

ensues madness (a symbolic death), despair or suicide, through which the knight must pass on the road of initiation to a new self. The long analysis of the hero's despair again points to Dessaint's emphasis on what the adventure means to the hero rather than to the Lady.

The final stage of the knight's initiation is the subject of the last section of the study. Beginning with a second departure whose goal is reunion with or at least pardon by the Lady, the quest may end with the changed hero's return to the Arthurian world, or with his choice to remain in the Other World, or, for a few, with unending wandering or death. While the Lady mediates the hero's quest, she herself cannot chose to pursue a quest: "La quête ne se décline pas au féminin dans les lais" (128). Dessaint argues that the adventure "est désormais féminine" (189); a few pages later she recognizes that the adventure in the works studied "est celle du héros en quête de lui-même, et qui se trouve par la Femme" (194). From this analysis of the hero's adventure the author draws some tenuous parallels between his quest and modern psychoanalysis, but it is difficult to see in what way Guigemar and Lanval prefigure the psychoanalytic patient, that they will show the way to "bon nombre d'analysants" (142).

The principal weakness of this study is the omission of contemporary work on gender in medieval romance. Although Dessaint stresses that the figure of the female intermediary is characterized by power, knowledge, and sensuality, she barely alludes to the fact that this character is ultimately a masculine construct, created to give meaning to the hero's exploits. Even the lais of Marie de France implicitly recognize the overwhelming weight of the masculine construction of erotic relations (see my forthcoming article in *Dalhousie French Studies*.) There are no references in Dessaint's study to the important gender analyses of medieval narratives by feminist scholars such as Jane Burns, Joan Ferrante, and Penny Schine Gold. In fact there are virtually no references to any scholarship outside France. Thus, although the study offers a number of insightful readings of individual texts, feminist scholars will find unacceptable the traditional, out-dated mode of analysis on which Dessaint relies. Finally, readers should be aware that *La Femme médiatrice* requires reading knowledge of Old French; some familiarity with the works studied is probably also necessary.

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¹ Harf-Lancner, Laurence, *Les Fées au Moyen Age, Morgane et Mélusine, La Naissance des fées* (Paris: Champion, 1984).

Farmer, Sharon. *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris. Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. Pp. xiii +1998.

Conference papers and articles have whetted the appetite for Sharon Farmer's important new book on poor women in the Middle Ages. From original sources of ambiguous narrative structure mediated by clerics, Farmer has

enlarged our understanding of the female support networks presented in her 1998 article “Down and out and female in thirteenth-century Paris.”

Farmer imaginatively employs the narratives of miracles presented during the canonization inquest of 1282-83 conducted at the shrine of St. Louis at St-Denis.² Obviously the material is not unproblematic since it was compiled by proctors for a specific ecclesiastical purpose. Farmer takes this clerical intervention into account in her sensitive reading of the sources, from which she extracts biographical and life-course information about individuals. The total corpus of the inquest materials is limited, but the details it provides enable Farmer to suggest nuances to the prevailing picture of the demography of the urban poor in the thirteenth century.

Farmer focuses on gender differences while pointing out that concepts of gender are complicated by social orders – hierarchy, if you will. The core of the book is her discussion of the informal, personal, social and support networks available to single women – often recent migrants – in a vast metropolis. Poor men were subjected to a discourse about the dignity of the robust body and labor so that those males incapable of working might be stigmatized as not masculine. Poor women, however, suffered more because they were the objects not only of a hierarchical but also a patriarchal discourse. Moreover, while *some* poor men had access to *some* institutional support, to all intents and purposes that support was denied to poor single women, not least because of the suspicion aroused by women “out of hand” and not under male authority. Some of the most fascinating parts of the book are those where Farmer evaluates how discourse acted on women’s actions or if women resisted that discourse (for example, pp. 131-2, 151).

Surviving poverty confirms and further explores the personal inter-relationships of women in urban society signaled in “Down and out.” Support networks were engendered topographically through spinster clusters. The book’s originality lies in the demonstration that the urban poor’s survival depended on mutual assistance rather than on alms from the elite and their institutions. In that economic environment, however, poor *single* women were disadvantaged because the income of a single woman would not support an individual. Under those circumstances, begging combined with an occupation (spinning, for example) was the most common recourse for such women. When crises occurred for individual single women, other women came to their support. The argument is convincing and sophisticated.

Without detracting in any way from this powerful discussion, there are a few points of minor quibble. Can “strategies” (p. 94 “survival strategies”) really be attributed to the poor (however popular that term has become among historians of the poor) rather than their adoption of the tactics which Michel de Certeau allowed them?³ To refer to the poor as “active agents in the survival of their fellows” is perhaps also too emphatic (p. 164). Of the two terms employed at page 25, [“life-cycle”] servanthood seems more felicitous than “servitude.”⁴ At page 70, it might also have been explained that women, unlike men, are subjected to the Ave/Eva syndrome which informed gender differ-

entiation.⁵ 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,⁶ 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.

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¹ Sharon Farmer, “Down and out and female in thirteenth-century Paris,” *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), pp. 345-72.

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.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Cal., 1984), pp. 29-30.

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

⁵ Paradoxically perhaps, one of the best explorations of this dichotomy is Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 11-12.

⁶ Julian Haseldine, ed., *Friendship in Medieval Europe* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Philippa Maddern, “Best trusted friends’: concepts and practices of friendship among fifteenth-century Norfolk gentry” in Nicholas Rogers, ed., *England in the Fifteenth Century* (Harlaxton Medieval Studies Volume IV) (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1994), pp. 100-17; for a wider approach to friendship, Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman, eds, *The Anthropology of Friendship* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

Fenster, Thelma S. and Clare A. Lees, eds. *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The New Middle Ages Series. New York: Palgrave, 2002. Pp. xi + 292 pp., 6 black-and-white illustrations.*

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