

*The Book of Gladness/ Le Livre de Leesce, A 14th Century Defense of Women, in English and French, by Jehan Le Fèvre.* Translated, annotated and with an introduction by Linda Burke. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013. Pp. 168. ISBN: 9780786474271; E-ISBN: 9781476612492.

Jehan Le Fèvre's *Le Livre de Leesce* has been, in Linda Burke's words, "surprisingly little recognized in recent decades" (i). Thanks to her new edition and translation, this work promises to finally receive the attention it deserves. Le Fèvre, a relatively unsuccessful lawyer, wrote in the *Book of Gladness* a "tour de force" defense of women that acts as both a sequel to and refutation of the misogynistic *Lamentations of Matheolus* (1290 or 1291), which he had also previously translated from Latin.

Le Fèvre's *Livre de Leesce* is crucial in the study of attitudes toward women in the Middle Ages; first, because it was, if not the source, at least a strong inspiration for Chaucer's arguments in many of his *Canterbury Tales*. It also, as Burke argues, had an important intellectual influence on the works of Christine de Pizan, notably on her writings on the quarrel of the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Book of the City of Ladies*. An annex of the edition notably establishes an interpolation on Christine in two of Le Fèvre's manuscripts, offering an original view on the subject while also suggesting interesting ideas for further scholarship.

What makes Le Fèvre's work especially interesting is the way in which he not only challenges, but also strongly criticizes three notable poets that he deems misogynistic, namely Ovid, Jean de Meun, and Mahieu. Le Fèvre/Gladness, as Burke designates him, mostly challenges the ideas that women are frivolous and that they are a bane for men. Instead, he states very early on that his objective is "to defend you ladies faithfully, and especially to show that no man ought to blame women" (74). The fact that Le Fèvre was a man is specifically what brings the most interest to the text, especially in his discussion of the stupidity of men who condemn women for what people consider them to be, instead of focusing on what they are. He particularly insists on the fact that, whereas the ill actions of a woman are applied to women in general, the same is not often said for men, urging people to reconsider the fact that the actions of one do not define the majority: "If a bad woman or wicked man does some particular wrong, we should not insist that the consequence applies to all" (86). His effort to rehabilitate perceptions of women and prove that they are worthy of being loved by men emphasizes their "utility" to men, while attacking traditional figures of authority—writers, but also men in the Bible, such as Solomon, whose actions he considers to be against common sense.

Another point that makes Le Fèvre's book particularly interesting is the discourse he uses in his defense of women. In order to accomplish his defense, he describes all the misogynistic stereotypes of women of the time and then opposes them. This leads Burke to comment that virtually every critic to confront the text wondered whether or not it was actually a defense of women and whether Lady Gladness—the namesake of Le Fèvre in the book—was “a substantive creation with arguments intended to persuade” or if she was “some kind of joke” (20).

All of these elements make for an intriguing and engaging book. What makes it particularly interesting for feminist medievalist scholars is the very question of Le Fèvre's sincerity in *Leesce*. In the medieval period when women were not often given a voice, seeing such a defense written by a man is astounding. Burke defends Le Fèvre by pointing at the opposition between Christine de Pizan, the famous French writer and defender of women, and Le Fèvre on the question of rape. While Christine starts her rebuttal by summing up the traditional misogynistic ideas on rape, Le Fèvre, from the very beginning, underlines the fact that women should never be raped. Le Fèvre, then, offers a double analysis in his book. First, he gives a panorama of the state of misogyny at the time; he then offers his feminist defense, seen through the eyes of a man whose previous writings were hurtful for women. Le Fèvre explains at the very beginning of his book, “I am all ready to write a book to redeem myself” (74). Through this path to redemption, he exemplifies the idea that institutions considered the pinnacle of authority, such as the Bible or famous authors, were sometimes wrong and could be debunked by a simple man.

That this fantastic piece of literature is available to most is thanks to Linda Burke's extraordinary work in her translation. Her translation is masterful, and the critical notes are abundant. Her introduction offers an erudite insight into the many historical, political, and intellectual references of the text. Her translation is perhaps the most impressive trait of this edition; her choice of words—which she defends expertly, for example, when she explains her choice to translate “leesce” by “gladness” based on Chaucer's use of the word—is always well thought out and straight to the point, not only making the text available to a non-French reading audience, but also conveying the context of the text skillfully.

Burke's edition of the *Book of Gladness* is a superb piece of scholarship that offers great insight into the perception of women in the Middle Ages. As such, it could easily become the central piece for undergraduate and graduate classes on medieval gender, but also could be used to provide insight on gender in the

Middle Ages for a general introductory course in gender and feminist studies. Its intellectual astuteness, critical apparatus, and splendid translation make it a (major piece of) work that should be read by all interested in such subjects.

*Charles-Louis Morand Métivier*  
*University of Vermont*