entiation. Since the book is effectively about affective [female] relationships, a form of "friendship," some reference to the recent literature on friendship—which has indeed concentrated on male friendship as largely instrumental—might have been considered, and (at page 133) the episode of the knights might have been associated with Ami et Amile.

Such minor suggestions do not detract at all from what is an astonishing evocation of the experience of the urban poor, more particularly female singletons and how the personal resources available to them assisted their survival in times of deep personal crisis. Where it is at its most innovative is in attempting to assess how [clerical] discourse (ideology) and "reality" (experience) interacted. We are familiar with the thesis that urban centers expanded through immigration and that that influx produced a large margin of subsistence, the "underside" of demographic urban expansion. What we now understand more clearly than before is how the medieval urban poor managed and the place of affective female social relationships in this milieu.

—Dave Postles, University of Leicester


2 Ronald C. Finucane, Miracles and Pilgrims. Popular Beliefs in Medieval England (repr. London: Macmillan, 1995), indicated the potential of this material for issues outside the process of canonization.


4 The preferred phrase at the Social History Society annual conference at the University of Leicester in Jan. 2003 was "life-course."


Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees introduce this interdisciplinary volume, which first took conceptual shape at the 1999 Fordham University Medieval Studies Conference, by quoting Torril Moi’s reflections on Simone de Beauvoir and the relations between the universal and the particular in the question of what a woman is (1). “Woman’s” contested status as an anomaly or as an accepted member of humanity indeed lies at the heart of the medieval, Renaissance, and modern debates on gender. Each of the eleven essays presents an original approach to the “woman question,” exploring a particular instance in which the question was formed, presenting the medieval and Renaissance
discussions of “woman” from a variety of perspectives that bring them into dialogue with twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical discourses.

In the spirit of broadening our understanding of the pan-European debate genre, none of the essays focus exclusively on Christine de Pizan, whose unique role as a woman engaged in a debate overwhelmingly staged and conducted by men has often been interpreted as foundational and has overshadowed the development of the debate prior to the querelle de la ROSA and in other medieval literatures (2-3).

In “The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and the Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England,” Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing explore Anglo-Saxon wisdom literature, riddles and epic poetry to find prescriptions for women’s roles in society in a literary tradition generally considered “not a promising place to think about sex” (25). They argue that, while the literature of the Anglo-Saxon period does not follow the patterns of debate described for later medieval literatures, its structures of knowledge, particularly of knowledge of and about women, contribute to a better understanding of the later, formal debate literature.

E. Ann Matter further opens the field of the “debate” by examining the lack of debate in medieval theology on woman’s creation in “The Undebated Debate: Gender and the Image of God in Medieval Theology.” The contradictory interpretations that simultaneously affirmed woman’s equal creation in the image of God and woman’s inferior creation as a companion for Adam made it possible to ground women’s spiritual self-assertion in theological authority, but as Matter concludes, “any time women were thought to transgress their status, they could be forcibly reminded of their secondary status in the order of creation” (51).

Alcuin Blamires, whose The Case for Women in Medieval Culture is a frequent reference throughout the collection, offers additional terminology useful for the study of the debate in “Refiguring the ‘Scandalous Excess’ of Medieval Woman: The Wife of Bath and Liberality.” In his analysis of the Wife of Bath’s sexual largesse, he coins the term “redoctrination” to describe a rhetorical strategy frequently used in defenses of women, “whereby medieval defenders of women translated alleged moral deficits of women into moral credits” (58). He draws a parallel between the Wife of Bath’s defense of feminine liberality and Hélène Cixous’s meditations on “giving” to posit the long history of “redoctrination” of the misogynist accusation of women’s sexual excess (68-9).

In “Beyond Debate: Gender and Play in Old French Courtly Fiction,” Roberta Krueger traces the constructions of gender identity and performance in three works, Guigemar, Aucassin and Nicolette, and the Roman de Silence. Using Judith Butler’s now classic analysis of gender, Krueger reads courtly fictions as a “textual laboratory in which the gender roles of elite culture were articulated, examined, and put to the test” (79). While none of the works completely overturns traditional ideas about male and female roles in society, Krueger
argues that their persistent “interrogation of cultural conventions, codes and norms” reveals a high level of self-consciousness about how gender is constructed through language and performance (91).

In “Thinking through Gender in Late Medieval German Literature,” Ann Marie Ramussen observes that the traditional categories structuring scholarship have tended to render the pervasiveness of the debate on women invisible in the German context. She analyzes the compilational strategies used in the transmission of Minneredem, or discourses of love, to demonstrate that the debate was in fact a prominent facet of late-medieval German courtly literature.

Karen Pratt’s “The Strains of Defense: The Many Voices in Jean LeFèvre’s Livre de Leesce,” returns to the formal debate on women in French medieval literature. She reexamines LeFèvre’s supposed refutation of his own infamously misogynist Lamentations de Mathélous, observing that his playful use of feminine personification and voice calls the work’s stated intentions of defending women into question. Helen Solterer also revisits formal debate literature in “The Freedoms of Fiction for Gender in Premodern France,” tracing the evolving meanings and resonances of “franchise” in order to analyze the controversy provoked by Alain Chartier’s “Belle dame sans merci,” a figure who claims her right to accept or reject suitors freely. In her analysis of a controversy generally dismissed as an inconsequential literary game, Solterer, like Krueger, argues that fiction can be a transformative force that provides a space for experimentation about gender.

In the “Debate about Women in Trecento Florence,” Pamela Benson observes that making the case for women necessarily involved engaging in debate, acknowledging and responding to the well-known and authoritative arguments against women. Focusing on vernacular works advocating practical improvements in women’s domestic lives, she traces changes in the ideology of profeminine writing that parallel changes in political systems. Shifting focus to painting in fifteenth-century Italy, Margaret Franklin’s “A Woman’s Place: Visualizing the Feminine Ideal in the Courts and Communes of Renaissance Italy,” analyzes two portrait cycles featuring illustrious men and women as a reminder that the debate “was not confined to the written word” (190). The portraits depict female and male virtue in the context of political duties and performances. The relative action or passivity of the heroic figures portrayed comments on idealized gender roles for citizens and courtiers.

The final two essays, Barbara Weissberger’s “‘Deceitful Sects’: The Debate about Women in the Age of Isabel the Catholic,” and Julian Weiss’s “¿Qué demandamos de las mugeres?: Forming the Debate about Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain (With a Baroque Response),” bring an important current of hispanomedieval studies to the attention of other medievalists. Weissberger underscores the relevance of debate literature during the reign of Isabel the Catholic, a figure whose power engendered anxiety about the traditional definitions of gendered political roles. Weiss also situates the debate within a broader context of political and national self-fashioning, highlighting a point made implicitly throughout the collection, that debating the nature
of woman is “inextricably intertwined with a range of other ideologies that structure social castes and classes, notions of race, morality or medicine, or such practices as courtliness and the literary” (242).

This is an informative, thought-provoking, and enjoyable volume that successfully widens the scope of study of the debate on women and gender, making an important contribution to gender studies and to medieval and Renaissance studies. Throughout the volume the authors point to the significance of the debate as more than a courtly game in which the misogynist side is merely the parroted repetition of inherited authorities. As the essays in Gender in Debate consistently show, the variety and frequency of works that strive to define “Woman” underscores the fluidity and adaptability of the debate, which could serve patriarchal interests, contribute to gendered, courtly self-fashioning, and also, if only tentatively, imagine new kinds of female subjectivity.

—Emily C. Francomano, Georgetown University


On the first page of Nancy F. Partner’s Introduction to Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1993) she notes that “feminist scholarship has restored to the Middle Ages the substantial reality that human societies consist of two sexes.” In the decade since Partner’s volume appeared, scholars interested in art patronage during the medieval period have continued to amass material documenting or suggesting that women, as well as men, commissioned works of art and have explored the varied meanings these works held for their audiences. This material has appeared for the most part as isolated journal articles or book chapters, so Loveday Lewes Gee’s study comes as a welcome, more broadly-conceived examination of the relationship between women and art patronage in England over the course of about 150 years.

Gee’s book incorporates material about specific patrons and specific monuments into an exploration of the process of patronage. Her Introduction (pp. 1-6) provides an extremely brief overview of pertinent research, including more theoretical studies that address medieval spirituality and gender issues, such as Caroline Bynum’s Jesus as Mother (1982). Chapter One introduces her readers to the women who people her study (“Noble and Generous Ladies,” pp. 7-24). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 address the reasons these noble ladies might have had for their patronage of various types of monuments, such as monastic foundations, castles, tombs, manuscripts, and seals, all under the general rubric of “Motives for Patronage” (pp. 25-72). Chapters 6 and 7, “Artistic Choices: Architecture” and “Artistic Choices: Sepulchral Monuments,” address the appearance and style of some of these monuments (pp. 91-122). In Chapter 5, “Decisions, Endowments, and Documents” (pp. 73-92), documentation of the relationships between a few patrons and their commissions allows Gee to look at the practical aspects of certain types of patronage, particularly religious foundations (the abbeys at Lacock, Sweetheart, and Denny) and