Lara Farina. *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*. (The New Middle Ages.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. 179.

In *Erotic Discourse*, Farina, by her own admission, compiles "a history of reading for pleasure" in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England (3). She has taken several well-known texts, including *Christ I*, the *Ancrene Wisse*, the Wooing Group, and Thomas of Hale's *Love Ron*, to show how often the references to pleasure found in secular literature also appear in devotional literature. She positions her work in the scholarship on the history of sexuality (p. 5)—a history initiated by Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in the late-twentieth century and since refined by feminist scholars, including Caroline Walker Bynum, Karma Lochrie, Aranye Fradenberg, Carla Freccero, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, and Catherine Innes-Parker, among others. I would argue that Farina's strengths lie not in attempting to situate her work within the history of sexuality, but rather in retracing the path of religious reading from a communal (erotic) practice, as directed in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, to a private (erotic) act of piety that encompasses first the body, then the mind/imagination, and lastly, the spirit. Consequently, what initially may seem to be a simple restructuring of reading practices is, in actuality, the creation of something entirely new within early English literature, for, as Farina convincingly argues, there is seemingly no devotion without desire during much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For this reason, Farina's redirection of our own reading deserves more than a cursory glance, even if some of her more sweeping generalizations regarding these texts and their historical moments are questionable.

Farina has assigned herself the task of finding enclosed bodies, places, and readers in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman religious communities and literature earlier than the thirteenth century, when the transition from group to private devotional reading took hold. The thirteenth-century rise in anchoritic devotion, which privatized religious reading (particularly women's) and heightened the spiritual isolation of these religious complicates this task. The anchorite's physical isolation contributed significantly to the necessity for writing at the same time that it freed anchorites to read without supervision (pp. 10-11), which communal policing of devotion prevented

in early religious communities. Farina is undeterred by either the seeming opacity of the works she has chosen or by prior criticism that has denied that these texts, in particular, contain erotic language, tropes, and images. She attributes this critical oversight to modern mistranslation of this era. Moreover, if one were to pay more "attention to the tropological aspects of literary eroticism [. . .] it may even suggest erotic meanings for images or expressions that no longer appear 'sexual' to modern readers" (17). This introduces the book's underlying project, a process of tropological reading that supposedly uncovers the previously hidden "erotic meanings" in the works Farina has chosen. It is a method that proves problematic when Farina attempts to make broad generalizations about this literature and its overall impact on the genesis of reading erotically or devotionally (or both). It also proves to be an asset when she engages the texts she has chosen in some truly distinguished close readings. Readers' main difficulty with this book will occur not when the author traces history or navigates within her chosen text, but rather when she attempts to marry the two aspects of her analysis to each other. Then her arguments often seem too loosely connected to ultimately prove convincing as a unified whole. Take, for example, the tropological exegesis of Mary's womb in the first chapter, "Before Affection: *Chris I* and the Social Erotic." Farina reiterates her warning to modern readers regarding the "difficulty [in] discerning erotic elements in Old English literature" (17). She attributes this difficulty not to the fact that these elements perhaps do not exist, but rather, it seems, to modern scholarship's consistent failure "To discern the right conditions for erotic reading" (17) in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England—a shortcoming she is confident she will correct. This chapter does present a truly engaging analysis of the "eroticized representations" of Mary that appear throughout *Christ I* (p. 25). Farina surmises that Mary's womb becomes a space that, while enterable, remains both physically hidden from view and spiritually inaccessible to anyone/entity save for God (p. 26). Hence, just as the private mental reading spaces the author describes in her introduction remain part of group devotional practice, so too is Mary's womb closed and private, even though its product is eventually meant to save every faithful soul. Farina's general constructions at the beginning of this chapter do not have the

same intellectual intrigue and development as this compelling close reading of both Christ I and its rather unusual emphasis on Marian devotion at this period in literary history.

In the remaining chapters, "Dirty Words: *Ancrene Wisse* and the Sexual Interior," "Mystical Desire, Erotic Economy, and the Wooing Group," and "The Popularization of the Affective? Friar Thomas of Hales and His Audience," Farina's analysis follows the same problematic structure articulated above—detailed and convincing analyses of these works encased in suppositions about how these texts were once read interspersed with cautionary notes to her modern audience that they must read these texts far more closely in the contemporary moment to find the underlying naughty bits. Ultimately this does more harm than good to the stronger elements of Farina's book. While her endnotes are copious, informative, and further demonstrate the author's obvious expertise in her field, the lack of a concluding chapter that brings together the parts of her arguments into a cohesive whole leaves the reader with more doubts about whether the chronology that the author plots in the introduction actually connects these texts, than, perhaps, he or she would have regarding the individual works and their effect on both religious and lay audiences. The author's ability to reason through individual poems, allegorical images, and tropes with ease is often lost in the larger argumentative framework.

Farina's overarching thesis, that *Erotic Discourses* will ultimately demonstrate how "in late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England, a practice of erotic devotional reading predates the organization of affective piety on the Continent" (3), does not prove to be as convincing, in the long run, as her far more focused arguments that the individual texts she has chosen are, in essence, "forays into varying issues attending a history of reading for pleasure" (3). In the latter regard, Farina's analyses are undoubtedly thought-provoking and will be valuable to scholars who work with (de)constructions of the female body as commodity or as open (en)closed spaces, women as pure (vis-à-vis Marian devotion) and as "whore." For those who trace the myriad methods employed by Church Fathers and preachers in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England to translate the conventions of vernacular literature into religious sermons, *Erotic Discourses* might be a bit

thin, save for the final chapter on the works of Friar Thomas of Hales. In this chapter, Farina most convincingly demonstrates that vernacular romance and the sacred were combined in both religious writing and preaching to a popular audience—to the extent that Christ becomes the metaphorical knight in shining armor for anyone wishing to be wooed from sin to sanctity through the increasingly private, yet still pleasurable, act of reading.

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Madeleine Des Roches and Catherine Des Roches. *From Mother and Daughter: Poems, Dialogues, and Letters of Les Dames Des Roches*, edited and translated by Anne R. Larsen. (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.) University of Chicago Press, 2006. Pp. xxx + 319.

Mother and daughter Madeleine and Catherine des Roches, hostesses of a salon frequented by the elite of sixteenth-century Poitiers, were among the first women to publish their works in sixteenth-century France, *Les Oeuvres* (1578-79), *Les Secondes oeuvres* (1583), and *Les Missives* (1589). Although they figured among the most well-known and prolific French Renaissance women authors, their texts lacked a modern edition until Anne Larsen's critical editions of *Les Oeuvres* (1993), *Les Secondes oeuvres* (1997), and *Les Missives* (1998), now the standard sixteenth-century French edition. With *From Mother and Daughter*, Larsen provides non-specialists with access to a selection of poems, dialogues, and letters from the Dames des Roches' wide-ranging oeuvre.

Larsen's profound understanding of the texts in question is manifest. The format of the poetry, presented with a facing translation, allows Larsen to opt for clear, unforced renderings by eschewing rhyme. Here the non-French specialist can get the sense of the poem and see how it works in terms of verse in the original.

Larsen's introduction is brief but solid. Madeleine des Roches (ca.1520-87), née Neveu, the daughter of a Poitevin notary, married twice. Catherine (1542-87), her only surviving child among three, was the daughter of her first husband. At the death of her second husband, François