Introduction

In the European Middle Ages, people did not perceive looking as a harmless, passive pastime. To the contrary, the harm that a person's gaze could cause was greatly feared; a stare was understood as an act of aggression. To be clear, the notion of the gaze as a destructive force predates medieval texts. Beautiful Narcissus, for instance, tragically loses his life because his eyes remain fixed on his own reflection for too long. Orpheus cannot control himself and defies the gods' command not to look at his beloved Eurydice in Hades, losing her forever. Yet the most poignant Greek mythological example of the destructive power of the gaze is the Gorgon Medusa, who kills onlookers through a redoubled death stare. Her own dead eyes look at the mortified gazer; the twin horrors of being seen by the Gorgon while beholding her horrific severed head turn the victim to stone.[1] Plato, in his physics of vision, imagined that rays of light projected from the eyes like darts. Other ancient philosophers developed theories of eye emanations or extromissions. Theophrastus, a student of Plato and Aristotle, taught that eyes contained hidden fire which flashed out when a warrior died in battle. This system of ideas was further developed by Galen, Euclid, Al-Kindi, Roger Bacon, and John Pecham before eventually falling out of favor in early modern Europe.[2]

Beginning in antiquity, spanning medieval and early modern times, people, especially women, who stared openly and directly at others ran the risk of being accused of casting the evil eye. The evil-eye belief, found in many parts of the world, is the superstition that looking at someone or something can cause injury and damage; it is conceptually and linguistically linked to envy, which is the suffering felt over another person's good fortune. The

envy-afflicted person engages in desiring and aggressive staring, thereby dominating and harming the object of the gaze.[3]

The word "eye" itself, as well as the German word "Auge," both derive from the Germanic word "augon," which was not a neutral notion; negative connotations survive in the related lexemes "ferocious" and "atrocious" (Ayto 42). The Latin verb "invidere"—in-videre, to look deeply into—is translated as "durch den bösen Blick Unheil bringen" (Menge 294). The noun "invidia" means malice, envy, jealousy, hatred, bitterness. Even if most people today wouldn't give much credence to sayings like "looks can kill," fragmentary evidence of the superstition survives in expressions like "burning holes in the back of someone's head." Etymological remnants of both the evil-eye belief and the extromission theory are found in the modern German language, in idioms such as "mit Blicken durchbohren," "Blicke schiessen," "mit den Blicken/Augen verschlingen," and "die Augen sprühen Funken/Blitze."[4] Believers were convinced that enviously looking at someone or something, ogling a coveted object, person, or animal, was an act of aggression.[5] Destitute women, barren women, old women, widows, and women with unusual physical features were thought to have an especially devastating gaze (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 365). Jehan Le Fèvre, a late medieval cleric, found it necessary to warn husbands of their wives' malevolent stare: "I tell you truly . . . she is like a basilisk and may God protect you from this snake that kills people with its gaze" (qtd. in Blamires 183).

Becoming the victim of someone's malevolent stare was quite serious. Alan Dundes lists the most common symptoms: loss of appetite, excessive yawning, hiccoughs, vomiting, fever, loss of sexual potency, and death (*Evil Eye* 290). Protective countermeasures against this danger are abundant and varied; the veiling of women in the Muslim world, for example, is one of the many preventative devices. The tilak, the forehead dot worn by many Hindu women, repels envious glances. In Mediterranean countries, the wearing of charms, beads, and amulets shaped like an eye symbolically returns and reflects the malevolent stare.[6]

An ancient way of counteracting the threat of the evil eye, art-historical evidence suggests, is to defecate upon it. One sculpture recently unearthed at Pompeii represents a man in a defecating position next to a woman. Above the image of the squatting man is the inscription "Cacator cave

malum." Another sculpture renders a figure with bare buttocks sitting on a giant eye. Folkloric evidence indicates that feces were thought to have protective powers; there is, for example, an ancient Scottish custom of putting dung in a newborn calf's mouth as a safeguard against the evil eye (Dundes, *Evil Eye* 11).

During the late medieval and early modern periods, countermeasures against the evil eye moved beyond the protective wearing of talismans or amulets to more drastic action: hundreds of women (and a few men) were burned as witches for the sole reason of having been suspected and convicted of casting the evil eye.

The widespread poverty and misery of medieval people partially explains the resentment and suspicion toward those who had slightly more than others. And, inversely, those who had slightly more suspected their fellow villagers of casting envious, harmful looks in their direction. The church, charged with keeping order, commanded parishioners to focus on eternal bliss instead of coveting their neighbor's possessions or attempting to amass possessions of their own. Basil, one of the church fathers, warned Christians that the envious person risked losing paradise over a love of corruptible things (Basil 12). Or, as Saint Augustine put it, envy "burns up all virtues, dissipates all good, generates all evil" (14). Whenever harm came to anyone or anything, it was often retrospectively blamed on the envious gaze of a socially or economically marginalized person who, more often than not, turned out to be a woman.

As I will show in the following pages through a close analysis of textual examples from courtly and religious literature written between the late twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries, high medieval society was greatly concerned with harnessing the power of the female gaze. The commonality among the various texts examined here is that they all provide fragmentary cultural evidence of gazing ladies. Putting the pieces together, a clear picture emerges: within the larger system of patriarchy, a coherent societal subsystem was in place, regulating the female gaze by prohibiting and punishing covetous, envious, or sexual ogling. This gaze, as we saw in the discussion above, was believed to be highly disruptive to the societal system. One of the countermeasures taken is the direct interdiction of female gazing in texts such as Thomasin von Zerclaere's writing, *Der Renner*, Heinrich von

Melk's admonitions, and Der Stricker's morality tales (discussed in chapters 1 through 3). In the *Winsbeckin* text, the male-authored mother figure's subversive advice lays bare the patriarchal fear of uncontrolled female sexual gazing. Another countermeasure, working in unison with the explicit rules laid out in conduct literature, was the implicit stigmatizing of ogling ladies in courtly literature (as the examples in chapters 4 through 7 will show). While condemning the disruptive, disorderly sexual or probing female gaze, another form of looking was encouraged and rewarded because it supported medieval patriarchy: the motherly, admiring female gaze. Examples of this "good gaze" are found in the romances *Eneasroman*, *Parzival*, *Erec*, and *Iwein*. This subsystem functioned as a feedback mechanism and an inherent structural support of medieval *ordo*.

While literary texts, as well as historical and anthropological sources, confirm the existence of a universal dread of the probing female gaze, they do not explain it. The key to understanding why the patriarchal system placed such great importance on controlling the gaze of women by any means available is found only in psychoanalytic theory. Admittedly, the psychoanalytic approach is not without pitfalls and shortcomings. Freud was, no doubt, a product of his specific time and social class, writing from a male norm; recent scholarly reassessments of his contribution have downplayed its lasting influence and significance. Yet I believe that his sexism and errors are not central to psychoanalytic theory. Freudian texts and theories rightly are critiqued and revised, but because the core of the psychoanalytic approach is so useful, there is still no better way of laying bare the inner workings of patriarchal society. For feminism, Freud's discovery that there is nothing inevitable about sexual development was a breakthrough. It opened the door to an inquiry into societal roles that had simply been understood as biological and accepted as immutable, as a given. Hence, Freud's work is vital for feminist theory because it centralizes gender and sexuality. Psychoanalytic theory deals with femininity and masculinity; it is a theory of gender inequality. Women are made, not born, and biology does not suffice to explain sexual orientation and gender personality. Despite all its blemishes, psychoanalysis is still the best theory we have to demonstrate the function of the sociocultural organization of gender.

In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey, a feminist film studies

scholar, uses specific psychoanalytic modes of inquiry regarding the gaze that proved particularly productive for my own exploration of the female gaze as represented in medieval texts. She bases her investigation on Freud's concepts of castration anxiety, scopophilia, and the fetish. She locates the origin of the love affair with gazing in the infant's look at the mother's face. This early gaze is not yet gendered. Or, more precisely, it is only gendered from one direction—the mother's. At this stage, both the male and the female infant display a strong and equal identification with the mother. Mulvey postulates a primordial pleasure of looking that has two contradictory aspects: one is voyeuristic, that is, pleasure comes from gazing at the human form; the other is narcissistic, that is, pleasure ensues from the identification with the visual object, much like looking in a mirror. These types represent the Freudian dichotomy of sexual instincts and ego libido. Mulvey does not examine why or how the initially ungendered infantile enjoyment of the mother's face turns into a male-gendered gazing position. Her goal is simply to describe and understand the state of affairs in a male-dominant society.

In "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," one of Mulvey's contemporaries, Claire Johnston, also used a theoretical, psychoanalytic approach to understanding women's roles. According to Johnston, female characters in film do not represent "woman" but instead, by a process of displacement, the male phallus. "Woman" as woman is largely absent. As a sign, she becomes the pseudo-center of cinematic discourse, the trace of the exclusion and repression of Woman ("Women's Cinema" 33). This argument strongly links feminist film studies to feminist medieval studies. Some feminist medieval scholars came to the conclusion that "woman" did not exist in medieval texts either, and female figures stood for male-male relationships or male fantasy.[7] Johnston theorizes the female character as split into a symbol for both maternal plenitude and the threat of castration. The female gaze in medieval texts demonstrates a similar split into a good, maternal female gaze and a "bad," sexually active, and aggressive gaze.

Mulvey and the other feminist film theorists produced an important shift in analytic focus, away from a purely textual analysis and toward a concern with the structures of identification and visual pleasure. For my own investigation of the representation of gazing females in medieval