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D. H. Green

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is conceived as a companion volume to *Women Readers in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2007), but with a double change of focus. In the earlier book I attempted to give a selective survey of the various classes of women in three countries (Germany, France, England) throughout the Middle Ages who were active as readers or engaged in other ways in literature, and also of the kinds of text they read, whereas now my question is more what appeals their reading made to them and how they may conceivably have reacted to it. Whereas the first book ranged over the whole span of the Middle Ages, from the seventh to the early sixteenth century, this one concentrates on the years before and immediately after 1200, above all because the wonderfully innovative force of the twelfth century promises illumination in regard to our question and because of the disturbances in the gender system which have been registered in that century. Focusing on the earliest German romances has the added advantage that they were written by authors of the highest rank and can be compared with French counterparts of similar quality.

The title of this book refers specifically to women alone. The reason for this is to provide continuity with the earlier volume, of which this one was at first conceived to form a part, but also because medieval misogyny felt the problem to lie more with women than with men, just as its modern successors coined a term for this (*Frauenfrage*) without feeling the need for a corresponding *Männerfrage*. Writing this book after its companion volume means that certain problems discussed earlier are not taken up again. These include the importance of women's literacy and their reading practice (especially of romances), but also their activity as sponsors and patrons of literature in the vernacular. As a consequence, authors addressed not merely a lay audience, but more specifically a female audience, to whose interests they made special appeal.

In Part I one chapter gives a brief, but purposely general sketch of views about women commonly held in the Middle Ages and a second chapter prepares the ground for what is to follow by narrowing its focus down to

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feminisation in the twelfth century. Part II is devoted to a more detailed discussion of three of the earliest romance themes in European literature: Erec, Tristan and Parzival. It is not difficult to justify the choice of these romances, for they are historically important as the first examples of the 'matter of Britain', the first works to engage in vernacular fictional writing, and they were also in the lead in treating lay themes for a lay audience. Above all, they are works of high literary quality, of European rank. English speaking medievalists may perhaps know the works of Chrétien de Troyes, yet few outside the dwindling band of Germanists in English speaking countries are acquainted with his German colleagues. This is regrettable, not simply because of the quality of these German works (no mere copies of French originals), but also because they provide rich evidence of value for a gendered approach to the medieval period.

As a Germanist my main concern is with the German versions of these three romance themes, but their French counterparts are also taken into account. To assist English speakers, quotations from medieval works are translated, either where my text introduces them or in brackets after the actual quotation. Those who, it is hoped, wish to explore the works in their entirety are well served by English translations. Chrétien's *Erec* and *Perceval* are available in translation in W. W. Kibler, *Chrétien de Troyes. Arthurian romances* (London 1991). The *Erec* of Hartmann von Aue has been rendered into English by M. Resler, *Erec, by Hartmann von Aue* (Philadelphia c.1987), Gottfried's version of the Tristan story by A. T. Hatto, *Gottfried von Strassburg. Tristan* (Harmondsworth 1960), who has also translated Wolfram's version of the Parzival theme, *Parzival. Wolfram von Eschenbach* (Harmondsworth 1980). Hatto's translation of Gottfried also includes a translation of the fragments of *Tristan* of Thomas of Britain.

Although medievalists have learned much from the new questions raised by women's studies in particular and by gender studies at large, I seek to qualify what may be termed an extreme feminism, the reluctance of some to recognise that, however dominant misogyny may have been in the Middle Ages, we cannot talk of a universal antifeminism in this period. If in A. Blamires's anthology of texts, *Women defamed and women defended* (Oxford 1992), the defence seemed to fall markedly short, this was soon more than made good by the same scholar's monograph, *The case for women in medieval culture* (Oxford 1997), in which the detailed and far-ranging case was argued by an impressive number of male as well as female authors. In the pages that follow I attempt to show that the case was also presented by the earliest authors in the romance genre in Germany as well as France. Medieval women were not entirely without sympathisers and allies amongst men.

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PART I

The role of women

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Introduction

In the two chapters that make up Part I the argument operates with a double time-focus. The first chapter ranges over the medieval period at large, discussing selectively views held about women, largely negative but sometimes positive. Given its importance for clerical views we start with authoritative biblical evidence, but also consider ways in which it was developed throughout the Middle Ages, and include occasional significant qualifications or divergences from its implications. This theological testimony is then supplemented by what light the practices of feudal society may throw on secular attitudes towards women and their position in the world, sometimes in agreement with ecclesiastical views, sometimes deviating from them.

In Chapter 2 we narrow our range down to the twelfth century in considering what I term 'feminisation' in this restricted period. The justification for this closer focus is the important changes in the relationship between the sexes which have been registered for this century, but also because this sets the scene for Part II with its treatment of vernacular romances dating from before and just after 1200.

Both chapters provide a background for the works discussed in Part II and are meant to contextualise them. They cover a broad range of social and ecclesiastical issues relating to women, deliberately broader than those treated in Part II, in order to illustrate the extent of the debate into which vernacular authors then insert their literary contributions. This breadth of range is also meant to highlight the ambivalence of traditional views which lie at the heart of such a prolonged debate.

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CHAPTER I

Women in the Middle Ages

The difficulty facing Eileen Power in her *Medieval Women* – how to treat a large subject in a short book – is even more acute in the case of a short chapter such as this. My first task is to present an abbreviated survey of the range of topics concerning women commonly discussed in the Middle Ages, providing the wider background for the more restricted number of themes taken up in the romances to be considered. Secondly, I focus on the variety of opinions, divergent and even contradictory, that could be held, thus preparing the way for the discussion or debate about women, love and marriage which the authors of these romances hoped to encourage in the vernacular amongst laypeople. The highly selective evidence presented in this chapter covers first the authoritative opinions voiced in the Old and New Testaments, with echoes and deviations in medieval discussion, and secondly the extent of agreement and also opposition between ecclesiastical views and the secular practices of feudal society in the Middle Ages. If this double perspective means omitting other contributory factors, such as medical views about the differences between the sexes,¹ my excuse must be that we thereby move more in the mainstream of medieval thought on these matters.

By talking of a variety of opinions and an opposition between views I have already suggested the core of what follows, namely that it is a mistake to regard the Middle Ages, as has long been done, as being characterised by a monolithic antifeminism. Misogyny may well pervade the whole period (and beyond) and may even be predominant, but not to the exclusion of other opinions questioning it from many points of view. Two scholars in particular have performed yeoman service in questioning the assumption of an unrelieved misogyny in this period. In England, Blamires gave markedly more space in his anthology of medieval texts to antifeminism than to defensive responses to it, but this impression of imbalance was redressed by

¹ On these see Bullough, *Viator* 4 (1973), 485–501, and Cadden, *Meanings*.

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his monograph on the case for women in the Middle Ages.² Whereas most earlier work in this direction had concentrated on isolated and relatively late examples of profeminine attitudes (e.g. Chaucer, Christine de Pizan) Blamires covers a much wider range. He thereby establishes a tradition in defence of women, existing alongside and in answer to the misogynous tradition, from the early to the late Middle Ages, but also drawing on support from the examples of a number of biblical women.

In Germany this argument has been reinforced by Schnell in two monographs.³ He argues that scholarship on medieval views on women has largely depicted them as uniformly misogynous because it has been based too narrowly on evidence taken from Latin clerical writing for 'internal' consumption, which has been wrongly held to represent the only view of women in the Middle Ages. In taking other discourses into account Schnell differentiates the picture and argues, like Blamires, that women could be defamed, but also defended against such attacks. Against the assumption of an all-embracing medieval misogyny Schnell stresses the interdependence of what is said and the conditions under which it is said, including such varying factors as oral or written communication, discourse amongst men alone or including women, Latin (for clerics) and vernacular (for laypeople), learned or pragmatic function, different social groups addressed for whom the issue works out differently. Schnell also makes a fundamental distinction between discourse on women (*Frauendiskurs*) on the one hand (scholarly, androcentric and a vehicle for misogynous views) and discourse on marriage (*Ehediskurs*) on the other (pastoral in intent and stressing the shortcomings of men as well as women).⁴ He emphasises the relevance of various types of discourse meant for laypeople in the vernacular. To these belongs, as the argument will show in Part II, court literature treating themes such as the relationship between men and women in love and marriage.⁵ This literature may reflect misogynous opinions deriving from clerical discourse as well as patriarchal attitudes to women at home in feudal society, but it would be rash to assume that the employment of such topoi necessarily implies an acceptance of them, rather than including them as a subject for discussion and debate. Finally, Schnell also maintains that the divergence of views can imply the contrast between imperfect reality and a utopian project, stressing that such utopianism can be detected in clerical views as well as in court literature.

² Blamires, *Woman and Case*. ³ Schnell, *Frauendiskurs* and *Sexualität*.

⁴ On some of these distinctions see also Schnell, *FMS* 32 (1998), 307–64.

⁵ Treated with relative brevity by Schnell in chapter VII of *Sexualität*.

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We may sum up these varying attitudes to women by applying to them what Bond, in another context, maintains of the conception of the private secular self in the high Middle Ages: the images ‘which began to appear are neither uniform nor coherent; they represent instead contested positions within an arena of ideological controversy’.⁶ More specifically with regard to the manifold depictions of women in medieval literature we must reckon not merely with differences between genres (which is Schnell’s main concern), but also within a given genre, within one author or even within one work. To look for a unified picture of women under such conditions and to expect that picture always to be essentially negative does little justice to the intensity of a debate on their nature which persisted throughout the medieval period.

We start by considering what first the Old Testament and then the New have to say about women, including also some selective references to how later authors reduplicated or qualified such statements. My main purpose is to illustrate the undoubted antifeminine current throughout these examples, but also to point to occasional, but persistent deviations from this tradition.

OLD TESTAMENT

For the Old Testament we may begin by quoting what Blamires says of the scriptural background in his anthology, that ‘ideally one would need the complete stories of Samson, Judith, Esther, etc., as well as extensive readings in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiasticus, the three books in which the most damaging assertions are made about women’.⁷ Such an undertaking is clearly out of the question as much for us as for Blamires, so that we must confine ourselves to selected passages from these books, but also considering the two episodes in Genesis, the Fall and the creation of man, on which misogynous tradition drew so persistently.

Solomon, or the gnomic sayings attributed to him, is our leading Old Testament misogynist. Ecclesiasticus 25, 33 begins at the beginning with its claim that from woman arose sin and through her we all die, but surpasses this in extremism when it says that the iniquity of a man is better than a woman who does good (42, 14) and gives warning that there is nothing worse than the anger of a woman (25, 23). This warning recurs in Proverbs 21, 19 with a shift from misogyny to misogamy in the statement that it is better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and irascible woman. The

⁶ Bond, *Subject*, p. 1. ⁷ Blamires, *Woman*, p. 31.

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same book also refers misogynously, in a manner not made clear in the Authorised Version, to the insatiability of women when it includes the mouth of the vulva, alongside the grave, parched earth and fire, amongst the four things that can never be satisfied (30, 15f.). Such categorical statements, enjoying biblical authority, seem damning enough, but that does not protect them from later qualification, however discreetly. Schnell draws attention to two admittedly early modern modifications of this kind. Where according to Solomon's saying only one good woman was to be found amongst a thousand (Ecclesiastes 7, 29) João de Barros (1540) makes the minor adjustment of talking about one good human being amongst a thousand, thereby involving both sexes, not women alone.⁸ The other example concerns Ecclesiasticus 42, 14 (the iniquity of man preferable to a good woman), as interpreted by Nicolas l'Archevesque as late as 1638.⁹ Whereas the biblical saying was meant misogynously, the French author converts this into one critical of men instead. He does this by arguing that the biblical text does not mean that the virtue of a woman is of less value than the offences of a sinful man, but rather that the man is morally so weak that, on seeing a woman, he lusts after her and commits sin. What brings about his sin is therefore not the beauty, let alone the virtue, of the woman, but the man's desire ('mais c'est sa propre concupiscence'). We shall see in what follows that the modification of the antifeminine thrust of the biblical argument brought about in these two examples of Schnell is not without parallel in the Middle Ages.

More important for the development of medieval misogyny than such sayings, however frequent and categorical, are two episodes in the Bible: the Fall and the creation of man. Both are recurrently used to establish woman's proneness to sin and her inferior status, but both call forth attempts to rectify such interpretations.

In the biblical account of the Fall (described by Blamires as the 'front-line weapon of misogyny')¹⁰ the serpent's tempting of Eve and her subsequent tempting of Adam are enough to bring down on Eve, and through her on all women, the punishment of the pain of childbearing and subordination to man (Gen. 3, 16: 'in dolore paries filios, et sub viri potestate eris, et ipse dominabitur tui' you will bring forth children in pain and be under the authority of your husband, who will rule over you). Paul makes reference to both these points as part of his argument that women are not to teach, for that would amount to authority over man and also because it was not the man, but the woman who was first seduced (I Tim. 2, 12 and 14). The

⁸ Schnell, *Frauendiskurs*, p. 233. ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 202. ¹⁰ Blamires, *Case*, p. 32.

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apostle is followed by fathers of the Church on this, as when Tertullian, quoting Genesis on woman's subordination, refers to her as the gateway of the devil, the first to go against divine law and the one who persuaded him whom the devil could not seduce,¹¹ or when Ambrose likewise quotes Paul to the effect that the woman, but not Adam, was deceived as the justification of women's subjection to the stronger sex.¹² The weakness attributed to women in this connection can be interpreted in various ways, as naive simplicity (*simplicitas*), softness (*mollities*) as opposed to firmness of character, short-sightedness or intellectual inferiority, but in any case explaining why the devil was able to tempt Eve as more vulnerable than Adam.¹³

The history of the exegesis of this doctrine, however, reveals a number of significant variations which lessen or question the antifeminine implications seen in it. Blamires has pointed out that, as part of the hierarchical relationship which demoted women, men were conceived as active and women as passive, but that as a result men must be more guilty than women, so that scrutiny of responsibility affects all areas of the debate.¹⁴ An example of how the antifeminine exegesis of the Fall, placing the blame squarely on Eve, can be adapted to involving Adam as well occurs in the Middle English *Dives and Pauper*.¹⁵ This text castigates Adam for the sin of blaming Eve, attributing his fault to her when God rebuked him, an evasion of responsibility by the 'stronger' party which amounts to a *fals excusacioun*. A similar strategy (undercutting misogyny by extending the criticism to embrace men as well) is employed by the author of the Anglo-Norman *Bounté des femmes* in insisting on Adam's share of responsibility because of his own folly.¹⁶ Nor do we have to wait for late medieval texts in the vernacular for the articulation of such criticism. As early as with Chrysostom Adam can be condemned since, if he is to be seen patriarchally as the 'head' of his partner and Eve as the 'body', then his responsibility is all the greater.¹⁷ That is a very condescending mitigation of Eve's responsibility and it lurks within a pronouncedly antifeminine context, but it does point the way to a later possible exculpation from an explicitly misogynous charge. Insofar as Adam is involved as well, the fault lies with human nature itself and is not gender specific, a defence of woman which as we shall see plays a prominent part in vernacular literature around 1200 with critical generalisations which are not restricted to the female sex alone, but extended to males too. The logical force of this strategy has been summed up well by Blamires as a refusal 'to let

¹¹ Quoted by Blamires, *Woman*, p. 51. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 61. ¹³ Blamires, *Case*, p. 113.

¹⁴ Blamires, *Woman*, pp. 14f. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 265, and *Case*, pp. 118f.

¹⁶ Blamires, *Case*, p. 28. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

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misogyny get away with a view of woman as a being of congenital unresponsibility on the one hand who is simultaneously, on the other hand, held profoundly responsible for sin'.¹⁸ Behind the claims for female or male responsibility which such examples illustrate we may detect traces of reflection on how to reconcile traditional biblical exegesis on the Fall with what was provided from other sources: hagiography (women saints), scripture (the women disciples' loyalty to Christ) and everyday experience.¹⁹

The other episode in Genesis, the creation of man, was also exploited misogynously, as a means of establishing woman's secondary, derivative and hence subordinate status. Material for debate, if not always used for that end in the Middle Ages, was present in the Bible in that Genesis incorporates two different accounts of creation difficult to reconcile.²⁰ The first version (1, 27), in biblical scholarship known as the 'priestly' one, implies the creation of man and woman at the same time, equal in their common designation as a human being (*homo*), but differentiated by terms denoting their sex ('Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam; ad imaginem Dei creavit illum, masculum et feminam creavit eos' And God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them). This version was largely ignored in exegetical tradition (until modern feminist criticism) in favour of a second ('Yahwist') account followed by patristic and medieval commentators. According to this version God first created man (Adam) from the slime of the earth (2, 7) and only subsequently took Eve from one of Adam's ribs (2, 7 and 21f.), whereupon Adam, because she had been formed from his bones and flesh, called her *virago*, woman, taken from *vir*, man. (The Latin word play follows the model of Hebrew and has a fortunate parallel in English *man* and *woman*, just as Luther employs *Mann* and *Männin* in this passage.) This version of creation therefore sees woman formed after man and deriving from him, a sequence Paul sums up in saying that man was not created for woman, but woman for man.²¹

As with exegesis of the Fall there are a number of variant interpretations of creation which, without reference to the first version of Genesis, attempt to rescue some equality for both sexes. The chronological sequence which was used to give man priority over woman was reinterpreted, for example, in a response, possibly by a woman author, to Richard de Fournival's *Bestiaire d'amour* by the simple, but effective means of arguing that, although man had been fashioned well by God the artisan, this was with the lowly material of slime, whereas woman was created from nobler material, the result of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 238f.¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.²⁰ Discussed by Bloch, *Misogyny*, pp. 22–5.²¹ I Cor. II, 9.