

Was Tertullian a Misogynist? A re-examination of this charge
based on a rhetorical analysis of Tertullian's work.

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ABSTRACT.

Feminist scholars have long assumed that Tertullian, a second-century Church Father, was a misogynist. This assumption is based almost exclusively on the infamous “Devil’s gateway” passage in the opening chapter of *De cultu feminarum*. However, feminist scholars have read this passage in isolation without reference to its wider context in *De cultu feminarum* and without considering other passages from Tertullian’s treatises. Furthermore, they have failed to recognize the influence which ancient rhetoric had on Tertullian’s work. By reading the “Devil’s gateway” passage in a wider context, and by engaging in a detailed analysis of Tertullian’s use of rhetoric, it becomes evident that Tertullian’s comments in that passage are not based on misogynistic view of women. Rather, they serve a specific rhetorical purpose in one particular treatise. Furthermore, by looking beyond the “Devil’s gateway” passage to other passages in which Tertullian makes reference to women, it is clear that his comments in the “Devil’s gateway” passage are not representative of his view of women. An examination of themes such as Mary, the anthropology of woman and woman’s role in the social order reveals a more nuanced picture of Tertullian’s view of women, than the one offered by some feminist scholars.

By bringing together two areas - Tertullian’s use of rhetoric and feminist critique of Tertullian and of the Fathers in general - I will challenge the assumption that Tertullian was a misogynist and show that in some areas Tertullian can make a positive contribution to the feminist question.