancing their “Jewishness” with their engagement in non-Jewish culture, sometimes transgressing religious precepts and disobeying rabbinic authority. This dichotomous representation of medieval Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews has its roots in the modern period, when Jews in Germany and other northern European countries began to look for ways to integrate, culturally and politically, into the emerging modern states. By the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews were indeed starker, and their experience of modernity different, in part because of each group’s experience of the past.

There is no doubt that there are differences, sometimes even quite acute, between the cultures of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, but Malkiel is right that these distinctions may have been exaggerated and misunderstood by historians. The book seeks to challenge the myth of Ashkenazi isolation and communal autonomy, and present Ashkenazi Jews as much more textured historical actors, actively participating in the social and cultural developments of the larger society in which they lived. The differences, Malkiel argues, are much softer than has been accepted until recently. The premise of the book is, thus, important, the execution, however, more disappointing.

The book’s important contributions are often lost in long-winded discussions of scholarly debates that contain numerous quotes and details, too internal and specific to Jewish historiography that may leave scholars not familiar with all the characters—who are often not introduced, except in shorthand by their last names—lost. At one point, the author admits in passing, “The object of our study turns out to be the historians as much as or more than subjects of their investigation” (72). Although it is important to discuss historiography to correct our understanding of history, such corrections cannot be made effectively without telling the history through primary sources. Yet, primary sources in this book seem like a prop used to score historiographic points rather than tell the (corrected) story. The book and its historiographic impact would have been stronger if the balance were reversed and the story were told through the sources, allowing the author to highlight problems within historiography. As is, however, the debates with historians take precedence over telling history; quotes from historians predominate, obscuring the “human face” of the book’s medieval subjects. And so, for a book that seeks to tell the story of medieval Ashkenazic Jews anew there is not enough storytelling. For example, discussing “apostasy” (itself a loaded term), the author challenges earlier historians’ apologetic approach to Jewish conversions to Christianity, arguing that the “apostasy” was a more common phenomenon; but again, primary sources supporting this important statement are nearly missing. Rabbenu Tam,
a medieval Jewish leader, is cited, and one paragraph is devoted to “the volume of legal sources about the apostate's right to inherit.” It seems that a more effective challenge to earlier historians would have been inclusion of the stories of these converts and a detailed discussion of primary sources supporting the author's claims (118–21, 138.) Because of this focus on minute points within internal debates in Jewish historiography, sometimes in a tone that reads unnecessarily as attacks on other historians, the book often appears as if it were a fruit of discussions in a graduate seminar on medieval Jewish history.

Historiographic books, of course, have an important place in scholarship. The best ones take works of historians and locate them in historical contexts of the authors' lives. *Reconstructing Ashkenaz* is a hybrid; it wants to be a book about medieval Jewish history and a historiographic critique of earlier historians' works. Being so, the book does not accomplish most effectively what either more narrative, if still revisionist historical or historiographic works could accomplish separately. (Some of the problems with the book could have been perhaps remedied in the editorial process.) Although the book addresses an important subject of stereotypes in representing Jews of “Ashkenaz” and “Sefarad” that had been skewed by decades of sometimes ideologically motivated studies and although the book does reach valuable conclusions, its format—far too insular for a broader, even scholarly, audience—will limit the book's appeal as a possible text to be adopted in classrooms and thereby its potentially broader impact.

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**Reviewed by:** Jessica A. Boon, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

The field of biblical reception history emphasizes interdisciplinary work between biblical studies and the history of Christian thought and practice, yet usually configures its field of inquiry around the Bible as a whole or around individual books of the Bible. As a result, it leaves aside the multiple and rich arenas of literature, art, and drama that in certain eras depended on a cultural framework imbued with biblical language and stories. O'Reilly, a scholar of Spanish Golden Age religion and the arts, articulates in his book what can be termed a new method of biblical reception history; he acknowledges the different levels—latinate and vernacular—of biblical literacy that authors and audiences held in common and posits that no intellectual history of any piece of literature or art in the early modern era is complete without attention to its biblical sources. Of particular interest is his insight that an author's allusions to the Bible may not always have been intentional, but can nevertheless be tracked to a common trope initially disseminated by devotional literature as well as by theologians and biblical exegetes. O'Reilly thus argues in part that no type of literature or art in the Golden Age can be fully analyzed without crossing disciplinary boundaries, for religious literature generated components critical to various types of apparently secular works. As he states in the introduction: “Normally [biblical images] function as part of the matrix of symbols and myths by which Golden Age Spaniards interpreted the world in which they lived.” Yet he does not consider only putatively secular works, but also religious art and texts whose biblical framework has so far escaped scholarly notice.

The six chapters of the book contain six case studies—travelogues, devotional guides, picaresque fiction, religious poetry, drama, and painting—all of which he suggests are