

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Da Costa, Alexandra. Marketing English Books, 1476–1550: How Printers Changed Reading

Brenda M. Hosington

Volume 44, Number 4, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089368ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38661>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hosington, B. (2021). Review of [Da Costa, Alexandra. Marketing English Books, 1476–1550: How Printers Changed Reading]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(4), 264–266. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38661>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

found it reshaping how I think about (and teach) both Donne and Milton, and it proved immediately relevant to my current scholarship. Given that the book touches on religion, politics, and gender in early Stuart England, it should have something of interest for almost any scholar working in the field.

JASON A. KERR

Brigham Young University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38660>

Da Costa, Alexandra.

Marketing English Books, 1476–1550: How Printers Changed Reading.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 270 + 12 ill. ISBN 978-0-19-884758-8 (hardcover) \$100.

A welcome volume in the monograph series Oxford Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture, Alexandra da Costa's account of the marketing of early English printed books certainly lives up to the scholarly standards demonstrated in previous Oxford Studies works and responds admirably to the general editors' criterion of interdisciplinary and innovative research. It is divided into three main sections: "Devotional Reading" (works of catechism and contemplation, forbidden books); "Worldly Reading" (romances, scurrilous tales, gests); "Practical Reading" (pilgrimage guides, advertisements, souvenirs, household books).

Although by now there have been many studies of individual early printers' marketing strategies employed in the competitive world of early modern bookselling in England, this is the first book-length study of the subject. As such, it is also, perhaps, the first to discuss the marketing of a wide range of English books by English printers by placing it within a wider European context, reaching out to connect the publication of works in England to their earlier printed versions in France, Germany, and the Low Countries. In so doing, it reminds readers of the transnational and multilingual nature of early printing but also of the extent to which early printers in England were influenced by their counterparts on the Continent.

Given its emphasis on this close interweaving of English and foreign print practices and concerns, the book demonstrates a rather surprising neglect of

translation and its extremely important role in early English printing. The index has a main entry of “translation,” with five sub-entries referring to types: “evangelical”; “into English”; “into other European languages”; “of news”; “scriptural.” Individual translations are mentioned, and some briefly discussed, in the text, but there is no overall assessment or appreciation of the importance of translation in general, or of any special marketing strategies employed for selling translated foreign texts. The paratexts accompanying translations, as opposed to original works, are often quite different in nature and reveal different marketing practices. This deserves attention.

Paratexts nevertheless rightfully occupy an important place in da Costa’s study. The various types represented in these early books are considered here, not as individual items—titles, title pages, woodcuts, prefaces and so on—but as “marketing tools” working together to “encourage demand for particular kinds of text and to shape how they were read” (18). This holistic approach seems extremely suitable for the early decades of print. Indeed, much of da Costa’s very persuasive argument concerning the crucial role of paratexts in marketing books reposes on her discussion of the innovative methods used by the very early printers such as Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, and Richard Pynson. However, she does not neglect their successors and in her “Afterword” is careful to point out that by the middle of the sixteenth century, such use of paratextual materials had become “regular practice,” although it was more varied and text-targeted. Her case study amusingly demonstrates this framing of a work by various marketing practices. In Richard Whitford’s 1541 *Diverse Holy Instructions*, title page, table of contents, and prefaces combine in a remarkable sales pitch, with Whitford evoking in his prefaces a bookshop where a compilation is being dishonestly peddled and a scene in which a sceptical reader confronts the marketing tactics employed on title pages. Nuggets such as these make da Costa’s book not only instructive but also entertaining.

Indeed, of particular interest is her discussion of how compilations, or *Sammelbände*, played a marketing role at a time that most books were sold unbound. Printers could produce editions that would encourage or promote compilation. The way in which this might be achieved through the use of common vocabulary across different editions is fascinating and illustrated by several of Wynkyn de Worde’s contemplative texts. Elsewhere, da Costa shows how a pragmatic book such as *The Noble Book of Feasts* could be bound with other works concerning social and household matters to form a useful reference

work covering everything an aspiring gentleman in service should know, and how when bound with a Latin vocabulary and everyday phrases, as in one case, it could serve as an instruction book for pages employed within households (211). These and other examples demonstrate the breadth of da Costa's corpus of texts, which draws on a range of genres, both religious and secular.

Printers could in fact specialize in one specific genre, thus carving out for themselves one particular kind of market. Wynkyn de Worde, says da Costa, concentrated on contemplative works (but also, we might add, on satirical and misogynist writings); Thomas Godfrey specialized in evangelical publications, Richard Pynson in news and travel guides, and Thomas Berthelet in household and husbandry. They could focus on one sector of the potential buying public, making works particularly attractive through the careful choice and exploitation of appropriate paratextual features, although they did of course print works of all genres. They often had no choice in the matter, one might add, if they were to remain commercially viable.

Marketing English Books, 1476–1550 succeeds in demonstrating how individual printers could build on previous marketing strategies but also prove themselves innovators by putting those strategies to new uses. In so doing, as da Costa says elegantly, “[they] changed the horizon of expectation for readers” (24). The work also convincingly contends that the commercial need to sell large numbers of books had a cultural impact; such need “fundamentally influenced both the creation of new works and reception more generally” (240).

BRENDA M. HOSINGTON

Université de Montréal/University of Warwick

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38661>

Di Macco, Michela, ed.

Letterati, artisti, mecenati del Seicento e del Settecento. Strategie culturali tra Antico e Moderno.

Quaderni sull'Età e la Cultura del Barocco 3. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2021. Pp. xiv, 220 + 67 ill. ISBN 978-8-8222-6735-1 (paperback) €35.

This volume is part of the series *Quaderni sull'Età e la Cultura del Barocco*, published by the Fondazione 1563 to help young scholars bring to light the