

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.

Helen Solterer
Romance Studies, Duke University

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

babbling, barbed tongues and the like are focussed in the writer and thereby drawn up into the all-encompassing system of literary play.

In large measure, Bloch's discussion leads to a reinforcement of the separation between the discourse of misogyny and its function in a wider cultural setting. Bloch clearly demonstrates how much of medieval literature is feminized. But is this to say that the representations of women can only tell us more about the workings of Literature than about the stakes in representing them in these derogatory ways? However exactly Bloch attempts to define medieval misogyny as a sophisticated game of literature, it inevitably escapes those bounds, inflicting its text on women's and men's lives. To confront the phenomenon of misogyny then entails grappling with the way it can prescribe and regulate human behavior. Earlier on, Bloch seems primed to undertake such an analysis; but as soon as he mentions law, theological doctrine, and scientific diagnoses, he backs away from them, relegating that material to the province of social history. The warning is against proceeding too swiftly from what Bloch calls "the domain of institutions" to misogynistic discourse in general. It is a difficult move, as Bloch rightly underscores. But it is a version of that move that must be made--not perhaps from institution to discourse, but from institutionalized, prescriptive discourse through the spectrum of other discourses. Following such a line of reading, we can set the relation between the various textual configurations of misogyny into proper relief. We can attempt to situate misogyny at the nexus of discursive *and* social practices. Rather than risk displacing and evacuating the force of misogyny again, we can read it centrally in medieval culture, at play in the grammar of tropes, as it plays fatally with the contours of human experience.
