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Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400
(review)

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of Anglo-Iberian relations and in highlighting the need for further scholarly consideration of this topic.

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CATHERINE A. M. CLARKE. *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700–1400*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006. Pp. xii, 160. £45.00; \$80.00.

Near the end of this book, Catherine Clarke remarks that only her chronological focus has imposed limits on a “potentially enormous subject.” In fact the corpus of materials revealed seems rather small for a seven-hundred-year span. Chapter 1, “The Edenic Island,” relies heavily on Bede’s well-known descriptions of Britain and Ireland. Clarke notes his debt to Gildas, brings in the very brief descriptions of the island of Farne in Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*, and adds Alcuin on York and the transformation of St Guthlac’s island in the fen in Felix’s *Life*. Chapter 2, on the *locus amoenus* tradition in Old English, covers sections of the poems *Phoenix*, *Genesis A*, *Guthlac A*, and a few lines of *The Seafarer*, with discussion of some Latin and one Irish sources and analogues. Chapter 3 considers landscape in the later monastic accounts of Glastonbury, Ely, and Ramsey, three island monasteries. The material here is less familiar, but once again Guthlac receives a certain prominence. Clarke notes that though he is strongly associated with Crowland, there was a cult of him at Glastonbury, which had a ninth-century abbot called Guthlac, and suggests that this could be part of a West Saxon strategy of appropriating Mercian and East Anglian saints. This allows Clarke to make a further argument for these island descriptions acting as “metonym or emblem for the island nation” of Britain. Her fourth chapter moves from islands to cities, and considers two twelfth-century texts on London and Chester, and three later ones including sections of Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*, and a satirical poem that gives three lines to each of seven English cities, and pokes fun at their products—*verba vana* or “empty words” for London, “halfpenny pies (?)” for Norwich, *burges negones* or “niggardly citizens” for Bristol, and so on. A final chapter roves rather more widely in search of material, but at the expense of focus. Is Arthur’s taunting

speech in Layamon about the Avon being choked with dead warriors who look like steel fish an “ironic version” of the *locus amoenus* tradition, which “works to remind the audience that the idealized literary *locus amoenus* of England is constructed over the historical realities of conquest, invasion and conflict”? Not many readers of the poem over the last eight hundred years are likely to have thought so: the speech’s sarcastic intention is overpoweringly strong.

The relative thinness of the material obliges the author to work hard at interpretation, and continuing threads in the argument are appropriation, resonance, polyphony, and commodification. Appropriation is necessary to connect the local or regional nature of so much of the material, essentially about islands and cities, with “the idea of England” announced in the title. Resonance serves much the same purpose. If the landscape of Glastonbury is “Edenic,” and if Bede’s account of Britain was similarly so, then the four-century gap between them becomes a continuity, at least in the mind of a well-read and well-instructed author or reader. The image of the monks of Ramsey severing themselves from “the barren olive-tree of the world” also “resonates with” the tree that represents Saint Dunstan in a vision recounted by William of Malmesbury, while a later version of the same vision, which mentions the many monks who will gather *in hac regione*, may be making a local tradition into a national one: but the connections seem forced. Polyphony is thoroughly congenial to the modern academic mind, but does not make much allowance for the exigencies and imperfections of composition. In 1392 the city of London was forced to pay King Richard II an enormous fine, and to stage a pageant of reconciliation, celebrated in Richard Maidstone’s poem “Reconciliation.” One stanza of this includes a catalogue of trees and of wild beasts, and one line of the latter includes the *cervus celer* among the tigers and panthers and predators. Richard’s own emblem was the hart, and Clarke suggests that the “threatened and beleaguered” deer in “a hostile environment” may be the city’s warning to Richard of his own vulnerability: a well-concealed warning, one has to say, and a motif more easily explained by the frequency of deer in wilderness descriptions. Commodification, finally, is seen as a feature of several accounts, which celebrate land as “a valuable possession,” to be held, beheld, and fought over. But that, surely, is exactly what it was, and still is, though less apparently so now that there are many more obvious sources of wealth. There is a strong element of “appropriation” within this short work, as medieval works are brought into line with

modern notions of the appropriate, and with the ongoing academic discussion of nationhood. The works and authors themselves, however, often seem obstinately committed to much narrower concerns and perspectives.

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LARA FARINA. *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. 179. \$65.00.

Lara Farina's exploration of the erotic in early English religious writing is wide ranging—from the tenth-century hymn *Christ I* to the thirteenth-century *Love Ron* of the Franciscan Thomas de Hales. Farina also exhibits an acute awareness of the range of critical approaches available; feminist theory underlies her analysis, but she makes use of psychoanalytic and economic theories as she explores an important paradox in these texts: the coexistence of eroticism and asceticism, both occupying the "same representational ground" (p. 48), that is, the body.

It is the readers of these texts, and their assumed response to the erotic and affective writing, that is the focus of Farina's exegesis. The idea of the erotic is used to give a sense of connection between the works, although the chapters can stand on their own (and indeed the first chapter, that on *Christ I*, has appeared as a journal article). The inclusion of a chapter on a pre-1066 English text in a book dealing mainly with Middle English writing is useful for suggesting possible continuities between English literature before and after the Norman Conquest. Farina is concerned to stress the importance of bringing this early text into the discussion of erotic discourse; she acknowledges the "difficulty of discerning erotic elements in Old English literature" (p. 16), but believes this difficulty can itself be informative. Her most important contention is that "a practice of devotional reading both pre-dates the organization of affective piety on the Continent and amends itself to fit contexts that were quite different than the reformist monasteries" (p. 3).

Farina is looking not for obvious sexual representation, but for an apprehension of interiority: "*Christ I*'s location of erotic interest in the