Robert Archer. *The Problem of Woman in Late-Medieval Hispanic Literature.* (Colección Támesis, Serie A, Monografias.) Tamesis, 2005. pp. 227.

In his book, Archer sets out to discern the question of what renders woman as problematic in late medieval Hispanic authors' ponderings. Under the umbrella of "Hispanic Literature," Archer includes traditionally canonical texts written in Castilian by authors such as Alfonso Martínez de Toledo, Diego de San Pedro, Juan de Flores, or Álvaro de Luna, among many others. Archer explores many different genres, ranging from didactic literature, conduct books, humor and satire, both blatantly misogynistic texts and open defenses of women in both prose and verse. The book draws on Archer's thorough expertise in Catalan texts, of which he includes such well-known authors as Bernat Metge, Jaume Roig, Joan Roís de Corella, or Francesco Eiximenis. The book also studies many other writers, displaying an impressive breadth in its ability to show relationships among many texts, including those by Vincent Ferrer, that contribute to the understanding of misogynistic discourse, even if they have not always been examined alongside the canonical texts pertaining to that tradition. An insightful methodological approach that stems from the inclusive use of these traditions promotes the further exploration of intertextual overlapping in literatures that were in constant contact, but are often studied separately. Analyses of Vincent Ferrer, Pere Torroella (or Pedro Torrellas), and others effectively exemplify a transcultural textual tradition of misogyny. But the book does not stop there in its wide aim, as it also engages related traditions, such as Provençal and Galician-Portuguese poetry, and reaches to the early modern period by a thoughtful consideration of the writings of Juan Luis Vives. As such, the book's intrinsic value lies in its ability to scrutinize sources and to summon an impressive array of texts, both in defending and slandering women. Because many of these works have not been

translated into English, readers not readily familiar with the original versions will appreciate the close textual readings that are systematically the object of the book's narrative. The book stands as a masterly piece of scholarship and a solid exposition of the many textual traditions dealing with the nature of women. Archer reads these texts with a sophisticated discourse that reads the primary texts with theoretically sound methodologies.

Beyond this integrated study of different literary traditions, the book considers the long-standing question of the nature of the debate on women that experienced a heightened interest in the second half of the fifteenth century. Archer questions the very idea that there was a debate at all, but rather sees clusters of texts that deal with both a flexible and shared conceptualization of the "notion of woman." The pliability of this notion and the extreme depiction of female otherness engender a range of positions in a wide spectrum of attitudes serving specific purposes in the context of each author's environment and period. Here Archer joins recent new approaches to the topic, notably by Barbara Weissberger and Julian Weiss, emphasizing the homosocial nature of the discourse on women and its relation to the gendered power structures of the time. A conclusion that a reader of Archer's book may draw is the realization that it is this very flexibility of the discourse on woman that helps not so much to undermine misogyny, though it may be thus used, but to help it survive, a factor of its being embedded and nurtured by patriarchy itself. The problematic consideration of the question of woman may indeed be seen, if not as a debate, at least as a male forum where: clerics can malign women as a source of temptation; legally minded writers may muse on her rights, or the advisability of curtailing her participation in the different social and political spheres; teachers can chastise female students for such vices as the stereotypical female garrulity; and courtiers can vie to show their civility by championing women or boast a caustic humor at their expense. In fact, these texts, when seen as individual rhetorical acts, may

strike the reader as having an operative "male author function" that can be predicated from the authors' positioning in relation to women. In this vein, one question that arises after reading about the carefully studied male authors is that which concerns women's voices. The book's focus on male literary traditions keeps moving the book toward a study of the representation of woman in literary texts with all its inherent and well-delineated complexities. The story cannot be wholly told, though, until the texts can be engaged in a dialogue with female authors on the topic or, even further, with the very idea of female authorship.

In this vein, the book would have benefited from a study of the fifteenth-century Spanish writer Teresa de Cartagena and her long defense of women and their right to authorship in her well-known *Admiraçion operum Dey*, and, in Catalan, from a look at Isabel de Villena's *Vita Christi*. A consideration of the work and context of other female authors, such as Leonor López de Córdoba, Isabel Suaris, or Florencia Pinar, as well as the study of writing queens such as Violant de Bar or Isabel of Castile, among others, would enrich and perhaps help refocus the question at hand. Their at times subtle and often open positioning in the intellectual and moral arena vis-à-vis a male counterpart would help situate male-authored texts in a wider politics of contextualized discourse. Among some of the important questions stemming from Archer's study is that of the relationship of the apparent growth of the number of female authors as a concomitant phenomenon to that of the "defenses" of women and the rise of a female monarch in Castile. Were women on their way to a Renaissance, or was this intensifying discourse a sign of the heightened problematization of woman, both as a notion and as a social and political agent? With solid erudition and keen understanding of multi-layered literary traditions, Archer's book has laid the ground for just such inquiries.

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