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"SHE REPRESENTS THE PERSON OF OUR LORD":
THE PERFORMANCE OF MYSTICISM IN
THE *VITA* OF ELISABETH OF SPALBEEK AND
THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

Elliott Visconsi

This virgyne, whos lyfe is alle mirakil, the
moor-ouer all her-selfe is but myrakil, as
hit schewiþ by the abouen writyng, fig-
ures and expounes not allonly Cryste, but
Cryste crucifyed, in hir body, and also þe
figuratif body of Cryste, þat is holy
chirche.

Vita, Elisabeth of Spalbeek.¹

In the small village of Spalbeek, near Liege, "þere was a mayden þat
hyght Elisabeth, in whom oure mercyfullorde haþ schewed merueil-
ous miracles of his blissed passyone, þat maye stir all cristen pepil to
deuocyone."² Elisabeth of Spalbeek was one of a number of Beguines

¹I am working here from the Middle English version, *Vita* (S. Elizabeth of Spalbeck) MS Douce 114, repr. and ed. C. Horstmann, "Prosalegenden. Die Legenden des MS. Douce 114," *Anglia* 8 (1885). All further references will be from this edition and cited parenthetically by page number in the text as *Vita*. The *Vita* of Elisabeth also exists in Latin: "Vita Elisabeth Sanctimonialis in Erkenrode, Ordinis Cisterciensis, Leodiensis Dioecesis," in *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum Bibliothecae regiae Bruxellensis, I.* (Bruxelles, 1886), 348-378. The quote above is from p. 118 of Horstmann's transcription.

I would like to thank V.A. Kolve and Sarah Stanbury for their insight and advice on this essay. I am here following J.E. Ziegler's work on Elisabeth and I owe her a special debt of gratitude for being an exemplary instructor and colleague. Any omissions or errors are, of course, my own.

²*Vita*, 107. Spalbeek is a small village near Liege in the eastern part of Belgium, situated as the *Vita* suggests, near the abbey of Erkenrode. Elisabeth is also referred to as "Elisabeth of Spalbeck" and "Venerabili Elisabeth de Erkenrode." She has figured in

for whom the spiritual experience of Christ was enacted *on* and *with* their bodies; Elisabeth is also part of a vast medieval tradition of female mystics whose acts of physicality signified openly and publicly their experience of divinity (usually Christ).³ Yet, as J.E. Ziegler has recently pointed out, unlike a typical hagiographic account of the thirteenth century, Elisabeth's *Vita* "is not a record of her life and miracles; it is a record of her *physical enactments only*—of the bodily manifestations of her beliefs."⁴ The important distinction to be made here is that her life and miracles *were* her physical enactments; her sainthood was predicated on her remarkable somatic miracles. From her hagiographer, Philip of Clairvaux, we get little else than a record of her ritualized performance of the Passion, her reenactment of the Way of the Cross and the Crucifixion, and her several stigmata. Elisabeth is all body, so to speak.

Yet what a body it is. The *Vita* begins with Philip's personal testimony as to the veracity of her "marvelous miracles" and of her stigmata:

it is to witte þat the foresyde mayden beerith ful openly tokens of the woundys of oure lorde Jhesu Cryste; þat is to saye: in her handys, feet and syde with-ouen any dowte, similacyone or fraude fresshe woundys are ful euydently shewed, often and namely bledyng on fridayes. þe woundys of handes and feet are rounde, þe wounde in the syde is auelonge, as hit were of a speer, and þat oper foure woundes of nayles. (*Vita*, 107)⁵

the work of Walter Simons, J.E. Ziegler, Caroline Walker Bynum, Karma Lochrie, and Ute Stargardt.

³For example, MS Douce 114 contains the *vitae* (Middle English) of three of the most well-known Beguines, Mary of Oignies, Elisabeth, and St. Christina mirabilis (most notorious for jumping into ovens and furnaces and emerging unscathed). I will return to the question of women's mystical physicality later in the essay.

⁴J.E. Ziegler, "Before the Public's Eye: The Thirteenth-Century Ecstasy of Elisabeth of Spalbeek," (delivered in the session "Women and Public Acts in the Middle Ages" at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, January 1996); her emphasis. I have appropriated her term "physical enactments" throughout this paper. Walter Simons makes a similar point in his "Reading a saint's body: rapture and bodily movement in the vitae of thirteenth-century beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), 10–23.

⁵Caroline Walker Bynum, in her *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), has suggested that the uncertain physical origins of the stigmata were less important than the fact of their existence; their somatic existence was evidence of a direct, compassionate or imitative relationship with Christ. The self-infliction of stigmata, then, was not a

His account continues to follow Elisabeth through the liturgical hours, describing the "representacyone of his blyssed passyone" (*Vita*, 107) which she performs every day. At matins, the frail and otherwise paralytic Elisabeth is ravished and arises "merueyously stronge to suffre labour and peyne, þat was byfore in body weyke and vnmyghty" (*Vita*, 108). This "labour and peyne" is articulated in the first part of her performance of the Passion, a performance of stunning devotional physicality:

Sche strechys oute her righte arme and makeþ a fiste of her hand, and lokeþ grymly, braunysshynge hir fiste, and makes feerful tokens and bekenynges with eyen and handys, as a bodt þat were wrooþ and angry. And after þat anoon sche smith her-selfe vpon the cheke, so strongly, þat all hir body bowith to þat party ageyns þground for heuynesse of the stroke; þan sche smytes hir-selfe in þe nodel of the hede byhynde, now bitwix þe schuldirs, now in the necke; and þanne sche noseles downe forwarde and wonderly crokes her body and dasches her heed to the erthe. Also oþer-while sche takith vyolently hir heer, þat is aboute her forhede but short, and smith þe grounde with hir heed wiþ a meruaylous draughte, and hir feet vn-meuyd. And also sche takeþ hir-selfe by þe heer, booþ on þe rizhte syde and þe lefte, her and þere, sterynge and bowynge hir-selfe wiþ draught of hir handys, wiþ a maner þat may neiper be herde ne tolde (*Vita*, 108-109).

The *Vita* continues to detail Elisabeth's performance of the Passion as the liturgical hours progress; she is ravished and seems as a dead body, she reenacts the various Passion scenes weeping, striking her breast, gyrating, and performing the Crucifixion in remarkably gravity-defying postures:

sche stretcheþ her-selfe in þe figure of a crosse. And oþer-while, as hit is seyde, she lenith to þe erthe with the to foot aloon and bowith all her body towarde þe grounde, a party on the too syde; and soo þe mayden standith longe heygyng strongely, bowynge to the to syde, and a-boue mannes myghte sche susteyneth her body hengenge (*Vita*, 112-113).

Elisabeth repeats the Passion scenes every day in her celebration of the liturgical hours; on Fridays the stigmata appear. She bleeds from the five wounds, from her eyes, and from beneath her fingernails, her blood mixed with water. Philip concludes his hagiography with de-

self-referential act of a fraud but an act of an "enthused" agent of Christ. See in particular pp. 209-210.

scriptions of her eucharistic devotion at Mass, infrequent public counsel, and her several mystical visions.⁶

Elisabeth of Spalbeek's body occupies space in a remarkable kinesthetic way⁷—her smittings and ravishings and turnings are performed "in a maner þat [he] may not telle" (*Vita*, 112). But Philip specifically makes a point to vindicate Elisabeth from any claims of impropriety: it is most likely that he is not censoring his ecclesiastical pen but merely has met an obstacle which he cannot overcome.⁸ Seemingly, Elisabeth's body denies representation. As an example of a disorderly body, venerated even as it crosses into the unspeakable, Elisabeth is a star in the hagiographic firmament. Her body is an apt starting point for this essay, which will describe how medieval women produced a mysticism beyond extant gender representations, a performative mysticism firmly grounded in the disorderliness of the female flesh as it enacts the *imitatio Christi*, predicated on an educable audience, and finally to result in a subjectivity of self-annihilation. I will describe such a remarkable public, somatic mysticism as it appears in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and in the *Vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek.

The rituals and devotional actions of many medieval women mystics, including Elisabeth, are remarkable in their unmediated physicality; women drink the pus of lepers (scabs and all), roll in broken glass, tear off pieces of their own flesh, refuse to eat or excrete, jump in ovens, smite their breasts and head, flog and nettle themselves.⁹ In particular, Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that these often grotesque and always bizarre acts, rather than a simple loathing or defilement of the female flesh (a reading which reifies normative medieval misogyny) are somatic proofs of these women performing an *imitatio Christi*: "women forged, through charity, miracle, and fasting, an alternative role—an essentially lay and char-

⁶For the notion of eucharistic devotion, see Caroline Walker Bynum's essay "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 179–214. Reprinted in her *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 119–150.

⁷See Ziegler, "Before the Public's Eye."

⁸Philip absolves her (despite her female body) of carnality or impropriety in her ravishings: "Tis to witte þat in mouynges and berynges of body of þe forseyde virgyn þere fallith no þinge vnsemely nor no þinge þat may displese mannes syghte" (*Vita*, 114).

⁹Culled from diverse sources: *Vita* (S. Christina Mirabilis), in Horstmann, "Prosalegenden"; Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Ziegler, "Before the Public's Eye"; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

ismatic role—authorized not by ordination but by inspiration, not by identification with Christ the high priest but by imitation of Christ the suffering man.”¹⁰ For the female mystic, Christ the man was accessible and subject to imitation; in all his abject physicality, his bleeding wounds, and visible suffering, Christ was the material template for devotional piety. Bynum, in her important essay “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion” suggests that if the medieval mind equated the soul to the male and the body to the female, then women saw in the Incarnation of Christ not only the redemption of physicality but also the election of women in general.¹¹ Because Christ was incarnate in the flesh, and suffered physically, the female mystic was particularly and correctly qualified to perform the *imitatio Christi*; “to soar towards Christ as lover and bride, to sink into the stench and torment of the Crucifixion, to eat God, was for the woman only to give religious significance to what she already was.”¹²

The direct experience of Christ through the *imitatio* was one of the markers of affective or positive mysticism. In performing the *imitatio Christi*, the female mystic sought to reenact on the surface of the body (through the stigmata or in imitating the configurations of the Passion) the physical suffering of Christ and in the process experience a kind of mystical union with Christ—a union of flesh with flesh.¹³ The *imitatio*, as a signifier of direct experience, is necessarily somatic and usually public; while one might profitably contemplate Christ’s suffering, the physical experience of his suffering had to be performed on the body. Karma Lochrie suggests that in her imitation of Christ, the female mystic, as a creature of the flesh, must always acknowledge and privilege her own abject defilement; that defilement then causes medieval orthodoxies of the body to break down, “placing the flesh back in circulation.”¹⁴ So for Lochrie the very taboo, defiled materiality of the flesh is a potential site of agency for the female mystic; the flesh makes a claim of privileged communica-

¹⁰Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 233.

¹¹Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion.” See also Sarah Beckwith’s essay “A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe,” in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986), 34–57. Beckwith suggests that the female mystic’s place in patriarchy is “associated with the debased matter of the flesh, which they see as valorised and redeemed in Christ’s torture on the cross, a redemption through physicality” (47).

¹²Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion,” 149.

¹³Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion,” 146.

¹⁴Lochrie, 42.

tion with Christ possible when her *imitatio* illuminates the repressive somatic economies of church theology.¹⁵

Margery Kempe is one female mystic to whom a privileged communication with Christ was the *sine qua non* of daily life. Christ directs her to embrace the slanders and rebukes, charges of heresy, and bodily anguish which is publicly inflicted upon her by townsfolk, traveling companions, and miscellaneous skeptical rabble:

Dowtyr....for now þu hast þe ryth wey to Heuyn. Be þis wey cam I to Heuyn & alle my disciplys, for now þu xalt knowe þe bettyr what sorwe & schame I suffryd for thy lofe, and þu schalt haue þe mor compassyon whan þu thynkyst on my Passyon.¹⁶

Margery's imitation of Christ appears in many places in her *Book*; she weeps and wails, she is ravished, she falls down and contorts her body as she contemplates the Passion, here in Jerusalem:

þe forseyd creatur wept and sobbyd so plentyvowsly as þow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey sufferyng hys Passyon at þat tyme. Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplycon, & þat cawsyd hir to haue compassyon. &, whan þei cam vp on-to þe Mownt of Caluarye, sche fel down þat sche myght not stondyn ne kneyn but walwyrd wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in þe cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. (*Kempe*, 68)

During these moments, her body visibly signifies her affective relationship with Christ and her successful *imitatio Christi*—like Elisabeth's ravishings, Margery loses control of her body and effectively cedes control to Christ. Margery's physical enactments of suffering and devotion are similar to those of Elisabeth's in which the body simply overloads and cannot be contained. Wendy Harding suggests that these physical enactments "can be seen as a woman's attempt to

¹⁵Lochrie, 46.

¹⁶*The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech. and H. E. Allen, Early English Text Society, Original Series, no. 212 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 156. All further references will be made from this edition and cited parenthetically by page number in the text as *Kempe*. Some helpful studies of *The Book of Margery Kempe* are: Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Sarah Beckwith, "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Agency and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 171–200.

signify a mystical experience whose intensity cannot be written but must be inscribed by living flesh."¹⁷

Like Margery's remarkable wrestings and fits of ecstatic crying (signs which unfortunately cause her to turn the 'colowr of leed') Elisabeth's body performs divinely inspired somatic raptures in moments of miracle—miracles which defy the "normal" state of her body. Margery's body is "normally" controlled and subject to weeping and writhing at certain moments of inspiration (such as when she sees handsome men, or male babies, or the Eucharist); Elisabeth's body is "normally" paralytic until she celebrates the canonical hours at which point she is frequently ravished and almost literally *inspired* by Christ "to suffre labour and peyne, þat was byfore in body weyke and vnmyghty" (*Vita*, 108). Such somatic moments indicate in their very sensual, physical overload the fleshly character of Christ's suffering that signifies to women in particular. That these somatic disjunctures are often represented as "spiritual labor" only reinforces Bynum's notion that women were thus privileged by the Incarnation.

For both of these women, these inspired or affective moments are sources of bliss as well as physical pain, a pain after which they need to recover. Elisabeth and Margery undergo a kind of spiritual labor in their writhings and ravishings, a labor which reflects both the femininity of the fleshly Christ and the peculiarly feminine flavor of their *imitatio Christi*. That medieval women often characterized Christ as feminine is a commonplace.¹⁸ If labor in childbirth was assigned to Eve in punishment for her Edenic transgression, then the crucified, permeable, and feminine Christ's labor on the cross redeems Eve and all women.¹⁹ During a sermon, Margery's soul is

so delectably fed wyth þe swet dalyawns of owr Lorde & so fulfilled of hys lofe þat as a drunkyn man sche turnyd hir fyrst on þe o syde & sithyn on þe oþer lyth gret wepyng & gret sobbyng, vn-

¹⁷Wendy Harding, "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Sarah Stanbury and Linda Lomperis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 173–174.

¹⁸Several of the essays in Caroline Walker Bynum's *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) demonstrate this point.

¹⁹Genesis 3:16 reads, "To the woman, [God] said, I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

mythy to kepyn hir-selfe in stablines for the vnqwenchabyll fyer of lofe wheech brent ful sor in his sowle. (*Kempe*, 98)

Shortly thereafter, she is succored by good women who are astonished by her "gostly labowr" (*Kempe*, 99). Her weeping, in particular, is physically draining; Mary permits her to eat meat once again because her body is depleted: "Dowtyr, þu art weyke j-now of wepyng & of crying, for þo makyn þe febyl weyke anow" (*Kempe*, 162). For Margery, her moments of disorder are both the physical signs of her affective devotion and the actual physical symptoms of Christ's suffering. Like Christ, Margery's "labor" (moments such as when she "fel down & wrestyd wyth hir body & mad wondryful cher & contenawns wyth boystows sobbyngys & gret plente of terys" [*Kempe*, 40]) is a public sign on the surface of her body which attests to her devotional piety. With Christ, Margery suffers the physical pain of a disorderly body, a passive body subject to external control.

Sarah Beckwith has suggested that the crucified body of Christ also appealed to the female mystic because, like her, it was passive and acted upon rather than active and thus masculine.²⁰ Elisabeth undergoes a similar spiritual labor in her physical enactments. After her elaborate performances of the Passion

sche restith hir froo þat vnsuffrabil trauelle, euen as she were alle ouercomen and anentized. And a litil while after, now and now, sche makith sobbyngs and sighes, as a body schulde dye. þen, forsooþ, as sche schulde zeeld þe gost, sche is rauesched and restith alle her body froo þat vnsuffrabil froo tourmente and labore. And tille þat while she is comunly longe rauyshed, and noon oþer þinge is seen in hir but starkness of membrys, palnes of visage with-oute blood, and all-maner lackynge of felynge, mouynge and breth, as hit were a deed body. At þe laste oure lorde, þat slees and qwykenes, makyng cleer wedyr after tempeste, restorith hir azeyn to lyfe. (*Vita*, 109)

After her detailed enactments of the Passion and her ravishings, Elisabeth's laboring, tormented, suffering body is emptied only to be inspired yet again by Christ. Like Margery, Elisabeth's physical suffering is caused by her ravishing, by an affective devotion to Christ which is publicly performed on the exterior surface of her body in her miraculous smittings, writhings, and stigmata. The performance of the Passion causes her pain, which redeems her female flesh and unites her compassionately with Christ in his labor on the cross. The

²⁰Beckwith, 48.

"child" that Margery and Elisabeth are laboring to give birth to is the public apprehension of Christ's suffering. Thus, in her stylized labor, the female mystic is no longer the physically base, sinful, and permeable woman; she is a subject saved by the direct experience of Christ and delivered from the sinfulness of her physicality by the embrace of Christ's physicality, represented by a common labor performed publicly by the body. At its most permeable moment, childbirth, the female body "offers a radical notion of perfection. The excess of drives—those heaving powers of the flesh—topple over into love of God. The same interior flux or perviousness of the flesh which leads to sin likewise leads to perfection."²¹

Perhaps one of the reasons that Margery's traveling companions found her so objectionable was that her weeping was a constant reminder of their own hypocrisy, of their own unwillingness to do anything more than say a few paternosters. Margery herself is subject to frequent accusations of hypocrisy, Lollardy, and diabolical possession—most likely because she publicly expressed her affective piety in an unusual way, with her unruly body. Rather than wearing a hair or a mail shirt of penance, Margery's weeping and writhing body indicates her devotion, a devotion which Christ values for its purity:

For, dowtyr, þis lyfe plesyth me mor þan weryng of þe haburion or of þe hayr or fastyng of bred & watyr, for, 3yf þu seydest euery day a thowsand Pater Noster, þu xuldist not plesyn me so wel as þu dost whan þu art in silens sufferyst me to speke in thy sowle (*Kempe*, 89).

Margery's weeping body signals a critique of those (including many of her persecutors) for whom piety is in "many bedys byddyng, in gret fastyng, in gret penawnce doyng wyth-owtyn-forth þat men may se it" (*Kempe*, 205). If we want to think of hypocrisy as ritual for the sake of performance and public consumption, such as the wearing of a hair shirt, then Margery is clearly no hypocrite.²² However, Margery's somatic devotion to Christ is performative and public; her body signifies an interior quality (her soul, which Christ esteems) on

²¹Lochrie, 39.

²²Significantly, one of the first things Margery casts off is her hidden hair shirt. However, Ute Stargardt, in her essay "The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Germany, and Margery Kempe," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan, (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1985) reads Margery unsympathetically as a kind of derivative, inferior mystic who sought to imitate saints' lives and thus mark herself as a holy woman.

its surface, an affective devotion to Christ represented by her weeping and ravishing which threatens to illustrate the devotional emptiness of other public performances. If hypocrisy is the public performance of internal emptiness, then Margery's public devotion is radical not only because it is somatic but because she enacts an interior "fullness"; she is full of Christ's love as the proper devoted subject ought to be.²³

Concomitant with the equation of masculinity with the soul and femininity with the flesh was the notion of interior and exterior. If the 'female' flesh was visible as the exterior, material aspect of the self, then the interior of that body was the masculine, spiritual space of the soul.²⁴ Charles Taylor glosses Augustine's distinctions between the inner and the outer man, suggesting that "the outer is the bodily [man], what we have in common with the beasts, including even our senses, and the memory storage of our images of outer things. The inner is the soul."²⁵ Margery's "sweet converse" with Christ took place in her soul; she apprehends Christ with her "soul's eye." But Margery's interior experience of Christ is audibly and physically represented on the surface of her body:

in hir sowle sche beheld owr Lord comyng wyth hys apostelys, & sche was so raueschyd in-to contemplacyon wyth swetnes & deuocyon þat sche myth not stondyn a-geyns her comyng as curtsey wolde but leynd hir to a peler in þe chirche & helde hir strongly þerby for dred of fallyng, for sche wold a stondyn & sche myth not for plente of deuocyon which was cawse þat sche cryed & wept ful sor. (*Kempe*, 117)

²³A metaphor used by Aelred of Rievaulx in his *De institutione inclusarum*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt (New York: Early English Text Society / Oxford University Press, 1984), is helpful in thinking about the female mystic's "fullness" or her containment of Christ. In this text, Aelred prescribes a system of conduct for anchoresses, suggesting among other things that a "maydenes flesche is...a vessel off irþh" in which the gold of maidenhood is assayed. Margery is a vessel who is unusually full of affect; she, unlike the hypocrites, contains the gold of Christ.

²⁴The interior/exterior paradigm seems to me a good example of Foucault's suggestion that the body may be compelled to incorporate the disciplinary law as its essence and meaning. The female flesh's essence or meaning, within a medieval theo-medical paradigm, was base matter which could only be redeemed by the masculine presence of spiritual substance, the source of ecclesiastical law, and logos. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: Vintage International, 1979). His argument is glossed in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 134-137.

²⁵Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 129.

Margery's body, and more generally the female mystic, makes her interior devotion available for public consumption with her weeping, her ravishing, and her physical enactments. Philip vindicates Elisabeth from charges of improper or sinful physicality by suggesting that "þe vtwardclennes of þe same virgyn Elisabeth beeriþ witness and open euydens of hir inwarde clennes" (*Vita*, 118). The propriety and cleanliness of Elisabeth's physical enactments, then, are evidence of her internal, affective piety. Her body, like Margery's, is "wrested" open and publicly represents her interior devotion. The female mystic "opens" the flesh and seemingly exposes her soul, her masculine interior; for Lochrie, she exaggerates the permeability of the female flesh through physical enactments.²⁶ The permeable female body thus becomes a signifier of an internal devotion, of "dalyawns...so swet, so holy, & so devowt" (*Kempe*, 75) instead of, as medieval theology and medicine would have it, a flawed, base simulacrum of the male body.²⁷

Such exposure of the interior is "masculinizing"—not in the sense that the female body is regendered, but in the sense that the female body publicly signifies a private masculine quality. This is not to suggest that the female normally has no soul; rather, as the female mystic exhibits evidence of her soul, she forces the somatic paradox of medieval theology. Like the onanist, the female mystic spills the soul, the precious masculine essence out of the body into public space. By opening the body, the female mystic enacts a subversion of theological gender as she claims an interior, masculine subjectivity for herself.

By thus destabilizing the misogynist associations of female with sinful materiality, the female mystic illustrates the fabricated nature of medieval gender categories.²⁸ According to Judith Butler, the notion of an interior, essential core of gender identity is a regulatory strategy constructed by acts, gestures, and desires on the surface of the body.²⁹ In her public demonstration (her physical enactments) of an interior affect, the female mystic shows that the medieval ideology of interior and exterior "precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the

²⁶Lochrie, 42-43.

²⁷See Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," in Stanbury and Lomperis, 145.

²⁸See R. Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations* 20 (Fall 1987): 1-24.

²⁹Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

ineffable interiority of its sex."³⁰ Her physical enactments collapse the interior/exterior split and make an analysis of the gendered subject, and a kind of subjectivity, possible. This peculiar kind of berdache subjectivity (wherein a subject assumes the external roles of the other gender without necessarily assuming the "interior" or identificatory qualities of that gender) stems not only from the authorized or redeemed female flesh but also from the female mystic's public destabilization of gender categories.

Like the saints who were to be emulated if not imitated, the female mystic is a didactic tool of Christ; her physical enactments signify to an audience which will be educated or inspired by looking upon her body to see the agency of Christ.³¹ Peter the Chanter, a twelfth-century Parisian cleric, in his *De vitiis et virtutibus*, sought to standardize prayer; one of his tenets was to encourage a "publicly performed, yet also privately binding" method of prayer. Prayer, publicly and correctly performed, could "teach by word and example."³² So too could the female mystic, in her somatic performativity, teach by word (the word of God signified on her body) and example. Margery Kempe is perhaps the best example of such a didact.

During one of her affective dialogues, Christ vindicates Margery from skepticism and condemns the hypocrisy of her persecutors. He reinforces his desire for Margery to maintain her public role by charging her

to be a merowr a-mongys hem for to han gret sorwe þat þei xulde takyn exampil by þe for to haue sum litil sorwe in her hertys for her synnys þat þei myth þerthorw be sauyd, but þei louyn not to heryn of sorwe ne of contricyon. But, good dowtyr, do þu þi deuer & prey for hem whil þu art in þis world, & þu xalt haue þe same

³⁰Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

³¹Bynum, in the introduction to *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, argues that "saints are not even primarily 'models' for ordinary mortals; the saints are far too dangerous for that. Like Christ himself, they could not and should not be imitated in their full extravagance and power. Rather...they should be loved, venerated, and meditated upon as moments in which the other that is God breaks through into the mundane world, saturating it with meaning" (7). Likewise, in the *Vita*, Philip concludes by suggesting an elaborate allegorical interpretation of Elisabeth's life, a life which is not intended to be imitated (if it were possible) but which might "stir all Christian people to devotion" (*Vita*, 1).

³²Richard C. Trexler's gloss of the manuscript, in his *The Christian at Prayer* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1987), 43-44. See also Simons, "Reading a saint's body."

mede & reward in Heuyn as 3yf al þe werlde wer sauyd be þi good wil & þi preyer. (*Kempe*, 186)

Margery's disorderly body, like the saint's body, is a public event to be loved and venerated; her weeping and suffering is the public performance of what should be a privately binding Catholic devotion to Christ. Yet she is aware of the dangers of performance and spectacle; her embrace of a performative role is limited by propriety:

I wolde, Lord, for þi lofe be leyd nakyd on an hyrdil, alle men to wonderyn on me for þi loue, so it wer no perel to her sowlys, & þei to castyn slory & slugge on me, & be drawyn fro town to town. (*Kempe*, 184)

Margery's naked female body is still a source of danger which might cause men to sin; while Christ calls her to be a visible subject acted upon by her audience, her public enactments should incite contemplation rather than sin.

Judith Butler has argued that "performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power."³³ Margery's performativity, then, rather than an egomaniacal conceit, can be seen as Christ's authoritative speech, his affective claim of didactic authority. Her body, and the body of the female mystic, publicly signifies the interior, magisterial authority of Christ. The performative acts of the female mystic reify the final authority of Christ by implicating the audience in the very production and interpretation of her body, and by allowing her a way to dismantle a subjectivity constructed by her somatic performances. As her body enters the field of public consumption, she cedes control of it to Christ; her physical enactments become pious translations of Christ's agency acting in her body. While Margery's entrance into the performative arena might be qualified by fears of instigating sin with her female body, her affective physical representations of Christ are unqualified, immediate, and unmediated.

It is essential to the female mystic that she construct a subjectivity as a kind of berdache, a subjectivity through her "opened" body which grants her agency within a medieval system that offers her few options beyond virgin, mother, or nun.³⁴ It is equally essential to the

³³Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 225.

³⁴Berdache is a category within many Native American cultures in which a person of one gender adopts the social roles, dress, and status of the other gender. Please see

female mystic that she erase or dismantle this subjectivity by yielding to the agency of Christ (in her bodily enactments) and to the agency of the audience gazing upon the mirror of her body as it moves through space. She institutes a subjectivity through a radicalism of the flesh and erases that subjectivity by offering herself as a didactic performative subject, a visual representation of Christ's Passion and a mirror for the audience. Rather than an obstacle or a conceit, for the female mystic performativity is essential to her mystical devotion; her body, inspired by Christ, creates a new subjectivity; her position in the public eye allows her the possibility of discarding that subjectivity in favor of Christ. In each case it is a necessary *telos*. Such a devotional trajectory of mystical experience leads the female mystic to a *willing* erasure of subjectivity from a spiritually full place, not from a position of deference or discipline. Such a willing erasure of her own subject is the final, essential curtain that falls on the performative, devotional dance of her body, a dance in which "she representiþ þe person of oure lorde" (*Vita*, 109).

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Gilbert Herdt's interesting volume, *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1994). Will Roscoe's exhaustive study of berdache materials is also very helpful: "Bibliography of Berdache & Alternative Gender Roles Among North American Indians," *Journal of Homosexuality* 14, nos. 3/4 (1987): 81-171.