R. Howard Bloch's analysis in "Medieval Misogyny" is erudite, sharp-witted, and illuminating about some of the positions on the "woman question" taken early in the Christian era. But when Bloch follows these trends of thought relentlessly into the later Middle Ages he disarms the kind of precise historical argumentation with which he treated discourse in Medieval French Literature and the Law and Etymologies and Genealogies. He rightly notes that references to women are given in "the citational mode," often claiming descent from "the absent (and possibly non-existent) Theophrastus," a mode which displaces authority from the personal to the sacred, the original, or the ancient. That is a common tactic of much medieval discourse, but it does not guarantee the unanimity that Bloch seems to see in such a chain of reference.

What is obscured in Bloch's discussion of the citational in discourse about women is that re-appropriation and re-production are involved, not mere repetition. Even in the extreme case in which the same words are reiterated in the same order, those words are set in different treatises or narratives, given voice by different speakers, for different audiences to construe. Jean Guiart makes the point that in all societies, archaic and modern, cultural traditions always remain vulnerable to "the techniques of manipulation implied in the very utterance of tradition" (115*). John of Salisbury, one of Bloch's authorities, acknowledges re-appropriation in his defense of the reading of the pagan writers. Bloch's technique tends to flatten out distinctions between one instance of, say, appeal to Theophrastus and another. He mentions Chaucer's Wife of Bath Prologue as if it repeated a misogynistic point about woman's "overdetermination" as riot, but the passage he quotes is part of Alisoun's assault on her old husbands and is usually taken nowadays to expose antifeminism to ridicule by re-positioning its arguments.

Bloch applies an ingenious logic to the early exegetical tradition (here abandoning the citational mode) in order to establish that it is the creation of woman, not her role in the Fall, which begins the debasement of life through the female, but such a position creates serious theological inconsistencies, making God directly the author of dissonance in His newly-created universe. Moreover, that reasoning (important to the theme of "Medieval Misogyny") would mean that women could not be ethically chastised or urged to adopt one kind of behavior instead of another--their sins must be regarded as inevitable, not committed. In fact, the preaching tradition continually charged women

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with actions which they were admonished to correct. I think a much subtler use of misogynistic lore was at work in these sermons, one tinged with the "can't win" rhetoric of woman's inherently flawed nature, but always at the same time holding out the possibility of Christian purity, creating in the devout hearer a powerful blend of guilt, personal responsibility, and striving for grace. That blend would provide a far better basis for social control than a flat definition of woman as "supervenient" and it would, therefore, provide a better rationale than Bloch's for the material and institutional practices which denied certain social powers to women.

A similarly ingenious logic denigrates clothing and language (as clothing), and links woman with both, and especially with figurative language. The observation that woman is figure will not lead to the serene denigration of womanhood Bloch sees in medieval discourse, because from the time of On Christian Doctrine and after the figure was taken as God's preferred way of speaking to man--non-literal, perhaps, but persuasive and beautiful, sometimes linked with the Incarnation. That woman is rhetoric is similarly two-sided; rarely is the efficacy of rhetoric called inherently evil; like other words and coverings, rhetoric receives praise when "decent and comely" (as the English Reformation controversies put the matter). When it all adds up to women being like literature in their unredeemability, we see a rich and many-sided controversy about the moral status of both reduced to an ahistorical monotony which characterizes neither.

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Here's a proper subject for the legion of feminist men: let them undertake the analysis that can tell us why men like porn.


Surely Howard Bloch would agree that he is, to use his word, in a citational relation to the texts of misogyny, that is, that he is quoting and respeaking and paraphrasing them with the understanding that he does not agree with what they say, though he does purport to represent correctly what is said. What I wonder about is the source and character of the pleasure that speaks in his citing, and the way it spills over into his own style. What interests me is the impish chopping of logic, and the savoring of paradox and the outrageous, whether they are thought of as Augustine's and Tertullian's or as Bloch's, though neither he nor they quite owns up to them. If I think of this pleasure as Tertullian's, I find myself wanting to know the institutional setting and the reception of the impudence that is at work in the passages from him.