
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 Fraenberger, 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 finally, 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


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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
case 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
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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


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.

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