

R. HOWARD BLOCH

M·E·D·I·E·V·A·L
M·I·S·O·G·Y·N·Y



*and the Invention of
Western Romantic Love*

MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY AND THE
INVENTION OF WESTERN ROMANTIC LOVE



M·E·D·I·E·V·A·L

and the Invention

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

M · I · S · O · G · Y · N · Y

of Western Romantic Love

R · H · O · W · A · R · D · B · L · O · C · H

Chicago & London

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Printed in the United States of America
05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 3 4 5 6 7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bloch, R. Howard

Medieval misogyny and the invention of Western romantic love / R.

Howard Bloch.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-226-05973-1 (pbk.)

1. Women—History—Middle Ages, 500–1500. 2. Misogyny—Europe—
History. 3. Patriarchy—Europe—History. 4. Love—History.

I. Title.

HQ11143.B56 1991

305.4'09'02—dc20

91-12699

CIP

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for
Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Virginia R. Bloch,
and to the memory of my father, Bertram H. Bloch, 1913–1990

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S



Much of what is to be admired in this book results from the attentive listening and engaging responses of those who attended my seminars at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Newberry Library, Chicago, as well as from careful readings by friends and others who expressed concern for my social and domestic well-being. This, then, is a delicious opportunity to express my thanks to Peter Allen, Albert Ascoli, George Beech, Charles Bernheimer, Leo Bersani, Daniel Boyarin, Adam Bresnick, Catherine Brown, Kevin Brownlee, Caroline Bynum, Jane Chance, Susan Crane, Carolyn Dinshaw, Shoshana Felman, Dolores Frese, Sepp Gumbrecht, Penny Shine Gold, Janice Butler Holm, Sylvia Huot, Sam Kinser, Anne Knudsen, Alexandre Leupin, Leo Lowenthal, Stephen G. Nichols, Nancy Regalado, Mary Beth Rose, Tilde Sankovitch, David Stern, Tom Stillinger, Mogens Trolle Larsen, Sylvia Tomasch, and Eugene Vance. The group around *Representations* is, of course, an enduring source of intellectual pep, and the evening discussion of my original paper on misogyny in Mike Rogin's living room in the presence of Jacques Revel produced a fracas for the ages. So too, the published response to this paper in the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* marked the beginning of a salutary dialogue whose effects upon the pages that follow are the very stuff of meaningful intellectual exchange; for this I am grateful to Elizabeth Clark, Wendy Clein, Elaine Hansen, Peggy Knapp, Marshall Leicester, Linda Lomperis, Carol Neel, and Helen Solterer. Where the actual preparation of the book is concerned, I am indebted to Lys Ann Shore, whose expert copy editing and knowledge of medieval sources made the final version more precise than at the outset, and especially to Katharine Streip, whose assistance in every aspect of the current endeavor—from the sleuthing of elusive sources and the proofing of tangled prose to astute criticism of substance—was without equal. Finally, I am saddened that Joel Fineman did not live to see the final product of a dialogue that benefited more than a little from his wacky, generous brilliance.



This book has aroused some controversy even before its publication. Much of the reaction, which came in the form of responses to an article originally published in *Representations*, has been highly constructive, and indeed has had a determining effect upon that which follows.¹ The tone and the insistence of some scholars, however, reveal what I can only take to be a certain disapproval of the topic, seen to be morally inadmissible. Such a consequence is surprising. Surprising, first, because I conceived of my essay from the outset as an essentially feminist project; second, because one of the defining presumptions of feminist analysis is the omnipresence of misogynist attitudes within our culture; and third, because such disapproval can only be based upon the assumption that writing about misogyny automatically constitutes an endorsement of it. Nothing could be further from my intention. Nor is anything less logical than supposing that the choice of a subject for critical treatment means advocacy. The designation of antifeminism as a legitimate topic for study no more implies an espousal of its obviously unacceptable terms than the sociologist's study of poverty entails an apology for abjection, the historian's study of the Nazi or Stalinist past a call to authoritarianism, or the medical researcher's study of cancer a welcome to disease.

If I present antifeminism as a topic for discussion, it is because I think it is a mode of thought often taken for granted; one that, when acknowledged, is often analyzed superficially, even in the languages of anthropology and psychoanalysis, which tend to naturalize rather than inhibit it; and, finally, one that works most insidiously when occulted. It cannot, in other words, simply be washed away by assuming that it is always already there or by the best moral intentions. On the contrary, a failure to recognize the topic can itself be a source of misogyny by leaving the way open to the kinds of unconscious complicities to which none of us is immune. "Misogyny," as Frances Ferguson and I wrote in an earlier volume, "seemed to us to emblemize 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."² This book concerns itself even more deeply with the problems of enacting an easy fit between representation and what one might think of as a political will.

Since much contemporary feminist thought assumes the diverse cultural forms of the West to have been misogynistic from the beginning, and since some feminists have reacted disapprovingly to my recognition of the topic of misogyny, I can only speculate that this contradiction entails a question of voice. Indeed, those who have read my early work or listened to my lectures on this subject often pose one or another version of the question, "Where do I situate myself with respect to the subject?" To which I can only reply that I am a self-identified gendered male, who is prevented out of a deep respect for the variety of feminisms from speaking for *a* feminism; and, more important, prevented out of respect for the ability of women to speak for themselves from adopting the voice of a woman, to speak or "to read like a woman" in the phrase made popular by Jonathan Culler.³ For, as both men and women are becoming increasingly aware, the ventriloquistic imitation of someone else's voice can turn out, in this hyperflorescent moment of the prehumiliated sublime, to be either a strategy of seduction or a usurpation of that person's power. Moreover, the quick move from "speaking like a woman" to the supposition that only a woman can speak *about* a woman, to an essentialized notion of woman *as* truth—yet another version of the Eternal Woman, which I discuss by way of conclusion (chapter 7)—places such a gesture firmly within one of the strong currents of Western misogyny from Plato at least to 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. 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*, 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.")⁴

My approach to the topic stems from what I recognized early on to be a repetitive monotony in what misogynists had to say about women from the church fathers on, and which has hardly varied in almost two thousand years. This is not an original perception but one that dates from the early fifteenth

century and the first sustained attempt to counter the pernicious effects of misogyny on the part of Christine de Pizan. "Judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators . . .," writes the apologist for women in the Quarrel of the *Romance of the Rose*, "it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth."⁵ But, more important, alongside the monotonous persistence into the current era of the topoi of misogyny established in the first centuries of Christianity, I discovered that most previous histories of misogyny seemed to be simple summations or rehearsals of that repetition; and such a tactic leads to a common strategic error—that is, the equation of the uniformity of the discourse with its inevitability.⁶ For example, in writing about the Quarrel of the *Rose*, Blanche Dow tends to assume that what is widespread is eternal, and what is eternal is natural: "It is a recurring quarrel, and is no more than one expression of the eternal struggle between the forces of naturalism and those of classicism, between the opposing definitions of art, two conflicting moral concepts, a struggle between elements which are always present in the human mind and in the social order. . . . The 'Quarrel of the *Rose*' involves an argument which is universal and ageless."⁷ Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, the author of an excellent study of the misogyny of medieval theologians and philosophers, expresses a similar resignation before the monolithic quality of the material: "We must then resign ourselves to a harsh exposition, illustrated by texts that lack variety and that reveal only an approximate image of the real attitude of the men we will cite."⁸ Katherine Rogers, who has written a more general history of literary misogyny, is also aware of how easily the acknowledgment of universality promotes a blindness that naturalizes: "The view that women are inferior to men and therefore should be subordinated to them is not in itself misogynistic, because it was almost universally held until modern times."⁹

All of this made it clear to me from the outset that any effective strategy for resisting antifeminism must be twofold.

First, in exploring the pitfalls and paradoxes of this socially sanctioned discourse, it is not enough simply to recite once again the history of a tort, a litany of woe. Given the persistence of the topoi of antifeminism, moral righteousness and counterexamples—both medieval and modern—have historically never been enough, or even very effective. One must push the antifeminist clichés to their limit in order to unmask their internal incoherences—to deconstruct, in short, whatever will not go away simply by exposure or by wishing that it were not so. To that end the present essay is an attempt to say to all those responsible for the particular articulation of antifeminism under

which our culture still labors—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 of the nineteenth century—that where a certain vision of woman is concerned, “you are not only wrong, you also contradict yourself.”

This is why it is so important, second, to distinguish between language and action, words and deeds, in dealing with the question of misogyny. Here again, Christine de Pizan serves as our best guide. In her insistence upon the repetitiveness of misogynists she acknowledges the important role played by language in coming to grips with antifeminism. Misogyny is the expression of a negative opinion. Concerning what is perhaps the most virulent anti-matrimonial tract of the late Middle Ages, Jehan Le Fèvre’s *Lamentations de Matheolus*, Christine confesses that “just the sight of this book . . . made me wonder how it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked things about women.”¹⁰ That is, using her own terms and leaving aside for the moment the unknowable affective element of antifeminism as well as the social status of actual women at any given moment, misogyny is a way of speaking about, as distinct from doing something to, women, though speech can be a form of action and even of social practice, or at least its ideological component. Such a distinction between words and deeds, where relations between the genders are concerned, is the necessary foundation of a dialectical, historically informed, political understanding of the phenomenon, an understanding which otherwise would remain hopelessly enmeshed in the literalism of a false ideology, a literalism that risks taking gender difference rather than the oppressive exercise of power by either sex for the true historic cause of social injustice. Thus I have been careful throughout this book to distinguish between the alienating speech acts made by the self-identified misogynists I quote and my definition of what they are doing. I have not used the phrase “Woman is . . .” without bracketing it by something like, “according to the discourse of medieval misogyny. . . .” For only by making such a distinction can one 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 antifeminism (see chapter 6).

Here lies another important difference between previous modern histories of misogyny, some of which may be unconsciously complicit with the phenomenon they describe, and the present attempt to undo it. My conclu-

sion broadens Christine's perception concerning "so many wicked things about women" said by "so many different men" to include the alienating effects of both negative and positive predication. Whether good or bad, laudatory or deprecatory, the reduction of Woman to a category implies in our culture—and this because of a historic real imbalance of possessory power—an appropriation that is not present when identical generalizing statements are applied to man or men. I propose, then, a definition of misogyny as a speech act in which woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term; or, alternatively, as the use of the substantive *woman* or *women* with a capital *W*. Even the sentence "All women are different" is included in such a definition, since there are among women, as among men, points of resemblance that reduce such a statement to a violating generalization akin to the notion, never very far behind, that "Woman is undefinable," is a question or an enigma (see chapter 7).¹¹ "We talk about 'women' and 'women's suffrage,'" Millicent Fawcett, the nineteenth-century British feminist, is quoted as saying, "we do not talk about Woman with a capital *W*. That we leave to our enemies."¹² More recently, Judith Butler has sought to extend the proscription of the word *woman* to *women* as well.¹³

This means that the contrary of misogyny is neither a corresponding negative generalization about men (which culturally would not produce the same effect) nor the love of all women (a pretense that is merely another form of misogyny), but something on the order of a perception of women as individuals, or the avoidance of general statements such as "Woman is . . ." or "Women are . . ."¹⁴ For the effect of a speech act such that woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term, that effect which dwells in the zone where the use of words produces the most basic elements of thought—and thought authorizes action, is to make of woman an essence, which, as essence, is eliminated from the world historical stage. This is precisely why the discourse of misogyny seems so repetitive, is so culturally constant, and seems to lack an internal history. Its purpose—to remove individual women from the realm of events—depends upon the transformation of woman into a general category, which, internally at least, appears never to change.

To say that the discourse of misogyny seems to have no internal history is not to say that this way of speaking, and thus of thinking and acting, does not have a history or that it is "only a text"—as patristic and medieval misogynists and their modern counterparts maintain that it is—or that its effects are not real. It is not to imply that there have been no changes in the ways misogyny

has been received, understood, assimilated, or pressed ideologically in the service of social practice. It is not to say misogyny has not been different in other cultures or has not been used in different ways in the course of the Christian era (though even here one can point to a rather singular purpose, which is subjugation). It *is* to say, above all, that any essentialist definition of woman, whether negative or positive, whether made by a man or a woman, is the fundamental definition of misogyny. It *is* to say that such essentialist definitions of gender are dangerous not only because they are wrong or undifferentiated but, once again, because historically they have worked to eliminate the subject from history. “‘Woman’ as a collective noun is as full of traps as it is convenient . . . ,” writes Sheila Ryan Johansson. “Over time men have changed their minds again and again about who and what ‘Woman’ is. . . . Most often it has been those hostile to women who have written of ‘Woman’ and their true unchanging essence. Descriptions and analyses of the eternal feminine have usually been put forth by those anxious to justify continuance of various forms of social and legal restrictions.”¹⁵ Thus the very lack of an internal history of antifeminism implied by the use of the eternalizing, essentializing substantive *Woman*, or by the use of *woman* or *women* in a universalizing proposition, is intimately bound to its specific social effects.

Again, what is called for is not the repression of the topic but its critique, analysis that would undermine rather than confirm its historic power. For, to repeat, any attempt merely to trace the history of antifeminism without deconstructing it—without exposing its inner tensions and contradictions—is hopelessly doomed, despite all moral imperative, to naturalize what it would denounce. The definition I propose suggests, in contrast, that the tenacity as well as the uniformity of the topoi of antifeminism are significant in and of themselves. In fact, these characteristics provide one of the most powerful ways of critiquing it precisely because the problem of defining misogyny remains indissociable from its seeming ubiquity or from the essentializing definitions of woman apparent in the writings of almost all who adopt this way of addressing the question of the feminine, from the earliest church fathers to Chaucer.

So persistent is the discourse of misogyny in the Middle Ages that the uniformity of its terms furnishes an important link between this period and the present, rendering the topic even more compelling because, as we shall see, such terms still govern (consciously or not) the ways in which the question of woman is conceived—by women as well as by men. This is by no means an obvious point, and in order to make it I shall refer not only to

the canonical antifeminists of the Middle Ages, but to their spiritual heirs—the philosophers, novelists, medical specialists, social scientists, and critics of the nineteenth century, whose own particular brand of Romantic and naturalistic misogyny carries a large charge of unexamined attitudes from the medieval, and even the patristic, past.

If the title *Medieval Misogyny* seems redundant, it is because the topic of misogyny, like the mace or chastity belt, participates in a vestigial horror practically synonymous with the Middle Ages and because one of the assumptions governing our perception of the early Christian and medieval period is the viral presence of antifeminism. This view does not emanate from the nineteenth-century revival of medievalism, from contemporary feminism, or even from recent interest in the study of women in medieval culture. Christine de Pizan complains in the *Cité des dames* (1405): “I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was.”¹⁶ The denunciation of women, as Christine acknowledges, constitutes something of a cultural constant. Reaching back to the Old Testament and to ancient Greece and extending through classical Hellenic, Judaic, and Roman traditions all the way to the fifteenth century, it dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, and discussions and compilations of canon law; scientific works, as part of biological, gynecological, and medical knowledge; folklore and philosophy. The discourse of misogyny runs like a vein—Christine’s “several chapters or certain sections” of almost every “book on morals”—throughout medieval literature.

Like allegory itself, to which it is peculiarly attracted, antifeminism is both a genre and a topos, or, as Paul Zumthor might suggest, a “register”—a discourse visible across a broad spectrum of poetic types.¹⁷ Examples are to be found in classical Latin satire and in the satires of the High Middle Ages—John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium* (especially the Letter of Valerius to Rufinum), Andreas Capellanus’s *Art of Courtly Love* (Book III)—as well as in the *Quinze joies de mariage* and the *Lamentations de Matheolus* denounced by Christine. The little-known subgenre of debate poems, popular in the thirteenth century and involving the virtues and vices of women (“Le Sort des dames,” “Le Bien des fames,” “Le Blastagne des fames,” “Le Blasme des fames”), participates in the antifeminism of popular forms, not the least of which is the hermetic fifteenth-

century *Malleus maleficarum*. Misogyny is, moreover, virtually synonymous with the works grouped under the rubric of “les genres du réalisme bourgeois”: the comic tale or fabliau (including Middle English and Italian versions); the animal fable (*Roman de Renart*); the comic theater or farce. It is also associated with certain mixed or unclassifiable types like the *chante-fable Aucassin et Nicolette* or Adam de la Halle’s *Jeu de la feuillée* and, of course, Jean de Meun’s portion of the *Roman de la rose*. It was this last work which sparked France’s first literary quarrel, involving both the question of poetic interpretation and that of woman in a sexual/textual scenario, that would last through the medieval period into the neoclassical age (see chapter 2). Further, as we shall see in chapters 5–7, even those types which historically have been considered to be the opposite of, or liberating from, the dark age of medieval antifeminism—the courtly romance, lyric, and lay—maintain a complicated relation to the hegemonic negative images of the feminine that dominated the earlier period.

If the expression “invention of Western romantic love” seems like a contradiction, it is because we so often assume love as we know it to be natural, to exist in some essential sense, that is, always to have existed. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. For love, unlike the discourse of misogyny of the Christian West, has an internal history expressed both as an evolutionary shift and a difference from itself. The terms that serve to define, or mediate, what we consider to this day to constitute romantic involvement were put into place definitively—at least for the time being—sometime between the beginning and the middle of the twelfth century, first in southern and then in northern France. Along with the revival of cities, the return of money, and growth of long-range trade with the East; along with the reconstitution of monarchy and the legal institutions of the monarchic state; along with the reconquest of territories that had since the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire escheated to local feudal lords; along with the revival of classical literature and the rise of a poetry in the vernacular—all manifestations of what C. S. Lewis characterized as one of the few moments of true cultural mutation the West has ever known—there occurred the most significant shift in the articulation of the feminine and of sex since the patristic invention of gender in the first centuries of the Christian era. As C. S. Lewis, Robert Briffault, Denis de Rougemont, Reto Bezzola, Irving Singer, and others maintain, the notion of romantic fascination that governs what we say about love, what we say to the ones we love, what we ex-

pect them to say to us, (and to say they say), how we act and expect them to act, how we negotiate our relation to the social—in short, the hygiene that governs our erotic imagination right down to the choice of whom we love or the physical positions we use to express it—did not exist in Judaic, Germanic, Arabic, or Hispanic tradition, in classical Greece or Rome, or in the early Middle Ages.¹⁸ Romantic love as we know it did not come into being until what is sometimes called the renaissance of the twelfth century.

The chapters that follow seek to situate and to relate two moments of rupture or disjunction in the history of sexuality in the West. The first, which occurred between the first and fourth centuries (some say as early as Paul and others as late as Augustine), is characterized by an articulation of gender quite different from that of Stoic, Judaic, Platonic, Aristotelian, Gnostic, Manichaean, or late Roman tradition. Indeed, the Christian construction of gender is composed of elements to be found in preexisting or surrounding cultures, but not in quite the combination that was passed to the Middle Ages and has lasted until the current era. More precisely, we find in the writings of the early church fathers: (1) a feminization of the flesh, that is, the association, according to the metaphor of mind and body, of man with *mens* or *ratio* and of woman with the corporeal; (2) the estheticization of femininity, that is, the association of woman with the cosmetic, the supervenient, or the decorative, which includes not only the arts but what Saint Jerome calls “life’s little idle shows”; and (3) the theologizing of esthetics, or the condemnation in ontological terms not only of the realm of simulation or representations, of “all that is plastered on” in Tertullian’s phrase, but of almost anything pleasurable attached to material embodiment. Nothing in prior tradition rivals the asceticism of early Christianity, according to which only the renunciation of the flesh holds the promise of salvation. The shape of this initial articulation of gender is the subject of the first two chapters, which also seek to define the crucial role played by literature and poetics in the definition of gender in the West and in the dissemination of that definition upon the stage of history and within the context of a social and material base.

Here a word of caution is in order. The initial chapters are not about women in the Middle Ages. They do not seek to uncover the suppressed voice of women; they do not present a rounded portrait of women, of the images of women, or even of the social status and roles of medieval women. That has been done by others far better than I could do. Instead, they are

about one particularly negative version of the feminine, which happens also to be particularly influential upon the question of gender still today. Above all, I do not want to deny the existence, alongside the discourse of misogyny, of a myriad 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 diminish the importance of female spirituality in late Classical and medieval culture. On the contrary, I seek in chapter 3 to answer the question of how those who thought so intensely about gender in the first four centuries of the Christian era were able almost to a man to assert that woman is both good and bad, is at once the "Bride of Christ" and the "Devil's Gateway."

In chapter 4 I focus upon the topic of virginity, which lies at the core of the medieval discourse of misogyny. As a defining constant of both theological and literary works, it enables us to make a connection between the patristic writings of the earlier period and the courtly literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6, the obsession with chastity among both Church Fathers and poets leads to the conclusion that this second crux in the history of the relation of the genders represented not so much a break with the Early Christian articulation of sexuality as an inversion of its terms, a transformation of antifeminism into woman worship. It is my claim that the asceticism of the earlier period, synonymous with the deprecation of the feminine, was, in the High Middle Ages, simply transformed into an idealization both of woman and of love according to which: (1) desire was secularized, or the passion reserved in Christianity for divinity became legitimately focused upon a supposedly mortal human being; (2) secular love became impossible or, as Denis de Rougemont and others have noted, it became by definition "unhappy," "romantic"; and (3) impossible love became noble, and suffering the mark of social distinction.

This shift cannot be accounted for, as so many have tried to do, by single-factor explanations, such as the influence of Celtic folk rituals, Eastern religions, Albigensian heresy, Platonic philosophy, or Arabic or Hispanic poetry. It cannot be seen merely as a manifestation of the secularization of society at the time of the Gregorian Reform, for a similar evolution took place both in secular culture and in the ecclesiastical sphere, where it was most keenly expressed in terms of the Mariolatry accompanying new forms of piety in the late feudal era. Nor can the invention of romantic love adequately be understood as a by-product of a general "warming" of the

cultural climate in twelfth-century Poitou and the South. Indeed, as we shall see in chapter 7, only an analysis of the specific social, legal, and economic determinants of this seemingly radical change in the politics of gender can account for the appearance of what since the late nineteenth century has been called “courtliness” or “courtly love.”¹⁹ The coming into being of Western romantic love was part of a particular moment in the history of misogyny—a moment at which, because of contemporaneous changes in both the forms of property and relations of power between the genders, the debilitating obsession with woman as the source of all evil became inverted into a coconspiring obsession with woman as the source of all good.

Thus we seem to be caught between a redundancy and a contradiction. On the one hand, a disparaging of woman is asserted to lack internal history. On the other hand, an idealization of woman appears to possess too much history, or to be overdetermined by it. In fact, the terms of our equation are not as simple as they might seem. As both psychoanalytic and feminist criticism have confirmed, the relation of the competing discourses on the feminine—the misogynistic and the courtly—is a good deal more complicated than one of simple opposition. For, to repeat: it is not exactly that misogyny is without history, but the denial of history to women entails an abstraction that also denies the being of any individual woman, and is therefore the stuff of a disenfranchising objectification. Conversely, the articulation of love as an ideal, which is what we mean by romantic love, *is* the product of a historical process, of material conditions and of a contingent set of circumstances and even personalities, belonging to a specific time and place. A certain way of thinking about history, no matter how big the scale, implicates what the French call “la petite histoire.” But this is jumping the gun a bit; and though readers might want to believe me out of either the political correctness or the deconstructive perversity that such an equation implies, we have a good deal of territory to cover before they will be called upon to concede that negative and positive fetishizations of the feminine work to identical effect, and that their seeming polarity is the product of material conditions that have pertained since the end of what Marc Bloch terms “the first feudal age” and Georges Duby the “watershed years” of the early modern era.

MOLESTIAE NUPTIARUM AND THE YAHWIST CREATION



The persistence—in theological, philosophical, and scientific tracts; in literature, legend, myth, and folklore—of so many of the earliest formulations of the question of woman, from the church fathers to the nineteenth century, means that anyone wondering where to begin to understand the Western current of antifeminism must recognize that it is possible to begin just about anywhere. We begin our study with a passage from among the many antimatrimonial tirades of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*:

Ha! se Theophrastus creüsse,
ja fame espousee n'eüsse.
Il ne tient pas home por sage
qui fame prent par mariage,
soit bele ou lede, ou povre ou
riche,
car il dit, et por voir l'afiche,
en son noble livre *Aureole*,
qui bien fet a lire en escole,
qu'il i a vie trop grevaine,
pleine de travaill et de paine.

*Ha! If I had only believed Theophrastus,
I would never have taken a wife. He
holds no man to be wise who takes a
woman in marriage, whether ugly or
beautiful, poor or rich. For he says, and
you can take it for truth, in his noble
book Aureole, which is good to read in
school, that there is there a life too full of
torment and strife.*¹

Though the Theophrastus referred to—identified alternately as the author of the *Characters* and as a pupil of Aristotle—and his *livre Aureole* are mentioned by Jerome in *Adversus Jovinianum* (I, 47), they are otherwise unknown, which does not prevent their being cited by almost every antimatrimonial writer of the Middle Ages.² Together they constitute an absent *locus classicus* of the topos of *molestiae nuptiarum*, the pains of marriage, which was read, Jean maintains, “in school.”

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