textual pragmatist who presupposed the limitations of the literal sense and held a consensual and historically grounded account of reading. While More held that the authority of the church councils and the collective decisions of the church across time had the power to restrain the unwritten authority of the church, his polemical engagements with evangelical literalists had a contagious effect upon him. More's own involvement in the violent persecution of heretics is not denied. However, Simpson argues that More's persecuting activities were not the product of his own reading approach. Instead, More and his evangelical opponents alike became entangled in an immensely demanding and punishing textual culture marked by the impersonality of literalism.

This book is well written and the author uses his primary sources persuasively even if he is occasionally guilty of anachronism. Since many evangelicals saw the Radical Reformation as a misguided movement and reacted against it, some discussion of radical hermeneutics might have strengthened Simpson's summary of early modern political violence. Furthermore, Simpson's analysis requires more theological nuance in places. For Luther and many of his followers, for instance, Holy Scripture principally meant the Old Testament, and the good news of Christ was not to be understood as something that supersedes this. For evangelicals the good news was a reality that should not be understood chiefly as something written, but as the self-utterance of the living Christ who brings the Scriptures to life. Holding to such assumptions, evangelicals were always able to find Christ in the Old Testament. Despite some minor interpretive issues, Simpson's reappraisal of early modern reading has offered a fresh perspective on an important topic. It deserves to be widely read and responded to.

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Bridget Heal

The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500–1648

Past and Present Publications. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Pp. xvi, 341

This volume springs from Heal's University of London doctoral dissertation, and its association with the late Bob Scribner surely generates heightened expectations. Heal rises to the occasion wonderfully—she deftly guides us through this complex and fascinating subject, overturning or updating conventional wisdom as she goes,

moving from treatises and letters to paintings and single-sheet ephemera. Happily, she extends her coverage through the Counter-Reformation developments as well as the influence of the confessional conflicts in the Thirty Years War. Overall it is a wide sweep, but the inclusion of seventeenth-century material is vital to understanding Mary's role in the Catholic "renewal." Heal's orienting introduction presents the current state of early modern Marian studies, followed by an excellent discussion of the alterations in Marian teaching following the Reformation, including connections between Marian devotion and anti-Semitism. The book's central chapters deal with Marian piety in Lutheran Germany—and here Heal handles the nuances deftly—and Mary's status amid what she calls "confessional frictions." In discussing Mary and the Counter-Reformation, Heal reveals a fine eye for the telling detail that illustrates the complexities of popular devotion in a society no longer homogenous, a theme she devotes more time to in the subsequent chapter on Catholic pluralism. Her final chapter deals with the issue of gender, and Heal again exposes the intricacies of her subject by refusing facile conclusions. Overall, this is a stimulating, highly readable, excellently documented work and is likely to remain the standard for some time.

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Sara Beam

Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007. Pp. x, 268

Sara Beam's book attests to the enduring place of absolutism in the historiography of early modern France, demonstrating that this much-debated concept can still invite fresh perspectives and shape new avenues of research. *Laughing Matters* traces the demise of farce in France during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but does so primarily to shed new light on the role that urban elites played in the formation of the absolutist polity. Renaissance farce was political, and so too was the urban elites' tolerant regulation of it. Beam thus argues that the story of how these elites marginalized the insolent political commentary and raucous performance of farce reflects their adoption of a more resolutely royalist identity and political orientation. Beam's argument also challenges Norbert Elias's contention that the civilizing process was initiated by the French monarchy's domestication of the nobility. Urban elites did not stop laughing at the crude jokes of farceurs in