On the whole, Bloch's own rhetoric in this essay seems to be riddled with phrases that tend in the direction of the absolute: references to "language itself" (3), "vision itself" (5), "writing itself" (19), and "literature itself" (20) persist throughout. Historical particularities and those of any given text that Bloch quotes are subordinated and placed in the service of the single over-arching equation Bloch seeks to make: "woman in the Middle Ages = literature." Hence, Bloch concludes, the hatred of women in the Middle Ages amounts to nothing more than the hatred of "literature itself."

Bloch's discussion thus remains in the realm of large ideas about Writing and Woman. It is, in short, an idealist project. Naomi Schor's understanding of the complicity that exists between the norms of modern idealist aesthetics and the discourse of misogyny has bearing here.* Schor's discussion of the detail in terms of the ornamental and the feminine corresponds in a number of ways to Bloch's discussion of "woman" as she was apprehended by patristic writers. Schor's position as a reader, however, is quite different from Bloch's. Schor confesses her potential for getting lost in the very details she analyzes, explicitly eschews the "exhaustive history of the detail more congenial to male epistemological models." She acknowledges that her attempt to vindicate the detail in modernist aesthetics may be nothing more than an attempt to legitimate her own critical practice. That sort of explicit acknowledgment of a critic's present interests, of a political stance, is one which has become the hallmark of a specifically feminist reading strategy. In launching an idealist argument and in remaining silent about the critic's own motives for writing about medieval misogyny, Bloch's discussion leaves us wondering whether his is a critique of the misogynistic attitudes of the Middle Ages or just one more instance of them.

experience understood literature to distort reality in a way they could identify with the feminine.

Most medievalists will grant Bloch his contention that woman as riot is an important topos in medieval literature. Nevertheless, the argument that he advances is loosely constructed. The textual examples he chooses span so many centuries as to avoid the question of medieval misogyny's development. Moreover, his concentration on evidence from vernacular, secular works limits the significance of his conclusions for medieval Latin and religious literature.

Bloch's essay falls squarely within the purview of literary criticism, and for that reason its failure to consider a broader variety of texts from a more interdisciplinary perspective can perhaps not be reproached; it should nevertheless be remarked. Recent historical study has cast a substantially different light than Bloch's on medieval misogyny, in regard to both its social reality and its representation in literature. The conclusions reached by that new research offer a useful counterpoint—perhaps a corrective—to Bloch's interpretation.

In the past five years of published research historians have found lively material in the relationship between real women's lives and literary, especially religious, models. Intensive study of saints' lives and other varieties of devotional literature has yielded conclusions that challenge Bloch's assumptions about medieval women's experience. In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,* Caroline Walker Bynum has for instance called our attention to the ways in which medieval women effectively empowered themselves through practices—particularly corporal self-abuse—generally perceived by moderns as disenabling. Bynum's work holds interesting implications for Bloch's interpretation of medieval misogyny, which assumes that situations and characterizations understood as damaging to women in the modern world necessarily held the same meaning in the Middle Ages (see esp. 8-9).

Related even more directly to Bloch's point are Penny Schine Gold's findings about the representation of women in both secular and ecclesiastical literature as compared with their actual roles in medieval society. In *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France*** Gold emphasizes the real influence exercised by women in monastic houses and in religious life more generally. Her broad conclusion that the limitations and possibilities of women in medieval society were far more complex than patterns of literary representation allow is one that readers of Bloch's article may well consider. In Gold's perspective, the topos of woman as riot probably bore some relation to the actual position of women in the medieval world, but

** Berkeley, Ca.: Univ. of California Press, 1987
*** Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985
so did the model of the sublime Virgin. As Bloch’s medieval authors well
knew, distortion accompanies all representation. Even its imperfect correction
demands the investigation of such richly varied evidence as Bynum and Gold
explore but which remains untouched in Bloch’s discussion of misogyny in
medieval vernacular texts.

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One of the most striking sentences in Howard Bloch’s "Medieval
Misogyny" reads: "If a woman is defined as verbal transgression, indiscretion,
and contradiction, then Walter Map, indeed any writer, can only be defined as
a woman; and the discourse of misogyny then becomes a plaint against the self
or against writing itself" (19). Bloch moves deftly here, as in the entire essay,
through a series of hypothetical constructions. By employing the "if" clause
repeatedly, Bloch opens up a space in which the charged subject of misogyny
can be examined rhetorically, according to a series of its most characteristic
topoi. While he assembles a significant array of figures--woman as chaos,
artifice, pure cover, all indisputable in their pervasive influence--it becomes
clear that Bloch marshals them for another purpose. The question of woman is
broached as a way to investigate another topic: "If a woman...then any
writer...." With that pivotal phrase, Bloch shifts the force of his argument. The
initial inquiry into the tropes of woman changes, taking on the appearance of
something quite different. Put in terms of the logical proposition offered, there
is a reversal of the sense and the reference, of what is being said [woman]
and about what something is said [writer]. Instead of continuing to
predicate such and such figures on woman, Bloch predicates the trope of
woman on the writer--a move which once again privileges the classic,
overriding concern with écriture. More importantly, the operation seems
exclusive: "...then...any writer, can only be defined as a woman...." All those
traits that distinguish the writer, trickery, seductiveness, contradiction--the
very features that account for writerly power--are to be understood
exclusively as feminine properties.

What Bloch effects here on the level of the sentence is, in fact,
dramatized in the construction of the argument as a whole. We have only to
look at the essay’s end to recognize how fully the issue of feminine tropes is
transformed: the danger of woman, Bloch asserts, is that of literature itself.
Not only does that claim recast the question of woman as a literary affair, but it
threatens to subsume it entirely. Bloch’s argument comes finally to process the
insidious destructiveness habitually associated with misogynistic discourse, and
converts it into the activity of writing. The near-formulaic descriptions of

MEDIEVAL FEMINIST NEWSLETTER, No. 6 (December 1988)