Harlots, Heretics and Homemakers

Roots and Application of Misogyny in Medieval Art and Literature

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Misogyny certainly existed before the Middle Ages, but it seems to become more noticeable with the advent of the idea of courtly love. The poetry of Ovid expresses great distrust and contempt of women. In his poem, "The Art of Love", lines 663-78, he encourages the act of rape, and bluntly states, "She may struggle, cry 'Naughty!', yet she wants to be overcome" (lines 665-6). The work of Juvenal becomes even more scathing. In his *Satire VI*, he recommends that men kill themselves before they marry, that a virgin is a rarity among women, and offers up the story of Messalina, wife of Claudius, sating her rapacious sexual appetite by sneaking out of bed at night to work in a whorehouse as an example of the treachery of women. Even Aristotle reported that females were inferior and therefore aged and died sooner than men. Each of these men and others contributed to the misogynous nature of the Middle Ages, but the formative source of fuel for the misogynous fire was scripture, and the men who interpreted it.

Our introduction to misogyny in The Bible is almost immediate. In the story of creation, Eve is presented as the downfall of the human race's life in paradise. Eve is the quintessential evil woman. She and Adam have everything they could ever need. Their life is simple. They eat the fruit of the plants that flourish around them, and they tend the animals who probably do not require much tending. Then one day Eve cons Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, the fruit of the one tree God has said they absolutely cannot touch, and by the whim of the first woman, toil and hardship appear for the human race. The entire incident is blamed on the woman. Never mind that Adam could have refused to eat what was offered to him by his inferior companion. This image of woman as the temptress, the seductress, the conniving sex is pervasive in medieval society and before. The writings of Saint Jerome

denounce marriage, and he cites the words of Herodotus when he says that "a woman takes off her modesty with her clothes" (Blamires 73).

We can see misogyny throughout The Bible. Lot's wife becomes a pillar of salt when she stops to turn around and look at what is happening to her possessions. She has everything she needs in front of her, her husband, her children, and the necessities, and she is interpreted to be a greedy, selfish woman for looking back when she has been warned not to do so (Gen. 19:26). The wife of Potiphar is a prime example of the temptress. She invites Joseph to her bed several times while her husband is away. When after many attempts she realizes that she will never get what she wants, she accuses him of trying to attack her, and Joseph is thrown in jail. She attempts to ruin him because he did not give in to her advances (Gen. 39).

Jezebel has long been a symbol of the wickedness of women. When a woman's face is overly made up, or she tries to seduce a man, she is called a Jezebel today. The story of the evil of this one woman has been passed into a society in which people may use the term without even knowing about its origins. The foreign wife of an Israelite king, Jezebel worshipped Baal, the god associated with giving and taking away fertility. In Israel, she was viewed as a woman annihilating men and dishonoring women. Jehn, the commander of an army, was sent by the prophets to end the reign of this evil royal family, and he said that there could be no peace in Israel, "so long as the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many" (2 Kings 9:22).

Yet another temptress of The Bible is Delilah, destroyer of Samson. Samson was known to have a weakness for Philistine woman, and much to the dismay of his parents, even married one. Delilah set him up quite well for the fall which she was paid to deliver. Interspersed between her caresses were questions about the source of this great man's strength. When he finally trusts her enough to tell her the secret is in never cutting his hair, she lulls him to sleep and then calls in the barbers. Upon awaking, Samson discovers, too late of course, that she was not a tender lover, but an evil woman only trying to trick him (Judg. 16).

Perhaps the most widely misinterpreted biblical example of misogyny is that of Bathsheba. King David happened to see her bathing one evening from his terrace and sent messengers to her house asking her to pay him a visit. They had sex, conceived a child, and David sent for her husband, Uriah, a great general. He came to Jerusalem but would not go home because of the law that men prepared for war could not have sex. David became angry and sent him to the most dangerous front hoping that he would be killed, and he was. David then married Bathsheba, and she gave birth to Solomon who became heir to the throne (2 Sam. 11-12). Many scholars contend that

Bathsheba seduced David when she arrived at his house, but no biblical evidence exists for this. Bathsheba, upon arriving at the king's home, could not have resisted David's advances if she wanted to because a woman was completely subject to the will of the king. The only thing that Bathsheba could have done to avoid the situation would have been to hang more curtains.

St. Jerome uses biblical examples in his writings against marriage. In "Letter 22, to Eustochium," he writes to a young woman who has chosen a life of celibacy:

> Do you wish for proof of my assertions? Samson was braver than a lion and tougher than a rock. Alone and unprotested he pursued a thousand armed men; and yet, in Delilah's embrace, his resolution melted away. David was a man after God' s own heart, and his lips had often sung of the holy one, the future Christ, yet as he walked upon the roof of-his house he was fascinated by Bathsheba's naked beauty, and added murder to adultery. Notice here how, even in his own house, a man cannot use his eyes without danger. Then, repenting, he says to the Lord: 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight.' Being a king he feared no one else. So, too, with Solomon. Through him Wisdom spoke, discoursing on plants 'from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall.' Yet he went back from God because he was a lover of women. And, as if to show that near relationship is no safeguard, 'Amnon burned with illicit passion for his sister Thamar.' (Blamires 75)

St. Augustine used the story of creation to determine the place of men and women in society. He often wrote against marriage and against sex, but for many years he lived with a woman before he became a Christian. In De Genesi Ad Litteram, he states that woman was not created as a companion for man, but only to propagate the species, and that woman naturally should be ruled by man because she was created from him. He says:

> How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and a woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together. And if they had to make an arrangement in their common life for one to command the other in order to make sure that opposing wills would not disrupt the peace of the household, there would have been proper rank to assure this, since one would be created first and the other second, and this would be further reinforced if the second were made from the first, as was the case with the woman. Surely no one will say

> that God was able to make from the rib of the man only a woman and not also a man if He had wished to do so. Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children. (Blamires 79)

Man is in the image of the Creator, and he is a creator in the sense that woman came from his flesh, and in the view expressed by Aristotle and believed for centuries, that the semen of the man creates life. The woman's only contribution is to carry and give birth to the child and have the primary responsibility for raising it. St. Augustine later says that Adam ate the fruit and Solomon worshipped idols because of the love of a woman. They thought that the women they loved would die without their support and affections, and that is the only reason that they gave in to their temptations (Blamires 81).

Misogynous attitudes also appear in the writings of Andreas Capellanus about courtly love. In *De Amore*, his virtual manual on the art of courtly love, he outlines a prevalent double standard in the thoughts of men that is seen also in the works of Juvenal and Jerome, and is later refuted by Christine de Pizan. He writes:

> God forfend that I should ever proclaim a pardon for a woman who was not ashamed to satisfy two men's lusts. Such behavior is tolerated in men because of the prevailing convention and that privilege of the sex by which performance of all shameful acts in this world is more freely permitted to men. But in the case of a woman, the modesty of her chaste sex accounts it so wicked that once a woman has lent herself to the pleasure of several men, she is considered a lewd harlot, reckoned by all as unworthy to associate with other bands of ladies. So if the woman should return to her earlier lover, it is considered quite shameful for him to enjoy her embraces further, for he can realize with the certainty of truth that love in no sense continues in her case. So why should he repose his affections in her. (Blamires 115)

Later he says that a woman cannot love a man enough not to be bought by another. If offered enough gifts, she will leave. He portrays women as gossipers, as insanely jealous, as greedy and gluttonous.

Women were often portrayed as troublesome and gossipy in the late Middle Ages. In an article from *Folklore*, "Folklore Motifs in Late Medieval Art II: Sexist Satire and Popular Punishment," Malcolm Jones discusses the various humor, art, and punishment of English women of the time. He says

that any woman who was accused of disturbing the peace was put in a ducking stool or had her mouth locked shut or was locked up in a cage. He notes that, "the mid C. 13 Rutland Psalter has a unique marginal image of a woman in a ducking-stool and a man with a look of unmistakably malicious glee, about to activate the dunking mechanism" (70). Another example of this humor is on a traditional sign. At pubs called 'The Good Woman,' the typical illustration is a headless woman. In several pieces of art from this period, men are seen carting women about in wheelbarrows. While possibly indicating the use of a viable form of transportation for the poor, Jones notes, "The imagery suggests that these women are rubbish" (Jones 73). Many more examples of misogynous imagery are found in manuscript illuminations, and even sculptures and reliefs in churches.

In the letters of Abelard and Heloise we see misogyny as it was applied rather than simply as it was theorized by men of the church and by men of learning. We also have evidence of women's convictions that they can be evil directly from the pen of Heloise. Even after considering the position of some that these letters may actually be very clever forgeries, these letters are still a rare glimpse into what may have been popular opinion at the time. The letter writers are well versed in philosophy and theology, and they often refer to the views of St. Jerome and St. Paul on marriage. In Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, he is telling his friend what evidence Heloise had given to him for why they should not marry. She says that married life and the philosophic life are not compatible, and she quotes:

> For example, St. Jerome in the first book of Against Jovinian recalls how Theophrastus sets out in considerable detail the unbearable annoyances of marriage and its endless anxieties, in order to prove by the clearest possible arguments that a man should not take a wife." (Radice 71)

Heloise later writes in the third letter that women are what destroy great men. She quotes Ecclesiastes: "I put all to the test . . . I find woman more bitter than death; she is a snare, her heart a net, her arms are chains. He who is pleasing to God eludes her, but the sinner is her captive" (131). She later relates the biblical stories of women as the downfall of men:

> It was the first woman in the beginning who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall. And that mighty man of God, the Nazarite whose conception was announced by an angel, Delilah alone overcame; betrayed to his enemies and robbed of his sight, he was driven

> by his suffering to destroy himself along with his enemies. Only the woman he had slept with could reduce to folly Solomon, wisest of all men; she drove him to such a pit of madness that, although he was the man whom the Lord had chosen to build the temple in preference to his father, David, who was a righteous man, she plunged him into idolatry until the end of his life, so that he abandoned the worship of God which he had preached and taught in holy writing." (131)

Abelard in the *Historia Calamitatum*, mimics the thoughts of Aristotle and St. Augustine that women should be presided over by men, and he expresses his amazement that women are allowed to govern themselves in convents with an abbess rather than an abbot in charge of them (Blamires 91).

Abelard and Heloise were very familiar with the misogynous attitudes presented in the bible and elsewhere. Heloise attempted to use these arguments to keep Abelard from insisting that they marry, and fatefully, he did not listen to her. That misogyny was the accepted rule in the middle ages seems certain. Even in the rules of courtly love we have seen evidence of misogynistic characteristics. Although the place of women today is still not equal to that of men, it is evident that the mindset of people now as compared to medieval times has changed drastically.

Works Cited

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