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Book Review: Sabine Lardon. L'Écriture de la méditation chez Jean de Sponde.

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BOOK REVIEW

Sabine Lardon. *L'Écriture de la méditation chez Jean de Sponde*. (Études et essais sur la Renaissance, 19). Paris, Champion, 1998. 314 pp.

Sabine Lardon's monograph commands attention for the precision with which it analyses Sponde's rhetorical technique in his *Méditations sur les Pseaumes*. Basing the need for her book on the critics' preference for writing about Sponde's lyric offerings rather than his prose, Lardon produces a study that yields great insight into Sponde's adaptation of language and form within the context of biblical exegesis. Though Lardon does not state so explicitly, the text relies on new critical and reader-response theories for its methodological perspective, as well as aspects of structuralism and semiotics. Divided into two parts, the first entitled "La Parole méditative," and the second, "Poétique et rhétorique," the book is at its strongest when demonstrating how subtle modulations in Sponde's grammar and lexicon create multiple levels of discourse between the speaker and reader and the speaker and God, as well as between God and the reader. The intricate union between the syntactic and semantic elements of Sponde's prose is responsible for what Lardon terms the overall "coherence" of the *Méditations* with respect to style, imagery, and argumentation. Sponde's "argumentative strategy" is aimed primarily at the miscreant, who must overcome doubt, as well as hostility toward God in order to convert to Christianity and receive grace. The implicit contention is that the endless "complexity" of Sponde's language and reasoning, which mirrors the boundless nature of God's intelligence, prompts the reader to recognize the infinity of human error and thereby submit

to divine "correction." The speaker, whom Lardon describes as the "meditant," thus becomes a mediator in the devotional process. Lardon's atomistic approach, and her conclusions about the speaker and reader, are convincing if for no other reason than that they show in exhaustive detail the paradigms Sponde establishes in order to give formal and thematic unity to his work. While it is clearly not Lardon's intention to go beyond Sponde's text, her conceptualization of Sponde's project seems at times overly narrow for a contemporary public. A larger contextual framework would have aided in outlining the originality of the *Méditations*. For example, readers should know why Sponde chose the Psalms (and indeed these particular Psalms), instead of the Gospels as his point of entry into the genre of the devotional essay. Greater comparative analysis would have enhanced the study, especially a discussion of Sponde's relationship to other Calvinist authors, among them d'Aubigné and Bèze, who also wrote on the Psalms. The comparison could have been extended to Catholic commentary on the Psalms by poets such as Chassignet and La Ceppède, and supplemented by at least some treatment of the Catholic meditative tradition. Nonetheless, Lardon's work makes a valuable contribution to Spondian studies, and will no doubt help renew interest in baroque devotional literature.

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