women. The Man of Law’s spatial
vacillations at tale’s end mirror his
ideological vacillations, his switching
back-and-forth between imperial and
national fantasies of England.

Lavezzo’s fifth and final chapter,
“‘From the very ends of the earth’: Medieval Geography and Wolsey’s
Processions,” crosses conventional
period boundaries to consider the
spatial implications of the career of
Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. As Lavezzo
notes, “More than any Englishman
before or after him, Wolsey tested
just how much an inhabitant of
the margin of Christendom could
garner the privileges of its Roman
center” (116). England’s marginal
exceptionalism was called into
question by European exploration,
an ideologically-destabilizing spatial
expansion that Lavezzo likens to
Wolsey’s equally disturbing violation
of class boundaries (exemplified
in the chapter by his controversial
processions). The chapter contains an
excellent discussion of John Skelton’s
attack in Speke Parrot on Wolsey’s
arriviste excess, one that distinguishes
Skelton’s paradisical Parrot from the
real parrots imported from the New
World. Lavezzo ends the chapter
(and her book) with an account of
Wolsey’s attempts to appropriate
centralized Roman privilege for
marginal England, a strategy that fails
on the personal level but is ultimately
adopted by Henry VIII during the
Reformation.

These short chapter synopses do
not do justice to the complexity
of Lavezzo’s arguments—yet at the
same time Angels on the Edge of
the World remains compulsively
readable. I enjoyed the book even
as it transformed my understanding
of center–periphery relations in the
medieval and early modern periods.
Lavezzo’s convincing case for the
simultaneity of marginal and central
fantasies of English nationhood
complicates what is conventionally
seen as a binary. Indeed, the highest
compliment I can pay her book is to
acknowledge the effect it has already
had on my own research into medieval
and early modern English regionalism.
I expect that many other scholars will
have similar epiphanies after reading
Angels on the Edge of the World.

Robert Barrett
University of Illinois,
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R. Howard Bloch, The
Anonymous Marie de France.
University of Chicago Press,

Howard Bloch’s most recent
book, The Anonymous Marie
de France, elegantly illuminates
not only the work of this mysterious
author but also the twelfth-century
sociolinguistic milieu that informs the
three texts that have been definitively
attributed to her, the Fables, the Lais,
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Bloch opens his introduction with
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provides us with so much—and yet so little; this fact, rather than restricting our understanding of the possibilities of her work, rather broadens the scope of our interpretations. Bloch speculates that Marie’s writing is at once a symptom of social change and a presentation of a new morality based on the responsibility inherent in the free will of the individual, and thus attributes to Marie “the birth of literature” (23), which is moreover a feminine literature in the way it “negotiates between individual and community” (24).

Launching the body of his book (Chapter 1, “The Word Aventure and the Adventure of Words”) with Marie’s obsession with beginnings in the Prologue of her Lais in an adroit maneuver that smoothly introduces the framing network of aventures that support the narratives, Bloch reminds the reader of the fluid nature of the word aventure and underscores the complexity of Marie’s deceptively simple Lais. Indeed, the “etymological murkiness” (30) of the lai itself stands as a contradiction, a sign of complicated symbols in a written rendering of what was most likely an aural performance. Because of Marie’s anxiety about origins and (mis)interpretation of truths, memory and remembering in the Lais become the moral duty of the writer, a process of the reassemblage of dispersed or fragmented material in danger of being forgotten by future generations. Thus the theme of Bloch’s second chapter, “If Words Could Kill: The Lais and Fatal Speech,” is an extension of these anxieties at play in the Prologue, of Marie’s fascination with the possibilities of language and its intrinsic multiplicity. He concludes that the Lais “are in some deep sense about language as a flawed, uncontrollable and sometimes fatal medium” (79). Indeed, writing itself can be seen as a betrayal of voice, an idea that Bloch explores in Chapter 3 (“The Voice in the Tomb of the Lais”) as he details Marie’s emphasis on the ways in which orality is drawn into writing, an entombment of the living voice in the written word, where she exhibits a marked contrast between the moral responsibility to speak that she discusses in the Prologue and the danger of speaking that is demonstrated in the lais.

In Chapter 4 (“Beastly Talk: The Fables”), Bloch observes that the Fables appear to double the Lais, since the major themes of obsession with beginnings and memory, and with language as difficult and flawed, are echoed in the Fables, as well as the issues surrounding translation or rewriting of material and its inherent potential for self-transformation. The subject of the suspiciousness of speech acts is carried over into Chapter 5 (“Changing Places: The Fables and Social Mobility at the Court of Henry II”), where Bloch points to the prevalence of animal imagery in twelfth-century writing, of the descriptions of the “bestial struggle” (154) of court politics, and the linkage of envy with animal appetite, as a dominant theme of the Fables that underscores the growing importance of the urban court in Anglo-Norman society and the anxiety that resulted provides us with so much—and yet so little; this fact, rather than restricting our understanding of the possibilities of her work, rather broadens the scope of our interpretations. Bloch speculates that Marie’s writing is at once a symptom of social change and a presentation of a new morality based on the responsibility inherent in the free will of the individual, and thus attributes to Marie “the birth of literature” (23), which is moreover a feminine literature in the way it “negotiates between individual and community” (24).

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from the radically changing social conditions and the emergence of a professional administrative class during the development of the royal bureaucracy. These changes brought about new ways of achieving social success based on merit and personal worth, especially through education. Bloch continues this line of reasoning in Chapter 6 (“Marie’s Fables and the Rise of the Monarchic State”) when he examines the importance of the individual in the Fables, especially the efficacy of free will in determining the course of an individual when reason, through intellect and will, can overcome animal instincts. He emphasizes the potential of ethical choice in the Fables, and argues that this factor coupled with the urbanization and organization of the Anglo-Norman monarchy, especially in the area of legal reform, calls into question the feudal traditions of wealth, family, and recourse to force to resolve conflicts.

Bloch’s exploration of the Espurgatoire Seint Patriz in Chapter 7 (“A Medieval ‘Best Seller’”) situates the poem in the emerging medieval tradition of Purgatory and courtly literature, noting in particular its resemblance to the Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes as “a ‘purgatorial sojourn’ in the mode of a Grail romance” (217). He pulls some of the most significant thematic threads of the previous two texts together with those of the Espurgatoire in order, in Chapter 8 (“Between Fable and Romance”), to position the poem both between Marie’s two earlier works and between two cultures (clerical and lay) in what he considers to be Marie’s attempt “to resolve that which remains incomplete, troubling, and untenable in her other two works” (242). In his final chapter (“The Anglo-Norman Conquest of Ireland and the Colonization of the Afterlife”), Bloch looks at the Espurgatoire through a postcolonial lens as part of the “civilizing mission of the English” (270) with Henry II’s conquest of Ireland, especially considering the poem’s “ideological sustenance of the administrative institutions of the Angevin monarchy” (286). Bloch’s ultimate conclusion, that the complexity of Marie’s work is ultimately observable in its resonance through the centuries and the variety of ways we can “read” the unknowable Marie and her writing, “whose ‘surplus of sense’ is, finally, inexhaustible” (320), will most likely meet with little protest by those who have journeyed with him through Marie’s captivating texts.

Bloch’s compelling arguments about the corpus of Marie de France’s work as we know it today are, like Marie’s writing itself, broad in scope and have potential for further investigation. By studying the three texts together, he is able to trace the major themes that echo through each poem and even Anglo-Norman society at large, situating her works in the varied milieux that inform them and are informed by them. His diverse approaches to the literature, ranging from philology to New Historicism to postcolonial studies, virtually guarantee that readers both expert and novice coming to Marie’s
writing will find something of value to enlighten their understanding of this intriguing writer and the radically changing world she inhabited.

Wendy Marie Hoofnagle
University of Connecticut

Barbara K. Altmann and R. Barton Palmer, ed.

With the publication of An Anthology of Medieval Love Debate Poetry, the University Press of Florida adds an exciting contribution to its growing roster of scholarship on and editions of medieval texts. This anthology collects and translates five lesser-known but important poems by the major medieval authors Guillaume de Machaut, Geoffrey Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, and Alain Chartier. Both Altmann and Palmer are well-qualified to translate this volume. Altmann edited The Love Debate Poems of Christine de Pizan for the University Press of Florida (1998). In addition to The Love Debate Poems, Altmann also co-edited Christine de Pizan: A Casebook (2003). R. Barton Palmer has edited and translated many Old French works, including five poems by Guillaume de Machaut for the Garland Library of Medieval Literature (1984-1993). The Anthology brings together five “acknowledged masterpieces” by the four poets as exemplars of a tradition defined by its preoccupation with “questions of love and gender” (1). The introduction traces the love debate genre from its origins in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Old French and Latin débats du clerc et du chevalier, in which ladies consider whether knights or clerics make better lovers, and in thirteenth-century jeu-parti poems, where two speakers dispute over questions of love and ask a judge to render a verdict. The introduction also addresses the influence of courtly romances and the Roman de la rose on Guillaume de Machaut’s creation of what the editors consider to be the standard form in the middle of the fourteenth century.

The collection begins with Guillaume’s Le Jugement dou roy de Bebaingne in which a knight and a lady ask who is worse off, a woman whose lover betrayed her or a man whose lover betrayed him? The king of Bohemia ultimately determines that the knight suffers more pain, setting the scene for the sequel, Le Jugement dou roy de Navarre, which appears here after the former text, as it does in the manuscript tradition. In Le Jugement dou roy de Navarre, Guillaume himself participates in the debate, when a lady (later revealed to be Bonneürté, translated as “Happiness” or “Good Fortune”) accuses him of deliberately offending women in the earlier debate’s conclusion since writing will find something of value to enlighten their understanding of this intriguing writer and the radically changing world she inhabited.

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