If there is a single theme that can be said to guide the presentation of the fourteen essays in this volume, it is only the platitude that medieval Iberia is, as the introduction states, a “kaleidoscopic field of investigation” (xviii). The editors work to make this a productive, organizational principle, stressing in their introduction “the fascinating complexity of Medieval Iberia” (ix), “the multi-faceted cultural experience that was Medieval Iberia” (xiii), its “complex cultural-political diversity” (ix) and “fascinating tapestry of linguistic varieties” (xv). The broad spectrum of meaning available in this hyperbole seems to be, nevertheless, necessary to accommodate the vastly different scholarly foci pursued here. As in most monograph collections by multiple authors, the wealth of variety made available is constantly at risk of devolving likewise into a poverty of disparateness.

Signaling this essential limitation, however, is in no way meant to be a criticism of the actual scholarship in this volume or of the hard work of its editors in bringing it together with such evidently careful oversight, but only a recognition of the circumstances of its genesis in the interdisciplinary symposium “Medieval Iberia: Crossroads of Culture,” held in November 2004 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Of the initial fifteen symposium participants, seven have contributed to this volume, along with seven new articles from other scholars. The editors have grouped the essays into four thematic sections, “Social and Cultural Minorities in Changing Societies,” “Contact and Conflict: Perspectives on History and Culture,” “Transmission of Learning and Texts in Changing Cultures,” and “Linguistic Contact and Change.” Each essay provides its own bibliography of works cited, and the volume contains a general index of themes and names. The contributions are all of interest and most offer new contributions to the topics they treat.

In the first section, the essay by E. Michael Gerli, “The Converso Condition: New Approaches to an Old Question,” proposes to apply insights from post-colonial theory, including those regarding “cultural hybridities” and “the problem of cultural representation,” to issues of culture and religion in medieval Iberia. Based on the examples of Diego de Valera, Teresa de Cartagena, and Antón de Montoro, his brief but very suggestive remarks about how post-colonial theory can be applied to criticism of Hispano-medieval literature are critically acute and deserve to be explored in much greater depth in further studies. The next article by Joseph Snow, “Speaking through many Voices: Polyphony in the Writings of Teresa de Cartagena,” provides a fruitful counterpoint to Gerli’s comparative reading of Cartagena by using a close reading of her texts to argue that Cartagena’s multiplicity of “voices” (epistolary, authoritative, personal, etc.) constitutes a carefully controlled textual “polyphony” by which she constructed a unique authorial voice. The third article by Frank Domínguez, “Chains of Iron, Gold and Devotion: Images of Earthly and Divine Justice in the Memorias of Doña Leonor López de Córdoba” deftly traces in the Memorias the positive and negative imagery of “chains” as shackles, golden necklaces of knights, and rosary chains used in prayer, all personally connected to López de Córdoba’s experience.

In part two, the essay by Stanley Payne, “Visigoths and Asturians Reinterpreted: The Spanish Grand Narrative Restored?” explores new historical and archeological evidence suggesting that the region of Asturias, once considered a backwater initially cut off from Visigothic society, was more integrated into its social establishments before the Muslim invasion
than previously thought. Even though this does vaguely seem to echo elements of the traditionalist “grand narrative” of a Christian and Spanish continuity through the Muslim invasion, Payne is cautious not to overgeneralize the ideological implications of the new evidence. In “Against the Arabs: Propaganda and Paradox in Medieval Castile,” Noel Fallows next examines a number of memorable examples of Christian anti-Muslim propaganda in fifteenth-century texts. He concludes that the persistence of popular anti-Muslim myths (such as their use of venomous weapons) was “based more on the propagandistic fantasies of the chroniclers than on historical reality” (66). Ivy Corfis concludes part two with “Conquest and Conversion in the Hispanic Chivalric Romance: The Case of Reinaldos de Montalván.” She examines the symbolic use of conversion in the sixteenth-century Castilian translations of Italian chivalric romances about Reinaldos de Montalván and draws a number of potentially fruitful parallels between conversion and discourses of masculinity, chivalry, and military prowess.

The opening essay of part three, Charles Fraker’s “Hermes Trismegistus in General Estoria II,” is an erudite exploration of the references to the hermetic tradition in king Alfonso X’s historiography. The author does not limit himself to conclusions from previous considerations of the topic but suggests that there are significant parallels between the discussion of giants in the Estoria and the tradition of the Greek hermetical text Kyranides. Michael Solomon’s essay, “Pharmaceutical Fictions: Celestina’s Laboratory and the Sixteenth-Century Medical Imaginary,” is a fascinating interpretation that contextualizes the description of Celestina’s “laboratory” within the context of shifting early-modern views on pharmacology. William Courtenay’s study, “Spanish and Portuguese Scholars at the University of Paris in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: The Exchange of Ideas and Texts,” presents new information about the presence of Iberian scholars in Paris and seeks to deepen current understanding of the Iberian role in preserving and transmitting knowledge and texts in scholastic tradition. Pablo Ancos’s punctilious study, “The Primary Audience and Contexts of Reception of Thirteenth-Century Castilian cuaderna vía Poetry,” builds upon earlier studies by the author about references to voice, audience, and perspective across various poems to argue that the audience, voices, scribes, and authors of vernacular cuaderna vía poetry are conflated into a multiple voice “both male and clerical” (132). Kristin Neumayer’s study, the last in part three, entitled “Editorial Interference in Amadís de Gaula and Sergas de Esplandián,” carefully combs over the scattered references to structure in Amadís and Sergas to attempt to reconstruct the original form of the texts before they were “reorganized” by sixteenth-century editors struggling to satisfy changing consumer tastes.

In the fourth section, Thomas Cravens’s text, “Perils of Speaking of Orígenes de la lengua,” is a heuristic, somewhat anecdotal, exploration of the pedagogical dangers of the “life” metaphor in discussing the evolution of languages. Cravens modestly concludes that the metaphors of criticism demand careful and exact clarifications to non-specialists and beginning students in the classroom. Ray Harris-Northhall’s study, “Aspects of Official Language Usage in Castile and Léon and the Vernacular in the Early Thirteenth Century,” looks at a number of official chancery documents from the early thirteenth-century reign of Fernando III to argue that the rise of the written vernacular under Alfonso X was not the product of a language “policy” so often attributed to the king but to an ongoing pragmatic shift that can clearly be traced back to his father’s reign. The volume closes with Joel Rini’s essay, “Considering Paradigmatic Factors in the Reduction of Old Spanish sodes > sois,” which builds upon Steven Dworkin’s proposal of an additional morphological factor in the reduction of second-person endings, -ades, -edex, -ides,
and -*odes* by proposing a leveling of *sodes* caused in part by the paradigmatic influence of the shift from *so* to *soy*.

The editors concede in their introduction that this collection treats “a rich and expansive topic” and the essays presented here “set forth only a few avenues” (ix). They do their best to provide a coherent interpretive framework by stressing Iberia’s complexity and multiplicity, but the variety of themes, methods, and arguments makes this more of a storehouse of unconnected articles than a coherent conjunction of multiple scholarly avenues. Even so, most of the essays are valuable pieces of scholarship and deserve attention by students and professors of medieval Iberia, even if the collection as a whole cannot help but be little more than the sum of its parts.