In this fresh and ambitious study of the medieval practice of disputation, Alex J. Novikoff seeks to shed light on an ancient custom that became entrenched in medieval thought and culture. While there have been books on medieval disputatio before, the present work offers a welcome and more appreciative tone than many earlier and more negative perspectives. Still pervading within many segments of scholarship is the myth that scholastic debate was preoccupied with useless forays into the abstract, as seen in its most familiar caricature of a disputant engaging the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin—a caricature likely of early modern and humanist origin. Into this quagmire, The Medieval Culture of Disputation comes and redresses such myths of Renaissance and Enlightenment promulgators that are frequently reasserted in popular lore. Novikoff does this by tracing the ancestry of disputatio to the ancient Greek and Socratic traditions through to the refinements and Christianization of such thinkers as Anselm of Bec to the irrefutable legacy of Thomas Aquinas and thirteenth-century Jewish-Christian debate culture. In short, the book spans the years from 1050–1300, and provides a compelling thesis for recovering disputatio as a cultural phenomenon that crossed the threshold of specialist schools to more popular forms of expression, such as poetry.

Chapter 1 traces the early history of the dialogue genre in the West from its ancient origins with Plato and Cicero through the Early Middle Ages. Special attention is given to Augustine, who used public disputatio to challenge the Manicheans and promote primitive Christianity; moreover, he used disputation effectively to cultivate an inner, spiritual dialogue with oneself and with God, evinced in his famous Confessions. Novikoff also discusses the contributions of Boethius, who made it his life’s work to translate Plato’s dialogues and promote their contents in Latin. In addition, Novikoff touches on, briefly, the Carolingian renaissance, an under-studied era that saw tremendous growth and renewal in classical learning. Novikoff thus traces the ancient origins of medieval disputatio as an outgrowth of the Christianization of certain aspects of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and Ciceronian rhetoric that “were absorbed into early medieval culture via the works of Augustine and Boethius” (p. 33).

Chapter 2 discusses the writings and influence of Anselm of Bec on themes such as speculative theology. Dubbed the “father of scholasticism,” Anselm’s contribution to the development of disputatio has hitherto been largely over-
looked. Novikoff devotes much of the chapter to rectifying the lacuna while also discussing the various contributions of Lanfranc of Pavia, Gilbert Crispin, and Honorius Augustodunensis, all formative thinkers of the twelfth century. It should be noted that Anselm of Bec developed an academic curriculum and a specialized way of teaching students that focused on the spoken word and literary dialogue that were formative in the development of disputation. Indeed, Novikoff sees within Anselm a specific approach to thinking about faith that stressed “conversation, interrogation, indeed disputation that a more accessible explanation of doctrine can be articulated and achieved” (p. 52).

Chapter 3 situates disputation more broadly within the culture of the twelfth-century renaissance and spends considerable time discussing the work and influence of Peter Abelard. It also places the flourishing of scholastic disputation within the Parisian schools at the turn of the thirteenth century. As the center of scholastic influence, Paris had numerous schools and scholars devoted to the proliferation of ancient philosophical works, all of which contributed to the intellectual culture of disputation. Novikoff uses the work of Peter the Chanter of Notre Dame to illustrate the threefold method employed for theological study: reading (lectio); disputing (disputatio); and preaching (predicatio)—all three were necessary for educating a divine, and disputation in particular since, quoting Gregory, “nothing is fully understood or faithfully preached unless first chewed or ground by the tooth of disputation” (p. 100).

Chapter 4 continues to probe the influence of ancient literature on disputation by assessing the mid-twelfth-century recovery Aristotle’s works, especially his Topics and Sophistical Refutations. What Aristotle did for medieval disputation was to give it an enhanced vocabulary and dialectic. Novikoff also shows how Aristotelian logic crossed the threshold of intellectual circles in the twelfth century to more popular audiences in the thirteenth through the publication of a Middle English poem known as The Owl and the Nightingale. While Novikoff acknowledges the work that John Marenbon has done on the reception of Aristotle in this period, he does not seem to use it; nor does he elaborate on the role of Aristotle’s Categories and De interpretatione, the two works which fueled early medieval Aristotelianism.

Chapter 5 explores the institutionalization of disputation within university curriculum and focuses on how disputation was used to train students in their search for truth. Of particular interest is how the practice of disputation in Paris can be traced to the faculty of arts, as well as the faculties of advanced learning, such as theology, medicine, and law. At the bachelor level, instruction was given in the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), and only after the satisfactory completion of a degree could a student advance to higher levels of learning, with theology being