“Feminist philosophy is a critique of the Cartesian subject” proclaims one of the contributors of this volume. It aptly captures a primary spirit of Women and Gender. Indeed, I found the literal deconstruction of Western philosophical categories for women, such as nature and sensible, to be so exciting that I at times raced through the pages. This book’s contribution, however, lies in its gathering of Jewish and feminist critiques of Western philosophy into an explicit dialogue with those who find that Western philosophy is the vehicle for a Jewish feminism. On the one hand it reminds us that Western dualism was nurtured in Neo-platonic strands of Christianity, and on the other it shows us that Jewish thinkers made systematic philosophy their own. Out of these differing ideologies, each author sincerely argues for gender inclusivity that is informed by Judaism.

The book represents a conference at Arizona State University on February 25-26, 2001. Papers either solicited or presented there have been collected into two sections: “Re-reading Jewish Philosophers” and “Re-thinking Aspects of Jewish Philosophy.” The editor, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, however redistributes the essays into three categories in her introduction: “human embodiment and knowledge,” “self and other,” and “power, law and justice.” These implicit divisions are in fact more informative than the explicit division in the table of contents. The essays range over modern and ancient periods, and engage Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers.

As someone who is primarily engaged in late antique studies, the interpretive work of Judith Plaskow, Miriam Peskowitz, Ilana Pardes and many others referenced are familiar to me. Even more so is the work of thinkers such as Derrida, Levinas, Husserl and Hermann Cohen, all of whom are also referenced. These moderns, whether deliberately engaged in reading the foundational texts of Judaism or (perhaps) bringing a Jewish frame of reference to their reading of philosophy, have contributed to the way I read ancient texts. The present collection, however, expands this repertoire to thinkers with whom I am not as familiar: Maimonides and Spinoza clearly deserve more attention than I have given them; and it introduces lesser known philosophers, such as Gabirol and Gersonides.

Western dualism, with its categories of good/bad; male/female; etc., tends towards essentialism. As Sarah Pessin notes in the first article, the Pythagorean system of opposites “sets a stage upon which the feminine signals the negation of goodness” (28). Biblical images of women as temptress and creator of the loss of Paradise intermingle in philosophical history with the devaluation of matter and the prioritizing of a “masculine” Reason, according to Pessin. In fact, this characterization of women’s essence and the ensuing discussion of feminine desire (read “lack”) casts a long shadow over Western
culture. Rightly, these two themes form the basis of discussion for most contributors to this volume.

Pessin’s article begins the discussion of destruction of desire by introducing Gabirol, an eleventh century savant comfortable in Jewish, Greek and Islamic circles. Gabirol, almost in a foreshadowing of Heidegger’s unconcealment, proposes that matter that is remote from the senses shares a hiddenness with the divine, indeed, it is “derived from God’s own essence” (40). “Feminine” matter that is the “spark of divine simplicity within each reality,” Pessin suggests, can be construed as a theory of “feminine-as-presence” (42). Pessin takes Hellenism’s identification of the feminine with matter and desire and finds that by upholding matter as divine, Gabirol in effect upholds passivity and the feminine.

Matter and desire continue to be the central topics of the next two chapters, by way of Gersonides and Spinoza, respectively. The last contribution to the volume, “Theological Desire,” engages the philosophical concept of inter-subjectivity and feminism. But matter and desire are also leitmotifs throughout the book. In Jean Axelrad Cahan’s chapter, for instance, there is a discussion of Daniel Boyarin’s Carnal Israel and his “materialist feminist” reading of the Talmud. Leora Batnitzky and Claire Elise Katz both likewise discuss Emmanuel Levinas, whose work on desire is particularly noteworthy when desire is considered a “feminine” characteristic.

The later essays in the book return to the problem of essentialism that Pessin says arises out of Pythagoras and Platonic hierarchies. T. M. Rudavsky, in particular, analyzes analytic philosophical tradition through this lens, and in the process gives us a rather surprising view of Maimonides. The Batnitzky and Katz articles both engage the post-Kantian New Thinkers—Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Derrida—to analyze “the feminine.” Significantly, Batnitzky finds that an ethics of care corresponds to qualities most closely associated with “the feminine.” Mutual dependence and vulnerability are necessary to a phenomenology of relation (146-7). Katz also finds that Levinas’ concern for the responsibility toward the other positively captures characterizations of “the feminine” (155). Instead of challenging the system of dualisms, Batnitzky and Katz instead challenge the prioritizing of the individual and reason over community and care. They suggest that the feminine “essence” in fact values an ethics that the world needs.

In the final essay of the book, Randi Rashkover uses Gillian Rose’s work to describe a different inter-subjective paradigm. Rose, Rashkover tells us, is concerned that post-modern Jewish thought has “renounced the labor of reason” in order to “sunder” law and ethics (323). For Rose, law is the mediation between speaking subjects (321), so, in contrast to Batnitzky, Rose finds that a concern for the other is quite close to reason. Law-as-mediation between subjects “is the site of transcendence” (332), an insight Rashkover finds attractive. Also attractive to Rashkover is the sense in Rose (and David Novok, whom she also discusses) that the mediation between subjects results in “a deep sense of existential anxiety or homelessness” (334). Such unease compels the subject towards a desire for God—a theological dimension necessary for a Jewish feminism.
In her search for a Jewish reading of feminist philosophy, Rashkover raises the very issue T. M. Rudavsky articulates: that is, the problem of how to acknowledge the influence of non-standard philosophical texts, such as rabbinic commentaries and mystical texts, in secular philosophy. Both Rashkover and Rudavsky despair of a post-modern rejection of reason as androcentric. Rudavsky warns that such attitudes relegate feminist philosophy to the political domain. Reason properly understood as a method that can be applied to texts or beliefs, however, allows scholars to study Jewish sources. Rudavsky is hopeful that women as well as men can find such reading productive—and indeed she does see this in Maimonides. Reason, for Rashkover, goes beyond method to being, as she puts it, “a covenantally significant activity” (337, her italics).

In a book that fairly bursts with creative thought, it is virtually impossible to provide a just summary. I had plenty of points of disagreement, not the least of which was Rashkover’s reading of Levinas. Judith Butler’s work with Malebranche and Merleau-Ponty could have informed Rashkover’s rather terse assessment of Levinas. Charlotte Fonrobert’s work on gender in the Talmud was not mentioned by anyone, nor was the feminist hermeneutic of Aryeh Cohen. However, these critiques reveal my biases, whereas the book’s strength is that it incorporates many points on the philosophical and feminist spectrum. By creating this spectrum, the reader locates a conversation between participants. In this way the conference is made present and the reader finds herself invited.