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It is reasonable to expect a learned discussion of "Medieval Misogyny," at this point in academic time, to enter into dialogue with the rich and constantly expanding body of recent feminist work on this topic (see the MFN roster and bibliography). But Howard Bloch's essay engages intellectually not with women, and not with feminists, but with an authoritative male textual tradition. The voices of this essay that are taken to be authoritative on questions of gender and poetics are men's voices--although paradoxically Bloch's main point, I take it, is that some or all of them are men in discursive drag. ("If a woman is defined as verbal transgression, indiscretion, and contradiction, then Walter Map, indeed any writer, can only be defined as a woman..." (19).

Bloch's neglect of the available feminist literature means among other things that he often comes belatedly to crucial matters. Seven pages into the piece, for instance, he problematizes his initial definition of misogyny ("the ritual denunciation of women," 1) to wonder if portrayals of good women (or even obsession with women, period) can be misogynistic. These are questions that feminists reading Chrétien de Troyes, say, or Chaucer (or Freud, or the nineteenth-century novel) have already explored quite fruitfully; Bloch sidesteps any real discussion of the challenges they pose to his own work.

Similarly, a page later, Bloch gestures in the appropriate direction by distinguishing between females as historical subjects with material experiences and femininity as a historical idea and a textual tradition; he mentions "the very real disenfranchisement of women in the Middle Ages" and warns that "one has to be careful not to move too easily between the domain of institutions and the discourse of antifeminism" (8, 9). The point is a familiar one to feminist scholars, who actually tend to be much more careful than Bloch is to make it clear, for the purpose of analysis, whether they mean to speak of "women" or "Woman." Feminists go on to insist, however, that those terms cannot remain neatly disjunct. We (all "speaking subjects," including critics and scholars) are always in motion between institutions and discourses, and the intersection of those two "domains" is the mystified site where we ("feminists") can watch cultures in the process of disenfranchising females and constructing the feminine (and the masculine).

I have similar reservations about what is potentially the most interesting part of the essay, that is, its attention to what I would call certain instabilities in the socio-gender system. Since woman is "synonymous with the senses or perception," as the standard texts monotonously (Bloch's evaluation, not mine) claim, then to look at a woman, Bloch deduces, is to be a woman: "there can be no such thing as a male gaze or desire." From similar evidence Bloch argues, as I noted before, that the writer, too, is a woman, and so misogyny is a form of
self-loathing. Yes; but what does that mean? Are we to take it that there is (only) female desire then? (That would have made life easier, and writing harder, for Tertullian, Augustine, and all the rest.) Or that women (little w) are not the target of misogyny? Either conclusion is suggestive, but erases at least a thousand years of history and oversimplifies the problem recorded in so much of the medieval literature that I know. Again, it is a problem of institutions intersecting discourses: "the" (medieval) writer may be defined as Woman, but (usually) writers were not women. It is more accurate to say that most writers, clerical or courtly, were men who sometimes found themselves in positions viewed by a particular discourse as feminine. The strategies by which writers responded to that situation, carefully historicized and contextualized in light of the asymmetrical relations of gender and power, merit fuller investigation. Eve Sedgwick’s work in *Between Men* is exemplary in that regard: focusing on male writing and male desire, Sedgwick discusses feminization and homosociality while at the same time she carefully negotiates what Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley speak of as "the dangers of forgetting the woman-who-is-not-referred-to in the pursuit of postmodern reading."

A final note: Bloch’s essay appears as the first piece in an issue devoted to "Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy," and Bloch is one of its two editors. The second essay in it, Joel Fineman’s "Shakespeare’s Will: The Temporality of Rape," may also be interesting, indeed troubling, to those of us working with pre-modernist texts. While I cannot fairly comment here on Fineman’s elaborate argument, I would like to point out that his declared aim is "to guard against a variety of naturalistic or naturalizing accounts" of "The Rape of Lucrece" (34). He also levels a charge of complicity against "moralizing discussions of the ethical questions raised by the rape and suicide of Lucrece" (note 12, 70-71). Precisely what this means for feminist criticism and theory is not made clear, for Fineman, like Bloch, does not enter into much direct dialogue with feminists. MFN readers ought to be alerted to the political import of Fineman’s work and to the fact that Fineman and Bloch purport to represent the state-of-the-art discourse about misogyny, misandry, and misanthropy for the medieval and renaissance periods, but they do so with essays that ignore or dismiss feminist scholarship.

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