of Ladies, Greene includes Pizan’s poems related to the debate. She also includes one of Gerson’s sermons in which he demonstrates his ability to write a sophisticated allegory in opposition to the themes of The Rose. Greene argues that Gerson is the most talented writer of the group.

The Romance of the Rose continues to overshadow this fascinating medieval debate about its merits. Greene’s edition will bring the debate to a wider, French-speaking audience and will open up continued scholarly work. In December 2006, Routledge published Debating the Roman de la Rose, edited by Christine McWebb. This critical anthology with translations into English contains many of the same letters and documents as Greene’s edition. The appearance of these two books in the same year speaks to the importance of this early example of literary criticism.

Elizabeth A. Hubble
University of Montana


The ritual of churching, the liturgical ceremony which concluded the “lying-in” month that followed the birth of a child has, as Paula Rieder notes in the introduction to her book, received very little scholarly attention. On the Purification of Women is, therefore, an extremely welcome addition to studies on the history of lay women’s lives in the later Middle Ages. Although Rieder admits that her original idea, to examine the ritual in the early and high Middle Ages, was hampered by “thin or nonexistent” material (7), she has identified a rich collection of archival sources for twelfth- to fifteenth-century France, especially for Normandy where the custom of churching was particularly popular. The study thus offers a “full picture of the liturgical and social celebrations of churching in France [. . .] in the fifteenth century” (7), directly complementing the more abundant studies of the post-Reformation rite.

Previous analyses of churching have focused either on the
historical and liturgical aspects of the rite or on the purification-versus-celebration debate that characterized the ceremony in the post-Reformation period. Studying English practices in particular, scholars like William Coster have interpreted churching as evidence of the low status of women within a Christian, patriarchal, society. By looking back at the history and development of churching, Rieder demonstrates how such debates came about. Most importantly, she shows that the ritual cannot be reduced to binary oppositions or simply to the subjugation of women. Rieder explores churching as a site where power is contested not only between men and women, but also between women and the celibate clergy.

Rieder's text begins with an analysis of the origins of churching in France before the twelfth century. She addresses the tendency of existing scholarship to explain churching as a simple continuation of the Jewish purification rites contained in the Bible or as a custom deriving from celebration of the Virgin's purification at Candlemas. Examining many different sources, particularly evidence from synodal statutes and penitentials, Rieder argues instead that "[t]he origins of churching in medieval France were [...] the result of many factors: ideas and attitudes about sexuality developed in the first five centuries of Christianity, perhaps indigenous Germanic customs married to the beliefs of Christian missionaries, adaptations of the Mosaic purity codes, and the invisible efforts of women" (37). The second chapter deals with the redefinition of churching by French ecclesiastics between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. During this period the focus of the ceremony was the recognition of a woman's status as wife and mother rather than purification per se. This is interesting for demonstrating not only the value that the church placed upon marriage and legitimacy, but also how churching was used to marginalize, or reinforce the marginalization of, those women who did not conform to sanctioned marriage. Rieder shows that the value attached to churching by society and by mothers themselves led unmarried women to seek out the rite, either by asking for special permission or by traveling to another parish where they were not known.

In the third chapter, Rieder shows that although the Church made churching a privilege of the legitimately married woman, the language of churching continued
to emphasize the superiority of the clergy’s celibacy. This implies that churching played an important part not only in maintaining the role of women in late medieval society, but also the role of the clergy. Chapter 4 explores how the priest’s offering of his stole to lead the woman into the church (in order not to touch her) maintained his physical and spiritual superiority. The different pollutions that churching was thought to cleanse—blood, semen, sin of lust—reveal the close relationship between scriptural and medical understandings of bodily fluids and women’s bodies. For the clergy, churching was associated with sexual pollution and bodily impurity. Churching offered “a solution, temporary and incomplete, to the problem of women’s bodies and, at the same time, [reaffirmed] the divine plan for the salvation of humanity in both body and soul” (79).

Rieder goes on to explore in depth the multiple meanings that churching engendered from the point of view of the different participants in the ceremony besides the clergy. Particularly interesting is how churching appears to have reinforced traditional gender roles at the same time that its subversive aspects potentially empowered the women who participated in it. Developing ideas explored in an earlier article, Rieder shows that the churching ceremony singled out the new mother, brought her into a privileged position in the church sanctuary, and celebrated her survival of a physically dangerous event.

Chapter 6 examines the ritual from the point of view of the women themselves, exploring the links with the Virgin’s Purification in the Temple. Rieder proposes that the frequency with which Mary is surrounded by other women in Purification scenes in late medieval manuscripts reveals that the churching was a “women’s event” in which ordinary women were brought closer to the Virgin Mary (127). Unfortunately the images of the Purification are used in an illustrative capacity without being analyzed on their own terms. For instance, Rieder notes that “larger crowds [at the Purification] are found in early printed books of hours intended for use by the bourgeoisie,” but the footnote refers to the “unusual” image of the Purification in the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry, which is neither printed nor was made for the bourgeoisie. Referencing this image from such a famous manuscript begs a series of other questions not only about images of churching, but
also about manuscript production which are, granted, not within the remit of Rieder's study. Nevertheless, more details on the ownership of the manuscripts discussed on pp. 125-127 and reproduction of the Purification images under consideration would have been welcome.

The final chapter looks at the celebratory aspects of churching, notably the feast that followed the ceremony, la feste des relevailles. Rieder shows that whereas this feast honored the new mother, it was also an event where men and women shared the same space. It could even become a space in which a man could celebrate his masculinity: the birth of an heir and the return to sexual relations with his wife, which the churching ceremony authorized. Thus late medieval churching and its festivities “offered something to everyone and, more importantly, helped to create and support essential social identities and the patriarchal structure of medieval society” (163).

When studying the histories of women, it is always necessary to negotiate the methodological traps that can befall attempts to recover them, especially where the subject is so intricately bound up with the history of the Church and its laws. An important part of the success of Rieder's study is her emphasis on the possibilities for women to take a seemingly prescriptive ceremony and imbue it with their own meanings. By drawing out those moments of tension between men and women, laity and clergy, within the rite, Rieder successfully insists on the alternative meanings of churching and how attempts to control the meaning of the rite made it a struggle for power. Furthermore, her analysis of alternative meanings for churching allows Rieder to show not only that some women sought out churching where it might otherwise have been denied them, but also that some mothers may have refused to be churched altogether. On the one hand then, a picture emerges of late medieval French churching as a rite in which women wished to participate, which offered them recognition of their social roles, provided them with a form of healing, and which offered the possibility of upsetting the social hierarchy. On the other hand, Rieder shows how myriad other meanings also emerge regarding the importance of this ritual for all the participants involved.

Elizabeth L'Estrange
L'Université de Liège
In the late 1990s, articles and books started appearing using postcolonial theory to read medieval texts. The combination struck some as anachronistic, and some asked how useful this trend was. The insights of the work of the last decade answer those critics and reveal that postcolonial theory has enriched our understanding of medieval chronicles of the Crusades, medieval travel writings, and even chivalric romance as Sylvia Huot’s new book *Postcolonial Fictions in the Roman de Perceforest* demonstrates.

Huot, of Cambridge University, has written a number of articles on *Perceforest*. Her last book, *Madness in Medieval French Literature* (2004), was a broad study of madness across Old French texts and genres. Her new book continues her focus on categories of alterity as she examines one medieval French work through the lens of postcolonial theory.

Written about 1340, the prose *Roman de Perceforest* is not well-studied. The lengthy, complex work comprises six books. The first through fourth books are available in modern editions in multi-volume sets. The fifth and sixth are only available in a sixteenth-century edition making the work relatively inaccessible. *Perceforest* was popular in its time and remained so through the early modern period as Europe entered the age of discovery and colonization. Huot’s elucidation of the romance’s complex tangle of themes should inspire more readers to tackle this vast medieval romance.

The work tells the story of a forgotten, chivalric, pre-Arthurian Britain ruled by a dynasty.