The Uses and Misuses of Misogyny: A Critical Historiography of the Language of Medieval Women’s Oppression

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Abstract • This article examines the development of language used to describe the oppression of medieval women—particularly the terms patriarchy and misogyny—and its connection with the women’s movement of the late twentieth century. It argues that the broad application of the word misogyny by medieval historians to describe a wide spectrum of anti-feminine attitudes and the tendency to understand misogyny and patriarchy as coterminous are inaccurate and problematic. The article supports this position first with an analysis of medieval clerical texts that use the common medieval linkage of women with sex and pollution. The analysis suggests that the usage of this negative linkage is not always misogynistic. The article then analyzes three medieval sermon collections intended for preaching to lay audiences and suggests that the sermons, though androcentric or paternalistic and so in some sense patriarchal, are not misogynistic.

Keywords • female pollution, medieval, misogyny, patriarchy, sermons, women, women’s oppression

Over the course of the twentieth century, medieval scholars moved from understanding the Middle Ages as a golden age for women to seeing medieval society and its institutions as vehicles of women’s oppression. Historians uncovered evidence of medieval women’s declining status and identified a consistent thread of anti-female rhetoric used to support male dominance. Ancient societies were increasingly described as patriarchal, organized around and dominated by men. Accusations of medieval misogyny became more common. By the last decade of the twentieth century, some scholars were describing medieval society itself as fundamentally misogynistic and were using the term misogyny to describe not only a hatred of women but also a broad range of anti-feminine attitudes and practices. Because clerics wrote much of the literature expressing these negative attitudes, the term clerical misogyny also came into common usage and was given a similar broad meaning. In fact, because of the enormous influence of the clergy on
literacy in the Middle Ages, it could be argued that all misogyny was in some sense clerical. This article outlines these developments by focusing on the relevant terminology, particularly the term misogyny as it has come to be used by medieval scholars. Using examples from literature written by medieval clerics, it argues that misogyny is currently understood too broadly to be useful and that seeing misogyny and patriarchy as coterminous is inaccurate and tends to weaken the analytical value of both terms.

Interest in women's history flourished when concerns about women's political or legal rights and the investigation of social classes and everyday life converged. Thus, the second half of the nineteenth century and the last quarter of the twentieth witnessed the production of important works on medieval women.¹ The earliest historians wrote about influential or authoritative women and sought to rectify the absence of women in the historical record. Scholars such as Georgiana Hill, publishing in 1896, and Eileen Power, in 1922, demonstrated women's place in Western history.² The focus on important women and the discovery that medieval women had enjoyed rights that modern women did not led to the idea that medieval Europe had been a golden time for women. There was little interest in identifying, let alone explaining, the limitations women faced. Notions of patriarchy or misogyny were entirely absent and probably unconsidered.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, there was a growing body of evidence suggesting that women's position in medieval society was not only a story of success but also one of decline. The belief in a medieval golden age was being challenged. Because historians still focused mostly on documenting events rather than examining the history of mentalities or ideas, little was being offered to explain the emerging story of women's decline. One of the earliest works examining attitudes toward medieval women was Betty Bandel's article, published in the Journal of the History of Ideas in 1955, which noted changes in language describing active, heroic women in English historical narratives between the tenth and twelfth centuries.³ Women described as wielding political power in the earlier narratives were criticized for that same behavior in later narratives, or were denied agency altogether. Bandel documented not only a decline in women's status but also a change in the attitude of the male chroniclers about what constituted appropriate female behavior. She made no effort to explain her observation but her work supported the new notion that gender roles changed over time.

When the second wave of the feminist movement took off in the 1960s, historians were poised to address not only the reality of women's decreased position in Western society but also the practices and mentalities behind that reality. As feminist activists pushed for women's rights, feminist historians worked to gain a clearer, less idealized picture of women's past. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, historians revised their understanding of medieval women's history and began to see it in terms of a gradual loss of power and authority that began in the eleventh century and accelerated between the thirteenth and fifteenth century. The resulting restrictions on women con-
tinued into the early modern era. As the feminist movement made significant gains for women’s rights, it also encountered growing opposition and resistance. In the 1970s and 1980s the feminist movement became divided between liberal feminists, who advocated change from within the system, and radical separatists, who called for more extreme forms of resistance to the established male order. The language of feminism grew sharper. It was in this political climate that the idea of patriarchy emerged as an explanation of women’s historical oppression. In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, published in 1986, Gerda Lerner clearly linked her scholarship to the political agenda of feminism. It was also at this time that medieval historians began to identify misogyny as a component of medieval society.

During the 1980s, “misogyny” appeared in more works examining the roles and positions of medieval women, though scholars tended to use the term in a limited sense to describe attacks on women, usually verbal. In 1981, for example, Suzanne Wemple used misogyny in her study of Frankish women to discuss hateful descriptions of women by clerical authors as part of the Merovingian church’s effort to create a celibate male hierarchy. Wemple’s use of the term is precise and limited to a discussion of verbal attacks on women by specific church leaders. “Misogynistic tirades in the church began with Tertullian ... [who] regarded women as the embodiment of evil. He added a nasty twist to the argument that Eve was to blame for the fall of Adam, and hence for the ‘ignominy of sin,’ by proclaiming that woman was also responsible for the fall of the angels.” In 1987, Susan Stuard argued that “polarities” fashionable in theological debates of the twelfth century depended on a construct that first assigned a trait to a man and then the opposite trait to a woman. “The construct itself,” she wrote, “tended powerfully toward misogyny.” Two years later, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg was careful to distinguish between negative attitudes toward women and misogyny. Discussing tenth-century ecclesiastical reforms, she noted that reformers “fostered an exaggerated fear of women that frequently took the form of full-blown misogyny.” In the scholarship of the 1980s, the term misogyny was thus used more frequently to discuss clerical literature but it was also used to describe direct hatred of women.

By the end of the decade, it was clear that the political scene in the country had shifted. The conservative movement had gained strength and the women’s movement faced increasingly difficult obstacles. Within the academy, the term patriarchy became politically incorrect. As Judith Bennett observed, “since to focus on systems through which women have been oppressed seems to ‘blame men’ in awkward and unappealing ways, the term ‘patriarchy’ has all but disappeared from most women’s history.” At the same time, ironically, the term misogyny took on a wider meaning. The clearest example of this change comes not from medieval historians but from the field of medieval literary studies.

In 1991, R. Howard Bloch published *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Bloch claimed that misogyny and the Middle Ages
were synonymous terms and apologized for the redundancy—medieval misogyny—in his title.\textsuperscript{10} Basing his work on a study of the literature of medieval romances like the Roman de la Rose and relying heavily on literary critical theory, he argued that any language that essentializes women by assigning traits or behaviors to them as a category is inherently misogynistic. Misogyny, for Bloch, is “a speech act in which woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term. ... This means that the contrary of misogyny is neither a corresponding negative generalization about men ... nor the love of all women ... but something on the order of a perception of women as individuals.”\textsuperscript{11} Although Bloch’s ideas work for literary scholars, there are some problems with his definition. Historians question the extent to which medieval people understood themselves as individuals rather than members of a group. Some have suggested that the twelfth century ushered in the discovery of individualism; but this is arguable.\textsuperscript{12} Certainly medieval authors did not share a modern sense of individualism and it is unsurprising to find that they usually thought of women as a group, as they thought of society in terms of groups. Also, by defining misogyny as any generalization about women, negative or positive, Bloch makes the term limitless. Indeed, as a literary scholar, not an historian, he seems willing to accept misogyny as almost ahistorical, a constant element of literature from the ancient world until today and a fundamental component of medieval culture. Used in this way, I suggest, misogyny is also indistinguishable from patriarchy.

Though Bloch is neither an historian nor a scholar of clerical literature, his work is relevant for the purposes of this article because it reflects an understanding of misogyny embraced by many historians of that time. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of medieval studies, historians paid attention to Bloch’s publication. Reviews of his book written by historians criticized his lack of historical analysis and method, but they did not challenge his definition or use of the term misogyny.\textsuperscript{13} Like Bloch, medieval historians increasingly used the term very broadly to mean almost anything negative about women. Ruth Mazo Karras states in the introduction to her work on medieval masculine identity that the insignificance of women to men in some cultural contexts was as much a part of medieval misogyny as overt attacks on women.\textsuperscript{14} She provides an example of this while discussing the development of masculine identities by university scholars in the twelfth century. Karras states that the failure of clerics to include women in academic disputations on topics that involved women, such as questions about marriage, was misogynistic. These clerics were misogynists because they were primarily interested in themselves and understood women as not important enough to warrant comment.\textsuperscript{15}

Catherine Cubitt used the term misogyny in the title of her article, “Virginty and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England,” which analyzes the works of a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon cleric.\textsuperscript{16} Interestingly, she does not use the term in the body of her work but, instead, leaves it up to the reader to determine how the word applies to the material. The article
discusses the marginalization of women in tenth-century church reforms and the negative view of female sexuality expressed in works on monastic virginity. Cubitt situates these in a world that, in both the religious and secular realms, increasingly valued men over women. It is unclear how much of this Cubitt understands as misogyny, since she does not use the term in her analysis or conclusions.

Not long after the publication of Bloch’s *Medieval Misogyny*, Jo Ann McNamara’s article on the restructuring of the medieval gender system appeared. Misogyny was central to her argument, yet McNamara did not define the term but implied that misogyny refers to a general negative attitude toward women. More important for the development of the historical use of the term, McNamara’s argument focused on clerics and what she called clerical misogyny. She used clerical misogyny to describe a general distrust and dislike of women held by medieval clerics and expressed by some in extremely virulent terms. She quoted, for example, the abbot Conrad of Marchtal, who describes women’s wickedness as “greater than all the other wickedness of the world” and women themselves as more dangerous to men than “the poison of asps and dragons.” Based on evidence such as this, McNamara argued that there was a “crescendo” in the language of clerical misogyny during the High Middle Ages. “We are so accustomed to thinking of the medieval clergy as violently abusive toward women that we have missed a chronological subtlety. Clerical misogyny reached a crescendo between the mid-eleventh and mid-twelfth centuries.”

The problem here is linking misogyny to the clergy as if all clerics were the same all the time. McNamara’s article actually provides evidence that clerical attitudes toward women were not the same all the time and everywhere. However, using the term “clerical misogyny” to describe a persistent element in medieval culture, as McNamara does, implies rather the opposite, making misogyny a fundamental characteristic of all clerics. The term crescendo suggests that while there may have been some misogyny in medieval culture at all times, it changed and expanded over time. What McNamara does not distinguish clearly, however, is the variability of clergymen themselves. No historian, including McNamara, would actually argue that all clerics were the same. For example, the ideas and attitudes of country priests living in small villages probably differed little from the peasants they served. Because that population produced almost no written records that reveal their attitudes and beliefs about women, we do not know what these clerics thought. The attitudes of secular priests, whether serving in rural or urban parishes, may well have differed from that of monks. Literacy was an essential part of the daily monastic cycle of prayer and study, so monks were far more likely to be exposed to Latin literature and the negative attitudes toward women expressed in such works as St. Jerome’s diatribe against marriage. Ordinary monks were also less likely than parish priests to have routine contact with women. University-trained clerics and bishops were also distinct groups, with some commonalities but also important differences.
Add to this the distinctions between clerics in different locations at different times and speaking of the medieval clergy as a unit becomes problematic beyond some very broad generalizations. These important distinctions are hidden under an umbrella term like clerical misogyny.20 Still, McNamara’s article located an important shift in negative attitudes toward women that she connected with the eleventh-century reforms. More recent scholarship has confirmed that analysis but also challenged and refined it. Maureen Miller urged a more nuanced understanding of clerical culture rather than seeing it as “misogynist, exclusive and repressive.”21 She argued that without a more careful understanding of medieval clerical culture it is not possible to understand how the clergy did and did not act as a vehicle of oppression. More recently, Miller has argued that the intense rhetoric of the period was aimed at lay men, not women.22 Other scholars have noted that intensely anti-feminist rhetoric was largely the work of the radical reformers and not that of all clergy.23 Such scholarship reveals the dangers in generalizing about the “clerical” aspect of “clerical misogyny.” It also demonstrates that paying close attention to the differences between clerics increases our knowledge and understanding. A similar effort to avoid the universal application of misogyny to all things anti-feminine and maintain a distinction between misogyny and patriarchy would also increase our understanding of women’s position in medieval society.

In a precise sense, misogyny means the hatred and fear of women, though it has come to be used very broadly to describe the negative attitudes that justified women’s secondary status. In The Creation of Patriarchy, Gerda Lerner defined patriarchy as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.”24 Lerner identified patriarchy as a social structure and attempted to explain how it was established and has been perpetuated in Western culture. She argued that this involved the abuse and commodification of women, actions that could be and often were hateful. The determination to maintain patriarchy relies on a constellation of attitudes, including some level of misogyny. It is easy, therefore, to understand misogyny and patriarchy as coextensive elements of Western culture or to conflate them as fundamental components of women’s oppression. In terms of political reality and social activism, the distinction is perhaps not important. Misogyny and patriarchy are not, however, the same thing. For the purposes of historical analysis, this distinction is important.

Not all negative language about women is the same. Differences in verbiage, context, and audience, for example, make some far worse and more dangerous than others. To dismiss mildly negative language as unimportant or harmless would be a mistake, but to describe all degrees of anti-feminine language or activity as hatred of women is also a mistake. Using misogyny as a broad descriptor of all negative ideas about women conflates a wide variety of attitudes and tends to identify androcentrism as misogyny when that is not always the case. Androcentrism—perceiving the world from a male-
centered point of view—is an attitude that, like misogyny, supports patriarchy. Paternalism is a kind of androcentrism without misogyny. As insulting and offensive as paternalism is to modern sensibilities, the belief that women are like children who need to be protected and governed for their own good can be embraced without hating women at all. Indeed, it has often been understood as the proper way to express love and respect for women. To demonstrate how the current broad use of misogyny and the failure to distinguish between misogyny and patriarchy are problematic, I turn to an analysis of descriptions of women in two sets of texts by medieval clerical authors. The first set was written for a clerical or monastic audience. The second consists of three model sermon collections designed to be preached to a lay audience. All of the texts refer in some way to the association of women with sexual sin or the dangers of pollution, an association often identified by scholars as misogynist.

In some of the texts, the two associations merge because of the medieval belief that sex was polluting. Distrust of sex developed in the early Christian Church and was complicated. Different schools of thought, some diametrically opposed, developed in a young Christian community whose identity and place in the world was still very uncertain. Not every rejection of sex was linked to women. Some early desert fathers, for example, rejected sex because, like eating and sleeping, it focused on the body rather than the spirit. In this school of thought, sexual abstinence was not a rejection of women but an effort to control the body. Others, such as St. Jerome, seemed consumed with a fear of women and the powerful lust their presence generated. In the Western Church, where celibacy for the clergy came to be the norm, the dangers of sex and the temptations of women were especially important for both spiritual and political reasons. Among medieval clergy, the renunciation of sex formed the basis of their claim to moral superiority and spiritual authority. The association of women with the dangers and pollution of sex became a common clerical motif, especially in times of turmoil, as during the eleventh-century reforms when calls for clerical celibacy became intense.

If we apply misogyny broadly to describe all negative attitudes toward women, then the clerical connection of women with sex and pollution was always misogynist because sex and pollution were always presented as evils to be avoided. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find medieval historians using the language of female sexual pollution as evidence of clerical misogyny. But not every use of this linkage was the same. A comparison of clerical texts written between the eleventh and thirteenth century that associated women with pollution suggests that one factor affecting the intensity of the language is whether it was created by the clerical author or borrowed from Scripture. When clerics created their own linkage among women, sex, and pollution their language tended to be more intense. One example of this is the truly hateful text by Conrad of Marchothal quoted above. The words of the eleventh-century reformer Peter Damian in a letter to the archpriest
Peter, in which he urges the archpriest to use his influence to combat the crimes of clerical marriage, are equally vicious. “Alas for those who, though joined to the choirs of angels by that wondrous sacrament of the altar, yet rush from heaven, fall back into the embrace of loathsome women and, like pigs, are immersed in wallows of dirty, muddy, worm-laden lust.” When clerics used their own words to describe women, as both Conrad and Peter did, they tended to use more powerful, often misogynistic, language. When they elaborated on a Biblical passage that made a similar connection among women, sex, and pollution, the tone and message were different.

Sermons on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin are a good example. In these sermons, women are described as polluted after childbirth by the blood of birth but also by semen and the sin of lust. Consequently, they needed the ritual of purification that had been observed by Mary after the birth of her son. The Latin words most commonly used to describe these pollutions are maculare and immunda, words borrowed from the Biblical verse from Leviticus upon which these sermons were based. Bruno of Segni, for example, set up his sermon on the purification of the Virgin Mary by quoting Leviticus: “For Moses said that a woman who receives the seed of man and bears a son will be unclean (immunda) for seven days.” The language here is rather mild and does not convey much emotion. It was also common for these authors to quote the Biblical passage but then to move quickly to other concerns, such as the ideal of sexual purity or the importance of humility. These themes were developed at length and appear to be much more interesting and important to the authors than the soiled woman mentioned in the Scriptures.

Clerical texts also borrowed a number of other Scriptural components that referred to female pollution. One of these is from the Book of Revelations, which describes the 144,000 virgins who were not polluted (coinquinati) with women. These are the saved; they follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Another passage is from the prophet Jeremiah, which describes a woman who, after being divorced by her husband, married another but was then divorced by him as well. Jeremiah poses a rhetorical question: Can the first husband take this woman back since she is now polluted (polluta et contaminata) by sex with another man? He goes on to explain that even though Israel—like the woman in the passage—has been polluted by many lovers, God—whose mercy is boundless—still takes her back. In both cases the vocabulary was borrowed from the Vulgate without alteration by the medieval authors. As in the passage from Leviticus, these texts often served as the bases for clerical exhortations, and women were not the subject of the author’s concern. The passage from Revelations calls the audience to virginity while the Jeremiah text reminds them that, despite their sinfulness, God is a merciful lover. Pollution was useful as a description of the moral condition to be avoided and the fact that the text referred to female pollution was unimportant. In fact, the same message was often delivered using a Biblical text about lepers and their pollution as the foil, rather than women.
All of these Biblical texts borrowed by medieval authors linked sex and pollution with women. The authors used the texts without question and in doing so seem to agree implicitly with the negative association articulated by Conrad and Peter. But these authors did not attack women as Conrad and Peter did. They used the texts to think about themselves and their monastic interests, rather than to think about women. They lived within a patriarchal society and a male monastic culture where the thoughtless use of texts linking women, sex, and pollution may have been as much habitual as intentional. Their disinterest in the Biblical women suggests as much. These authors might be androcentric but it is not clear that they were misogynists. Their words tell us little, if anything, about their attitudes toward women. To conflate these texts with those of Conrad of Marchtal or Peter Damian is a stretch.

Much of the language of female sexual pollution, whether extreme or mild, appears in clerical literature intended for a clerical audience, as in all of the examples above. The second set of texts examines the language used by clerics when they spoke to lay audiences that could have included women. To do this, I use three model sermon collections, those of Raoul Ardent, Alain of Lille, and Maurice of Sully. All three are French sources written in the second half of the twelfth century and thus immediately following the period of reform when misogynist language reached a crescendo. Unlike other sermon collections of the time, these three were intended to assist the clergy in preaching to the laity. Two of the authors, Raoul and Maurice, had the opportunity to preach directly to the laity. Alternatively, Alain produced his sermon collection only as a model for others to use. Though we have no way of determining if the sermons we have were actually preached or not, they suggest language and themes deemed appropriate for a lay audience. They have the advantage of offering us an idea of what kinds of negative language about women clerics might have used when they spoke to a more public audience rather than to one another.

Of the three authors, only Raoul Ardent used the negative image of female pollution. Three of the five examples of this language in his sermons borrow directly from Biblical passages described above. In two sermons, Raoul used the passage from Jeremiah regarding taking back an adulterous wife to emphasize God's mercy. He urges those who have fallen away from their baptismal promises, or who daily offend the Lord, to return to God because they can rely on his mercy. In these two sermons, Raoul was not especially concerned with women and the language of female pollution appears only when he quotes from the Biblical sources. His concern seems to have been to deliver a spiritual message about God's mercy, and the image of taking back an adulterous wife apparently served his purpose. Like the clerics discussed above, he used a negative female image uncritically for a spiritual message that has nothing to do with women.

In a sermon for the Feast of the Holy Innocents Raoul quotes from the Book of Revelations, which describes the 144,000 virgins who were not pol-
luted by women. He goes on to explain that by women is meant here anything that provokes pollution of the flesh. By pollution, he says, is meant lust, which leads to the misuse of the body, to filthiness, and afterward to shame and penance. Though he was not really concerned here with women, he did use them as a metaphor for lust. He goes beyond quoting the Biblical passage and elaborates in a way that makes the negative linkage between women and sexual sin explicit.

Raoul invented his own vocabulary of female sexual pollution in two of his sermons. In the first of these, he condemns priests who keep concubines: “Alas! What soul, what impudent concubinous priest, polluted in heart and body, would dare to touch the Son of virginity, he who purifies souls?” Here Raoul clearly suggests that sex with a concubine pollutes a priest; the concubine being the source of pollution. Again, Raoul was not really interested in the woman. He was more concerned with the actions of the priest whose illicit sexual activity had polluted him. The woman plays a minor, if nevertheless completely negative, role.

The last instance of female pollution language in Raoul’s sermons appears in an extended analysis of Proverbs 31: “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.” He explains that a virtuous woman is rare indeed because women have three weaknesses. They suffer from weakness of the flesh, the weakness of their sex, and the weakness of marital softness. Without expanding further on these weaknesses, he continued the sermon by explaining the duties of a good wife, following the Scriptural text and beginning with a woman’s duty to be faithful to her husband in her heart and her deeds. “Contrary to this,” Raoul wrote, “is that woman who violates the faith of marriage, who pollutes the marriage bed and spurns her husband. She will be subjected to an eternity of insatiable desire.” Raoul related pollution to illicit sexual activity, particularly the activity of a woman. The unfaithful wife pollutes her husband and her marriage by taking a lover, just as the concubine polluted the cleric. In this sermon, however, he addressed the woman and seems interested in exhorting his female audience to greater sexual purity.

Raoul used the language of female pollution in sermons to lay audiences in order to actually talk about women. Like other clerical authors, he seems androcentric and he connected sexual desire with women, thus describing them as a source of pollution. His condemnation of the adulterous wife and the concubine suggests more concern with sin than with femaleness, but his linkage of sexual sin and pollution with women is clear and intentional. He associated at least some women with sin and pollution and thereby presented a negative image of women to his listeners. He used the linkage of women with sex and pollution in a way that suggests he may have disliked women or been wary of them.

In his collection of model sermons, Arte Praedicatoria, Alain of Lille never used pollution language directly to describe women. He did, however, use it to describe adultery in his sermon for married people, Ad conjugatos. The
sacrament of marriage, Alain wrote, is polluted by adultery.42 Adultery, however, is not described as a woman’s activity or as a man’s vice. It is the sin itself that Alain decries and it is adultery itself that he sees as polluting. The only direct references to women Alain makes in this sermon are not concerned with pollution but with proper marital relationships, that is, patriarchal ones. He reminds couples that just as the spirit rules over the flesh so a husband rules over his wife,43 and that a man who loves his wife too much is an adulterer.44

Like Raoul, Alain connected women with lust. We find this in his sermon against lust, Contra luxuriam. At one point in the sermon, he identifies lust as female, saying that lust is the daughter of gluttony.45 This unpleasant association was traditional and Alain borrowed it uncritically. In another place he used a common proverb: three things drive a man from his home—smoke, water, and a wife. Alain understands this metaphorically. The wife, he says, stands for carnality, the smoke for the ebb and flow of lust, and water for the enormity of dishonor. The desires of the flesh, lust, and dishonor, he says, drive a man from home, that is, from peace, tranquility, and serenity.46 Through this analogy he seems to be suggesting that carnal desire and the feelings of lust generated by desire bring a man dishonor. This suggests the same idea Alain offered in Ad conjugatos, that the excessive sexual desire of a man for a woman is inappropriate and can even lead to ruin. The connection between woman and lust is somewhat indirect but still there; nevertheless, the sin of excessive desire is the man’s.

Interestingly, Alain closed this sermon with a series of Biblical examples, organized in pairs. In the first example, Alain writes that David’s lust led him to commit murder and because of Ammon’s incest, he felt the sword of Absalom. In the second example, he states that Daniel’s chastity brought him wisdom through his dreams and Joseph’s chastity made him first among the Egyptians. In the final example, he contrasts Jezebel and the Virgin Mary. Jezebel’s prostitution brought her catastrophe, while the blessed Virgin’s virginity brought her greatness as the mother of God.47 This is a very balanced set of examples. Two men, David and Ammon, associated with lust are contrasted with two other men, Daniel and Joseph, associated with chastity. Then he contrasts the archetypal evil woman, Jezebel, associated with prostitution, to the archetypal good woman, Mary, linked with motherhood. Although Alain again connected a woman with illicit sexual activity, the broader context makes it clear that this association was not foremost in his mind. Instead, he was preaching proper sexuality to an audience of men and women and assuming that sexual sin and sexual virtue were possible for both.

Alain expressed less concern with women and sexual pollution than Raoul, though he did connect women with lust and drew uncritically from traditional associations that were harmful to women. Alain’s balanced and careful use of the language is also revealing. He consciously addressed both men and women in his sermons, linking both to sexual sin. He used tra-
ditional images of women as sexual temptresses but used them to criticize male sexual excess. Considered in this way, Alain’s sermons made patriarchal assumptions but complicated the association of women and lust. The image of women presented to his audience had negative elements but these were tempered and modified.

Maurice of Sully, the author of the last sermon collection and the only one of the three preserved in the vernacular, also avoided the language of female pollution and did not associate women with lust. In fact, his sermons seem to strive for a kind of balance between men and women similar to but more consistent than that of Alain of Lille.

Maurice avoided the language of female pollution, even in his sermon for the Feast of the Purification. Instead, he focused on the idea of purification, which he described as bathing or washing. This feast, he says, offers all of us purification by washing from us the odor of sin, which he then enumerates: pride, envy, anger, hatred, avarice, covetousness, gluttony, drunkenness, and lust. Like the authors addressing a clerical audience, Maurice used his sermon for the Feast of the Purification to address the spiritual concerns of his audience. Writing for a parish, he expanded the idea of purification in a way that made it applicable to all of his listeners and to a broad list of sins. He did not associate women with pollution or link them with sexual sin. The closest Maurice came to connecting women with lust was in a sermon on the parable of the sower, when he describes the seed that falls among rocks and so withers as soon as it sprouts because it has no roots. This seed, Maurice writes, is like a man who tells the Lord that he will do only good things, but then when he sees a beautiful woman, or anything else that pleases him, is tempted to covetousness. The man’s sin was not sexual desire but rather desiring anything in a way that drew him away from God. Maurice, again, chose not to focus on sexual sin or women, though he assumed a male-centered position in his sermon and also assumed that men would inevitably be tempted by the sight of beautiful women.

In the rest of Maurice’s sermons women are typically mentioned along-side men, rather than being singled out as a source of temptation or pollution. For example, in a sermon on the Lord’s Prayer, when he expanded on the text, “And lead us not into temptation,” he used broad and inclusive language. “The devil,” he writes, “comes around good people ... he tempts monks and canons, hermits, recluses, men, women, the poor, the rich, tempting all of them to evil. But the good man and good women defend themselves virtuously.”

Like other clerical authors, Maurice used images that linked women with pollution and lust. He was aware of the notion of female pollution and the idea that women were sources of sexual temptation for men—both androcentric perspectives—but he clearly chose to invest those ideas with a different meaning. Maurice used these negative ideas in a pastoral, perhaps paternalistic, manner to encourage everyone in his audience to lead a better life and so the power of the images to harm women is diminished. Maurice
was less clearly interested in sexual sin than either Raoul or Alain, which may account for his less sexist approach. Whatever the reasons, Maurice’s sermons offered at least a neutral approach to women, closer to paternalism than to patriarchy.

The model sermons examined here demonstrate that clerics used the negative association of women with sexual sin and pollution in very different ways. If we understand misogyny in its broadest sense, as it has come to be used since the 1990s, all of these clerics seem to express or rely on some level of misogyny. If we understand misogyny precisely as hatred or fear of women, it is not clear that any of them was a misogynist. They do not live up to McNamara’s image of the “medieval clergy as violently abusive toward women.” They shared a male-centered view of the world, using male-centered images and examples. But they could be patriarchal, embracing androcentric and paternalistic attitudes, without being misogynist because these positions are all different. This is not to say that the attitudes expressed in these sermons are harmless or, even less, that they are indicative of all or even most medieval clerics. I do suggest, however, that we need a more careful use of the language of oppression in order to understand how and why negative attitudes about women changed over the course of the Middle Ages.

In some ways feminist medievalists face a problem similar to that of Gavin Langmuir’s efforts to define anti-Semitism. Langmuir tried to differentiate between levels and kinds of hostility toward Jews in order to understand the origins and reasons for such hostility. He proposed distinguishing between realistic hostility based on an actual threat, xenophobic hostility based on generalizing a threat from some members of an outgroup to all the members of that group, and chimerical hostility based on fantasies and figments of the imagination, such as accusations of witchcraft. Langmuir’s distinctions may not be adaptable to hostility toward women, but his intuition that language is critical to the analysis of a long-term and widespread cultural phenomenon holds true. Our current terminology uses the same word to describe the university scholar who ignored women and the magistrate who burned them at the stake. The two actions are arguably related but they are surely different.

This takes us back to historiography and two articles by Judith Bennett. In 1989, Bennett called for “a return ... to the grand feminist tradition of critiquing and opposing the oppression of women” and argued that the task of historians in this was to research the fundamental question of why and how the oppression of women has endured for so long and in so many different historical settings. “If we accept this question as our central question, we will be setting out to study patriarchy as a historical phenomenon.” Two years later, Bennett wrote another article questioning the study of misogyny as part of her efforts to understand the lives of the medieval alewives she was studying. Her statement at the beginning of this article is worth quoting at length.
First, the standard definition of misogyny as ‘hatred of women’ encourages us to underestimate both misogynists and their effects. It is the assumption of this essay, and indeed the implication of much feminist research, that misogyny is not the ideology of an extreme few, but rather a pervasive feature of Western culture. In other words, although only a few people might hate women outright, all Westerners share a culture that expresses hatred of women through such means as ridicule, belittlement, and marginalization, and all Western women experience the negative effects of this hatred.\textsuperscript{53}

Working from this broad understanding of misogyny as a pervasive negative attitude in Western society, she suggests that the question of what misogyny actually is cannot be answered and that this perhaps explains why historians have avoided the study of misogyny itself.\textsuperscript{54} I would disagree and argue that the understanding of misogyny accepted by Bennett is the problem. We avoid studying misogyny because we have lost sight of it as a distinctive element of Western culture. We see it everywhere and always, so tracing its development seems impossible. There was plenty of actual misogyny in medieval culture, many instances of real fear and hatred. And Bennett’s challenge to seriously study patriarchy and misogyny remains unmet more than two decades later. Our efforts to accomplish that will be improved, I believe, if we pay closer attention to the language of oppression: if we limit the use of misogyny to mean actual hatred and fear of women and maintain distinctions between misogyny, patriarchy, and the various attitudes that enable a patriarchal society.

\section*{Notes}


6. Ibid., 22.


11. Ibid., 6–7.
15. Ibid., 85.
18. Ibid., 18. McNamara dated this passage to 1137 but, in fact, it was written in 1273. This places the quote outside of the parameters of her article but does not fundamentally weaken her argument.
19. Ibid., 8.
20. Robert Grosseteste illustrates the difficulty. He was a university-trained theologist and an important bishop of Lincoln who wrote not only commentaries on Aristotle, but also a popular treatise on estate management for Margaret de Lacy, countess of Lincoln suo jure. Thanks to Linda Mitchell for mentioning this to me.
23. Megan McLaughlin, Sex, Gender and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000–1122 (Cambridge, 2010), 48–49.
26. The Eastern church, more influenced than the Western church by traditional Greek and Roman attitudes, did not require clerical celibacy. This difference in
church discipline contributed to the split between Latin and Greek Christianity in the eleventh century.

27. The texts were collected searching the electronic version of the *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series Latina, for texts from the eleventh to the thirteenth century in which words for woman appeared close to words for pollution. There are wide variations in purposes, audiences, and genres among the fifty-two texts. The differences between original and borrowed language is one of those variations.


29. See Paula M. Rieder, *On the Purification of Women: Churching in Northern France, 1100–1500* (New York, 2006), especially 61–71. According to the medieval authors, Mary, of course, was free from all forms of pollution and observed the ritual only as an act of humility. Mary’s purification, celebrated on 2 February, was an important Church feast and so generated a sizeable number of sermons.

30. “quod mulier quae sucepto semine pepererit masculum, immunda erit septem diebus” (*PL* 165, 1026A. Dicit Moses [Lev. XII, 1]).

31. Modern assumptions that virgins are always female can make this text confusing. The virgins here are male. Revelations 14:3–4: “illa centum quadraginta quattuor milia ... qui cum mulieribus non sunt coquinati.” Examples of this are *PL* 151, 864A, a liturgy for reception of the monastic habit; *PL* 165, 930C, Bruno of Segni’s Sentences, the chapter on chastity.

32. Jeremiah 3:1: “Si dimiserit vir uxorem suam et recedens ab eo duxerit virum alterum numquid revertetur ad eam ultra numquid non polluta et contaminat erit mulier illa.” Examples of this are *PL* 167, 947A, Rupert of Deutz’s treatise *De Trinitate*; *PL* 208, 798C, a sermon on the Lord’s passion by Martin of Leon.

33. See the sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux, *PL* 183, 288–291, in which Bernard used the story of Naaman the leper. He made leprosy a metaphor for sin, especially hardness of heart, which he describes as the most polluted form of spiritual leprosy because it is interior and therefore most deadly.


35. Stansbury, Preaching before the Friars, 176–177.

36. “Si recedens uxor a viro, duxerit virum alterum, nunquid revertetur ad eam ultra? Nunquid non polluta et contaminata erit mulier illa? Tu autem forniciata es cum amatoribus multis, tamen revertere ad me dicit Dominus” (PL 155, 1778B). Similar quote in PL 155, 1608C.

37. PL 1608B and C; PL 155, 1778B.


40. Weakness of the flesh refers to women’s tendency toward lust; weakness of their sex to their natural inferiority; it is not clear what Raoul meant by marital softness.

41. “Et hoc contra illam mulierem quae fidel violat nuptiarum, thorun maculat conjugalem, virum spernit, et ideo aeternae indigentiae subjacebit” (PL 155, 1614C).

42. “O quantam expugnat honestatem, qui rumpit tori fidei! dum relictio conjugali toro, adulteratur in alio, sacramentum quantum in se est commaculat” (PL 210, 193C).

43. “Observet etiam homo spirituale conjugium inter carnem et spiritum, ut caro tanquam mulier spiritui obediat, spiritus tanquam viri, carnem ut uxorem regat” (PL 210, 193D).

44. “juxta illud quod dicitur, quod ‘vehemens amator uxoris, adulter est’” (PL 210, 193D).

45. “Haec est luxuria, quae est filia gulae” (PL 210, 122B).
46. “Haec est illa pestis, quae tria complectitur per quae homo a domo ejicitur; scilicet, fumum, stillicidium et uxorem. Uxor est carnalitas, stillicidium luxuriae fluxibilitas, fumus infamiae enormitas. Haec tria ejiciunt animam a pace pectoris, a serenitate mentis, a tranquillitate cordis” (PL 210, 122D).

47. “David per luxuriam decedit in homicidium; Ammon per incestum sensit Absalonis gladium; Daniel per castitatem meruit intelligentiam somniorium, Joseph per castitatem Aegypio primatum, Jesabel per meretricium sensit mortis ruinam: beata Virgo per virginitatem Dei meruit genituram” (PL 210, 123A).


49. “mais après, quant il voient bele feme u autre chose qui lor plaist; que li diable lor amoneste a covoitier” (ibid., 95).

50. “Li diables vait environs le bone gent ... il tempte les monies e les canonies, les ermites, les recluse, les homes, les fames, les povres, les rices, ... Mail li prodome et les prodefemes se defendent virtuosement” (ibid., 86).


52. Ibid., chap. 14, especially 328–338.


55. Ibid., note 1, 183.

56. Ibid., 167.