Sharon Farmer articulates the limitations in medieval feminist scholarship addressing gender, particularly those studies that draw on multiracial and postcolonial feminisms that this collection of essays seeks to redress: that “most medieval feminist scholars continue to fall back into old binaries” of gendered categories and that most studies have focused on a small set of texts generated by Christians in northwestern Europe (x–xi). In chapters spanning four cultures (western Christian, Jewish, Byzantine, and Islamic), the contributors were asked to address intersections of gendered categories with at least one other category of difference: social status, religion, and sexuality. The resulting volume is divided into three sections—Part I: Differing Cultures, Differing Possibilities; Part II: Discourses of Domination; and Part III: Individual Choices, Strategies of Resistance.

In Part I, four essays illustrate the contingency and fluidity of gendered constructs. Daniel Boyarin’s theoretically-dense “On the History of the Early Phallus,” begins with Philo’s Judaic commentary on the two Genesis creation stories as a source for the body = Female / spirit = Male paradigm. Although in the first, Adam—created in the “image of God” both “male and female”—transcends common notions of male and female, displacing Masculinity from the male, the resultant idealized androgyne of early and medieval Christian discourse is clearly male. In the second creation story, in which Eve is created from Adam, Philo asserts that the helper given to Adam is the body. In contrast to such constructs, in which the female is necessarily devalued in favor of the ideal Masculine, Rabbinic midrashic commentary constructed Adam and Eve as clearly male and female, so that the female is not erased through the male of the ideal
androgyne. However, Boyarin argues, while the resultant gender binarism appeared to valorize women—through laws and commentaries, that, for example, appear to promote free expressions of female sexuality—it in fact subordinated them to men's needs and values.

Everett K. Rowson, explores the cultures of two categories of cross-dressers in 9th-century Baghdad: the ghulāmiyyāt, slave girls who dressed as adolescent boys, and the mukhannāthān, cross-gendered males (and sometimes eunuchs) who entertained at court. Drawing on contemporary literature, Rowson uses these two phenomena to show how, despite the strict segregation of the sexes in Islamic society, which suggests a similarly strict delineation of gender, medieval Muslim society recognized, tolerated, and institutionalized transvestism. In turn, such an institution acknowledged a certain fluidity of gender and gender behaviors even as masculinity—particularly as constructed through specific behaviors—remained the valued gender.

Kathryn M. Ringrose continues the examination of masculinity as she compares commentaries on Daniel. She argues that Byzantine culture included a number of gender categories that existed outside the male/female binary. The three groups of men she discusses are aristocratic men, ascetic men, and eunuchs, and, like Rowson, she concludes that in the social hierarchy, certain types of masculinity—specifically those of aristocratic males—were at the top of the social structure. Focusing on the prophet Daniel—commonly assumed by the Byzantines to be a eunuch she draws on a variety of sources, particularly St. Chrysostom's 4th-century Commentary on the Book of Daniel and Symeon Metaphrastes' 10th-century version of the story, to show that the status of eunuchs, and hence the categories of masculinity, changed over time.

Carol Braun Pasternack's "Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England," discusses the conflict between aristocratic Germanic and Christian values during the conversionary era.
in England. By looking at Theodore's Penitential and Æthelberht's law code, she shows that Christianity hoped to undermine important Germanic family and clan ties in favor of the individual and its responsibilities to God and Church in ways that negotiated gender differences.

The essays in Part II shift the discussion to the ways in which cultures dominated groups within society. Mathew S. Kuefler, addresses how ecclesiastical culture in 12th-century France sought to weaken aristocratic and military ties by implicitly and explicitly suggesting that these close male friendships were homosexual—and thus illicit—in nature. Martha G. Newman's examination of 12th- and 13th-century Cistercian saints’ lives, shows a shift from, in the earlier texts, models of spiritual behavior dependant on social status to gender-specific models in which women were associated with physical asceticism while men were represented more spiritually. Ruth Mazzo Karras' clear and cogent essay provides a useful description of laws and mores surrounding prostitution and rape. Unsurprisingly, perceptions of female sexuality rested heavily on issues of social status so that while religious and secular discourse treated all women as essentially the same, the experiences of poor and elite women were markedly different. Michael Uebel ends this section with a discussion of orientalist depictions of the homosexual Saracen, which served to highlight religious and racial differences. Using Edward Said's discussion as a starting point, Uebel examines texts such as William of Adam's De modo Sarracenos extirpandi and Marino Sanudo's Liber secretorum fidelium crucis super terrae sanctae recuperatione et conservatione to show how homosexuality was used to represent "oriental perversities" in general.

Part III consists of three essays. Sharon Farmer's clearly challenges the "body = Female/spirit = Male" paradigm addressed in Boyarin's and Newman's essays. Beginning with Genesis 3:16-19, in which God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgressions, both
women and men are associated with the body and physical pain. Her careful reading of the story of Jehanne of Serris’ story in Guillaume de St.-Pathus’ early 14th-century Miracles of Saint Louis illustrates that many categories of difference affected the way that the use of Genesis as a model for men and women’s roles (279). Ulrike Wiethaus provides a much-needed analysis of female homoerotic discourse. She explains the paucity of scholarship on women in this area as a problem due not to textual scarcity but to limited models. Instead of relying on “descriptions of aesthetics and relations that fit contemporary models of homoeroticism,” she writes, we must expand our sights to “accommodate a conceptual framework capable of capturing and decoding the ‘otherness’ of medieval female homoerotic (sub)cultures” (289). She points to writers such as Hildegard von Bingen and Margery Kempe to suggest that “non-conforming female subcultures” developed coded discourses that expressed homoerotic desire and resistance to the heterosexist domination of elite male discourse (289). The beguine Hadewijch of Brabant did just that through language that allowed her, in her interpretation of bridal mysticism, to express a theology of same-sex affection with explicit homoeroticism.

Elizabeth Robertson’s reading of Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale is an appropriate ending for a volume hoping to show how categories of difference continually intersect to produce fluidities in gender, social status, and religious constructions. She examines a well-known text to reach a conclusion different from that of many recent readings of the disturbing tale. Robertson argues that Chaucer’s self-conscious intersection of several categories of difference actually works to dismantle social constructs. In this case, apostolic Christianity as represented by Constance challenges the violent and hierarchical Roman model current in fourteenth-century England.

The editors of this volume have set several admirable goals, which, for the most part, have been fulfilled. The essays cover
broad ground and consider a variety of differences that have only recently begun to enter mainstream medieval studies. At the same time, although the editors express a desire that the collection be read in its entirety so that the reader may “begin to understand the diversity of gendered hierarchies and constructs in medieval culture, and multiple ways in which those constructs were employed and transformed” (xxiv), the variety of topics covered makes it unlikely that any but the most diligent scholars will do so. A second drawback—if one could call it that—is that while several of the essays do in fact reach beyond the borders of western Europe and Christianity, the bulk of them cover well-known material, albeit in frequently new, interesting, and exciting ways. The articles on Baghdad and Egypt are timely given the current political situation in the region, and readers might be particularly interested in re-examining orientalist discourse in light of recent discussions of American media.

Although I encourage medieval scholars and graduate students to peruse all the essays in the collection, they will be of most use, I believe, as individual contributions to the discipline, for both scholarship and teaching. A few of the pieces, such as those by Rowson, Pasternack, Kueffler, Karras, and Robertson, because of their subject matter and clarity in presentation, may be appropriate for inclusion in upper-division undergraduate classes.

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