As previous research has increasingly observed, early Christianity heavily relied on the existence of Jews because they were, in Augustinian terms, the living letters of the law. By the same token, as Lisa Lampert now argues, women were equally treated by medieval society as ‘other,’ but as essential for the identity of male society, that is, both as insiders and outsiders. In the present book, Lampert investigates the interconnectedness of gender and Jewish identity as polarities for male Christian society. She heavily relies on recent gender and race theory in order to gain a grip on a selection of medieval and Renaissance English texts where the conflict between men and women finds its parallel in the conflict between Jews and Christians. This is, of course, not a new observation, as Friedrich Heer had already commented on this phenomenon as early as 1961 in his seminal monograph *Das Mittelalter* (here not consulted). But we would be disappointed if we were to expect that Lampert would offer a detailed comparison between women's and Jews' existence within medieval society. She is only talking about the 'hermeneutical Woman' and the ‘hermeneutical Jew,’ that is, abstract notions of ‘otherness,’ so essential for Christian medieval society, not necessarily because they existed in the daily life of the time; instead because they were tools of Christian theology and ideology.

In a lengthy introductory chapter Lampert examines the meaning of the ‘hermeneutics of difference,’ as she calls it, applying it both to Jews and women, but within the context of Christian and patriarchal supersession. In essence, women were as “hermeneutically handicapped” (43; i.e., incapable of grasping deeper intellectual truth in contrast to men) as Jews were blind to Christian exegesis according to contemporary opinions, especially because both groups were identified with the body only, far removed from the spirit. Curiously, however, Lampert associates this approach with the role that the Virgin Mary played, who actually represented the spiritualization of the body through God’s grace. Unfortunately, the major sections of this book never fully address this issue, and instead pursue primarily the question how Jews were viewed by Middle English writers and also by Shakespeare—a rather traditional approach to this critical question despite the heavy theoretical underpinnings throughout the entire book.

Lampert begins her specific interpretation with a discussion of Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale* where clearly anti-Jewish sentiments come to the fore, with heavy accusations of ritual murder of a young boy. This has been discussed already from many different perspectives, and it remains to be seen whether Chaucer predicated this narrative on hard-hitting satire, or whether he reflected his own hatred of Jews. The Prioress apparently responds also to Lollard thinking, and defends the position of women as narrators, especially in reaction to the *Shipman’s Tale*, that is, with respect to the proper reading of a text and the authority to interpret Holy Scripture. This
approach, however, considerably moves us away from the basic concepts pursued by Lampert since the allegedly parallel situation of Christian women and Jews in medieval society is not adequately thematized, unless the discussion of the Prioress’s stance as a story-teller in contrast to the Shipman is meant to elucidate these aspects.

Why the tale would “play[ ] out its anxieties about the maternal and about Jews” (78) finds no real explanation. Can we really claim that the Jewish community is in a stage of chaos, and that the Prioress acknowledges the authority of the male hierarchy through her account (80)? Although the Prioress likens herself to the Christ babe, this would not necessarily mean that she is as ignorant regarding the meaning of the holy texts as the young clergeon who sings his Latin songs without understanding their meaning (82). Finally, why would Lampert emphasize the significance of Lollardic thinking concerning the availability of Holy Scripture so much in this context, leading us rather astray from the main point, the subordination of women and Jews under Christian hegemony? On the other hand, I find the author’s observation quite interesting that the theme of a young boy’s murder signals that the Christian community stands for the new, the young generation, whereas the Jewish community, in Chaucer’s eyes at least, represents the old community.

In the next chapter Lampert turns to two East Anglian plays, Croxton’s Play of the Sacrament, and the N-Town Nativity where we encounter, first, the figure of Jonathas the Jew, and then Salomé the midwife, the first standing in for the hermeneutical Jew, the other for the hermeneutical Woman, both of whom doubt the divine grace of Christ and Mary, and are being taught a serious lesson, leading to a miracle and their conversion (both times with the help of the motif of the stricken hand). This conversion ultimately allows to reconfirm the religious community because it is a “ritual of identity” (116), though the Jews at the end of Croxton’s play leave the scene and go wandering. Salomé’s disbelief in Mary’s maidenhood even after her delivery of Jesus proves to be, as Lampert convincingly discusses, a powerful strategy to allow men in the audience an indirect access to the world of female corporeality (probing of the genitals for the non-ruptured hymen). However, I have a hard time understanding how all this helps the author to promote her overall claims even though she finally argues that the “boundaries and nature of the Christian community are explored in these plays” (136).

Lampert concludes her study with a critical reading of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, a truly well-known play. Her most important point would be that the central issues addressed here are basically the same as discussed in medieval times, although the cultural-historical framework situates the play in the Renaissance insofar as “Shylock represents the old order, and the thwarted father, conquered by the stronger force of Christian youth” (141). Again, the underlying concern deals with identity and the establishment of a community, which works best, as illustrated by the play, through the exclusion of ‘the other,’ the Jew and the old community. Nevertheless, through the figure of the beautiful Jewess, Jessica, the traditional opposition between the ‘hermeneutical Jew’ and the ‘hermeneutical Woman’ seems to break down after all (166).

There is no doubt that Lampert offers a highly learned, thought-provoking study, but she does not fully succeed in addressing one part of her major topic, the way how women’s subjugation in the Middle Ages found its parallel in the persecution of Jews. The strongly anti-
Jewish sentiments in all texts discussed have been well-known, and I cannot quite see how Lampert’s theoretical thrust allows us to gain truly new insights into this complex field of cultural identity and the exclusion, if not persecution, of minorities. Not one of the women figures discussed here would fall into that category. The key aspect of Lampert’s interest remains, primarily, the Christians’ unabating hatred and persecution of Jews in medieval England, as reflected in literary texts. Why this was so, however, especially after their total expulsion in 1290, is not even addressed in this certainly sophisticated and intelligent, yet also unfocused and at times rather elusive study of texts that have been discussed for centuries.