writings and medieval Jewish philosophy, for Jews were important and influential cohabitants—not to mention writers and historians—in medieval Spain.

Recent work on the *kharjas* (short, fragmentary verses in Mozarabic, the archaic dialect of Spanish spoken in Muslim-ruled Spain) has opened up new avenues for integrating Spain's three cultures into feminist analyses, as has the discussion of Moorish and Jewish women in some of Spain's oldest known texts (e.g., Samuel G. Armistead's and James T. Monroe's "A New Version of *La morica de Antequera.*" *La Corónica* 12.2 [1984]: 228-40, and Edna Aizenberg's "*Una judía muy fermosa:* The Jewess as Sex Object in Medieval Spanish Literature and Lore." *La Corónica* 12.2 [1984]: 187-94). Yet much more could be done in this area.

Finally, it is urgent that those who work in the field participate more actively in broader feminist academic organizations and publications. I was stunned to discover at the 1988 Kalamazoo meeting that there were only two representatives of medieval Spanish studies in attendance at the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* business meeting. Colleagues in feminist studies covering different regions and different disciplines have much to learn from one another, as I myself have seen in my most recent project, a collection of essays on widows in medieval European literatures and histories. The resources uncovered by all medieval feminist investigators can profitably be shared by those who work on women in medieval Spain. And, from the perspective of those unfamiliar with medieval Spanish history and literature, the growing interest in multicultural feminist studies should make this field a natural one to study.

Louise Mirrer, Fordham University

---

**Commentary**

In the last "Commentary" column (MFN 6, fall 1988) eight readers offered reactions to an article entitled "Medieval Misogyny" (*Representations* 20) written by R. Howard Bloch, Univ. of California, Berkeley. The eight respondents were Elizabeth A. Clark, Duke University; Wendy Clein, University of Connecticut; Elaine Hansen, Haverford College; Peggy Knapp, Carnegie Mellon University; Marshall Leicester, Cowell College, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz; Linda Lomperis, Cowell College, Univ. of California, Santa Cruz; Carol Neel, The Colorado College; and Helen Solterer, Duke University.

Prof. Bloch was invited to respond. His comments follow:
Let me thank the contributors to the "Medieval Feminist Newsletter" for their comment on my article "Medieval Misogyny." Since the eight responses resemble each other so closely (and, therefore, even if untrue, must nonetheless be significant), I hope that the contributors will forgive my treating their contribution as a whole rather than independently. Here, then, is the reproach:

1) I do not pay sufficient attention to historical context, what Elizabeth Clark refers to as "the varieties of woman-hating."

I must admit that I fail to find much variety among medieval misogynists who, once they choose to play this tune, seem to perform on a violin with only one string. "Judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators (...)," writes Christine de Pizan, "it seems that they [misogynists] all speak from one and the same mouth" (Cité des Dames, tr. E. Jeffrey Richards [New York, 1982], p. 4). I know, having read Elizabeth Clark's Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends, that Jerome was a fine human being and a friend to many women. But this is another topic, and I am not quite sure how to relate it to the role he played in founding perhaps more influentially than any other Church Father (though not quite so virulently as Chrysostom in places) the discourse of misogyny that was appropriated by later medieval writers much more readily than any other aspect of his wise pastoral care and that was passed to the Middle Ages in collections or florilegia, which may help to explain its seeming uniformity. Even Jerome's counsel to women--e.g., for virgins to remain virgins, for widows not to remarry--might be seen as somewhat paternalistic, though expressive no doubt of a wider split within the Christian religion (after Paul), which, on the one hand, professes to make men and women equal and, on the other hand, makes woman the "Devil's gateway." Nor is it enough simply to ascribe the misogyny of Jerome and others to Christianity's ascetic campaign against the temptations of the flesh. The fact is that at this historical moment (some say as early as Paul, others as late as Augustine), the horror of the flesh became resolutely gendered as feminine (and estheticized) in a way that had not quite been in Stoic, Gnostic, Manichaean, Judaic, Platonic, Aristotelian, or Late Roman tradition.

To say that misogyny has no internal history is not to say that it does not have a history or that it is "only a text" or that its effects, like Freud's theory of seduction, are not real. It is to say that any essentialist definition of woman, whether negative or positive, whether made by a man or a woman, is the most basic definition of misogyny there is. Any speech act that says "Woman is," and has as a predicate a more general term falls within the pale of what I define as antifeminism, and is a dangerous gesture precisely because it eliminates the subject from history. (See Sheila Ryan Johansson's "'Herstory' as History" in Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays [Urbana, 1976] for a fuller account of why this is so.) One must, therefore, be
careful to distinguish between such a speech act, made by the self-identified misogynists I quote in my article, and my definition of what they are doing. I am careful not to use the phrase "Woman is..." without its being bracketed by something like, "according to the discourse of medieval misogyny,..." For it is only by making such a distinction that one can begin to identify not only the obvious forms of misogyny, but the more subtle, invisible manifestations of its grand themes, some of which even look like the opposite of woman-hating (more later).

If anyone doubts the monotonous persistence into the current era of the topos of misogyny first established in the early centuries of Christianity, let her read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, C. Lombroso, Proudhon, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Barby d'Aurevilly, and, yes, even that sorcerer's apprentice Michelet, on the subject of woman; there she will find almost verbatim repetition of Tertullian's notions concerning the feminine and decoration or of the cliché of woman as verbal abuse. Again, the post-Christian discourse of misogyny has no internal history because it is defined by a definition of woman as ahistorical; which is not the same as saying it has not been different in other non-Christian cultures, or that it has not been used in different ways in the course of the Christian era, even though here one can point to a rather singular purpose, which is subjugation.

Finally, the essay published in *Representations* is only the first part of a much larger project entitled *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, which sets as its goal to situate the discourse of misogyny within the social context of early Christianity. Further, I seek to situate within an even more precise historical context the rise of what has sometimes been seen as the antidote to, the liberation from, misogyny—the language of courtly love, which can be both geographically and temporally localized in Provence between 1075 and 1125, and from which our own notions of romantic love ultimately derive. I think it can be shown that courtliness came about as the result of a change in women's possessory rights in the region of Southern France at this time and that it is not the opposite of misogyny, but misogyny's inverted image. To put the thesis crudely: as long as woman was merely a possession to be disposed of between men, she was vilified in the terms of misogyny; as soon as she became capable of disposing in her own right, she was idealized in the terms of courtly love. Misogyny and courtliness are co-conspiring abstractions of the feminine. To repeat, unless one is willing to accept a definition of antifeminism according to which the woman is seen as timeless, outside of history, abstracted, one is liable to miss the fact that the idealization of woman is only another version of, just as disempowering as, her denigration. What I am saying is nothing new according to many of my women friends who tell me they experience woman-worship as being just as alienating as woman-hating.

2) I do not offer portraits of good, powerful women alongside that of
the misogynistic portrayal of woman.

My essay is not about women in the Middle Ages; it is not intended as a rounded portrait either of women, or of the images of woman, or of the social roles of women. That has been done by others far better than I. It is about one particular slanted version of woman, which happens also to be particularly influential upon the question of gender until this very day. I certainly am not suggesting that there were not, alongside the discourse of misogyny, a myriad of galleries of good women stretching from Augustine's portrayal of the martyrs Felicity and Perpetua, or Gregory of Nyssa's portrait of his sister, to Christine de Pizan's Cité des Dames or Chaucer's Legend of Good Women; nor do I wish in the least to suggest that the question of female forms of piety and spirituality were not an important element of medieval culture. One could even point to the cult of the Virgin and to the rise of twelfth-century Mariology as a counter-discourse to that of misogyny, though, here again, I am not so sure there is all that much difference between the reifying worship of the Virgin Mary and earlier exhortations, at the heart of the discourse of misogyny, to virginity.

3) I do not engage with feminists, or do not cite feminists; I seem to be speaking to men instead of women.

I could not agree more with the examples offered of good feminists whose work is to be taken into account. No work illustrates better than Naomi Schor's Reading in Detail the manifestation of medieval misogynistic topoi in the nineteenth century— that is, the persistent alliance of the feminine with the decorative, the esthetic, the superficial. No work better than that of Carolyn Bynum shows the rich cultural reservoirs of feminine imagery on which the misogynistic writers of the High Middle Ages could have drawn had they not been so obsessed by statically fixed negative portrayals invented, in some cases, almost twelve centuries earlier. Penny Schine Gold's The Lady and the Virgin is a work which I not only admire but on which I rely in the final chapter of my book for the analysis of the historical condition of women in the region of Fontevrault (see my review of The Lady and the Virgin in Modern Philology, November 1986). Finally, if there is any book that seems to confirm for a later period my thesis that the discourse of misogyny is a discourse by men, for men, of men, it is Eve Sedgwick's Between Men. My depiction of misogyny as a language constituted by celibate men for each other is, finally, a perfect example of what Luce Irigaray means when she says that "the enigma that is woman will therefore constitute the target, the object, the stake, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which, ultimately, she is not supposed to know anything about" (Speculum of the Other Woman, tr. G. Gill, p. 13). Please note that my quotation of Irigaray does not represent an endorsement by either her or me of the way she perceives the feminine to have been constituted by male culture throughout the ages.
4) All the contributors pose one or another version of the question "Where do I situate myself" with respect to this topic, and Linda Lomperis asks the obvious "Where is my subject?" (as if the discovery of my subject would expose the brute antifeminist at work).

Though we are, of course, always somewhat blind to our own desires and motives, I can only reply that I am a self-identified gendered male, who is profeminist. I am, however, prevented out of a deep respect for some feminisms (for there are many, and they are by no means all the same [see Janet Todd’s recent Feminist Literary History]) from adopting the voice of a woman, "to speak like a woman," in the current phrase. For, as both men and women are becoming increasingly aware, the ventriloquistic imitation of the voice of the other can turn out, in this hyperflorescent moment of the pre-humiliated sublime, to be either a strategy of seduction or a usurpation of the power of the other to speak for herself. Moreover, the quick move from "speaking like a woman" to an essentialized notion of woman as truth—yet another version of the Eternal Woman—places such a gesture firmly within one of the strong currents of Western misogyny from Plato to at least Nietzsche. Thus I have no choice that would not be as politically disenfranchising to women as the urge to "speak like a woman" finally is. Nor is this perspective necessarily such a bad one from which to approach a subject that is often too painful for many women to face head on, since, as a male, I am keenly aware not so much perhaps of what it feels like to be the victim of misogyny as of the many ruses of speech that even the most ardently feminist, sexually correct men use in order to continue to act as men have always acted. (In New French Feminisms [eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron], Gisèle Halimi, discussing what she calls "Doormat-Pedestal tactics," quotes Sacha Guitry, who "is willing to admit that women are superior to men as long as they do not seek to be equal"). This is why I think it is so important to distinguish between language and action, words and deeds, where relations between the genders are concerned. Such a move is, in fact, the foundation of a political reading, which otherwise would remain hopelessly enmeshed in the literalism of false ideology.

For more information about me as subject see my recently published first novel Moses in the Promised Land (Smith Peregrine Books, 1988, $10.95), Chapter V, "The Professor."

5) I am faulted by Marshall Leicester for taking a pleasure in writing that borders on the pornographic.

I enjoy writing. Anyone who reads my articles and books will, I think, agree. And what is the alternative? To drone on in a sad, disabused tone of voice whose roots in the most virulent Puritanism to be found in America hit, right here in California, a bedrock of asceticism that resembles nothing so much as the Early Church Fathers's horror of the flesh. The more sad we become the more we assent to that which we think we are resisting.
In conclusion, I would like to say a word about what I sense in the response to my article to be a certain disapproval of the topic. The assumption here has to be that writing about misogyny automatically constitutes an endorsement of it, as if the sociologist's study of poverty were an apology for abjection, or the medical researcher's study of cancer were a welcome to disease. It is true that I do validate the topic, because I think that it is one that is often taken for granted but rarely recognized; that, when recognized, is often analyzed only superficially (even in the psychoanalytic and anthropological instances, which tend to naturalize); and, finally, that it is a pervasive mode of thought which, because it is often occulted, continues to function insidiously--that cannot, in other words, simply be washed away. "Misogyny," as Frances Ferguson and I write in the Introduction to the Representations volume that will appear this spring as a book (Univ. of California Press), "seemed to us to emblematize the problem that representation poses when it creates oppositions between what we perceive and what we endorse. And in that sense, it provides the occasion for a discussion of the limits of idealism, or of a conflict between authors and readers comparable to the conflict between misogynists and the women who are misrepresented by its pervasive and perfidious, but often unrecognized, images. Some recent feminist writing has imagined that this disjunction could be healed by a science fiction, a utopian vision that would realign our desires with our views about the world; but, while accepting the spirit of that vision, the essays in this volume largely concern themselves with the difficulties of enacting an easy fit between representation and what one might think of as political will."

My own strategy, in exploring the pitfalls and paradoxes of the medieval discourse of misogyny, is not simply to recite once again the history of a tort, a litany of woe, but to push this insidious discourse to its limit, to expose as clearly as possible its internal incoherences, to deconstruct, in short, that which will not go away simply by wishing that it weren't so. "Medieval Misogyny" is to my knowledge the first attempt to say to Tertullian, Jerome, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Novatian, Methodius, Clement of Rome and Clement of Alexandria, as well as their intellectual and literary heirs, that where a certain vision of woman is concerned, "you are not only wrong, but you contradict yourself." Such a strategy, which recognizes that moral righteousness and counter examples--both medieval and modern--have historically never been enough, or very effective, can only through some unexamined desire on the part of another subject than my own be construed as complicit with that which it seeks to undo.

R. Howard Bloch, University of California, Berkeley