Chapter Title: ‘be blod þ[at] bohte’: The Wooing Group Christ as Pierced, Pricked, and Penetrated Body
Chapter Author(s): MICHELLE M. SAUER

Book Title: The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group
Book Editor(s): SUSANNAH MARY CHEWNING
Published by: University of Wales Press. (2009)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhbjd.12
Recent scholarship has addressed Christ’s body as a site of multiple, gendered penetrations in medieval art and literature. As well, scholarship has focused on the increasing sense of blood piety found throughout the Middle Ages, especially in the later era. However, early representations of both the permeable Christ and devotion to the wounds and blood have, until now, been overshadowed. In particular, the Christ celebrated in early anchoritic literature, especially the Wooing Group and Ancrene Wisse, is an insistently wounded, bleeding spouse, even when he appears in glory. I suggest that the Wooing Group focuses on the wounded Christ for three foundational reasons – eternal salvation, carnal reparation, and bodily purification – and that each of these reasons is tied to a specifically anchoritic outlook on the Incarnated Christ. The first is overt: Christ shed blood for humanity in order to open the kingdom of heaven. The other reasons are less explicit, but just as important to the anchoritic vocation. As will be discussed later, the anchoress lived with a constant threat of rape and violation; through mimetic mapping, Christ’s wounded presence relieves her of some of that fear. Because the cell and body are merged in the anchoritic vocation, the anchoress’s body threatened the purity of the church, while Christ’s stainless, bleeding body neutralized potential harm. When the two merge, his body becomes a stand in for hers, able to withstand sin and temptation, and able to overcome pollution and corruption.
through his saving blood, thus making the wounded, bleeding Christ a necessary part of the anchoritic vocation.

Early Blood Piety & the Wounded Christ

In her most recent book, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that blood piety was a central force in the Middle Ages. More specifically, ‘geographically … blood devotion was especially (although not by any means exclusively) northern. Chronologically, … it was characteristic of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries’.1 Continuing her insistence upon the lateness of blood devotion, Bynum declares,

I shall argue in what follows that blood debates and blood piety summed up peculiarly fifteenth-century anxieties. For behind debates over pilgrimage, relics, eucharist, miracles, and veneration, as behind a piety to which streams or drops of blood were central, lay two closely connected issues: the issue of holy matter, and the issue of access to God or, to put it another way, of God’s absence and presence.2

Problematically in terms of Bynum’s hypothesis, however, the Wooing Group – a collection of thirteenth century texts – fits many of her defined parameters. In particular, the anchoritic lifestyle was bound up with all of the so-called fifteenth-century concerns outlined above.

Two concerns – holy matter and access to God – can be connected through the sacrament of the eucharist. Bynum amply demonstrates the increasing desire the laity had to receive the blood of Christ alongside the communion bread of his body. While this would become one of the central foci found within heretical movements such as the Hussites, the desire existed long before the rebellion. Similarly, there was an increasing desire among the laity for more frequent reception of the eucharist in whatever form. In this, anchoresses occupied a unique position. Living in cells attached to churches, they enjoyed the constant presence of Christ in the sacrament. Anchoresses were privy to frequent reception of the physical sacrament, as well as constant reception of ocular communion (witnessing the elevated host). The squint, the small aperture or window leading into the church from the anchorhold, was generally positioned so as to afford the cell’s occupant the opportunity to participate in mass through a view of the high altar, the tabernacle, and surrounding accoutrements and sacramentals. Besides being part of mass, these objects also assisted the anchorite with contemplation. Examining remains of cells reveals that
while the view of the altar itself may have been at least partially obstructed, the view of the tabernacle was often clear. Jesus was a constant physical and spiritual presence. Moreover, a great many of these cells were built in front of the rood screen, beyond the point allowed to be penetrated by the ordinary gaze. And while anchoresses did not literally receive Christ’s blood in communion, they actively performed meditations that recalled Christ’s bleeding body as a way of accessing the holy matter of the eucharist, ‘þe holi sacrement of his flech & of his blod þ[at] ðe preost sacreð’3 [by the holy sacrament of his flesh and of his blood that the priest consecrates]. Through the sacrament as well as through guided meditation on the passion, anchoresses moved toward a totalizing union with Christ, sealed with his blood.

If the Wooing Group is precocious in its insistence on the importance of blood and wounds, it is also forward thinking in its anticipation of the Charter of Christ tradition, especially in its insistence upon inscribing identity upon the body.4 Although the vast majority of singular manuscripts date between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the tradition had existed since the early days of the Church, and was a popular allegorical representation of salvation. In seeking to explain Christ’s willingness to submit to the extreme pains of the crucifixion, theologians believed that presenting his torture as a dying bequest, a ‘will’ of sorts made the concept of bodily sacrifice more palatable. The charter was a document written in blood, sealed by Christ’s wounds, and ratified by the flow of more blood. Jill Averil Keen notes four main groups of these charters: those of enfeoffment; those of pardon; Sunday letters; Christ’s will. Keen goes onto call these various texts ‘documents of salvation’, because they are all legal interpretations of Christ’s salvific blood.5 The anchoritic charter is a combination of two of these groups. Charters of enfeoffment grant humans heavenly ‘land’ in exchange for ‘rent’ (love), while charters of pardon release humanity from the wages of sin in exchange for Christ’s blood sacrifice. The Wooing Group combines these approaches, further binding the relationship between Christ and anchoress in blood. In particular, all of the Wooing Group pieces focus on the idea of the anchoress being purchased by Christ through his blood and on the concepts of Christ’s blood being purifying.

This anchoritic enfeoffment in the Wooing Group, in turn, echoes the ‘heart-exchange’ motif, popular in late medieval mysticism.6 Instead of an actual heart, however, Christ’s blood is substituted:

þu swete iesu for me gef þeselu-
uen . þat tin ahne heorte blod
ne cuðes tu wið halde. Derre
But you, sweet Jesus, so gave of yourself for me that you knew not how to withhold your own heart’s blood. A dearer love-token was never given, lover to lover.

Heart’s blood seals the love between anchoress and Christ. This is a marriage contract: in exchange for her whole self, the anchoress receives an enfeoffment: ‘to rixlen o þi rihthond / crunet wið þeseluen’ [to reign at your right hand, crowned with you.] That Christ has purchased the anchoress – as spouse – and saved her, raised her up through his blood, is clear. She points out later that this was an expensive purchase: ‘A deore cheap hefdes tu on / me ne was neauer unwurþi / þing chepet swa deore’ [Ah, you had a costly purchase in me; never was an unworthy thing purchased so dearly.] These lines are followed by an extended series of images of Christ’s passion, all of which swirl with his blood, all of which was shed to save (‘purchase’) her. The lines are deliberately evocative, meant to vividly incorporate the anchoress into the scene, where she can literally become awash with Christ’s blood, culminating in an actual heart exchange: ‘Wið wrange schuldi / þe min heorte wearnen / siðen þat tu bohtes herte for herte’ [Only unjustly could I deny you my heart, since you redeemed heart for heart.] The exchange of bloody hearts surpasses the exchange of rings in this marriage.

In the Wooing Group’s version of the extended metaphor of body as deed, the anchoritic charter also demonstrates the cleansing (‘pardoning’) effect of Christ’s blood. Each of the prayers refers to the healing property of the blood. For instance, the Ureisun of God Almihti notes, ‘þe streames þet striden adun of þine deo / rewurðe uet . & of Þine eadie honden . nes hit forto waschen sunifule soulen?’ [the streams that flow down from you … Is it not for saving those soaked in sin?] The Ureisun carries this one step further, praising not only the cleansing power of Christ’s blood, but also the healing power of Christ’s wounds:

```
ase wis ase a drope of þine deorwurðe blode muhte
weaschen awei alle folkes fulðe ase wis liues
louerd þeo ilke fif wellen of þine blisfule bodie
sprungen & striken dun strundes of blode weasch
mine fif wittes of all blodie sunnen …
… þine wunden helen þe
wunden of mine soule.
```
‘PE BLOD [AT] BOHTE’

[Just as certainly, a drop of thy precious blood might wash away all folks’ filth; just as certainly, life’s Lord, might the same five wells that sprang from thy blissful body and gushed down streams of blood wash my five senses of all their bloody sin … May thy wounds heal the wounds of my soul.]

This ability of Christ’s blood to save and purify was a standard Christian belief. A century later, the Fasciculus Morum, a preacher’s manual, reports: ‘we should know that he shed his blood in the first place that it might be a help to sinners and a remedy against our spiritual enemies and fleshly sins’. The Wooing Group seems to have taken this salvific function seriously – each one of the prayers refers to the saving power of Christ’s holy blood. This blood springs forth not just from the side wound or the Eucharistic chalice; rather, Christ’s saving blood comes from his hands, feet, side, penis, fingernails, back, head, sweat, tear ducts, and the chalice. Christ’s blood is omnipresent in anchoritic prayers as his body is omnipresent in anchoritic cells.

Christ’s Body in the Cell

Anchoresses took three main vows: chastity, obedience, and ‘stude steðeluestnesse,’ or stability of abode. Stability of abode, unique to the anchoritic vocation, assured that the anchoress would remain in one location – her cell – for the duration of her earthly existence. The inclusion of this unique vow indicates the centrality of the anchoritic space to the vocation as a whole. The anchoress was dependent upon her cell not only as a dwelling place, but also as a site of identification. The cell defined who she was – an anchoress – and metaphorically, she and the chamber became a single entity. An oft-quoted passage from Ancrene Wisse, a prominent thirteenth century guide for anchoresses, exemplifies this metaphor:

Þeos twa þing limpeð to ancre, nearowðe ant bitternesse; for wombe is nearow wununge, þer ure Lauerd wes reclus,
… ȝef ȝe þenne i nearow stude þolied bitternesse, ȝe beoð his feolales, reclus as he wes i Marie wombe. Beo ȝe ibunden inwið fowr large wahes? Ant he in a nearow cader, i-neilet o rode, i stanene þruh bicluset hete-feste. Marie wombe ant þis þruh weren his ancre-huses.
… ‘ȝe’, þu ondswerest me, ‘ah he wende ut of ba.’ ȝe; went tu alswa of ba þine ancre-huses, as he dude, wiðute bruche, ant leaf ham
These two things belong to the anchoress: narrowness and bitterness. For the womb is a narrow dwelling, where our Lord was a recluse ... If you then suffer bitterness in a narrow place, you are his fellows, recluse as he was in Mary's womb. Are you imprisoned within four wide walls? – And he in a narrow cradle, nailed on the cross, enclosed tight in a stone tomb. Mary’s womb and his tomb were his anchorhouses ... ‘Yes,’ you answer me, ‘But he went out of both.’ Yes, and you too will go out of both your anchorhouses as he did, without a break, and leave them both whole. That will be when the spirit goes out in the end, without break or blemish, from its two houses. One of them is the body, the other is the outer house, which is like the outer wall around a castle.

The physical structure of the anchorhold becomes, in essence, the physical structure of the anchoress’ body. It is crucial to the vocation that the anchoress’ cell remains inviolate. She should not admit visitors, particularly male ones, nor should she indiscriminately open her windows.

The image of Christ’s body dominates the space within this cell, and thus takes hold of the anchoress’ body as well. Christ is present on several levels: physically, metaphorically, performatively, and spiritually. The crucifix is the main vehicle for Christ’s physical presence. A number of anchoritic Rules, including Ancrene Wisse and Aelred’s Rule for a Recluse, required that a crucifix be part of the cell’s meagre furnishings. Additional crosses were common as well. Each of these provided tangible reminders of Christ’s sacrifice and filled the cell with his existence. The metaphorical level of Christ’s presence combines physical reality with spiritual function. To enhance the physical presence of Christ gained through the crucifix, the cell’s windows, squint(s), and location all recalled the close relationship shared by the anchoress and her heavenly spouse. By being attached to the church itself, the anchoress was metaphorically attached to Christ, as his presence infused the sacred space. Further, medieval churches commonly had aisles and transepts that reflected the shape of the cross; thus, anything that was part of the church became a physical attachment of that metaphorically invoked cross. Every cell also had at least one squint that allowed the occupant to observe mass and receive communion. The view from this squint was generally one of the high altar, or in a few instances, a side altar. The altar where the sacrifice of the mass took place thus became the central focus point of the anchoritic gaze, providing another visual reminder of Christ’s presence, love, commitment, and sacrifice. Frequently, the cells that housed female anchorites had cruciform squints instead of angular or
square ones. Not only did this purify her gaze, but also it regulated her perception of the external world – everything was viewed through Christ and his body. Finally, the external windows, used for conversing, gift reception, and other physical needs, also bore reminders of Christ’s sacrificial love, as these windows were covered with black drapes into which white crosses were sewed. The black drapes recall the tomb in which the anchoress was said to dwell, as well as Christ’s sepulchre, while the white crosses provided visual reminders of Christ’s redemptive suffering.

As an object of devotion and fantasy, the body of Christ assumes a central place in the anchoress’ cell. Particularly, it serves to remind the anchoress of her commitment to her heavenly spouse, but also serves as a proper outlet for her redirected desires. Anchoritic devotions are designed to help anchoresses avoid moments of temptation, and to focus instead on turning their gaze towards an image of perfection (Christ). Significantly, the anchoritic gaze is even more specifically directed towards a suffering Christ. In a passage that foreshadows the blazon technique, The Lofsong of Our Lofdi relates the details of Christ’s fragmented body. Under the heated gaze of the anchoress, who has just admitted ‘mis i loked’, [evilly, I looked; l. 24], Christ’s shattered body and emotions are displayed:

[by his blessed fasting in the wilderness – by the hard hurts and the unworthy miseries that he willingly endured for us sinful [people] – by his deadly terror and by his bloody sweat – by his blessed prayers alone in the hills – by his capture and binding – by his being led forth – by all that anyone condemned him [with] – by his clothes-changing … now red, now white, in mockery of him – by his scorning and by his spitting and buffeting and his blindfolding – by the crowning with thorns – by the royal scepter of reed, in mockery of him – by his own cross, on his soft shoulders, so cruelly dragging – by the blunt nails – by the sore wounds – by the holy cross – by his side-opening – by his bloody Stream
that ran in many places: in [his] circumcision; in his bloody sweating; in his painful crowning with thorns; first in his one hand and afterwards in his other; lastly in his side-piercing – except for the sore wound, as believed by saints, that true stream of blood – it was in his first capture, in the binding fast, that that blood pressed out at his blessed nails.]

In this rather long passage, it becomes clear that the representation of Christ’s body revolves around blood. At times, the objects of his torture are substituted for pieces of his body or actions committed upon it. For instance, the anchoress turns from the crowning with thorns, an action that inscribes the marks of the torturers upon Christ’s flesh, to the sceptre, cross, and nails used to imprint his identity as suffering sacrifice on the world. Central to this passage is the concept of display and its counterpart, spectatorship:

Description, then, is a gesture of display, a separating off and a signalling of particulars destined to make visible that which is described. Its object or matter is thus submitted to a double power-relation inherent in the gesture itself: on the one hand, the describer controls, possesses, and uses that matter to his own ends; and, on the other, his reader/listener is extended the privilege or pleasure of ‘seeing’.19

In this idea of double power, the describer possesses and the reader ‘sees’. In the anchorhold, however, the anchoress is both describer and reader, so she possesses what she sees, and she becomes what she performs. In the space of the cell, anchoress and Christ fuse into one being – what happens to him happens to her, and, presumably, vice versa. The discourse of the anchoritic vocation allows for the positing of a new space where the particularly anchoritic Christ can exist, and can overlap with the anchoress herself.

**Merging with the Wounded Christ**

Besides the obvious salvific function of Christ’s blood – and thus the necessity of having him be pierced and pricked – there are at least two additional reasons that the anchoritic Christ was necessarily wounded, the potential for rape, and the purification of menstrual blood. Both of these reasons are tied to and negotiated through sexuality. Anchoritism, like mysticism and asceticism, holds as one of its goals union with the divine. The ascetic tradition sought to achieve perfection initially through bodily denial, and eventually through bodily punishment. The practitioner’s ultimate desire –
spiritual perfection – was obtained through the denial of the body and of the outside world; thus, holy men and women who aspired to ecstatic union with God deliberately sought out human suffering in order to fulfil their true desire. Instead of focusing on denial and repression, mysticism focused on desire, employing sexual intercourse with the Incarnated (and thus suffering) Christ as a primary metaphor for divine union. Both vocations, however, relied upon suffering as a vehicle for this expression. Anchoritism bridged the gap between these, with enclosure and discipline providing the ascetic atmosphere, and the performative prayers and Rules indicating mysticism. The anchoress was a bride of Christ, and as such was entitled to all rights and privileges thereof, including consummation. This could most easily occur within Christ’s wounds:

As the place of mystical communication and knowledge, the wound of Christ offers the mystic access to mystical union. Yet the ‘metaphor’ for communication is threatened by erotic ‘materializing’ of the mystic experience … As a place of mystical union and knowledge, the wound of Christ is sexualized even when the Latin homology is not present … The coming to know Christ, which imitatio strives after, is an erotic act. Language, like imitation, travels across the integrity of the physical and spiritual realms of knowledge and signification.20

Medieval Christianity endowed pain with great spiritual significance and recognized a supernatural use for suffering. In general, English anchoresses were enjoined not to undertake strict ascetic practices, so without elaborate self-mortification strategies, the anchoress’ participation in Christ’s passion became strictly mystical. Since the physical interior space of her cell was not a space of purgation, the interior space of her soul became the available and appropriate space. In her solitary cell, the anchoress was compelled to consider the body of Christ, both as saving force and as pleasurable object. And when the anchoress spent hours contemplating Jesus’ beautiful form, and recreating the tortures of the cross, he entered her heart, mind, and soul through the flowing blood. In this way, mortification became the focal point for imagination and meditation.

Anchoresses exploited their shared ‘physical’ pain – sensory in nature – as a mechanism for identifying with the suffering saviour. Like the early Christian martyrs, whose sense of self was systematically destroyed through torture only to be reconstructed through their reidentification with Christ, the anchoresses meticulously dismantled their worldly lives and their worldly selves only to be reconstructed through their new relationship with Christ. According to Michael A. Sells, mystics, ‘claim a moment of “realization” – a moment in which … sense and reference are fused into
identity with event’. Mystical union and divine transcendence take place within and through the sensations of the body; with the suffering body serving as a staging area for identity formation.

In the anchoritic world, physical space and spiritual space struggle to remain separate, yet constantly overlap. Henri Lefebvre elaborates on the idea of space as a code: ‘a spatial code is not simply a means of reading or interpreting space; rather it is a means of living in that space: of understanding it and of producing it’. In anchoritic reality, space, place, and occupant become almost interchangeable, a situation not uncommon for medieval women in general. In the Middle Ages, women were generally tied to a given interior space – the cloister, the cell, the home, or even the brothel. These spatial limits made it both easy to control women and easy to identify the margins. In the anchoritic life, spatial identification was built into the lifestyle:

Nan ancre bi mi read, ne schal makien professiun – þet is, bihat en ase heast – bute þreo þinges: þet beoð obedience, chastete, ant stude steaðeluestnesse, (þet ha ne schal þet stude neaver mare changin bute for nede ane, as strengðe ant deaðes dred, obedience of hire bishop oðer of his herre).

[By my counsel, no anchoress shall make profession, that is promise as a vow, except in three matters: these are obedience, chastity and stability of abode, so that she will never change that abode again except only in the case of need, such as force and fear of death, obedience to her bishop or to his superiors.]

These lines, taken from the opening of *Ancrene Wisse*, reify the link between the anchoritic lifestyle and topography. *Ancrene Wisse* further reminds the anchoress, rather brutally, that the anchorhold is her grave – her body is so intertwined with her cell, that she will not be separated from it, even in death. This reminds anchoresses to focus on the afterlife, but also it further emphasizes the extreme seclusion and restricted space of the anchoritic life. The physical anchorhold is an extension of her body – and serves as her tomb. A similar notion is found within the Celtic tradition, where both concepts are adroitly connected:

I am hidden and buried in this hollow heap of stones
Beneath the towering rock for a monument and a sanctified abode
An undeﬁled sanctuary, a house without stain
… this tomb. (my emphasis)

As this statement shows, the anchoritic enclosure was clearly a tomb, but was also a pure dwelling place. Likely this tradition can trace its roots back
to the early Desert tradition, when Coptic fathers urged monks to pledge their bodies to the walls of their cells, fusing flesh and stone. Thus, the dynamics of space permeated every aspect of an anchoress' life. In the spiritual sense, the anchoress did not exist in a place; rather, she was the space. In becoming an anchoress, she turned away from the physical world in order to seek an inner one, like the Sacred Heart or the Wounds of Christ.

The anchoresses’ body is integrated with her cell – a combination of physical spaces – as her mind and soul are integrated with Christ. As Roberta Gilchrist points out, ‘space and behaviour are mutually dependent’. The conflation of the mystical body with the physical one creates this new identity:

… Mi bodi henge
wið þi bodi neiled o rode sperred
querfaste wiðinne fowr
wahes & henge i wile wið þe
& neauer mare of mi rode cume
til pat i deie… .
A iesu swa swet hit is wið þe
to henge.28

[May my body hang with your body nailed upon the cross, enclosed transversely within four walls! And I will hang with you, nevermore to come off my cross until I die … Ah, Jesus, so sweet it is to hang with you!]

Combining ideas of spectatorship, imitation and reidentification allows for the overlap of anchoress and Christ. Moreover, anchoritic prayers such as those in the Wooing Group demand performance. The anchoress reads the same prayers daily, and in doing so engages in the performance of her vocation. Part of this involves merging with her beloved – her body ‘hangs’ with Christ’s, and the cross, a site of suffering, becomes their marriage bed. Union takes place through pain: ‘in the privacy of her cell, though, she has the opportunity to translate that suffering into a different locus, to identify it as Christ’s suffering’. Alongside this mimetic suffering, the anchoress must visualize Christ’s body, which subsequently becomes an object of devotion and fetish, and eventually serves as a proxy for her. As the anchoress performs Christ’s suffering, she imaginatively identifies with his position, gaining access to his body through the guiding visual imagery of his wounds. They are necessary signifiers, which enable the sight of passion, and thus allow merger with Christ. The anchoress’s ‘filthy flesh’ needs to be unmade and remade, and Christ’s body, and his erotic suffering, is the site of this struggle. Though she has sinned, his body will bear the punish-
ment; the point of convergence between the two bodies is Christ’s flowing blood.

The wounds of Christ provide a space – physical, spiritual, and metaphorical – in which this transformative process can occur. As Bynum notes, ‘the wound or wounds of Christ are more frequently hymned as doorway and access, refuge and consolation, than as violation; to penetrate is to open the way’.30 In particular, the wound in Christ’s side ‘provided a safe haven in which to live wounded inside the wounded body of God’.31 Moreover, ‘devotion to the Wounded Side … was widespread throughout medieval Europe before it was eventually superseded, in the thirteenth century, by the worship of the Sacred Heart’.32 The heart provides love, safety, comfort, nourishment, and enclosure – all hallmarks of the anchoritic life as Christ’s spouse. Kristen McQuinn further points out that ‘this type of devotion placed much emphasis on nuptial and Passion contemplation’, both central to the Wooing Group.33 For instance, in the Wooing of Our Lord, the anchoress triumphantly declares:

… Broht
tu haues me fra þe world to bur
of þi burðe steked me i chaumbre
I mai þer þe swetli kissen
& cluppen & of þi luue haue gastli
likinge A swete iesu mi liues
luue wið þi blod þu haues me
boht34

[You have brought me from the world to the bower of your birth, and bound me fast in your chamber. There, I may so sweetly kiss you and embrace you, and in your love find spiritual delight. Ah, sweet Jesus, my life’s love, with your blood you have bought me.]

The Wooing makes clear that his wounds reveal the depth of Christ’s love. The side wound provides a particularly powerful locus for the merger of Christ and anchoress, as within it,

… many of mysticism’s predominant themes converge. The wound in Christ’s side is a refuge; a nuptial bedchamber; a womb from which one is reborn into eternal life; a breast that nourishes, infuses the soul with grace, and provides erotic pleasure; a pair of lips that kisses; a flower; a warehouse that stores mystical paraphernalia … a well of living waters; a showering fountain of blood that washes away sin; an attribute of the New Adam; and a symbol of Christ’s final contribution to a vicarious sacrifice by quotas.35
In Christ’s case, the infliction of wounds equals, or at least parallels, the inscription of his identity in the text. The anchoritic prayers’ literary re-enactment serves to underscore the immediate and constantly reoccurring nature of Christ’s passion in the world of each reader of the text, thereby incorporating the reader/spectator into the scene. His body legally, spiritually, and metaphorically stands in for the anchoress’s, – a viable alternative since Christ’s body is both male and female, both sexual and virginal, and both open and closed. In illustrating this exchange, the iconographical focus of medieval art on the mouth, blood, and wounds of Christ reveals ‘an eroticised, gender-bending and penetratable body open to flows and fluid desires, that signalled danger in other lesser bodies’. According to Irigaray, Christ’s body as a symbol has openings, like a woman’s, for a purpose. By mapping ‘female lack’ back onto the masculine body, Christ’s literal body, female lack is reclaimed. Within the attempts to close this fissured space, God and woman might meet. In him, the conflation of humanity and divinity is enacted without danger to his purity; therefore it is ‘safe’ for him to assume the place of the sinner, in this case, the anchoress. Impurities of the soul, such as sexual desire, could be funnelled through a carefully controlled, ritualized narrative. Similarly, impurities of the body, such as rape and menstruation, could be channeled through the carefully constructed image of Christ. Further, all of these Christological functions are accomplished through a bleeding, wounded Christ – one whose body coexists physically and symbolically, and one that merges with the anchoress.

In this regard – Christ acting as the anchoress’ proxy after she has imaginatively identified with him – the anchoritic experience becomes one of interpassivity. This concept is based on the work of Slavoj Žižek, and elaborated by Emma Campbell, both of whom rely upon the Lacanian concept of the de-centred subject. In essence, Žižek purports that because of the subject’s indirect agency, ‘both active and passive responses … can be accomplished through another’. Active responses can be categorized two groups – the Other performs a task on the subject’s behalf, but she/he does not recognize their own belief, or the Other performs a task on your behalf, but the subject believes she/he accomplished it alone. Similarly, the subject can be passive through the Other – this is what Žižek specifically calls ‘interpassivity’. In displacing the subject from the centre of passivity, however, the Other also replaces the subject with the passive object. As Campbell explains interpassivity: ‘[it] prevent[s] the subject from experiencing this transgressive pleasure [jouissance, or the “pleasure principle”] directly, enabling her to displace it onto the Other who experiences it in her
stead’. The boundaries between subject and object become blurred, and both positions may be occupied simultaneously. The anchoress’ transformative identification with Christ results in a totalizing union achieved through blood and wounds.

The intertwined concepts of the charter of Christ – redemption and purification – also reverberate throughout these two more specific ways in which the anchoress’ transformative identification with Christ plays out. In providing a doppelganger, Christ purchases and protects the anchoress’ virginity, and also prevents and/or cleanses possible pollution. Each of these is, in turn, a salvific function of Christ’s blood, and one directly necessary to the anchoritic vocation.

Public bleeding, hagiographic union and physical rape

In *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero*, Peggy McCracken identifies a ‘broader system of cultural values in which men’s blood is celebrated in public displays but women’s blood [is] characterized as dangerous, as polluting, and as a bleeding that should not be seen’. Building her case, at least initially, upon the distinction between the blood of circumcision and menstrual blood, McCracken clearly identifies an essential dichotomy: ‘men’s blood is salvific, women’s blood is polluting’.

This position aligns neatly with the theological implications of Christ’s saving blood. However, it also supports the additional reasons that representations of a wounded Christ are so important within the anchorhold. The first of these to examine is the threat of sexual violence, particularly rape. This act was an especially troubled one in the Middle Ages, problematized by the conflicts between secular and canon law as well as by varying medical and social perceptions. Unlike modern definitions of the term, which rely primarily on constructions of power, medieval ‘rape’, at least early on, carried the explicit sense of sexual violation. There was a particularly high price to pay for the violation of a nun:

If anyone in lewd fashion seizes a nun either by her clothes or her breast without her leave, the compensation is to be double that we have established for a lay person.

Various other penitentials equate raping a nun with raping a widow or a married lady, and several with raping an unmarried woman. In no case does it go lightly punished. There is a further implication in the rather elaborate codes of early England that violation of nuns was considered especially

---

136 MICHELLE M. SAUER

This content downloaded from 136.167.3.36 on Wed, 01 Feb 2017 12:26:31 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
enjoyable. This sense of defilement is celebrated within the virgin martyr hagiographies as well as later secular romances, in which the ‘saintly’ woman is the repeated focus of sexual force.

Rape and other violations occurred with alarming frequency in medieval society, and the extreme isolation of the anchoress, especially as compared to other women, would have left her vulnerable to attack. However, this same isolation also left her vulnerable to temptation. As women who lived completely enclosed lives, anchoresses were both the safest of all women, and the most dangerous. Enclosure, at first looked upon suspiciously by the monastic world, became the preferred method of regulating female behaviour, and, indeed, became one of the identifying characteristics of female religious life. This was predicated upon a two-fold belief – the women were being protected from the world, but, simultaneously, the world (men) was being protected from the dangerous influence of female sexuality. Architecturally, spiritually, and vocationally, anchoresses were safer because of – and in spite of – their extreme enclosure. Because of these unique conditions, anchoresses were encouraged to adopt a routine within their cells that allowed them to redirect their tempting thoughts towards their heavenly spouse. This channelling was promoted through ritual and performance (the Wooing Group), visual enhancement (cruciform squints, the crucifix in the cell), and through edifying reading (hagiographies). Indeed, many of these methodologies inherently touched upon the threat of violation possible within the outside world, a threat dramatically realized in most virgin martyr hagiographies.

Texts anchoresses were encouraged to read included a number of edifying hagiographies, such as those in the Katherine Group (St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Juliana). These narratives were intended to increase the anchoress’ resolve to remain pure, they also provided a source of fantasy. Katherine Gravdal, for instance, suggests that male audiences were titillated by the sustained threat of rape present in many virgin martyr narratives. This interest recalls the inexorable draw of the cloistered nun to would-be rapists. The heightened sense of unavailability and the increased sanctity of the woman proportionately intensified the man’s desire to possess her sexually. Once defiled, she would not only lose her honour, dignity, and virginity, she would also, quite possibly, lose her soul. Church law was torn on the issue of rape, especially the rape of virgins. Officially, if she resists the invasive actions and does not consent to sexual intercourse, no repercussions were assigned; however, given the nature of women as carnal beings, most theologians were doubtful that once begun, the act remained without pleasure for women. It was doubtful that any victim of rape was completely unwilling, and thus blameless.
As Saunders points out, ‘hagiography, more than any other genre, engages with the question of the sanctity of the raped virgin’. The narratives about the early Christian martyrs reflect an obsessive concern with the preservation of virginity as a path to sainthood. Thus, virginity was the nexus of the woman’s holiness, and the source of her spiritual power. The relationship is fairly straightforward: the woman gains power by converting to (or upholding) Christianity and by controlling her bodily desires and retaining her virginity; this power threatens the pagan ruler(s) who then seek to eliminate her power, first through conversion (sacrifice to heathen gods), but also through marriage or concubinage – in other words, sex. Simon Gaunt declares the ‘universal subtext of saints’ lives about women is forced sex’. To render the virgin martyr powerless, she must not only turn away from the Christian God, but also turn towards the pagan man and his ﬂeshly desires. The constant threat of sexual violation ﬁlls the text with sexual tension alongside spiritual tension. Numerous critics have spoken about the eroticism captured within virgin martyr hagiographies, wherein scantily clad, beautiful young women are stripped and beaten in front of a hungry, hostile crowd. Soft, white, nubile bodies are put on display and then battered, bruised, and left bleeding.

Saunders rightly points out that many studies of sex and violence in hagiography overlook a crucial point: ‘the depiction of the saint’s tortured body must have evoked very vividly the familiar image of the naked, mutilated body of Christ … the naked body in pain becomes an object of inspiration, even desire, but often in such a way as to recall the violence of Christ’s own death’. The threat of rape is replaced with the reality of death, just as the threat of human sexuality is replaced with the reality of Christ’s presence. Just as his presence refocuses her sexual temptation, his presence also redirects any sexual violation. Indeed, as Cynthia Hahn points out, ‘virgin martyrs represent what might be called “doubled bodies”’. She is both sexually menacing – as all women were – and sexually safe, having moved ‘miraculously’ beyond sexuality. This miraculous achievement came through the martyrs’ deliberate attempts at imitatio Christi. The martyrs were desirable women who controlled their desires in order to achieve perfect union with Christ. They resisted attempts at persuasion and violation, even through horrendous tortures. In some cases, this staunch refusal to give into temptation was rewarded by substitution – instead of suffering the tortures herself, God sent an angel to take her place, or, in other case, Christ swapped places with the martyr in order that she might escape the pain and suffering, though never the final consummation (death).
These virgin martyrs, with whom Christ switched places and protected from rape and violation, were the anchoress’ role models. She, too, lived with the fear of rape every day, as she is reminded by texts like Ancrene Wisse. She was told not to allow men to look at her, not only because a glimpse of her would incite desire (hers and his), but also because men might make a forcible attempt to possess her. She was instructed to never be alone, particularly in the case of a ‘broken-open house’: ‘If some great necessity breaks your house open, while it stays broken, have a woman of pure life to stay with you in it by day and night.’ All of these measures were taken in order to guard her chastity (not necessarily virginity) and her reputation, both of which were subject to violation. The creation of a homosocial environment furthered this sense of security. But even beyond the fear of physical rape was the underlying concern with violation. Ancrene Wisse spends a great deal of time discussing the various ways an ‘unbreachable’ anchoress can be ‘breached’. Christ’s physical presence, invoked through performative prayers, mitigated this threat to some degree.

Thus, the anchoress needed to envision a wounded, bleeding Christ – a Christ that could be violated in her place. Since this Christ is beautiful, he is worthy of being a spectacle. There are hints of his soft shoulder, gentle hands, and beautiful face, each of which is immediately coupled with pain. The soft shoulder is torn, the gentle hands are pierced, and the beautiful face is blood streaked. The male body is on display as a fragmented work of art. In this, Christ is the opposite of the tortured virgin martyrs whose bodies defied division. His (male) body is ripped apart and displayed to the common gaze, while the female body remains whole and ‘unbreached’, unpenetrated, and hidden from all but a select gaze. Even dramatic ascetic practices, described by Bynum, such as rolling in nettles, hanging from a gibbet, lying unclothed on a stone floor, or drinking pus, do not shatter the wholeness that must exist in order for a woman to experience the highest form of holiness. The anchoress was expected to remain intact in solitary splendour while imagining the brutality of being sundered. She obediently begs Christ to ‘heal me’, as her body should not sport any openings, unlike Christ’s body, who had to be opened in order to close hers:

\[
\text{clense & peash}
\]
\[
\text{mine sunfule soule þuruh þine fif}
\]
\[
\text{wunden iopened o rode . wið neiles uor driuene}
\]
\[
\text{& seoruh fulliche fordtute . hel me uor-wunded}
\]
\[
\text{þuruh mine fif wittes wið deadliche sunnen . & opene}
\]
\[
\text{ham heouenli<che> king to<u>ward he<o>uenliche þinges.}^{52}
\]
[cleanse and purge my sinful soul. Through your five wounds, opened on the cross – pierced through with nails – and sorrowfully entirely filled up, heal me, who is seriously wounded through my five senses with deadly sins, and open them, Heavenly King, towards heavenly things.]

Christ’s flesh substitutes for the anchoresses’. To keep her body from being penetrated, Christ must allow his body to be pierced instead. In an extended sexual metaphor, the senses are enticed, causing Christ, as ‘stand-in’, to be penetrated, ‘driven through’ by nails. These nails penetrate Christ’s body, creating vaginal shaped wounds, which are then ‘filled up’ as the nails are sheathed in Christ’s flesh. The anchoress cannot allow her body to be penetrated by anything – a gaze, a nail, or a penis. Once opened, her body is prey to sin and can no longer be considered holy. A multivalent, permeable site, Christ’s body is able to be both sacred and profane in a way the anchoress could never be. Christ’s body – without sin or blemish – is the ideal alternate.

While it may seem inappropriate to term Christ’s crucifixion as a ‘rape’, the language belies that unseemly fit. Christ is represented as a static, pierced object of desire, and described in similar language as rape victims, such this case:

And in the midst of the room, the same R[aymond] … took this same Joan … between his two arms and … laid her on the ground with her belly upwards and her back on the ground, and with his right hand raised the clothes of this same Joan … with both his hands separated the legs and thighs of this same Joan, and with his right hand took his male organ of such and such a length and size and put it in the secret parts of this same Joan, and bruised her watershed and laid her open so that she was bleeding, and ravished her maidenhead.53

Joan, the victim, was only eleven years of age, and was certainly an innocent. This graphic scene is recorded in the language of a homicide case, citing location, the nature of the attack, the weapon (penis), and the injury (rent maidenhood).54

The crucifixion scenes in the Wooing Group and its associated texts echo this formulaic expression of felony rape. For instance, in the Wooing itself, the speaker (presumably the anchoress) witnesses a similar scene:

A nu haue þai broht him þider … A nu nacnes mon mi lef. A nu druuen ha him up wið swepes & wið schurges. A hu liue i for reowðe þat seo mi mi lef mon up o rode & swa to drahen hise limes þat i mai in his bodi euch ban tellen. A hu þat ha nu druuen irnene neiles þur þine feire hondes in to hard rode þur þine freoliche fet. A nu of þa honden & of þa fet swa lueli streames te blod swa rewli.55
Ah, now have they brought him thither … Ah, now a man denudes my dear. Ah, now they drive him up with whips and with scourges. Ah, how can I live, on account of all the dole that I behold – my beloved up on the rood, his limbs so drawn that I may reckon each bone in his body! Ah, how they now drive iron nails through your fair hands into the hard cross, through your splendid feet. Ah, now from those hands and from your feet so lovely, streams the blood so piteously.

Like the innocent Joan, Christ is lain down in the midst of the crowd on Calvary; he is stripped; his body is stretched out on the cross; he is penetrated, swiftly and painfully, by nails held against his limbs, and the result is wounds that are opened and bleeding. Instead of a rape being described as a homicide, this is a homicide described as a rape. The *Lofsong of ure Louerde* uses similar imagery: ‘þuruh þine fif wunden iopened o rode wið neiles uor driuene & seoruh fulliche fordutte hel me uor-wunded’. Here, Christ’s wounds are driven through roughly and then sorrowfully, painfully filled up. In *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, which is derived from the *Wooing* among other texts, the piercing of the holy body is described in anguished detail, and framed in familiar terms:

A lhesu now þei driuen. þe blunte vnruide nayles þorw þi feire hondes.and þi frely feet.

Nou bersteþ þi skin … þe blute of þi woundes.springes so breme.and stremeþ on þi white skin.

[Now they drive the blunt, enormous nails through your fair hands, and through your lovely feet. Now your skin bursts … the blood of your wounds springs so brightly, and streams down your white skin.]

The penis imagery becomes apparent: the nails are ‘blunt’ and ‘large’, designed to push through the fair skin in body parts (feet, hands) that had earlier been described in erotically-charged language. As if losing his maidenhead, Christ’s body ‘bursts’ when entered, bringing forth a gush of blood that mars his white (womanly) skin. This is particularly reminiscent of Joan’s case, cited above, where her ‘watershed’ is bruised to bleeding, and her maidenhead is battered. In a conscious echo of sexual relations, the thrusting nails both open and close the body; Christ is both penetrated and filled.
Because most cells were attached to churches, the anchoress dwelled entirely within sacred space; indeed, her body and cell were one, making her sacred space; therefore, the anchoress’s presence brought with it the fear of menstrual pollution. Rieder reports, ‘medieval clerics believed that any blood, men’s or women’s, spilt in a church or on sacred ground caused pollution’. Thus, Christ’s position as metaphorical stand-in for the anchoress – when his body and blood become her body and blood – mitigates more than the inherent threat to her chastity; it also serves to alleviate the potential threat to the sacred space that is her body, the cell and the church. If the blood could not be avoided, it had to be purified. Rules such as Ancrene Wisse acknowledged these ‘facts of life’, by including provisions not only for acquisition of food and other necessities, alongside disposal of waste, but also by providing for procedures such as bloodletting. Bloodletting was undertaken for health reasons, as a preventative measure. Particularly for women, however, bloodletting was seen as a way to rid the body of excess blood – menstrual blood – that built up due to lack of orgasm. Though recent scholarship reveals a conflicted tradition, there is at least some evidence that menstrual blood was considered a polluting force by some theologians and laypeople alike. As an anchoress, attached to the church, her body becomes the anchorhold, and, in turn, part of the church. Menstrual blood, therefore, presented at least some danger to the purity of sacred space. In order to mitigate this pollution, anchoritic Rules suggested physical purging as one option.

Another way to mitigate pollution is suggested by anchoritic prayer, which redefined the anchoress’s blood from defiling to purifying through a rhetorical (re)alignment with Christ’s blood. Paula Rieder states, ‘medieval clerical authors saw Christ’s blood, shed at his circumcision and during his passion, as salvific whereas they saw menstrual and postpartal blood as polluting’. Transformative identification with Christ’s body could thus be extended to his blood; thus, his pure blood substituted for her polluted fluid. The Myrour of Recluses, a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the Speculum Inclusorum, outlines this ‘blood swap’ most clearly. First, the sinner/recluse and Christ undergo a sensory exchange: his lips absorb the sinner’s bitter gall, his nose the sinner’s uncleanness, and so forth. Next, seven manners in which Christ’s blood saves the sinner are outlined. The first focuses on the ‘stremes and ryueres’ from Christ’s head, which draw out the sinner’s sin. The second holds up the ‘clene blood of Cristes herte, cruely woundyd with a spere’, which will cleanse and purge...
the sinner’s sin. The third step notes the ‘cours of blood’ from Christ’s hands, which will wash away the sinner’s sins. The fourth manner examines the ‘flowynge blood passynge out’ in strong streams, which will also cleanse the sinner. The fifth approach specifies the ‘dropes’ of blood that will cleanse the sinner from ‘superflu or outrageous vsage’. The sixth manner asks the sinner to behold the ‘tendre blood of þe yonge childissch membres of Crist, pat was circumcised for þe’. Finally, the seventh approach notes ‘flodes of blood’ dropping from Christ’s feet that keep the sinner from sloth.62 Though ostensibly paired up with the seven deadly sins, the word choices used to describe Christ’s blood are distinctly reminiscent of words used to describe menstrual flow – courses, flowing out, drops, and so on. Coupled with the insistence on the avid recollection of the circumcision, this tableau can be seen as a bodily/bloody exchange between Christ and recluse. He assumes her position, and assumes her menstrual cycle, but when he purges his blood – described in terms like hers – it washes away sin and pollution. This is similar to a request made of Christ by the anchoress in *An Orison to God Almihti*, which further includes a reference to her five senses: ‘ase wis liues louerd þeo ilke fif wellen of þine blisfule bodie sprungen & striken dun strundes of blode weasch mine fif wittes of all blodie sunnen’63 [just as certainly, life’s Lord, might the same five wells that sprung from thy blissful body and gushed down streams of blood wash my five senses of all their bloody sins]. Her sins are bloody, but Christ’s blood will purify that befouled blood. Although there is not a sensory exchange, a blood exchange does take place. The danger caused by her bloody sins is neutralized.

**Blood and Redemption**

The Wooing Group prayers anticipate the frenzyed blood piety of late medieval Europe in a constructive manner. Building upon already established traditions such as devotion to the Wounded Side and Sacred Heart, these prayers further emphasize the contractual nature of Christ’s blood – ‘I bleed, you survive’ – as well as the purifying qualities. The performative prayers of the Wooing Group deliberately focus on Christ’s blood and wounds. Indeed, the Wooing Group Christ must be wounded. In this way, the anchoress can ‘hide’ within Christ’s wounds, mingling her body and his. Through the intermingling of blood and body, the anchoress merges with Christ. The resultant mystic union not only brings the anchoress closer to spiritual perfection, but also preserves her physical body in a manner that
aids her spirituality. Through a totalizing union with Christ within the boundaries of her cell, the anchoress retains her bodily and spiritual purity – because Christ is pierced, she does not have to be. Through holistic substitution, she is redeemed, protected, and purified.

Notes


2 Ibid., p. 7.


4 For the most complete view of this tradition, see Mary Caroline Spalding’s The Middle English Charters of Christ (Bryn Mawr College Monographs Series, vol. 15, 1914).


6 In the heart exchange, the lover’s heart is removed and replaced with Christ’s heart as a manifestation of their total union. Saints who experienced such an exchange are numerous. Some better known ones include Gertrude of Helfta (1256–1301/2), Dorothea von Montau (1347–94), Catherine of Siena (1347–80), Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi (1566–1607), and Rose of Lima (1586–1617). Michael Camille discusses images of both sacred and profane heart exchanges in Medieval Art of Love (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

7 Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerde, ll. 94–98.

8 Ibid., ll. 101–2.

9 Ibid., ll. 446–8.

10 Ibid., ll. 551–3.


‘PE BLOD [AT] BOHTE’

18 On lofsong of ure Lefdi, ll. 42–64.
23 Ancrene Wisse, Preface, ll. 63–7.
24 Savage and Watson, p. 49.
25 Patrick Beglan, 1616 CE. Translated by Colmán Ó Clabaigh. Received as a hand-out at the International Anchoritic Society Symposium, Glenstal Abbey, Co. Limerick, Ireland, 13 April 2007.
26 Echoes 1 Peter 2:5, wherein the faithful are likened to living stone.
28 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerde, ll. 590–95; 598–99.
33 McQuinn, ‘Enclosure Imagery’, p. 97.
34 Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerde, ll. 572–9.
35 Graziano, Wounds of Love, p. 205.

Lacan argues that the subject is constructed through interaction with an external


46 Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 50–6.


48 Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, p. 126.


50 *Ancrene Wisse* 7:93–5, Savage and Watson 201–2.


52 *Pe Lofsong of ure Louerde*, ll. 47–53.


55 *Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerde*, ll. 502–3; 505–16.

56 *Pe Lofsong of ure Louerde*, ll. 48–50.


59 This condition is connected to what became called ‘greensickness’, a peculiar malady thought to affect women who were overly desirous of ‘venery’ (sex). In this case, it was believed that in order to be completely healthy, women had to release
excess build up through orgasm. This was, of course, ‘impossible’ for religiously vowed women to accomplish, so other methods were devised to release the excess, such as manual masturbation by an experienced midwife and bloodletting. *Ancrene Wisse* suggests bloodletting. For more about the lesbian implications of this situation, see my article ‘Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void and Medieval English Anchoritism’. *thirdspace* 3.2(2004): 70–88. For more about greensickness and related syndromes, see, among other sources, Valerie Traub. *Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine*. Ed. and trans. Monica H. Green (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).


*The Myrour of Recluses*, Ed. Marta Powell Harley (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1995). I have also consulted the manuscript: London, British Library, MS Royal A.v. See ll. 904–47.