Laurel Amtower and Dorothea Kehler, eds. *The Single Woman in Medieval and Early Modern England: Her Life and Representation.* Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003. xx + 242 pp. + 6 illus. $35.00. Review by LISSA BEAUCHAMP, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

This collection of essays explores the history, both practical and figurative, of the single woman in medieval and early modern England. The conception of the "single woman," as opposed to that of the married woman, is perhaps deliberately determined to overstep the proper boundaries of such a categorization. In other words, the editors establish the category of the single woman in comparison (rather than strict opposition) to "non-single" woman–"since at some stage in her life, if only the earliest, every female is single, every woman is a life-cycle single woman and grist for our mill" (ix). The single woman is thus virgin, betrothed but not yet married, widow, and even in some cases married but abstaining from or resisting marital relations. Amtower and Kehler acknowledge the "dizzying picture" that this approach presents, and it is undeniably useful, in a critical sense, to complicate the notion of any kind of categorization. Interesting as such an approach is, however, the collection of essays that follows is at times too dizzying to really develop the historical conception of the single woman as a coherent category, even if it does overlap into other life-cycle categories.

The eleven essays are arranged under four sub-headings, designed to examine by turn the celebration of celibacy, the deferral of marriage, the liminality of widowhood, and finally the significance of virginity (this last subsection would likely make more sense if placed at the beginning rather than at the end of the volume). Part I: Celebrating Celibacy focusses on the medieval period, with essays on Anglo-Norman single woman saints (Jane Zatta), variations on the fifteenth-century legends of St. Katherine of Alexandria (Paul Price), and Malory's use of the single woman as a determining signifier of the masculine (single man) virtue of chivalry (Dorsey Armstrong). Zatta's and Price's articles are nicely complementary: the former evokes the Anglo-Norman saints' subversive moral victories when obeying higher authority in order to assert independence from ecclesiastical control, while the latter traces the development of one saint's hagiography in order to depict the alchemical transformation of martyrdom. Katherine's pagan preference for the ideal

spouse is then typologically fulfilled in her *Sponsa Christi* conviction later in her life. Her stated preference then dictates her choice to re-envision "married" life with a different kind of spouse, again subverting the usual expectation of marriage through the assertion of virtuous choice. Armstrong's concern to conflate the masculine singularity of Lancelot and other knights of the *Arthuriad* as dependent on the defence of single women is interesting too, and serves as a useful bridge to the next section: with marriage, the knight becomes less knightly and the lady less in need of defence, and so the deferral of marriage serves to clarify identity for both genders.

Part II: Repudiating Marriage considers the versatility of money-lending as an occupation that allowed late Tudor and Stuart Englishwomen to remain single by choice (Judith M. Spicksley), and John Lyly's alternatives to marriage as a generic conclusion for comedy in the Elizabethan court (Jacqueline Vanhoutte). Spicksley's essay thoughtfully opens the discussion of the economic status of early modern single women, establishing that, contrary to received knowledge that women were entirely dependent on men regardless of marital status, women had a number of viable economic choices to support themselves in single life, and furthermore, that this economic versatility was in fact exercised–by single and married women alike. Vanhoutte's examination of Elizabeth's "exceptional" status as a single woman suffers somewhat from an insistence on a literal interpretation of the single state of the queen, and so mistakes the complications of "early modern society's rigid system of categorization" (102). That Elizabeth actually retained her non-marital status on the basis of being metaphorically married to her people or the state complicates such assumptions of rigid categorization in the period. In her reliance on feminist scholarship of the early 80's, such as Linda T. Fitz (1980) and Suzanne Hull (1982), Vanhoutte fails to recognize the subtlety of how marital figures and tropes sustained Elizabeth's independence. The critical notion that "chastity, silence, and obedience" must always be undesirable for women, and thus necessarily compelled, hampers the otherwise interesting insights into Lyly's quasi-disruption of the comedic genre through the use of relationships other than heterosexual marriage to resolve the plots of his plays. Many of Lyly's alternatives depend on the desirability of a marital relationship if only to present variations of it.

Part III: Imaginary Widowhood includes Amtower's and Jeanie Grant Moore's re-assessments of Chaucer's widows, and Allison Levy's examina-

tion of widow portraiture as an expression of masculine anxiety in the Restoration period. Amtower's consideration of Chaucer's Dido and Cleopatra (from *Legend of Good Women*), Criseyde, and the Wife of Bath as widows, presents a wide-ranging set of characteristics for this sub-category of the single woman. From pathetic to noble, from self-silenced iconic figures to more or less successful speakers, the widow "manipulate[s] social judgment and create[s] a space" (132) for individually determined status. Moore's focus on the Wife of Bath in the subsequent essay then follows nicely, drawing out the liminal nature of the widow: she is both married and single, controller and controlled, and discursively androgynous, thereby managing "to invert the rules and demonstrate new possiblities for a woman as wife" through her present status as "between" marriages (146). Levy's article, like Armstrong's at the end of the first section, offers a useful summation of the widowhood sub-category as well as a nice connection to the final section. In this consideration of widow portraiture, "masculine anxiety is both inevitable and necessary, and when channeled positively, this anxiety can become a strategic tool" for self-fashioning–both for women and for men (152). Just as a good betrothal determines a good marriage, "a good death was determined by good grief" (152); the portraits of widows commissioned by their husbands in advance of death shows how the anticipation of singleness for a woman is "a Synechdoche, under one to comprehend both Sexes" (162, qtg Acheson, *Diary*).

Part IV: Sexuality and Revirgination traces the connections between female desire and its representations in virginal women. Perhaps the most compellingly nuanced essay in the collection, by Tracey Sedinger, considers how "[w]omen were usually represented as strangely 'class-less'…even though their virtue implicitly signified an elevated social status" in versions of maidservant-lady relationships in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Book 4), Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Book 2), and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (174). Sedinger, unlike some of the other authors in this collection, notes explicitly the anachronism of some feminist approaches to the medieval and early modern female subject, which places priority on agency as a contingency of subjectivity: "For early moderns, … the subject did not connote freedom; to be a subject was to embrace (or be defined by) a subjection both social and political in character" (170). Like more recent work by Christina Luckyj (*'A moving Rhetoricke': Gender and silence in early modern England*, 2002) and Karen Newman (*Fashioning*

Femininity and English Renaissance Drama, 1991), Sedinger questions Suzanne Hull's 1982 assertion that the "chaste, silent, and obedient" woman is necessarily without visibility or agency. Sedinger concludes that "Visibility is always implicated within hegemonic discourses…the purchase of visibility often requires that one surrender desires and goals that cannot be articulated within available forms. Disguise indicates that the feminist projects of historical recovery should be suspicious of the rhetoric of visibility, and the assumptions regarding agency, representation, and power that often accompany it" (191). Susan C. Staub's examination of Anne Greene, a woman who survived being hanged for killing her newborn son, also raises important questions regarding the versatility of female representation. The pamphlets examined here present Greene as wrongly accused, and expose a legal malpractice through her revivified, virtuous body (though the case for "revirgination" is quite thin here, unless we assume that virtue can only abide in a virginal body, which seems to contradict the tremendous cultural significance of the virtuous and chaste married woman). Mara Amster's essay, which concludes the volume, treads the tricky path of the correlation between appearance/performance and empirical reality. Though the body is considered to be increasingly legible in the early modern period, Amster's exploration of "virgin tests" in the controversial legal case of Frances Howard's annulment, medical texts, courtesy manuals, and in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* exposes again the versatility of virtuous performance for women. The emphasis in all these media is on "Teaching women how to create a readable chaste body, rather than advising them how actually to remain chaste" (226). Just as Frances Howard and Beatrice-Joanna perform their chastity, early modern women must claim the agency of virtue through their performances of it.

Ultimately, this collection offers a variety of useful and though-provoking approaches to the notion of the single woman, if only because it refuses to settle on the strictures of categorization. While there are a few examples that do not seem consonant with this approach, most of the essays included here go well beyond single status to explore marriage, and many also go beyond issues of the feminine life and representation to consider masculine life and representation as well.