

Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love

I. MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY

- Genesis II 17. And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul...
18. And the Lord God said: It is not good for man to be alone; let us make him a help like unto himself.
 19. And the Lord God having formed out of the ground all the beasts of the earth, and all the fowls of the air, brought them to Adam to see what he would call them: for whatsoever Adam called a living creature the same is its name.
 20. And Adam called all the beasts by their names, and all the fowls of the air, and all the cattle of the field: but for Adam there was not found a helper like himself.
 21. Then the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon Adam: and when he was fast asleep, he took one of his ribs, and filled up flesh for it.
 22. And the Lord God built the rib which he took from Adam into a woman: and brought her to Adam.
 23. And Adam said: «This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.»

What sometimes passes unnoticed in the Genesis story is the degree to which the creation of woman is linked to a founding, or original, linguistic act. Adam is said to be the first to speak, the namer of things; woman, or the necessity of woman, her cause, seems to emanate, in turn, from the imposition of names¹. The designation of things, or a primal instance of man's exertion of power over them, and the creation of woman are coterminous. Further, in this account of the *ad seriatim* creation of the genders woman is by definition a derivation of man who, as the direct creation of God, remains both

¹ See my *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 37-44 and «Medieval Misogyny», *Representations* 20 (1987), 1-24.

chronologically antecedant and ontologically prior. This, of course, is not the only version of Creation contained in Genesis, for an earlier passage (I, 27) — the «Priestly» version — suggests the coeval creation of man and woman both subsumed under the name *homo*: «Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam: ad imaginem Dei creavit illum, masculum et feminam creavit eos.» («And God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him, masculine and feminine he created them»). Nonetheless, it is a fact of the history of exegesis that medieval commentators (Augustine, Jerome, Philo Judaeus), in fact most commentators until the time of Mary Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, focus upon the «Yahwist» version of creation and therefore understood the sequential creation of the genders in a highly hierarchized way. «It is not good that *any* man should be alone», writes Philo, «For there are *two* races of men, the one made after the (Divine) Image, and the one moulded out of the earth... With the second man a helper is associated. To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says 'Let us make a helper for him'; and in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper»². Thus, woman, created from man, is conceived from the beginning to be secondary, a supplement. Here the act of naming takes on added significance. For the imposition of names and the creation of woman are not only simultaneous, but analogous gestures implicated in each other. Such mutual implication is translated in the concreteness of the Creational language (II, 23) «os ex ossibus meis, et caro de carne mea», and in the play of the name itself: «Haec vocabitur Virago, quoniam de viro sumpta est» («This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man»). Medieval commentators who were aware of the derivational quality of the words for gender, and who therefore used it to substantiate the derivational relation of the genders, made much of the Hebrew *isha* from *ish* and the Latin *virago* from *virgo*³. Just as

² Philo, *On the Creation* (London, Heinemann, 1929), p. 227.

³ See, for example, Isidore's *Differentiae* (*Patrologia Latina*, 83, col. 68) and *Etymologiae*, 11, 2, 22. Such deadly serious wordplay will continue even after, or especially after, the fall. «All men are born crying in order to express the misery of nature», Innocent III writes. «For the newly born male says 'Ah', the female 'E'. All are born of Eve saying 'E' or 'Ah'. What is 'Eve' therefore? Either syllable is the interjection of one in pain, expressing the magnitude of the pain. Hence she deserved to

words are conceived to be the supplements of things, which are supposedly brought nameless to Adam, so woman is the supplement to, the «helper», of man. She is imagined to come into being as a part of a body more sufficient to itself because created directly by God and to whose wholeness she, as part (and this from the beginning), can only aspire. Here, of course, we encounter the liminal dilemma of what some have recently identified as phallogocentric logic. That is, in the phrase of Mary Nyquist, «when it comes to paired or coupled items, that which is temporally later is also, frequently, regarded as being secondary in the sense of derivative or inferior»⁴.

Adam's priority implies a whole set of relations that strike to the heart not only of medieval sign theory, but to certain questions of ontology that make it apparent that the Fall, commonly conceived to be origin and cause of medieval misogyny, is merely a fulfillment or logical conclusion of that which is implicit to the creation of Eve. Woman, as secondary, derivative, supervenient, and supplemental, assumes all that is inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse.

Adam has, first of all, what medieval philosophers called substance. His nature is essential; he possesses Being — Existence. «All good is from God», Augustine affirms, «hence there is no natural existence which is not from God»⁵. Eve, as the byproduct of a part of the essential, partakes from the outset of the accidental, associated with a multiplicity of modes of degradation implicit to her coming into being as becoming.

If Adam exists fully and Eve only partially, it is because he participates in what is conceived to be an original unity of being while she is the offshoot of division and difference. And unity, another word for Being, is the goal of philosophy because it is also

be called virago ('made from man') before sin, 'Eve' after sin...» «Omnes nascimur eulantes ut nature miseriam exprimamus. Masculus enim recenter natus dicit 'A', femina 'E'. «Dicentes 'E' vel 'A' quotquot nascuntur ab Eva». Quid est igitur «Eva»? Utrum dolentis est interiectio, doloris exprimens magnitudinem. Hinc enim ante peccatum virago, post peccatum «Eva»... (Pope Innocent III, *De Miseria Conditionis Humanae*, ed. Robert E. Lewis [Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1978], pp.102-103). I am indebted to John Fyler's to be published paper «Women, Theory, and the Defensiveness of Chaucer» read at the University of Rochester on April 23, 1988 for the gist of this idea.

⁴ M. Nyquist, «Gynesis, Genesis, Exegesis, and Milton's Eve», in *Selected Papers from the English Institute*, 1985, ed. M. Garber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), p. 158.

⁵ *De Libero Arbitrio*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh (London, SCM Press, 1953), p. 169.

synonymous with truth. «Philosophy as a discipline», writes Augustine in the *De Ordine*, «itself already contains this order of knowledge, and it need not discover more than the nature of one, but in a much more profound and divine sense»⁶. This translates even into what might be thought of as the metaphysics of number according to which, under the Platonic and Pythagorean schema, all created things express either the principle of self-identity (*principium Ejusdem*) or of continuous self-alteration (*principium Alterius*). Not only is the first associated with unity, the monad, and the second with multiplicity, dyadic structures, but they are specifically gendered; the monad being male, the dyad female. «One expresses stability, the other endless variation», writes Boethius in his *Arithmetic*. «Here is change and alteration, there the force of fixity. Here, well determined solidity, there the fragmentation of infinite multiplicity.»⁷ The oneness which Adam once enjoyed, the uniqueness of singularity, is indistinguishable from the oneness that is the founding principle, the guarantor, of grammar, geometry, philosophy; and, implicitly, of theology, since God is defined as the nature of one, that which is universal and eternal. «Christ», writes Tertullian, «is everything which is once for all»⁸.

This is another way of saying that Adam possesses form, is the equivalent of an Idea; for that which has unity and existence also has form. «All existing things would cease to be if form were taken from them, the unchangeable form by which all unstable things exist and fulfill their functions», asserts Augustine in a formula that appears almost everywhere in the discourse of misogyny⁹. That is, man is form or mind, and woman, degraded image of his second nature, is relegated to the realm of matter. Put in terms more appropriate to the

⁶ Augustine, *De Ordine*, ed. J. Jolivet (Paris, Desclée de Brower, 1948), p. 444.

⁷ «Hic enim stabilitas, illic instabilis variatio; hic immobilis substantiae robor, illic mobilis permutatio; hic definita soliditas, illic infinita congeries multitudinis» (*Arithm* 1139, cited De Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale*, Bruges, De Tempel, 1946, I, 14).

⁸ Tertullian, «On Exhortation to Chastity», in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Buffalo, The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), IV, 54.

⁹ Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*, p. 163. This is also an important concept in the Aristotelian tradition according to which in procreation man supplies the form and woman the matter; see in particular *De la Génération des animaux*, ed. P. Louis (Paris, Société d'Édition «Les Belles Lettres», 1961), pp. 3-5, 39-43.

Patristic tradition, man is associated throughout the period in question with spirit or soul formed directly by God, partaking of his divinity, while woman is assumed to partake of the body, fleshly incarnation being by definition the sign of humanity's fallen condition¹⁰.

My claim is that we cannot separate the concept of woman as it was formed in the early centuries of Christianity from a metaphysics which abhorred embodiment and that woman's supervenient nature is, above all, indistinguishable from that of all signs in relation to the signified, of all representations¹¹. As Philo Judaeus maintains, her coming into being is synonymous not only with the naming of things, but with a loss — within language — of the literal:

«And God brought a trance upon Adam, and he fell asleep; and He took one of his sides» and what follows (Gen. II, 21). These words in their literal sense are of the nature of a myth. For how could anyone admit that a woman, or a human being at all, came into existence out of a man's side¹²?

Since the creation of woman is synonymous with the creation of metaphor the relation between Adam and Eve is the relation of the proper to the figural, which implies always derivation, deflection, denaturing, a tropological turning away. The perversity of Eve is that

¹⁰ For a general discussion of this idea see Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, «Comment les théologiens et les philosophes voient la femme», *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 20, (1977), 105-129.

¹¹ Sharon Farmer has maintained that «Because ancient and medieval societies were predominantly oral cultures, philosophers and theologians in those societies felt the full impact of speech as sensuous and physical phenomenon, and they therefore associated speech with the physical realm and women. In the Middle ages, moreover, the tendency to associate women with the power of speech was bolstered by the fact that there was a sharp division between the oral world of illiterate women and lay men and the textualized world of clerics» («Softening the Hearts of Men: Women, Embodiment, and Persuasion in the Thirteenth Century» in *Embodied Love: Sexuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula Cooly, Sharon Farmer, Mary Ellen Ross [New York, Harper and Row, 1987], p. 116). I'm not sure, however, that we can reduce the mistrust of women to the mistrust of the oral without at the same time naturalizing such an equation since the assignment of women to the realm of the oral, which Sharon Farmer traces to the acquisition of a mother tongue («women... as mothers or nurses had uttered the first words that these men had heard and mimicked... [p. 119]) seems merely to represent another version the archetype of the garrulous female, which is the staple of misogynistic prejudice. Nor can we reduce the discourse of misogyny to a matter of lay versus clerical culture since illiteracy is certainly no guarantee against misogynistic speech.

¹² Philo, *On the Creation*, p. 237.

of the lateral: as the outgrowth of Adam's flank, his *latus*, she retains the status of *translatio*, of translation, transfer, metaphor, trope. She is side-issue¹³. This may seem like a contradiction — the association of woman both with the material and with the figural. And we might read it as simply an aforesaid of the myriad of paradoxes intendent upon the discourse of misogyny, or reduce it (monadically?) to the coherence implied by figuration — signs, material representations — within a universe in which embodiment is always already on the side of the degraded. Again, Eve as figure of the figural stands for the division of unity of which metaphor is itself an attempt, in the terms that Augustine understood it, a recuperation.

Marsha Colish has written a brilliant article, «Cosmetic Theology: The Transformation of a Stoic Theme», in which she shows convincingly that the Early Christian Father's appropriation of the Stoic (and before that Cynic) attempt to ally ethics, nature, and reason involved a shift from a concern with masculine modes of self-presentation (including dress and hairstyle) to the obsession with the aesthetics of femininity¹⁴. Indeed, Tertullian, using biblical, apocryphal, and classical sources, «turned the Stoics inside out». For Tertullian articulates the link between the derivative nature of the female and that of figural representation in a way, I maintain, that dominates thought on gender well into our own era.

The great misogynistic writers of the first centuries of Christianity — Paul, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Novatian, Ambrose, Philo, Jerome — were obsessed by the relation of women to decoration; they were fascinated by veils, jewels, makeup, hairstyle and color — in short, by anything having to do with the cosmetic. Such an

¹³ Nor is the metaphorical status of woman necessarily negative, for it is this very possibility of interpretation that enables the Christian recuperation of the pagan past. The third-century Greek Father Methodius was well aware of this fact. «For if we are really to take Scripture merely as giving a representation of the union of man and woman, why then does Paul, in referring to it and, as I think, guiding us into the way of the Spirit, allegorize the story of Adam and Eve and apply it to Christ and the Church?» he asks. «The text in Genesis reads as follows: *And Adam said: This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man...* The Apostle, then, in considering this same passage, does not now, as I have said, want it to be taken literally in a natural sense...» Saint Methodius, *a Symposium, A Treatise on Chastity* (London, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1958), p. 58.

¹⁴ «Cosmetic Theology: The Transformation of a Stoic Theme», *Assays* 1 (1981), 3-14.

obsession is evident even in the titles of the essays of, say, Tertullian: «On the Veiling of Virgins», «On the Pallium», «On the Apparel of Women» (also Cyprian's «The Dress of Virgins»). For the third-century apologist, woman is a creature who above all else and by nature covets ornamentation:

You are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of *your* desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunic of skins? Come, now; if from the beginning of the world the Milesians sheared sheep, and the Serians spun trees, and the Tyrians dyed, and the Phrygians embroidered with the needle, and the Babylonians with the loom, and pearls gleamed, and onyx stones flashed; if gold itself also had already issued, with the cupidity (which accompanies it), from the ground; if the mirror too, already had licence to lie so largely, Eve, expelled from paradise (Eve) already dead, would also have coveted *these* things, I imagine! No more, then, ought she *now* to crave, or be acquainted with (if she desire to live again), what, when she *was* living, she had neither had nor known. Accordingly, these things are the baggage of woman in her condemned and dead state, instituted as if to swell the pomp of her funeral¹⁵.

If man's desire for ornament, or for that which is secondary, is analogous to man's desire for woman, it is because woman is conceived as ornament¹⁶. She is, by her secondary nature, automatically associated with artifice, decoration. The mildest version of such a paradigm is found in the often repeated licence for men to pray with head bare while women are enjoined to be veiled — and in its corollary, that woman is covering or veil: «But if a woman nourish her hair, it is a glory to her», writes Paul, «for her hair is given to her as a covering» (I Corinthians, 11, 15). Woman naturally decorates herself: and, according to Tertullian, is by nature decoration:

¹⁵ Tertullian, «On the Apparel of Women» in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV, 14.

¹⁶ Here there is an association as well of woman with the Jews, for as the Jews come to represent the letter without the spirit, or understanding, women represent the superficially decorative. The passage from the Old Testament often cited by the Church Fathers is Isaiah, 3.16-24 which deals with the «haughtiness of the daughters of Zion»; and that from the New Testament I Timothy, 2, which enjoins women «to adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broidered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array».

Female habit carries with it a twofold idea — dress and ornament. By «dress» we mean what they call «womanly gracing»; by «ornament», what is suitable should be called «womanly *disgracing*». The former is accounted (to consist) in gold, and silver, and gems, and garments; the latter in care of the skin, and of those parts of the body which attract the eye. Against the one we lay the charge of ambition, against the other prostitution¹⁷.

One might be tempted, in reading such a passage, to equate the hostility towards women with a more generalized horror of the flesh. And this is certainly not what is lacking. «We are trained by God for the purpose of chastising, and (so to say) emasculating, the world», Tertullian attests. We are the circumcision — spiritual and carnal — of all things¹⁸. Yet, it is not the flesh which Tertullian denounces. On the contrary, there seems to be little difference between the materialism of the body and of its clothes; moreover, it is the draping of the flesh with «dress and ornament» which is the equivalent of seduction:

The only edifice which they know how to raise is this silly pride of women: because they require slow rubbing that they may shine, and artful underlaying that they may show to advantage, and careful piercing that they may hang; and (because they) render to gold a mutual assistance in meretricious allurements¹⁹.

To decorate oneself is to be guilty of «meretricious allurements», since embellishment of the body, a prideful attempt «to show to advantage», recreates and is the sign of an original act of pride that is the source of potential concupiscence. This is why Tertullian is able to move so quickly and naturally from the idea of dress to a whole range of seemingly unapparent associations — e.g., between transvestism and the monstrous, or between the toga and lust, adultery, cannibalism, intemperance, and greed²⁰. It is as if each and every act of clothing an original nakedness associated with the sanctity of the body, and not the weakness of the flesh, were a corrupting recapitulation of the Fall entailing all other perversions.

If clothes are at once the sign, the effect, and a cause of the Fall, it is because, as artifice, they, like woman, are conceived to be

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 16.

¹⁸ «On the Apparel», p. 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ «On the Pallium», in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV, 9, 12.

secondary, collateral, supplemental. Dress is unnatural since, like all artifice, it seeks to add to, to perfect, the body of nature or God's creation:

That which He Himself has not produced is not pleasing to God, unless He was *unable* to order sheep to be born with purple and sky-blue fleeces! If He was *able*, then plainly He was *unwilling*: what God willed not, of course, ought not to be fashioned. Those things, then, are not the best by *nature* which are not from God, the *Author* of nature. Thus they are understood to be from *the devil*, from *the corrupter* of nature: for there is no other whose they *can* be, if they are not God's; because what are not God's must necessarily be His rival's («Apparel», p. 17).

A recreation, the artificial implies a pleasurable surplus that is simply inessential:

Thus (a thing) which, from whatever point you look at it, is in *your* case superfluous, you may justly disdain if you have it not, and neglect it if you have. Let a holy woman, if naturally beautiful, give none so great occasion (for carnal appetite) («Apparel», p. 20).

Tertullian does not, of course, seek to determine how something can be «naturally beautiful», much less to wrestle with the supervenient status of his own thought upon the superficial. Moreover, his indictment of the artificial condemns not only what we think of as the realm of the esthetic, «adulteration with illegitimate colours», but extends to any investment of nature with human intention. Thus the constant comparison of iron, the use-value par excellence, with gold, which is perverse because its worth is extrinsic. The affinity between gold, the product of excess labor, «the arts», and women constitutes an economic nexus taken as a given; their natures, by definition inessential and antinatural, attract each other because they partake coevally in a scandalous excess that offends.

Here we arrive at an idea that runs deep throughout medieval thought and that indeed can be considered to constitute the essence of a certain theologizing of the esthetic. To wit, the artificial participates in a supervenient and extraneous rival creation that can only distract man's attention from God's original «plastic skill»: «Whatever is *born* is the work of God», Tertullian concludes, «Whatever is *plastered* on is the devil's work... To superinduce on a divine work Satan's ingenuities, how criminal it is!» («Apparel», p. 21). The decorative not only constitutes, as in the case of gold, an artificial investment of value, with all that such intention implies by

way of potential concupiscence, but is a literal adding to the «weight» of creation:

The wonder is, that there is no (open) contending against the Lord's prescripts! It has been pronounced that no one can add to his own stature. *You*, however, *do* add to your *weight* some kind of rolls, or shield-bosses, to be piled upon your necks!... Nay, rather banish quite away from your «free» head all this slavery of ornamentation («Apparel», p. 21).

From the always scandalous dressing of the naked body of nature emanates the entire range of perverse terms associated with «meretricious garbs and garments». In particular, the church fathers move quickly, by association, from the symbolic — artifice, idolatry — to the erotic — concupiscence, fornication, adultery, prostitution as if representation itself were, always and already, an offense. Verbal signs, in particular, stand as a constant reminder of the secondary and supplemental nature of all «the arts». «With the word the garment entered», Tertullian asserts, implying that language is a covering that, by definition and from the start, is so wrapped up in the decorative as to be essentially perverse²¹.

This nexus of ideas suggests that the representation of woman as ornamentation is in the discourse of medieval misogyny an integral part of a broader paradigm, or that her perverse secondariness is the secondariness of the symbolic. The deep mistrust of the body and of the materiality of signs defined by their accessibility to the senses constitutes, in fact, a commonplace of what we know about the Middle Ages. Where it becomes interesting for our purpose is in the explicit analogy between woman and the sensible; for, as Philo reminds us, the relation between the mind and the senses is that of man to woman:

To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says, «Let us make a helper for him»; and in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper. In these particulars again, while using the terms outward nature, he is conveying a deeper meaning. For sense and the passions are helpers of the soul and come after the soul (*Creation*, p. 227).

The ontological status of woman is, then, analogous to that of the senses within the cognitive realm. Man as mind and woman as sensory perception are, as Philo explains, mutually exclusive: «... it is

²¹ «On the Pallium», in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV, 8.

when the mind (Adam) has gone to sleep that perception begins, for conversely when the mind wakes up perception is quenched.» Woman, formed of flesh from the rib, remains bound by the corporeal. «‘He built it to be a woman, (Gen. ii, 22)’», Philo continues, «proving by this that the most proper and exact name for sense-perception is ‘woman’» (*Creation*, pp. 237, 249). Woman as sensitive soul is allied with the sensual; to perceive her, John Chrysostom maintains, is no less dangerous to men in general than the faculty of perception is to the soul of every man:

Hence how often do we, from beholding a woman, suffer a thousand evils; returning home, and entertaining an inordinate desire, and experiencing anguish for many days; yet nevertheless, we are not made discreet; but when we have scarcely cured one wound, we again fall into the same mischief, and are caught by the same means; and for the sake of the brief pleasure of a glance, we sustain a kind of lengthened and continual torment... The beauty of a woman is the greatest snare. Or rather, not the beauty of woman, but unchastened gazing²²!

Here we meet with a paradox within the medieval discourse on women. To wit, if woman is conceived to be synonymous with the senses or perception, then any look upon a woman’s beauty must be the look of a woman upon a woman; for there can be no such thing as a male gaze or desire. This is why any answer to Saint Chrysostom’s question «How is it possible to be freed from desire?» must be to be free of perception, or from the feminine altogether²³. In this sense the discourse of misogyny is bound to the will to escape the senses, perception, the corporeal, or consciousness itself, and, as a desire for totality becomes the site of another contradiction — that between the keenness of the awareness of woman as flaw and the desire for absolute wholeness expressed in the persistent exhortation to chastity, which is the unmistakable symptom of a death wish. «While in the flesh let her be without the flesh», urges Jerome; «The virgin... both yearns for her death and is oppressed by life, anxious as she is to see her groom face to face and enjoy that glory», John Chrysostom assures us. And, in fact, a certain inescapable logic of virginity, most evident in medieval hagiography, leads syllogistically to the conclusion that the only good virgin — that is, the only true virgin — is a

²² John Chrysostom, Homily XV in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1956), IX, 441.

²³ Homily XVII in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, X, 116.

dead virgin. Martyrdom is practically synonymous with virginity, as Ambrose insists in his tale of St. Agnes's beheading: «Why are you delaying?» the soon to be perfected virgin taunts her executioner. «Let this body perish which can be loved by eyes which I would not»²⁴.

II. VIRGINITY

The definition of virginity, which shares pride of place with clothes and decoration within the corpus of Patristic fascinations, is elusive indeed. To be more precise, virginity contains an historical reference to Adam and Eve and to a theological state of man, as in Augustine's notion of technical virgins who reproduce in Paradise without desire or pleasure; this implies within the writings on virginity the corollary that with the end of human time everyone will again be a virgin because sexual difference will no longer be necessary. Virginity carries with it always a doctrinal reference to Mary, the Virgin, who redeems Eve; and it implies, on the individual level, a lack of personal sexuality. Here, the more one seeks to fill the category, the more evasive it becomes. One begins, of course, with the assumption that a virgin is a woman who has not slept with a man. Yet, as the Fathers make abundantly clear, it is not enough merely to be chaste. The distinction between virgins in mind and chastity of the body is emphasized throughout: A virgin is a woman who not only has never slept with a man, but who has never desired to do so. Thus Jerome: «There are virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit, whose body is intact, their soul corrupt. But that virgin is a sacrifice to Christ whose mind has not been defiled by thought, nor her flesh by lust.» «There must be spiritual chastity», John Chrysostom insists, «and I mean by chastity not only the absence of wicked and shameful desire, the absence of ornaments and superfluous cares, but also being

²⁴ St Jerome, *Letters in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VI, 194; John Chrysostom, *On Virginity, Against Remarriage*, tr. Sally Rieger Shore (New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), p. 96; Ambrose, *Three Books of St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Concerning Virgins, To Marcellina, his Sister*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York, Christian Literature Company, 1896), X, 364.

unsoiled by life's cares²⁵. One might well ask how the absence of «superfluous cares» can be anything but the very superfluity it renounces, but that is one of the defining paradoxes of virginity that must await the conclusion of our paradoxical escalation.

To continue: Since the desire of a virgin is sufficient to make her no longer a virgin, and since, according to the Patristic totalizing scheme of desire, there can be no difference between the state of desiring and of being desired, a virgin is a woman who has never been desired by a man. St. Cyprian:

But if you... enkindle the fire of hope, so that, without perhaps losing your own soul, you nevertheless ruin others who behold you, you cannot be excused on the ground that your mind is chaste and pure. Your shameless apparel and your immodest attire belie you, and you can no longer be numbered among the maidens and virgins of Christ, you who so live as to become the object of sensual love²⁶.

Or Tertullian: «For that other, as soon as he has felt concupiscence after your beauty, and has mentally already committed (the deed) which his concupiscence pointed to, perishes... («Apparel», p. 19).

What's more, the Fathers argue, since desire is engendered by, and indeed consists in, a look, a virgin, seen, is no longer a virgin. Almost to a man they quote the dictum from Matthew V, 28 — «Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery» — and are obsessed by public baths. It seems, Cyprian argues, that no amount of soap and water can cleanse the body sullied by being seen: «You gaze upon no one immodestly, but you yourself are gazed upon immodestly. You do not corrupt your eyes with foul delight, but in delighting others you are corrupted... Virginity is unveiled to be marked out and contaminated» («Dress», p. 47). «Seeing and being seen», Tertullian states, «belong to the self-same lust» («Veiling», p. 28). And, finally, in what is perhaps the most violent expression of the deflowerment of the look, Tertullian insists that «every public exposure of a virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape» («Veiling», p. 29). There is in the founding thinking of the problem of desire in the first four centuries of the Christian era a profound link, that will later

²⁵ St Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VI, 357; Chrysostom, *On Virginity*, p. 115.

²⁶ St Cyprian, «The Dress of Virgins» in *Treatises*, ed. and tr. R.J. Deferrari (New York, Fathers of the Church, 1958), p. 39.

surface occulted to dominate the Western love tradition, between the distortion implicit to the gaze and erotic desire. Ambrose speaks of the «guilt even in a look»; Chrysostom of «unchastened gazing»; Cyprian of the «concupiscence of the eyes»; and Novaton of «the adultery of the eyes». A virgin, in short, is a woman who has never been *seen* by a man. But not exactly, since, in condemning public baths, the locus par excellence of the gaze of the other, Jerome wonders if it is licit for virgins to bathe at all since, in seeing their own bodies, there is always the potential for desire: «For myself, I wholly disapprove of baths for a virgin of full age. Such a one should blush and feel overcome at the idea of seeing herself undressed.»²⁷ Nor do things end here really: Since desire resides in sight, and since it makes no difference whether one sees or is seen, either by the other or oneself, and, finally, since sight does not consist entirely in the faculty of perception but is also a faculty of the intellect, a virgin is a woman who is not thought not to be one in the thought of another. The virgin is above suspicion: «Even though they (men and women) may be separated by walls, what good is that?» John Chrysostom asks. «This does not suffice to shelter them from all suspicion.» And Clement of Rome, supposedly the disciple of Peter, warns against sitting next to a married woman, «lest anyone should make insinuations against us...»²⁸ Thus, the only true — alive — virgin is the one who has never sat next to or been in the presence of the opposite sex, or, finally, one who has not entered the thought of another. «For», to quote Tertullian, «a *virgin* ceases to be a virgin from the time it becomes possible for her *not* to be one.»²⁹

The time has come to wrap a few of the myriad of paradoxes attendant upon the concept of virginity, which lies at the center of one important strain of the medieval discourse on women. First, and here the theologians are fully aware of the contradiction, if virginity were general, then there would be no human race. Virginity as absolute cannot, in other words, be absolute, but depends upon the difference

²⁷ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VI, 194.

²⁸ Saint Jean Chrysostome, *Les Cohabitations suspectes, comment observer la virginité*, ed. and tr. J. Dumortier (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1955), p. 130; Clement of Rome, Two Epistles Concerning Virginity in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, VIII, 64.

²⁹ Tertullian, «On the Veiling of Virgins» in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV, 34.

it excludes. This is one of the persistent justifications for sexual intercourse — that, in loosing one's virginity one can give birth to a virgin. Second, though virginity may represent the antithesis of the cosmetic, it remains an adornment in its own right. And despite the fact that Cyprian, for example, maintains that «virgins, in desiring to be adorned... cease to be virgins» and that the only proper adornment of the virgin are the wounds of the martyr, Jerome speaks of continence as the «ornament of the inner man»; and Methodius, of Christ as «arming the flesh with the ornament of virginity». There is, again, no way of dissuading the reader from ornamentation without becoming complicit with that from which one pretends to dissuade. Third, to the extent that virginity is conceived as a quietude of the senses, an escape from desire, it itself becomes a source of desire: «... true and absolute and pure *virginity* fears nothing more than itself», Tertullian observes. «Even *female* eyes it shrinks from encountering. Other eyes itself has. It takes itself in refuge to the veil of the head as to a helmet, as to a shield, to protect its glory against the blows of temptations, against the darts of scandals, against suspicions and whispers and emulations; (against) envy also itself» («Veiling», p. 36). Though virginity may hold the fantasy of an escape from desire, it cannot escape the logic of the desire to escape desire, which remains internal to desire itself. This leaves only two possibilities: 1) Either virginity, as absolute, has no substance, does not exist; or, 2) the abstraction which virginity implies is destroyed by its articulation. This is another way of saying that there is no way of talking about virginity that does not entail its loss since the universal is always veiled by the defiling garment of words. For if, as Tertullian maintains, the veil is the *sign* of the virgin, protecting her from both the gaze of others and her own gaze, then virginity itself can be nothing else but a veil; and, as veil, it falls within the material pale implicit to embodied signs. There can be no difference between Tertullian's «veil of virginity», Jerome's «veil of chastity», and Methodius's «veil of letters». «With the word the garment entered», Tertullian asserts. Which can only be read: Language is the ornament, the veil, which defiles the virgin by exposure, since the senses, equated with the body, have no direct access to an Idea, allied with the soul. If the impossibility of locating virginity, which resides neither in the chaste body, nor in the body's desire, nor in the look, makes of it an abstraction equivalent to an Idea, the loss of virginity seems, in fact, closest to what the medievals conceived as the loss of its universality tought

expression. «No one», John Chrysostom maintains, «has seen the soul stripped of the body.»³⁰ Thus there is no way of thinking the question of virginity which does not sully it. No account even of such an attempt can be other than the very act of despoiling that which fiction presents as the possibility of virginal perfection. «Who could describe the pleasure?» Chrysostom asks. «What expression could suggest the joy of a soul so disposed? It does not exist» (*Virginity*, p. 104). All of which leads to an extreme form of discretion not unrelated, I maintain, to the ethos of courtly discretion, and to the dramatization of speech and silence that lies at the center of so many courtly works.

III. COURTLINESS

In order to see just how these two seemingly contrary, but similarly overdetermined, misogynistic and courtly fascinations with the feminine might intersect, I propose to look briefly at two love lyrics, one from the Provençal tradition and the other from Old French. The first, from the end of the twelfth-century — «Can vei la lauzeta mover» — is by Bernart de Ventadorn, «in whom», as Robert Briffault asserts, «the 'courtly' manner attains at a bound its full development»:³¹

1. Can vei la lauzeta mover
de joi sas alas contral rai,
que s'oblid' e-s laissa chazer
per la doussor c'al cor li vai,
ai, tan grans enveya m'en ve
de cui qu'eu vey a jauzion,
meravilhas ai, car desse
Lo cor de dezirer no-m fon.
2. Ai, las, tan cuidava saber
d'amor, e tan petit en sai,
car eu d'amar no-m posc tener
celeis don ja pro non aurai.
Tout m'a mo cor e tout m'a me,
e se mezeis e tot lo mon,
e can se-m tolc, no-m laisset re
mas dezirer e cor volon.

³⁰ John, Chrysostom, «Letters to the Fallen Theodore» in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, IX, 104.

³¹ *Les Troubadours* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press), p. 83.

3. Anc non agui de me poder
ni no fui meus de l'or' en sai
que-m laisset en sos olhs vezer
en un miralh que mout me plai.
Miralhs, pus me mirei en te,
m'an mort li sospir de preon,
c'aissi-m perdei com perdet se
lo bels Narcisus en la fon.
 4. De las domnas me dezesper.
Ja mais en lor no-m fiarai,
c'aissi com las solh chaptener,
enaissi las deschaptentrai.
Pois vei c'una pro no m'en te
Va leis que-m destrui e-m cofon,
totas las dopt'e las mescre,
car be sai c'atretals se son.
 5. D'aisso's fa be femna parer
ma domna, per qu'e-lh o retrai,
car no vol so c'om deu voler
e so c'om li deveda, fai.
Chazutz sui en mala merce,
et ai be faih co-l fols en pon,
e no sai per que m'esdeve
mas car trop puyei contra mon.
 6. Merces es perduda, per ver,
et eu non o saubi anc mai,
car cilh qui plus en degr'aver
no-n a ges, et on la querrai?
A, can mal sembla, qui la ve,
qued aquest chaitiu deziron
que ja ses leis non aura be
laisse morir, que no l'aon.
 7. Pus ab midons no-m pot valer
precis ni merces ni-l dreihz qu'eu ai,
ni a leis no ven a plazer
qu'eu l'am, je mais no-lh o dirai.
Aissi-m part de leis e-m recre.
Mort m'a e per mort li respon,
e vau m'en pus ilh no-m rete,
chaitius, en issilh, no sai on.
 8. Tristans, ges no-n auretz de me,
qu'eu m'en vau, chaitius, no sai on.
De chantar me gic e-m recre,
e de joi et d'amor m'escon.
1. When I see the lark beat his wings for joy against the sun's ray, until
for the sheer delight which goes to his heart, he forgets to fly and plum-
mets down, then great envy of those whom I see filled with happiness
comes to me. I marvel that my heart does not melt at once from desire.
 2. Alas! I thought I knew so much about love, but really, I know so little.
For I cannot keep myself from loving her from whom I shall have no

- favor. She has stolen from me my heart, myself, herself and all the world. When she took herself from me, she left me nothing but desire and a longing heart.
3. Never have I been in control of myself or even belonged to myself from the hour she let me gaze into her eyes: — that mirror which pleases me so greatly. Mirror, since I saw myself reflected in you, deep sighs have been killing me. I have destroyed myself just as the beautiful Narcissus destroyed himself in the fountain.
 4. I despair of women. No more will I trust them; and just as I used to defend them, now I shall denounce them. Since I see that none aids me against her who destroys me and confounds me, I fear and distrust all of them, for I know very well that they are all alike.
 5. In such things my lady acts like a woman, and for this I reproach her. She does not want to do what she should, and she does what is forbidden her. I have fallen into ill-favor, and I have acted like the fool on the bridge; yet I do not know how it happens to me, unless it is that I tried to climb too high.
 6. Mercy is lost for good — although I never knew it anyway — for she, who ought most to have it has none at all. Yet where shall I seek it? How sorry it must appear, when one considers it, that she lets this miserable, longing creature, who has no good without her, perish without helping him.
 7. Since neither prayers, pity, nor the justice of my cause help me with my lady, and since my loving her brings her no pleasure, I will say no more to her. I leave her and answer her. Since she does not retain me, I depart, wretched, into exile, I know not whither.
 8. Tristan, you shall have nothing more from me, for I depart, wretched, I know not whither. I forsake and renounce singing, and I seek shelter from joy and love³².

«Can vei la lauzeta mover» contains many of the elements we have seen both in the discussion of courtly love and that of misogyny. Love is, first of all, practically synonymous with a dispossession not unlike that of the neglected knight, Lanval: «She has stolen from me my heart, myself, herself and all the world. When she took herself from me, she left me nothing but desire and a longing heart» (II). Further, the dispoilation of the self that is the equivalent of desire is in the *canço* imagined, as in both its courtly and misogynistic context, to enter by the eye, to originate in what Andreas Capellanus terms «sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the beloved», and the misogynists «adultery of the eyes»: «Never have I been in control of myself or even belonged to myself from the hour she let me gaze into

³² *The Songs of Bernart de Ventadorn*, ed. S.G. Nichols (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1962), p. 166.

her eyes», (III) Bernart confirms. More important, «Can vei la lauzeta mover» turns around a series of contradictions entailed by desire which make it clear that the lyric is as implicated in the global paradox of the misogynistic articulation of woman as paradox as any of the more explicit anti-feminist writings of the Early Church Fathers or Latin satirists: John of Salisbury, Walter Map, or Andreas.

Love is conceived as paradox of knowledge and ignorance: «Alas!», the poet laments, «I thought I knew so much about love, but really, I know so little» (II). It is expressed as a paradox of conterminous joy and pain: the poet who shares the joy of the lark beating its wings (I), and whose elation remains inseparable from the destruction, misery, and wretchedness of his departure (IV-VIII). Bernart praises his lady as the source of all good for him in stanza VI, and condemns her for having destroyed and confounded him in stanza IV. He admits to loving and hating women at the same time: «It cannot keep myself from loving her», he confesses in stanza II; «I despair of women», he maintains in number IV. «Can vei la lauzeta mover» contains a profound drama of the will; rather, a conflict between knowledge and the will that is transmitted from the outset in the image of the high-flying bird so taken with delight that he forgets to fly, which is picked up again in Bernart's doubt (VI) that he has «tried to climb too high». In short, the poet does not have the power to obtain that which he desires, a dilemma mirrored by the lady's refusal to desire that which she might obtain: «She does not want to do what she should», the troubadour complains, «and she does what is forbidden her» (V); «Mercy is lost for good — although I never knew it anyway — for she, who ought most to have it has none at all.»

The multiple contradictions contained in «Can vei la lauzeta mover» are in some profound sense subsumed in the paradox of the poetic voice itself — that is, in the articulation of a fear of speech, which is such a common motif within the *canço*. Cercamon, for example, maintains in «Quant l'aura doussa s'amarzis» to be «so overcome that he doesn't dare to speak his desire» at the same time that he claims that his worst fear is «that he will die without daring to request» his lady's love³³. So too Bernart in «Can vei la lauzeta

³³ «Quan suy ab lieys si m'esbahis / Quieu no. ill sai dire mon talan,» ... «Tal paor ai qu'ieu mesfalhis / No m'aus pessar cum la deman,» (*Poesies*, ed. A. Jeanroy, Champion, Paris, [1922], p. 2).

mover» uses his voice to renounce singing; for the very phrase «I forsake and renounce singing» (VIII) stands against the manifest presence of the song. Nor can the paradoxical use of the lyric to renounce singing be separated from the poet's irreconcilable relation to his own desire. «I will say no more to her» (VII) in the plaint directed to the lady is not essentially different from the threat «I leave her and renounce her» (VII) which contradicts the original confession — «I cannot keep myself from loving her» (II).

Here we hit upon an incongruence that can be considered as the global paradox of the courtly relation and that resides precisely in the fact that the poet continues to sing despite the intention to remain silent, that he continues to desire despite the hopelessness of desiring: «I cannot keep myself from loving her from whom I shall have no favor.» One begins to wonder, in fact, if the poem gives expression to the futility of its own desire or if desire itself does not constitute the condition of poetic futility. The paradox is not unlike that of virginity. Put in its simplest terms, the *sine qua non* of desire — that is, of a woman's being loved — is that she be perfect; yet the condition of her perfection is that she be self-sufficient, self-contained, complete; or that, being desired, she not desire herself. The very perfection of the love object excludes or prevents her desiring. In order to be loved the woman must be a virgin. There is, in other words, no way of loving that does not imply the very incongruity of persistent singing about dissatisfaction that «Can vei la lauzeta mover» makes so explicit. The paradox of the poet is, finally, that of speech: That is, to the extent to which he expresses his desire, exposes it, it disappears, or is at least rendered impossible. Every love song deflowers a virgin. In this dilemma of language, which goes way beyond its mere thematic analogue in the courtly exhortation to discretion, the notion of an impossible virginity, destroyed by sight, thought, or even suspicion, resurfaces in a form that, for being unrecognized, is all the more compelling.

The paradox of the poet's singing to renounce song, of his desiring only that which, by definition, will not desire in return, the paradox, in sum, of the love of virgins has several consequences for our understanding of courtliness. First, it explains the easy movement within the lyric between so-called courtly love and the elements of anti-feminism which transforms the courtly poet into the fellow traveller of the misogynist. «I despair of women. No more will I trust

them; and just as I used to defend them, now I shall denounce them. Since I see that none aids me against her who destroys me and confounds me, I fear and distrust all of them, for I know very well that they are all alike» (IV). The deprecation of the feminine lurks just below the surface of the courtly idealization of woman. In fact, if we accept a definition of misogyny as a speech act such that the subject of the sentence is *woman* and the predicate a more general term, it becomes clear that there is no difference between negative and positive qualifiers, between the reifying idealization of the abstract woman who is never named except as *domna*, a type, and the condemnation of all woman: «I despair of women... for I know very well that they are all alike.» Second, and this is just a corollary of the courtly abstraction of the feminine, the lyric seems to have very little to do with women at all; but, on the contrary, to implicate the poet's relation to the self. Love in «Can vei la lauzeta mover» is born, as in the discourse of misogyny, through the gaze; but the gaze is not upon the woman so much as a reflection: «Never have I been in control of myself or even belonged to myself from the hour she let me gaze into her eyes: — that mirror which pleases me so greatly» (III). Finally, the poet's desire expresses, again, as in what we have identified as the discourse of misogyny, a deep-seated death wish. The dispossession of the self, the disembodiment contained in the love of an abstraction, an ideal, an idea that is destroyed by poetic embodiment, is self-inflicted. Thus the fatal attraction of seeing oneself in the eyes of the other; and thus the attraction of the myth of Narcissus: «Mirror, since I saw myself reflected in you, deep sighs have been killing me. I have destroyed myself just as the beautiful Narcissus destroyed himself in the fountain» (III).

The self-inflicted death implicit to courtly love is nowhere more apparent than in Thibaut de Champagne's «Ausi conme unicorne sui», which contains many of the same motifs as «Can vei la lauzeta mover», but which makes the connection between desire, death, and virginity even more explicit. Thus Thibaut de Champagne, like Bernart de Ventadour, is disembodied: his heart has been impounded:

Mes cuers aloit si tressaillant
 Que il remest quant je m'en mui.
 Lors fu menez sanz raençon
 En la douce chartre en prison

My heart shook so violently (when I saw you) that it stayed with you when I left. Then it was captured without ransom and close in the sweet prison...³⁴

The poet has been seized — «Mult ont tost un honme saisi» (III) — or dispossessed, the word «saisi» being related to «saisine», which is the literal equivalent of possession. Like Bernart, he desires his own interminable suffering: «Dame, je ne dout mes riens plus / Fors tant que faille a vous amer» (V). Thibaut, moreover, recognizes the extent to which his own imprisonment is occasioned by a virgin:

Ausi conme unicorne sui
 Qui s'esbahist en regardant,
 Quant la pucele va mirant.
 Tant est lië de son ennui,
 Pasmee chiet en son giron;
 Lors l'ocit on en traïson.
 Et moi ont mort d'autel senblant
 Amors et ma dame por voir.
 Mon cuer ont, n'en puis point ravoïr.

I am like the unicorn which is stunned in looking, fascinated, at the virgin. Happy with his torment, it falls into her lap; prey offered to the traitor who kills it. So it is with me: I am truly put to death by Love and my lady. They took my heart, and I cannot recover it.

«Ausi conme unicorne sui» is a parable of the fatalism of the gaze upon the virgin, a parable of virginity, which underscores the over-riding paradox of courtliness and of the courtly lyric.

Stated simply, again, to the extent to which the woman of the lyric seduces but is never seduced, she represents a virgin. The prerequisite of her being desired, in fact, is that she be perfect, ideal, complete unto herself, without imperfection or lack, and therefore without desire. The specification of loving, therefore, is that one not be loved in return. The lady must be a virgin in order to be loved, the desire for the virgin representing an ideal or idea that we have identified elsewhere — in relation to the concept of misogynistic virginity — as a desire for the absolute, which in this case subtends a profound wish for identity with the other, for self-identity. Yet the very notion of self-identity, like the possibility of the embodied virgin, is undercut at every instant within the poem since self-identity is never realizable

³⁴ *Poèmes d'amour des XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, ed. E. Baumgartner (Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions, 1983), p. 98.

within the realm of language. The proof lies no further than the first line: «Ausi *comme* unicorne sui.» «To be like» a unicorn is not «to be» a unicorn; language itself embodying the principle of such difference, or opening a space within the self each time one speaks or writes. This is, in essence, the meaning of the disincarnations contained in the poem: «They took my heart, and I cannot recover it» (I); «My heart shook so violently (when I saw you) that it stayed with you when I left» (II).

The alienation of the self from the self opened by the opening metaphor implies that something is the self which is not; that something is animate which is not; implies, in other words, personification. The culminating distance within «Ausi *comme* unicorne sui» is precisely that — personification allegory, the presentation of the self as abstraction, and, conversely, the presentation of abstractions as if they were animate. The pillars of the lover's prison are desire; the gates, contemplation; and the chains, good hope («les piliers sont de désir, / les portes de contemplation, / et les chaînes, de bon espoir» [III]):

De la chartre a la clef Amors
 Et si a mis trois portiers:
 Biau Senblant a non li premiers,
 E Biauté ceus en fet seignors;
 Dangier a mis a l'uis devant,
 Un ort felon vilain puant,
 Qui mult est maus et pautoniers (III).

Love holds the key to the prison, and has placed there three guards: Sweet Seeming is the first, and then Beauty which exercises its power. Danger has been placed by the front gate, an ugly, stinking low felon, full of mischief and spite.

The question must be asked, in reading a lyric like «Ausi *comme* l'unicorne sui», where to locate the allegorized drama which pits the principles of seduction — Biau Semblant — against those of inhibition — Dangier, Souffrir. Does it belong to the woman, as C.S. Lewis has maintained in relation to the *Roman de la Rose*? Or is it internal to the man? If one of the givens of the lyric is, by the very presence of the singing voice, a perpetually unsatisfied desire, what, it may also be asked, is the object of desire? Is it for the woman who is never present? Is it, as was suggested above, for self-identity? Is it for language or the song itself? There is certainly ample evidence in other vernacular works to identify the gaps within language, what Marie de

France calls its «obscurities», with a desire for meaning and for the text itself. Is the ultimate object of the poet's desire, as argued by D. de Rougemont, desire itself? Thibaut's final strophe in which he asserts «Lady I fear nothing more than failing to love you» (V) would certainly support such a claim. «Ausi comme l'unicorne sui» is a lyric which, like «Can vei la lauzeta mover», makes it clear that the desire for suffering cannot be dissociated from the desire for song and that this masochistic element transforms the poet's suffering into a relation less with the woman who is never named, and of which it supposedly speaks, than with himself. Thus the terms of the lyric are those which we have identified with the poetics of virginity. To wit, if the poet is like the unicorn who seduces himself with a fatal look, and if the representation in metaphoric language of that seduction implies an alienation of the poet from himself, then there is, finally, no way of separating the death wish intended upon virginity from the use of metaphor itself. The prison of the poet is the «sweet charterhouse» of writing (*chartre*): «Lors fu menez sanz raençon / En la douce chartre en prison» (II).

This is another way of saying too that there is no difference, ultimately, between the courtly love song, identified with the secular realm of the flesh, and the supposedly more spiritual genre of songs to the virgin. In a virgin lyric entitled «Tant ai amors servies longuement», for example, Thibaut seems to renounce the love of his lady in favor of devotion to the Mother of God³⁵. Yet he recognizes, at bottom, that love is always directed toward the unobtainable:

Mes bone amor ne let honme apenser
 Ne bien choisir ou mete sa pensee.
 Plus tost aime on en estrange contree,
 Ou on ne puet ne venir ne aler,
 Qu'on ne fet ce qu'on puet toz jorz trover,
 Ici est bien la folie provee. (V)

True love does not allow one to choose the object of his thoughts. One prefers to love in a foreign land where one cannot come and go than to love what one can have at home. The folly is well known.

In the seemingly contrasting love lyric and the song to the virgin, Thibaut underscores once again the coterminous paradox of courtliness and of virginity — that to love one must love perfection,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

or a virgin; that to love a virgin is to love an abstraction; and that to love an abstraction, one loves what is, by definition, unembodied; and this despite the contradictory alliance, where it serves the misogynist, of woman with the material (see above pp. 000). Whether one desires the unattainable lady or the Holy Virgin, the object of desire is always absent in order for desire to fix upon it. This is the point of several whole subgenres of the lyric which are structured dramatically by the motif of departure — the *congé*, the dawn separation or *aube*, and, of course, the crusade song of which «Tant ai Amors servies longuement» represents but an example. The premise of the love song is separation. Herein lies the profoundest sense of the famous «love from afar» («amor de lonh») of the troubadours which, far from isolated subcategory of courtly love, stands as the purest expression of the logic of virginity inherent to courtliness.

What this suggests, again, is that the phenomenon of courtly love, which culminates in the reifying praise of the perfect woman who, in order to be perfect must remain a virgin, is neither the antidote to nor the opposite of the medieval discourse of misogyny, but a co-complicit abstraction of woman that functions alongside of and not against the misogynistic strategy of possession that dominated the articulation of gender from the Early Church Fathers to the troubadours³⁶. The task remains, however, to trace the economic, legal, and social conditions under which, in the half-century between 1075 and 1125, the deprecatory condemnation of woman as the source of evil became inverted into its idealized equivalent.

R. Howard BLOCH

³⁶ The view of courtliness as the opposite of anti-feminism is, of course, a widespread and tenacious one. Diane Bornstein, who wrote the article on Courtly Love in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, states: «It also celebrated woman as an ennobling spiritual and moral force, thus expressing a new feminism that contradicted both the antifeminism of the ecclesiastical establishment and the sexual attitudes endorsed by the church» (*The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Strayer [New York, Scribners, 1983], 3, 669). For a more sophisticated view see: J.-Ch. Huchet, *L'Amour discourtois. La «Fin'Amors» chez les premiers troubadours* (Toulouse, Privat, 1987), pp. 59-141.