This volume fills a longstanding void in the scholarly treatment of Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, focusing on how these sermons are “structured by configurations of gender” (399). This, at least, is the general frame of this study. More specifically, the author explores the rhetorical strategies by which Bernard crafts a “performative” text, one meant to lead to what the author describes as “devotional transformation [which is] realized through and by language” (8). Building on Burcht Pranger’s exploration of the theatricality of Bernard’s sermons, by which such texts stand as an example of the “artificiality” of monastic exegesis, Engh suggests that we read this literature in terms of what she calls a “countererotics,” an interpretive strategy meant to establish the privilege of Cistercian monastic life through the practice of “Christomimesis”: “Ultimately, the Cistercian monk mimics a model of a masculinity to be acquired and conquered by everyone and which, as discussed, is also [a] model of progress and perfection, unto participation in divine transcendence” (405). That is, Bernard’s purpose, in “performing the bride” as he does, was meant to offer his monastic brothers (and later readers) a glimpse into transmutations of gender—precisely by means of an elaborate “literary fiction” by which “a dual-sexed bride mimic[s] the dual-sexed bridegroom, a male absorbing all femaleness, a celibate man ‘writing like a woman’ in a world without women” (408).

This is an ambitious and to my mind important undertaking, one that gains focus and depth through the astute manner in which the author sets such themes within the wider framework of earlier theological and monastic treatises. Thus, the first chapter explores the language of gender in premodern devotional discourse, ranging widely among sources of Late Antiquity and the earlier Middle Ages (i.e., pre-Cistercian). Here, she focuses particular attention on the *virago*, the “virile or manly woman,” and the “male bride” in order to establish trajectories of interpretation and self-interpretation—which she calls “autoexegesis”—as the means by which Bernard takes on “gender crossing” and “gender blending” as devotional models. Eschewing a reliance on contemporary gender theorists such as Thomas Laqueur, Gilbert Herdt, or Judith Butler, Engh’s primary conversation partners in this discussion are Carolyn Walker Bynum, Joan Ferrante, and Barbara Newman, among others, pointing to how—here following Newman’s lead—Bernard uses gendered images in order to “perform” the text with and for his monastic brothers on the “empty stage” that the Cistercian monastery represented. In so doing, Engh suggests, his interpretive strategy encourages “a distinctively Christian transvaluation of values by which social liabilities (such as humility, poverty, weakness, foolishness, and femaleness) become spiritual assets” (36). Indeed, this study as a whole could be read as an insightful and wide-ranging exposition of precisely this thesis. What is particularly striking in this opening chapter is the manner in which Engh argues this case based on a subtle understanding of how metaphor functioned in the culture of this period, in that “a symbol, as perceived in medieval theory, reveals a metaphysical correspondence, and it does so by implementing the presence of what it symbolizes, albeit it in a reflexive, secondary sense” (61).

The second chapter presses this point more deeply, moving from the wider frame of theological tradition to focus on how Bernard’s sermons conflate erotic imagery with maternal imagery in a way that serves to “configure the bride,” as Engh puts it. Here, one finds a detailed probing of various sermons, following particular themes relevant to Bernard’s interests and pertinent in unfolding the author’s central thesis about his deliberately
transgressive use of bridal imagery. What is striking here is Engh’s suggestion of how these monastic texts hold what might be otherwise unbearable tensions—in literary, but also in existential/spiritual terms—in a frame that was intended to serve primarily as a devotional strategy. Here, an apparent disorder in terms of such tensions, with the calculated asymmetries involved, reveals not only the character of Bernard’s careful literary strategies, with all their deliberate and often playful “sub/versions,” but also his careful reinvention of gendered identity. Her conclusion is important, and remains startling even though undergirded in the lengthy textual commentary that precedes, pointing to how Bernard consistently moves from the erotic to the ethical, and thus from the heights of the erotic delights latent in the contemplative path, as he understood it, to the moral obligations that shaped his view of the monastic preparation in this life for greater pleasures in the life to come: in blending the Augustinian duality by which love was seen as dually ordered toward “the divine and spiritual as well as the worldly and temporal,” he finds a unique way of integrating “both the Augustinian doctrinal foundations as well as his own Christocentric mysticism” (149). It is this insight, to my mind, that stands as a kind of fulcrum in this marvelous study, with the weight of earlier interpretive traditions on one side and Bernard’s unique reconstructions in service of a new Cistercian devotionalism, on the other. In this manner, she follows Pranger’s lead in methodological terms, exploring how these texts function “constructively” within the “emptiness” of the Cistercian “stage.” Again, she here begins to apply his notion of the “artificiality” of Christian identity in a quite startling and important manner in terms of gender construction.

The chapters that follow add nuance and depth to this approach to Bernard’s sermons, shifting the focus from the erotic and maternal imagery to images of “idealized femaleness” (ch. 3), the “feminized male” (ch. 4), the ways he “stages eschatology” by bringing it into a constructive tension with the monk’s own present experience (ch. 5), the tensions latent in this approach that relate “feminized man” to “divinized man” (ch. 6), and, finally, a concluding chapter that sets Bernard’s approach within the wider social and ecclesial frame of the day. Here, finally, we come to see, following Engh’s suggestive insight, how the dualisms so often dominant in medieval theological discourse and rhetoric finally “collapse” in Bernard’s adroit hands, a process she rightly interprets as “anagogic” in that it “pertains primarily to eschatology, to restoration, and secondarily to rare and fleeting glimpses in contemplative excess” or ecstasy (399). Here, then, we find ourselves able to make sense of how and why Bernard’s trans-gendered rhetoric points to what she describes as the “queer identity” he offers his monks, and how this is finally transgressive in an otherwise unexpectedly spiritual sense—that is, by offering the monks a means of “performing the bride,” which is at the same time a means of performing the strange inversions of a text deliberately “misread” (one might say) on the strength of a kind of transgressive devotionalism.

This is a thoroughly engaging and important scholarly study, one that should become as essential to scholars of early Cistercian literature as Pranger’s Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought. Broken Dreams (Leiden: Brill, 1994) was when it first appeared two decades ago. My one query—and it is a cautious one since it is tempting (and usually self-congratulatory) in writing reviews to lament what is not present and thus ignore the wealth of what is—to wonder how this already impressive study might be further deepened if the author were to explore the role of memory and its importance in re-forming the monk’s inner life. Here, Pranger is surely right to question whether we can legitimately speak of an “inner life” of a monastic in Bernard’s day, at least as we understand this today. But this
should not deter us from seeing how imaginative—and, for his project of shaping the devotional life of his monastic confreres, instructive—Bernard’s own work was in reorienting the mind’s deep reservoir of memory for his immediate monastic audience, particularly important because Cistercians (in contrast to Benedictines) only allowed adults entry. One could presume, then, that the youngest recruits arrived “formed” by what we would consider adult experiences, with memories unlike those shaped by those entering other monastic communities in childhood.

This query should not be read to gainsay the importance of this study, but rather to set it in a context that might confirm and deepen the author’s approach. In this case, it would set her often daring insights into questions of Bernard’s “trans-gendering” reading in conversation with the approach Janet Coleman suggested in her study of medieval memory, and this in much the same way that Engh engages Pranger’s work to extend his approach in directions he had not yet fully articulated. Here, this would mean exploring more deeply the question of how “medieval theories of memory are...theories of reconstruction,” as Coleman put it (Ancient and Medieval Memories. Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992]), thereby suggesting how monastic memory was in a distinct sense what she describes as a search for “oblivion”—that is, for a kind of disintegration of what we as moderns have come to think of as the ego, precisely in order to support what she suggests to be a “renovation” of that life. I, at least, would welcome finding this in the next chapter(s) of Engh’s work on Bernard, since Coleman’s insight into how remembering is a kind of imagining—and, in terms of Bernard, a form of “blanched memory”—suggests another depth in the kind of transformative rhetoric which Engh rightly sees as shaping these sermons: this insight into the role that the “blanched memory” (Coleman) came to play in preparing Bernard’s monastic hearers or readers to “breach boundaries” of gender opens the way to what Engh rightly sees as the manner in which the available religious resources Bernard had at hand became the means by which he confuses and reorganizes gendered experience.

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