

CONFERENCE ON CHRISTIANITY AND LITERATURE
TEXT OF THE CITATION OF THE 2010 BOOK AWARD

We are pleased to award the 2010 Book of the Year Citation to *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, written by Sarah McNamer and published by the University of Pennsylvania Press. McNamer boldly combines recent work on the history of emotion with a close study of medieval devotional texts in order to challenge dominant paradigms of the emergence of literary-theological compassion in the middle ages. She reads the literature of affective devotion as a script for a gendered performance that emerges alongside a developing legal culture in England in which women found it necessary to demonstrate compassion as legal proof of their status as *sponsa Christi*. In her own words, the book “presents a new reading of medieval Christian compassion as a historically contingent, ideologically charged, and performatively constituted emotion—and one that was, in the broad period considered here (ca. 1050-1530), insistently gendered as feminine” (3). This striking thesis is explored through six chapters which masterfully balance close attention to text with cultural analysis and theoretical framework. McNamer imaginatively and persuasively redirects analysis of the medieval devotional text to focus on the reader, arguing that even when these texts reach mixed audiences, the implied female reader continues to model for *every* reader what it means to read compassionately: “like a woman.”

After a wide-ranging introduction covering compassion as a historically conditioned expression of culture and meditative text as affective script, McNamer begins in the first chapter by tackling a critical conundrum about relating the two seemingly disparate halves of the thirteenth-century *Wooing of the Lord*, a connection she makes by demonstrating how the compassionate meditation of the alliterative prayer’s first part relates to the marital affection of the *sponsa Christi* in the work’s second half. It is thus clear from the first chapter that McNamer’s theoretical approach is to have solid interpretive payoff. In her second chapter, McNamer challenges long-standing assumptions about the origins of affective devotion, proposing that, while the tradition may originate with men such as John of Fecamp, Anselm of Canterbury, and Peter Damian, it is actively shaped by a female readership which exerts influence over the production of the text in anticipation of

occupying the *I* as a performance position. In the next chapter McNamer proposes that the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* originates from an Italian version which was certainly written for, and perhaps written by, a woman. Skillfully tracing changes introduced by a later redactor intent on diminishing the prominence of compassion in the text, she illuminates a growing tension between male and female forms of devotion in the middle ages. In the fourth chapter, McNamer examines the feminization of the reader in medieval English devotional texts by Richard Rolle and others. She shows how the female characters in passion narratives serve as mediators for the compassion of the male characters and how the affective script enables male readers to experience feminine compassion. In the next chapter McNamer broadens the perspective to examine how compassionate depictions in devotional texts of the cruelties suffered by Christ, rather than contributing to a widespread desensitization as has been often argued, may have actually helped arouse a revival of pity encouraged by Mary's lament for her son. In the later portions of the book, McNamer traces the widening gap between female devotion and male readers, suggesting, for instance, in the sixth chapter that "the late Passion lyrics register forms of category crisis or anxious masculinity—mixed feelings that can be traced chiefly to orthodox lay men, caught as they were between increasing cultural pressures to perform straightened forms of masculinity in the world while rendering feminized feelings to the suffering Christ in their private devotions" (177). The result she argues is a "masculinization" of the Middle English Passion lyric.

The richness of this study lies in the astonishingly wide range of reference that supports its argument. *Affective Meditation* offers fresh insights in a large number of disciplines, as McNamer moves deftly among the histories of emotion, law, women, and reading—not to mention Christianity and literature—and transforms the conversation in each field. A wealth of scholarship stands behind her arguments, from generous reading in modern theories of performance and emotion, to painstaking philological investigation of manuscript traditions. Fundamentally, however, the arguments rest on meticulous and sensitive close readings; by paying close attention to the affective realities of the meditational texts that are her subject, McNamer is able to reorient the context in which we understand them, and ultimately to reassess their meanings, as well as their histories.