At the end of the Middle Ages the love debate, a literary genre devoted to the examination of questions of love and gender, rose to cultural prominence and then flourished for more than a hundred and fifty years. What became its standard form took shape toward the middle of the fourteenth century in the hands of the French poet Guillaume de Machaut. The model he set stages a debate argued by two or more characters, each of whom speaks to a particular side of an issue concerning love. The discussion often takes place in the presence of a narrator figure in charge of recording the argument for a patron who will decide the matter. The whole case is written up as poetry, providing plenty of scope for lyrical expression of the joy and pain brought on by strong emotion. In the hands of the best poets, language and erudition are on display as much as sentiment. Once Machaut pioneered it, the genre immediately proved popular with aristocratic readers and was taken up by some of the other great English and French poets of the age, who produced love debates of great charm and sophistication that are among the finest literary achievements of the period. These works deserve a wider audience. To date, few have been translated, and they have thus been unavailable to the nonspecialist reader.

The present volume is the first to include, complete and in new modern English translations, five of the acknowledged masterpieces of the love debate tradition: Guillaume de Machaut’s Jugement dou roy de Behaingne (Judgment of the King of Bohemia) and its sequel the Jugement dou roy de Navarre (Judgment of the King of Navarre); Geoffrey Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women; Christine de Pizan’s Debat de deux amans (Debate of Two Lovers); and Alain Chartier’s Debat des quatre dames (Debate of the Four Ladies). The reader will find that each selection is preceded by headnotes that set out the relevant facts of literary history, including author biographies, and offer brief discussion of important themes and literary motifs. Endnotes after each selection explain allusions to events, people, or other literary works that might not be familiar to a modern audience. This general introduction will avoid, for the most part, any commentary on the individual works. Instead, it offers some remarks about the larger intellectual and literary traditions in which the genre participates in order to trace its literary pedigree and outline the thematic preoccupations that place it at the heart of medieval sensibilities.

What makes these works entertaining and instructive for the modern reader? The answer lies in the range of issues, amatory as well as literary, that are debated in them. These issues of the heart and of literary etiquette have by no means lost...
their relevance. For example, who suffers more, a man whose beloved has spurned him in favor of another, or a woman whose lover has been killed? The woman can no longer look upon the face of her dead lover, but the man can still see his lady. And yet when he sees her he is reminded of her betrayal and his loss. Is he therefore worse off than the bereaved woman? Is it true that men love with more intensity and faithfulness than women, who, it is conventionally alleged, forget absent lovers easily and soon form new attachments? What about the male poet who writes of such matters? Despite his declaration that he is devoted to the gentler sex, does he actually prove himself a misogynist when he decides that the man hopelessly bound to a faithless woman suffers more than his female counterpart? If the poet is a misogynist, is there any hope for his eventual reformation? Can he be converted to a proper respect for those he should loyally serve by requiring him to produce a series of tales that testify to the superior virtues of women in love?

There is an even more basic question that demands consideration: How are we to understand what we call love in the first place? Older and more experienced men may view such emotional experience more cynically than their youthful and naive counterparts, but which group defends the more realistic view? No matter how we answer this one question, others immediately arise. If, for example, we subscribe to the female opinion that love may be nothing more than a self-fulfilling and self-deceiving male fantasy, does that mean that such idealized emotion is only so much misplaced energy? If men are presumed inferior to women in their ability to recognize the limitations and disadvantages of love, then what sort of man is rightly judged the best? And what about the unfortunate woman in love with a man who proves a coward on the battlefield and thus a traitor to the chivalric values that should govern his behavior? How is she to view her disappointment in love? By what criteria can we evaluate the different degrees of despair and sorrow to which women fall victim when their lovers are separated from them through the various workings of misfortune? Which sad ending to a relationship is, in fact, the saddest?

These are some of the questions about romance and the range of experiences of men and women in love that are raised in the works anthologized in this volume. These love debates explore the nature and dubious value of gender stereotypes, including the arguably greater perspicacity of women in affairs of the heart, as well as the responsibilities poets bear toward both the women they are meant to praise and the readers they are meant to amuse. With insight and sophistication, they analyze the nature of the romantic experience itself, especially its complex mixture of sexual and psychological yearnings. Not surprisingly, those yearnings prove to be of ambiguous moral value, and they affect men and women in both similar and strikingly different ways. The works collected here treat men and women as quite distinct in nature and depict their mutual attraction with both humor and seriousness, exposing the foibles of the two sexes but also praising their virtues. Written primarily by court poets dependent on the
patronage of the nobility, the love debate was meant primarily to entertain, but the better works in the genre also prove enlightening about the human comedy.

Of course, love between the sexes is the predominant subject of medieval secular literature, finding expression in a range of literary genres from brief lyric poems to lengthy romances. The love debate that flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries drew on a number of other literary forms. We will consider briefly here some of those genres and a few particular examples, presented more or less in chronological order, as a way of tracing the formative influences on the poems in this volume.

Reaching back to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, extended poetic debate on the topic of love existed already in what were called “débats du clerc et du chevalier” (debates of the cleric and the knight) or “jugements d’amour” (judgments about love). We have as examples of this genre half a dozen works, some in Latin and some in Old French, that stage a discussion in which ladies weigh the relative merits of clerics and knights as lovers. From these works the later Middle Ages retained, among other elements, the description of the God of Love and his attendants. One of the most compelling and elaborate is the Concile de Remiremont, to which we will return below. A second debate form we can consider a forerunner of the works in this anthology is the “jeu-parti,” a shorter and somewhat later form composed in the thirteenth century and associated with the city of Arras. In the two hundred or so preserved examples of this type of poem, two speakers debate in alternating stanzas a predicament concerning love and end by each calling on a judge to pronounce on the matter.

While the “jugements d’amour” and the “jeu-parti” certainly influenced the later debate in its structure and even in its subject matter, the courtly romance also played a significant role in developing the great interest in love as a driving force behind the actions of courtly characters. The romance emerged to prominence in the last half of the twelfth century, at a time when European culture was experiencing a flourishing of both learning and letters that has been designated as a “renaissance” by many modern scholars. Perhaps the most striking of these developments took place in the vernacular literature produced in northern France. The romance took shape dramatically and quickly constituted a new literary form. Its subject par excellence was love—a love that, while not excluding sensual pleasure, was also seen as an ennobling psychological and moral experience. This new narrative form dominated the European scene until the end of the Middle Ages and even beyond. Recounting tales of valiant knights pursuing desirable ladies in settings defined by the unexpected and the marvelous, the courtly romance exemplifies medieval literature for many modern readers. What it brought to the European tradition in particular is an enduring literary “matter” featuring Arthur, the semimythical king of England, and his Round Table. With their finely wrought plots and detailed depiction of the inner, emotional life, courtly romances were produced under the enthusiastic patronage of the powerful and wealthy nobility, especially Henry II of England, his wife, Eleanor of
Aquitaine, and Eleanor’s daughter Marie, countess of Champagne. The theme of these works, *fin’ amors* (refined, courtly love), proved to be a complex, even mystifying mixture of social attitudes and literary themes that had been recently introduced from the sophisticated courts in the south of France and the troubadour poetry that circulated northward from those courts.¹

Among the earliest and most notable of the romances are the stories composed about Tristan and Isolde, or “Iseut” as the French render her name. The great Celtic tale of Tristan and his beloved Iseut, wife of his uncle Marc, is one of the most enduring stories of Western literature, as aficionados of Wagnerian opera can attest. There are indications that the material was known to poets well before it was set down in the versions we now know. Paradoxically for a story so often retold and so greatly admired, the early French texts are all fragmentary. There are two major strains in the various forms of the story. One is known as the “common” version and is represented by the work of Béroul (ca. 1190), which is somewhat simpler in its style and psychology. The other is the “courtly” version, of which the earliest manifestation is the romance by Thomas d’Angleterre (ca. 1172–76), which is marked by a more complex rhetoric and manner. The work of both of these French authors was adapted and imitated in other medieval vernacular languages as the legend gained currency throughout Europe. What it leaves to the romance tradition—apart from its characters, who embody the very notion of tragic, abiding devotion—includes what we have come to define as the tenets of courtly love: love and passion that find their fulfillment only outside of marriage; love as inner turmoil and suffering; love as a force that ennobles those who give themselves to it utterly; love as a force more powerful than separation and death.

Chrétien de Troyes, writing between 1160 and 1185, makes references to the Tristan story and mentions a version of his own, which is unfortunately lost. His surviving five romances all engage similar cases of all-consuming passion that dramatize the heights and depths to which love drives the knight and lover.² Two of these works, *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain or Le Chevalier au lion* (*The Knight of the Lion*), show their heroes torn between the conflicting demands of love and chivalry. When Erec devotes himself to his wife, the lovely Enide, he is accused by his fellow knights of uxoriousness and dereliction of duty. He submits himself and Enide to a harrowing series of adventures in order to prove her love and his valor. In a mirroring of that plot, Yvain neglects a promise to his wife to return at the appointed time because he spends too long on the tournament circuit. Distraught at the loss of his beloved, he goes mad when he realizes his breach of faith. Yvain forfeits his name and identity until he can win her back through his loyalty and courage. The seriousness and solemnity with which love is treated in these two romances is transformed in a third, Chrétien’s *Lancelot or Le Chevalier de la charrette* (*The Knight of the Cart*), where the author takes an ironic and at times humorous tone. In this tale, written, as the prologue tells us, for Marie de Champagne, Chrétien pokes fun at the obsessive nature of “refined love.” Those at
Marie’s court likely laughed at the spectacle of the proud and renowned knight Lancelot hesitating, while on a mission to rescue the haughty Guenivere, before stepping into a cart of the kind normally used to transport criminals. Such a vehicle is unbefitting Lancelot’s dignity, but it can convey him on part of his journey to find the queen. Deciding to put his purpose above his pride, Lancelot jumps in. Later in the tale, he is severely reprimanded by Guenivere for his hesitation, which in her eyes represents a momentary failure of devotion, even though he eventually succeeds in saving her from a gruesome abductor.

Another work composed, like Chrétien’s Lancelot, for Marie de Champagne teaches us even more about the elusive nature of fin’amors. This work is a witty Latin disquisition composed by her court chaplain, a certain Andreas, surnamed Capellanus. Andreas draws deeply on the sophisticated if apparently tongue-in-cheek treatment of seduction in the Ars amatoria (The Art of Love) by the Roman poet Ovid. Andreas’s De amore (usually translated as The Art of Courtly Love) offers a series of often contradictory meditations on the joys, tribulations, and “customary” practices of love between men and women outside the bonds of matrimony, laying out difficult rules that should govern the conduct of lover and beloved. Modern critics disagree about the tone of the De amore. Is the work an extended joke or an attempt to limn the contours of an emerging—and radically innovative—idealization of the emotional life? Like Chrétien’s Lancelot, Andreas’s work seems to refuse to treat “refined love” in an orthodox, sober fashion. We are perhaps safest in concluding that Andreas is ambivalent about a code of behavior so much at odds with the official sexual morality of his age, based on the harsh strictures of Christian doctrine.

To return to the development of the love debate as a genre, let us consider the Concile de Remiremont (Council of Remiremont), which dates from more or less the same period as Chrétien’s and Andreas’s work and was also written in France. In the Concile, composed in Latin, romantic love is once again treated in a humorously ironic fashion. It is a complex if brief text, containing in its 234 verses all the basic themes and structures of this new genre. Because it is the first important and most accomplished of the “jugements d’amour” that are the first examples of the love debate, it merits a somewhat detailed look.

The Concile recounts the extraordinary events that supposedly took place during an assembly of the nuns at the monastery of Remiremont. The nuns have come together on the Ides of April, we are told, not to hear the reading of the Gospel but to discuss amoris tractatus, the “practice of love.” Such a topic of discussion, we learn, has never before figured as the sole business of a gathering of nuns, who are, of course, pledged to a life of celibacy that hardly includes romantic attachments, platonic or otherwise. On one level, then, the poem satirizes those devoted to the religious life, who were often famed, justly or unjustly, for a failure to observe that most difficult of vows. No men are permitted to attend this council except for “honest clerks,” monks from nearby Toul, whose presence is welcomed and for whose “solace” the company of women has, in
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fact, been convoked. All the sisters know of love, but they have no physical experience of it. In a kind of mockery of religious service, the meeting begins not with a reading from the Bible but with a passage from the teachings of Ovid, which are declaimed by a certain Eve, who is said to be well skilled at following Love’s commandments and offering sagacious advice to others. Eve is hardly attired in the modest garments of a nun. Instead she is dressed like a courtly lady, wearing splendid clothes and adorned with precious jewels and flowers. She has come, so she says, to advise them never to hide the manner of life they have chosen for themselves—which, she says, is characterized by its exclusive devotion to, if not the actual physical practice of, carnal love and desire. Eve must also judge if any among the company needs to be reproached for having violated the rules that should govern their order.

Elizabeth of Granges responds for the company, declaring that they have served Love to the best of their ability. If they have transgressed, it has not been through a failure of good intentions. Most important, the community has observed the rule of refusing to have sex with men (viri copula) and not accepting the companionship of anyone who does not belong to their “order.” Elizabeth of Faucogney, however, offers a somewhat more expansive view of the sisters’ behavior. They have never ceased enjoying, she declares, the grace, the worthiness, and the good memory of clerks—and they intend to continue loving them in this fashion. In fact, amorous relations with men of religion are what they truly revere, not the rule according to which they ostensibly live.

Elizabeth of Faucogney then proceeds to catalogue the virtues of clerks as lovers. The clerk is gracious, kind, and attentive, full of courtesy and generosity. Experienced in love, he knows how to treat a woman well, bringing her appropriate presents and never failing to keep a promise. And he is faithful in his love, never abandoning a woman to whom he has joined himself. A knight, in contrast, is not worth the trouble or affection of a virtuous lady. His brand of loving is detestable, unfortunate, and short-lived. The sisters of the house at first sought out knights for lovers but, realizing that they were deceivers, quickly abandoned them for clerks, who are famed for being blameless in affairs of the heart. And so any attachment to a knight has become forbidden to members of their company, she concludes. Such is the life they will continue to live, if it pleases Eve for them to do so.

One of the other nuns present has a different view, however. Clerks, she declares, are not as able in loving as Elizabeth of Faucogney has maintained. Those who share this opinion also belong to the “family of Love.” Knights are worthy of respect because they love both war and pleasure. They fear no pain, whether it comes from love or wounds. In battle they are courageous, with a view toward gaining the ladies’ affection and possessing the bodies of women. The pasture at Remiremont is always open to their horses, as is the fountain. This nun and her sisters intend to serve the knights who serve them, paying no attention to the psalter. No life could be sweeter or more profitable, in her view.
Those who prefer clerks then state their case once again before Eve puts an end to debate. She affirms that clerks are able, sweet, and affable, while knights are fickle and given to foolish speech. Henceforth, these women should accept the proffered affection only of clerks, and this is what she ordains as a new rule for the sisterhood. Women who shun this advice should not be admitted to the company until they repent and are granted absolution for their transgression. It is Eve’s further wish that all the sisters restrict themselves to a single lover. Those who violate this rule will be expelled, as no easy penance can wash away such a crime.

Knights and those of low degree should always be forbidden from touching the women’s bodies, throats, and thighs. Giving such men any pleasure is a terrible crime because it will diminish the glory of women. The wisdom of clerks is to be preferred because, when women act foolishly, clerks will know where their best interest lies and direct them to pursue it. Eve orders that those who do not follow her injunction be excommunicated from the community and become objects of hatred. But pardon will quickly come to anyone who shows proper repentance.

Andreas’s treatise concurs with Eve’s judgment that clerks make the best lovers, but, enforcing a double standard, he affirms that nuns are to honor absolutely their vows of chastity. The Concile thematizes this new “doctrine” in a different fashion, making the question of how women should behave in love the subject of a debate that centers on the qualities to be expected in the men to whom they devote themselves. That the debaters, and the judge who resolves their argument, are ostensibly members of a religious house adds a touch of lighthearted social satire, turning the poem into an evident fantasy, set in a spring season that focuses one and all on love. It is suited to the entertainment of its anticipated educated audience, who were sophisticated enough to understand the joke. More important, perhaps, the Concile establishes the basic structure of the genre: a debate about an important aspect of the love experience—here the relative suitability of clerks and knights—which is eventually referred for adjudication to an appropriate authority figure.

Another early text in the love debate tradition is worth a brief look. The French Jugement d’amours (Judgment of Love), which belongs to the same period, offers a distinctive variation on what was becoming a stock theme. 5 One May morning two maidens, pretty and elegantly dressed, make their way to a pleasant garden, where they intend to entertain themselves. After a walk through a valley filled with blossoms and the pleasant fragrances of the season, they find an olive tree, under which they sit and discuss a question of love. The first maiden, Blancheflor, sings the praises of the man with whom she has fallen in love, a clerk, while Florence, her companion, argues for the superiority of her lover, who happens to be a knight. They can reach no consensus and decide to take their case to the God of Love, who, with his knowledge and power, can resolve the dispute. On the appointed day, they make their way to Love’s palace,
a beautiful dwelling covered with flowers, but the door is barred and there is no porter to allow them inside. Suddenly two birds appear to conduct them to the divinity, who is taking his rest on a bed of flowers. The god listens with interest and summons his council of “barons,” who are all birds of different kinds. They debate the issue among themselves, fail to resolve it, and so determine on a single combat between champions representing the two positions. The champion who supports the knights is soon forced to admit that clerks are valiant and courteous, and that all virtues are more evident in them than in any other men. Feeling her lover dishonored, Florence breaks into tears, moans bitterly, and dies. The poem ends with her burial as a martyr to Love.

The “literature of love” reaches its apotheosis in the thirteenth century with the *Roman de la rose* (*Romance of the Rose*), a work of immense breadth and impact that is preserved in more than 250 manuscripts, a huge number for a medieval vernacular work. Its influence is correspondingly large. Virtually all love literature that follows over the next two centuries—including the work of the four poets included in this volume—shows the impact of this work in some way, reproducing, rewriting, or taking exception to its contents, conceits, and characters.

The *Rose* consists of two parts, the first of approximately 4,000 lines and the second of an additional 18,000. It is conventionally assumed that the two parts were composed by different poets. Guillaume de Lorris is known as the author of the older portion, composed around 1230, which begins the story of a young lover who falls in love with a rosebud he sees in the Garden of Delight. The garden is the domain of the God of Love and his company, a group of allegorical personifications favorable to his powers. The second part of the romance, composed by Jean de Meun around 1270, describes the vicissitudes experienced by the lover but also incorporates long passages of exposition on all manner of topics, making it a compendium of knowledge as well as the resolution of the quest for the Rose.

This story is a dream vision that unfolds in the narrator’s unconscious, and it makes room for extensive meditations on love. Here, too, we find debates about what are the (at least conventionally) central issues of the emotional life. Becoming the vassal of Love in the first part of the poem, the dreamer is aided in his pursuit of the Rose by Fair Welcome, who is driven off by Danger and Shame before the lover can attain his goal. At this point, Reason rushes to the lover’s rescue, urging him to give up on love, which, she maintains, is both unnatural, because not centered on procreation, and unreliably transient. An opposing view is offered by Friend, who emphasizes the positive aspects of the love experience, persuading the dreamer to disregard what Reason has advocated. In the poem’s second part, the dispute over the value of love becomes even more elaborate, as a variety of other personifications appear to offer different perspectives. For example, a character known as the Old Woman, who has, perhaps foolishly, been given charge of the Rose’s virtue, offers a disquisition on the rules of love, coun-
seling foolishness, promiscuity, and the blatant manipulation of unfortunate men. Her advocacy of an immoral surrender to impulse is opposed both by Nature, who recognizes that “laws” can be rejected by those who make use of their reason, and by Genius, whose view of love’s essential connection to the procreative imperative reflects official Church doctrine. In the end, these points of view are, at best, uneasily reconciled. The lover does finally gain possession of the Rose, although his success is depicted in an extended military metaphor that shows his victory as a siege and assault on the tower protecting the Rose, a violent and overtly sexual ending to a tale that began in the most refined of registers. Most modern readers agree that the debate over the nature of love offered in the poem is never really resolved.

The many possible interpretations of the contents of the *Roman de la rose*, in combination with its enormous influence, led to the first literary “quarrel” in French letters, more than a century after Jean de Meun had brought the sprawling work to a conclusion. Christine de Pizan participated in this epistolary debate and was highly critical of the romance. Other participants included Jean Gerson, the brothers Gontier and Pierre Col, and Jean de Montreuil, all leading figures of Parisian intellectual circles. At issue were the truth value and moral probity of the *Rose*, and more specifically its misogyny and use of explicit language. Their arguments demonstrate that the questions of love raised in the *Rose* and other medieval love literature often have wider cultural or moral relevance, including proper behavior in amorous relationships and the difference between male and female sensibilities.

A second literary quarrel took shape several decades later over a work by Alain Chartier, who wrote several debate poems. That quarrel concerned the ending of his best-known poem, *La Belle Dame sans mercy* (*The Beautiful Lady without Mercy*), in which a beautiful lady will not deign to take pity on a deserving admirer. Chartier’s poem was extended through a series of textual continuations, all of which comment on the lady’s refusal. Some suggest that she is merciless, while others point out that she may be eager only to avoid an experience she regards as utterly foolish and fraught with peril. Some praise Chartier and blame his female protagonist, while others defend her actions and blame him for an unchivalrous depiction of her. It is the inconclusive ending of Chartier’s poem, like the equivocal and multiple opinions laid out in the *Rose*, that invited further debate and discussion, marking the later Middle Ages as an era in which the principal literary themes of an earlier age came under greater (and often mockingly playful) scrutiny, furnishing the matter to compose new texts from old. The issues raised in these literary quarrels are similar to those debated—and likewise never given final answers—in the love debates included here.

We can conclude this introduction with some brief comments about how these various literary strands are eventually woven together to give the love debate new life some two centuries after its emergence. In his *Jugement dou roy de Behaingne*, Guillaume de Machaut reopens the debate begun in the *Rose*. The
Behaingne offers, first, a confrontation between human characters (a gentleman and a lady who disagree about a love question in the manner of the disputing sisters in the Concile de Remiremont) and, later, the opposition of different views about human life and purpose (an intellectual confrontation in the manner of the Rose). In Machaut’s poem, Reason makes a reappearance, and this time elicits violent disagreement from both Love and Youth. The dispute between the gentleman and lady is brought to the court of the king of Bohemia, whose courtiers are the personifications made so familiar to medieval readers by the Rose. There the question ostensibly to be decided is not whether clerks or knights make the better lovers; rather it is who suffers more, a man betrayed by his disloyal beloved or a woman who has suffered the death of her knight in battle. The discussion at court, however, soon ranges far beyond the rather simple question of comparing degrees of suffering, launching into a disagreement about the nature and value of the love experience.

At the end, the king sides with Reason, agreeing both that the man’s suffering is worse and that love is worthless and should be avoided if it cannot offer rewards commensurate with the service and pains it requires. As we will see, the king’s (and by extension Machaut’s) judgment hardly ends the debate. Machaut, for reasons we will explore, takes up the same issue in a sequel to the first debate, his Jugement dou roy de Navarre. And Christine de Pizan, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Alain Chartier all compose works that offer, in one way or another, “answers” to Machaut’s text. These answers, of course, like Machaut’s own, are never final. For modern readers, as for our medieval counterparts, they remain thought-provoking, subtle, and entertaining, extending an invitation to continued discussion and reasoned disagreement. With finesse, sophistication, humor, and subtle wit, the love debate poems of the later Middle Ages provide a suitable coda to the exploration of refined emotion and the proper behavior of those in love that so dominates the literary history of the era.

Notes
1. A useful discussion of these developments is found in Boase, Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love.
2. See Kibler, Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances.
3. An English translation is in Walsh, Andreas Capellanus on Love.
4. The Latin text and a modern French paraphrase of the Concile are in Oulmont, Les Débats, 92–107.
5. The Jugement d’amours is in Oulmont, Les Débats, 122–42.
6. For further discussion of these two quarrels, see Baird and Kane, Querelle de la Rose, and Champion, Histoire poétique, 1:60–73. Chartier’s Belle Dame and its continuations have recently been edited by Hult and McRae as Le Cycle de “La Belle Dame sans mercy.”