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The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence

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the speaker of a willfully incoherent discourse that resisted the demand for coherent narrative being imposed on the unruly countryside: in the witchhunt, for example, women accused of sorcery were required to produce a story that agreed with proto-modernist preoccupations with narrative coherence. Benson's meticulously-documented text makes a convincing case for these main points. *Money and Magic in Montaigne* is thus an important contribution to Montaigne studies, as well as a compelling intellectual history of a crucial moment in the development of modernity.

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Ross Fuller. *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence*. (SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions.) Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. xii + 353 pp. \$16.95. ISBN: 0-79-1422437.

As Ross Fuller notes when introducing the *Devotio Moderna*, historians have mistakenly "equated it with almost every intellectual and religious trend of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (82). Long a victim of the search for the Reformation's roots, this spiritual movement has recently been reassessed independently as humanist or Erasmian. Fuller's long, detailed, and passionate work is intended to contribute to this revision. Unfortunately, it is far less convincing.

Fuller begins by situating the Brethren in the context of Christian monasticism and pre-Reformation attempts to purify the meditative Christianity that he sees monasticism as representing. Opposing the perspective that monasticism reflects pure retreat from the world, he suggests that it acted as a catalyst for integration into a broader World "founded . . . upon the inward freeing and gathering of the energy of attention from its automatic and habitual dispersion in the repetitive associative thought, shallow emotional reactivity and isolated sensations of the self" (xviii). The ability of monasticism to overcome these flaws accounted for monasticism's vitality in late medieval Europe, although not in a form that Saint Benedict would have recognized. For Fuller, the Brethren and their "New Devotion" were the successors to Benedict, forming a monastic community and fulfilling human potential for communion with the divine. This connection between secular and spiritual needs explains the appeal of the Brethren. In the second half of the book, Fuller examines the theoretical underpinning and the practice of the New Devotion in England. In so doing, he stresses the role of the Syon Fathers in promoting a "new" piety through both their example and writings describing pious works and meditative methods. Of particular interest to this reader was the continuation of the Brethren's influence into the 1550s, long after the beginning of the English Reformation.

Fuller's work has several qualities that strongly recommend it. It is clearly the product of detailed research into early printed works about the

Brethren. It provides many examples of English spiritual concerns in the century before the Reformation and during its beginnings. Finally, in stressing the binding role of the monastic condition and “religion” (*re-ligare*), he overcomes any tendency to separate monasticism from the world, refusing to slide into facile arguments based on the “worldliness” of monks to make the appeal of the Brethren even more apparent. Despite these qualities, however, I found this book highly disturbing and frustrating. Fuller’s asides, interests, and even at times his analytical framework tell more about his personal quest for spiritual fulfillment than about the Brethren. In a book ostensibly analyzing the influence of the Brethren and New Devotion, what they actually were — their foundation, original values, and spiritual sources — are defined only in chapter four. Although Grootte, Radewijns, and their followers established their order in Windesheim, Fuller’s focus is predominantly English, with most of his main primary sources being English, and Grootte himself, not to mention Kempis, playing a minor role. While concentration on England could yield many useful and interesting results, that book is not what is promised in Fuller’s introduction. Given the book’s title and themes, reorganization is needed to highlight the New Devotion’s place earlier within Fuller’s analysis; a more focused use of authors should have been made to reflect the wide variety of sources found in his bibliography, and an expanded discussion of the New Devotion’s effect on pious practices is needed. The broad generalizations about the human condition and spiritual needs that almost inevitably follow detailed readings further undermine a book that does not deliver what it promises and frustrates while delivering what it has.

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John O’Brien, ed. *(Ré)Interprétations: Etudes sur le seizième siècle*. (Michigan Romance Studies, 15.) Ann Arbor: Michigan Romance Studies, 1995. 278 pp. \$15. ISBN: 0-939730-14-6.

This volume contains ten essays (two in French, eight in English) framed by John O’Brien’s introduction and Terence Cave’s “Afterwords.” The contributions explore a wide range of texts from critical perspectives including deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, and reader-oriented approaches. The first five contributors write on poetry; the latter five investigate less-canonical prose writing. The unifying theme of the work is announced by the “Ré” of the title, for the emphasis is on Renaissance literature’s seemingly unending power to spawn new interpretations. Not surprisingly, the words “difference,” “uncertainty,” “identity,” and “other” play a prominent role in these studies.

Examining Jean Lemaire de Belges’s use of metaphor, David Cowling attempts to reaffirm the poet’s special position among the *rhétoriciens* by