

<i>Commentary</i>

This Commentary column discusses issues raised by R. Howard Bloch's essay, "Medieval Misogyny" (*Representations* 20 (1987), 1-24). The idea for it came from last May's Kalamazoo meeting, where the article gave rise to some discussion. Shorter responses from several voices were encouraged, rather than lengthier ones from one or two.

Prof. Bloch has been invited to respond in the spring issue of MFN.

Readers reactions to these comments are also welcome. Deadline for the spring issue is March 15.

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The answer that Howard Bloch gives to the question of literature's relationship to "life" does not adequately assess the function of texts in the extratextual world. By declining to contextualize his material, Bloch unwittingly participates in the very process he decries: the essentializing of woman. While for him misogyny is simply a constant across time, I, as a scholar of early Christian history, hold that attention to historical context provides a richer sense of the variations in "woman-hating"--variations that relate to flesh-and-blood people.

The question of whether misogyny is "only" a literary topos can be raised for the writings of the patristic era as well. That is most especially so for the writings of Jerome and John Chrysostom, which redound with anti-female and anti-marital sentiment, yet whose authors maintained supportive, even tender, relationships with women for many years. But even if we look only at their writings, not at their personal lives, we find that the *topoi* they employ on the woes of marriage function as part of a larger project that goes far beyond the text: they are designed to promote--and consciously so--the ascetic campaign that would disentangle both men and women from the ties of family, sexuality, reproduction, property. And since women, especially those of wealth, had more to gain from the disentanglement than did men, the Fathers' exhortations to them are especially pointed.

Jerome provides useful examples that illustrate the necessity of contextualizing his *topoi*, for such a contextualizing points up differences in patristic and medieval use of the same material. At the end of Book I of his treatise *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome cites numerous examples of "good" and "bad" pagan women, and adds a long anti-marriage diatribe that he claims is taken from Theophrastus' *Aureolus, On Marriage*. Not only is this the same work referred to in the medieval source Bloch cites, Jerome's quotation is the most likely source--whether direct or indirect--for the medieval writers' allusions to the treatise.¹ Thus in *Adversus Jovinianum* I, 47, we find the same arguments as those employed by the medieval writers: whether rich or poor, pretty or ugly, wives pose a danger to men; that although a prospective buyer may try out horses, seats, kettles, cups, and pitchers before he purchases them, only a woman cannot be tested before the (marital) transaction is made.

Jerome's use of such texts, however, differs significantly from that of the medieval authors Bloch cites. With this recognition we are led to question whether the constancy of the misogynistic motif deserves highlighting, as Bloch argues, or whether it is the difference in its extratextual function that should be emphasized. Jerome's purpose in *Adversus Jovinianum* is to refute an opponent who had claimed, among other points, that virginal vows were not superior to chaste Christian marriage in which the partners respectfully fulfill God's command to "reproduce and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Jerome's angry response to this levelling of the two estates so denigrated marriage that his supporters--themselves Christian ascetics--hastened to remove the treatise from circulation.² In addition to the arguments he can muster from Scripture to support the vast superiority of virginity to marriage, Jerome borrows ammunition from the pagans. He adduces numerous examples from classical literature and mythology to "prove" that even pagans celebrated virginity and denounced second marriage (*Adversus Jovinianum* I, 41-46): the purpose of his exercise is to shame Christian readers into embracing the ascetic resolve he champions. The citation from "Theophrastus'" work is part of a diatribe reinforcing, for Christian males, the anti-marriage argument. Yet Jerome is even better known for his letters and treatises to *women* that paint in lurid hues the horrors of marriage: abusive and sexually wandering husbands (it is *men* who are prone to run riot in patristic literature), the woes of pregnancy, the insubordination of slaves, and so forth. Those nightmares they will escape if they adopt Christian celibacy. As obnoxious as we may find "Theophrastus'" advice, its sentiment is counterbalanced--indeed, over-balanced--by Jerome's

¹For a summary of the scholarly discussion about "Theophrastus'" text, see Harald Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics: A Study on the Apologists, Jerome, and Other Christian Writers*. *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* 6 (Göteborg: Elanders Boktr. Aktiebolag, 1958), pp. 147-59.

²Jerome, *Ep.* 48 (49), 2.

anti-marriage arguments directed to women. In both cases, his rhetoric against the opposite sex bolsters his campaign to win as many Christians as possible for the ascetic life--a life that is lived outside texts. Marriage is the lowly "thirtyfold harvest" (compared with the glorious "onehundredfold harvest" of widowhood) that Christians of *both* sexes would do well to eschew.³

The patristic writings, in other words, not only concern life outside texts, they are written to influence it. Their aim--and here we can speak confidently about authorial intention--is manifest: to keep women from the priesthood and from public activity in general, to reinforce the subordination of wives to husbands, and to lure as many Christians as possible to the renunciation of marriage and reproduction. Whatever "entertainment" the patristic authors provide for educated readers through their skillful incorporation of classical allusions, ringing rhetoric, and witticisms, their purpose is severely didactic in a way that the literature cited by Bloch is not -- and didacticism, to be sure, aims at a world that exists outside texts. By blurring the different texts of patristic literature, by claiming misogyny as a constant that cannot be well historicized, Bloch contributes to the very generalizing and essentializing of woman that he repudiates intellectually. The factors that prompted the different constellation of anti-female and anti-marriage sentiments in medieval texts, as compared with patristic ones, are glossed over, to the detriment of a more historically nuanced reading.

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Howard Bloch's essay argues convincingly that the instability and garrulousness attributed to women in misogynistic discourse is also an attribute of the very texts that execrate these "feminine" characteristics. But Bloch also suggests that these writings are finally concerned less with women than with rhetoric, that medieval misogyny is a hermeneutical rather than a political issue. To be sure, Bloch acknowledges "the very real disenfranchisement of women in the Middle Ages" (8); he even devotes a paragraph of his essay to a list of some examples of medieval sexism. Having made that gesture to social history, however, he questions the validity of connecting antifeminist discourse with the material conditions of women. [These material recriminations] "...are not the same as misogyny, and one has to be careful not to move too easily between the domain of institutions and the discourse of antifeminism"(9). Rather than risk a too easy movement between the two domains, Bloch then

³Jerome's famous exegesis of the parable of the sower (Mk. 4:3-9=Mt. 13: 1-9=Lk. 8: 4-8), found in his *Adversus Jovinianum* I, 3, and *Epp.* 22, 15; 48 (49), 2; 66, 2; 123, 9.