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Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing
(review)

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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

half-visible interiority of the female body is thus perhaps its most lasting contribution to the history of sexual signification" (p. 33). The erotic is not limited to the blatantly sexual; it is located in the practice of reading as, variously, the discernment of sexualized meaning in text, sensual pleasure in reading, and the penetration of the text by the reader. The liturgical basis of *Christ I* requires a communal reading of the text and thus a social erotic. By "social erotic," Farina means the representation of desire as a social or collective phenomenon, arguing that "it is as a part of a community that the reader of *Christ I* learns how to desire, for desire becomes purposed, intelligible, in its social orchestration" (p. 32); here the social orchestration is the monastic liturgy. In contrast, Farina considers the reading of the thirteenth-century guide for female recluses, *Ancrene Wisse*, as a private and enclosed activity. Farina concentrates on the text's construction of the anchoress as physically enclosed in order to preserve her bodily integrity—the anchorhold acts as a metaphor for the enclosed body, as well as enclosing the body, allowing no penetration. In treating *Ancrene Wisse* solely as a text for anchoresses, however, Farina ignores the other readers inscribed within it. I would suggest that *Ancrene Wisse*, by being written with an awareness of other potential readers, men and women, lay and religious, also opens up the anchorhold to those in the world.

Farina shows how the text of *Ancrene Wisse* constructs the gendered space enclosing the sisters, protecting and defining them as anchoresses and as readers of the text. She argues that in constructing this space the author is creating a "source of worry," founded in the paradox of asceticism and eroticism: "the sealed space of the anchorhold is envisioned as promoting and protecting not chastity but the secret pleasures of a transgressive sexuality" (p. 57). Farina relies heavily on Ann Warren's account of anchoritism, an account which has, to some extent, been called into question; her account of *Ancrene Wisse* needs to be read alongside other recent work, in particular, the 2005 collection of essays *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs* edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, and *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, edited by Yoko Wada (D. S. Brewer, 2003). What is valuable about Farina's work is that she places this anchoritic text within the larger diachronic context of medieval religious writing, exploring common threads of eroticism as an aspect of *affectus*.

Farina also studies other texts associated with *Ancrene Wisse*; in particular, the works in the Wooing Group. Farina reads these works as ex-

pressions of “mystical desire” and starts her third chapter by stating, “My readers may find it odd that mysticism, that most obvious source of devotional eroticism in the Middle Ages, has been only tangentially discussed in chapters 1 and 2” (p. 63). Farina’s twenty-first-century readers would undoubtedly understand eroticism as a valid expression of the mystical experience, but it was not ever thus. Cuthbert Butler, for example, was very coy about any erotic aspect of mysticism, writing of Bernard of Clairvaux’s description of the spiritual marriage in the *Song of Songs*, “Let whoso will, see in this fine piece any note of sensuousness or of selfish enjoyment of spiritual delights” (in *Western Mysticism*, p. 172). For Farina, the sensuousness carries the meaning of Bernard’s interpretation, and although his sermons are not within the scope of Farina’s main analysis, his presence is felt throughout, with references to his “theology of love” (p. 89).

Farina stresses the social rather than individualistic approach to mysticism; that is, she believes it is important to understand the social context of mystical experience and writing rather than to think of mystics as exceptional individuals outside temporal and social influence. Farina exhibits a sensible caution here over psychological approaches to mysticism, and provides an interesting consideration of material structures and their articulation in the language of commerce; she examines in particular the role of the language of gifts both within texts and in textual production (pp. 82–83).

Farina is aware of the manuscript tradition of the Wooing Group and consequent issues of readership, an approach she extends to the final text considered, the *Love Ron* of Thomas de Hales. She argues persuasively for a reappraisal of the readership of the *Love Ron*, suggesting a readership more aristocratic and more sophisticated than has been assumed (p. 97). She acknowledges the importance of this lyric within an understanding of the development of vernacular spirituality aimed at lay readers: “A more accurate understanding of Thomas’s audience is of importance for understanding the trajectory of religious literary eroticism in the thirteenth century and in the later medieval era” (p. 88). The trajectory of Farina’s own work—from Anglo-Saxon monasticism via anchoritism to Franciscan spirituality aimed at a lay readership—is of great interest, although no conclusion is offered tracing this path. Farina is maybe too cautious to subscribe to any grand narrative but concentrates, rather, on the particular, and it is her analysis of particular

texts—especially the *Christ I* and the *Love Ron*—that this reviewer especially appreciated.

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Colne Engaine

JOHN M. FYLER. *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 306. £50.00; \$101.00.

John Fyler's book is the product of wide reading and sustained reflection on the nature of medieval literary representation. Its roots lie in a project that sought to align the history of ideas with a critical interest in poetics and found important expression in studies like Marcia Colish's *The Mirror of Language* (1968), Brian Stock's *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century* (1972), and Winthrop Wetherbee's *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (1972). This genealogy suggests the deep perspective informing Fyler's work, not its belatedness or isolation from contemporary literary studies. Fyler's understanding of the interpretive stakes of his topic clearly registers the influence of turns in recent decades to theory and history. As Fyler notes, his study shares some common territory with James M. Dean's *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* (1999), but his focus on medieval views of the origin and nature of language leads, I think, to a darker assessment than the pervasive trope of *senectus mundi*. For the imaginative and expressive possibilities that the question of language opened up for Dante, Jean de Meun and Chaucer are tied profoundly to loss, mourning, and the bitter freedom of disenchantment.

Fyler's opening chapter argues that medieval speculations about language are shaped decisively by Genesis 1 and the exegetical tradition established by Augustine and developed by other patristic and medieval commentators. Fyler identifies "three historical foci" in Genesis: the origin of language, the effects of the Fall, and the building of the Tower of Babel (p. 3). His analysis of the biblical text distinguishes God's (performative) language at the Creation from Adam's (denotative) naming of the birds and animals, the (mythological) language of his progeny after the Fall, and the (historical) languages generated after Babel by