A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe

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To the precise degree that the absolute is made to approximate to the finite, the finite is absolutized.

(Adorno, 177)

As negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth. Since the place of the Other is also the place of God, this is the ultimate form of mystification.

(Rose, 50)

One of the crucial areas opened up by recent developments of critical theory has been the feminist analysis of the imagining, construction, and articulation of sexual difference. Frequently this has taken the form of how women are articulated as “feminine,” and what positions are available for them to adopt in a patriarchal society that constitutes woman as Other.¹

One of the first extant written records in England by a woman must therefore merit analysis, and it is interesting that the Book of Margery Kempe (1438), which has been dubbed the first autobiography in England, one which is therefore jointly concerned with the construction of femininity and subjectivity, should also have been produced within the context of medieval mystical Christianity. For if medieval Christianity was so instrumental in the construction and relegation of woman to the place of Other (a construction seen clearly in the traditional polarization of Eve and Mary as impure flesh and pure soul), it was also the endeavour of the mystical aspect of Christianity to articulate the Otherness of God himself. Female mysticism in the late Middle Ages, which has recently been described by one feminist theorist as the “only place in Western history where woman speaks and acts in such a public way” (Irigaray, 238), is therefore an area
in which the intermingling of God, the Other, and woman is complexly overdetermined. Female mysticism is doubly colonized as a focus for the projection of Otherness because both God and woman are seen as the place of a mystified and unrepresentable (but nevertheless constantly represented) Otherness.

It is the simultaneous exclusion and construction of the Other that is instrumental in the construction of any dominant value system. “No group ever sets up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself” (de Beauvoir, 17). De Beauvoir’s formulation in the Second Sex has been redefined by more recent feminist theorists who see woman as the Otherness that permits the establishment of the norm of a specifically masculine unity. For Luce Irigaray, in her Speculum de l’autre femme, the mirroring function of the woman that allows man to reflect and be reflected in his own image operates through the very means by which his subjectivity is structured, linguistically and socially, at the level of the production of meaning itself. Such a process can be seen at work in the medieval ideology of courtly love in which the feudal aristocracy constructs woman as the Other (the static, voiceless lady of fin amor), creating her as the demarcator of their own boundaries and so establishing a confirming and legitimizing definition of themselves and their own power.2

But if the construction of the masculine as such depends on the repression of the feminine and its relegation to the role of Other, the feminine is, for that very reason according to some recent feminist theory, the potential source of subversion, for she is also in the position to return, to dislocate the very unity that posits her as other, to disrupt, disperse, and displace the masculine parameters that establish law and reason. She is thus both the support of the dominant value system (as Mary, perhaps) and the root in the very foundations of that system (Eve): “a marginality internal to the system, integrated in it, indispensable” (Feral, 10).

The phenomenon of female mysticism was widespread in the late Middle Ages. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries it was women who were more likely to be mystics than men, and it was women who encouraged and propagated the most distinctive aspects of late medieval piety—devotion to the human Christ as lover, husband, and infant, devotion to the Eucharist in a form of piety that insinches on the physical as a legitimate means of access to the spiritual. “For the first time in Christian history we can document that a particular kind of religious experience is more common among women than men” (Bynum, 172).

One of the aims of this essay is to explore Irigaray’s notion of female mysticism (“the only place in Western history where woman speaks and acts in such a public way”) as a model feminine discourse, a place in which patriarchy can be mined from within. Clearly such a claim is important, for the Lacanian symbolic order that recent feminist theory both employs and attempts to discard “is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class society structured around the transcendental signifier of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the Father embodies. There is no way then in which a feminist or pro-feminist may uncritically celebrate the symbolic order at the expense of the imaginary” (Eagleton, 187–88).3 Thus the question posed by the league between God, Christ, and woman in female mysticism is one that has been crucial in the debates surrounding French feminist theory—the question as to whether female mysticism is a possible space for the disruption of the patriarchal order, or whether, on the contrary, it exists to act out rigorously its most sexist fantasies, to reinforce the relegation of “woman” to a transcendent, mystified, and mystificatory sphere where female masochism is spectacularly redeployed in the pose of crucifixion/crucification.

The Book of Margery Kempe is an apt focus for analysis, for Margery is an isolated English example of a widespread continental phenomenon with which she had important connections—connections that were clearly important to legitimize her own form of piety before a disbelieving male clergy. And moreover, whereas most contemporaneous women’s writings take the form of revelations (the validity and possibility of women’s writing depended on their ability to prove that they were the special witnesses of God’s grace), Margery’s book is a devotional work that does not exclude the material context of its piety. The book (unusually) contains an account of its own difficult genesis and Margery’s difficulties in persuading her male scribe to take down her revelations: “for þær was so mech obloqie & slawndyr of þis creatur þat þær wold few men beleue þis creatur” (Meech and Allen, 6) testifies to the dangers and difficulties of female authorship at a time when the Church was anxious to control an increasingly literate laity, and where women in particular were the object of a vernacular devotional literature that attempted to channel, construct, and contain feminine spirituality. Indeed one of Margery’s commentators has written that the Book of Margery Kempe bears, “besides the marks of a woman’s dilemma, the stamp of clerical analysis and controversy. It is a deeply polemical work in a way in which her literary models were not” (Goodman, 349). Margery was a religious woman who refused the space traditionally allotted to religious women—the sanctuary (or imprisonment) provided by the anchoress’s cell or the nunnery.4 Her lack of circumspection, her insistence on living in the world, enables the social dimension that makes her mysticism distinctive. And it is
this social dimension, something insisted upon in her life and apparent in her book, that facilitates an account of the material context of mysticism, an examination of the uses to which it is put in relations of power. Such an examination must precede any assessment of the precarious balance between subversion and subservience in the mystical text.

The first part of this paper, "The Discourse of Mysticism: Medieval and Modern," uses the critical reception of the Book of Margery Kempe to isolate and analyze the ideology at stake in the representation of mysticism and in particular the problems that consideration of women's mysticism reveal. The second section, "Mystical Reflections," looks at the mystical philosophy behind Margery's Franciscan mysticism and provides a context for the third section, a fuller rereading of the Book of Margery Kempe, which redefines the interests of the book for feminist analysis.

The Discourse of Mysticism: Medieval and Modern

Although this stress on the determination of literary production is a necessary part of any thorough-going Marxist criticism, the historical and material determinations which as it were flow into the literary through the diverse and changing structures which condition the modes of its consumption are of no less importance.

(Bennett, 225)

The "social dimension" apparent in Margery's book has produced a series of critical responses that help reveal important ideological features in the representation of mysticism. When the Butler-Bowden manuscript was discovered in 1934, the initial and dominant critical response was a discussion as to the genuineness or otherwise of Margery's mysticism. Father Thurston, in his series of articles in the Catholic periodicals The Month and The Tablet, objects, for example, to the preoccupation with self evidenced in her competitiveness in spiritual affairs, quoting Margery's boastfulness about a certain Eucharistic vision that was granted to her but not St. Birgitta. He objects to the theatricality of her "exaltée piety," her disruption of town worship, her moralitv, her boisterousness and lack of decorum, and the publicity of her life: "If she had really been an ancestress, living secluded in her cell, these peculiarities would not have mattered. But she insisted on going everywhere following as she thought the special call of God" (Thurston, 570). It is a response shockingly similar to that of the "eld monk" in Margery's book: "I wold pow wer closyd in an hows of ston bat her schuld no munc speke wythpe" (Meech and Allen, 27). To Thurston, then, Margery's personality, her theatricality, her excess, her sheer loudness, disqualify her as a medium of God's voice. Her book nominally written for the glorification of God ("pis lytyl trety schal tretyn sumdeel in parcel of his wondry werkys") is more concerned with the glorification of Margery. And she remains incapable of abasing herself sufficiently for the glory of her maker to shine through. Margery is simply too intransigently present (one reason why her book has been dubbed the "first autobiography" in England).

Behind such judgments as Thurston's rests a notion of absence, negativity, apophasis, as the only means of access to God. Commentary on mysticism makes the distinction between positive and negative mysticism. Positive mysticism uses imagery and analogy to approximate and approach God, seeing the Incarnation as the type and legitimation of such symbolizing, the means through which God descends, and reciprocally the means of mystical ascent to God. This kind of mysticism, most closely associated with St. Bernard and St. Francis, was the most popular and the dominant form of late medieval piety. Negative mysticism transmitted to the Middle Ages via the work of the pseudo-Dionysus abjures all symbol that it sees as necessarily inadequate; God's divinity being without limit, he cannot be finitely enclosed within any analogy or symbol, but only by the mystic's kenosis or self-emptying, a coming to a cloud of unknowing where no human image will obscure God's divinity. Generally in the representation of mysticism, it is the negative, mystical way that is the model for mysticism, privileged as the superior mystical mode. Clarissa Atkinson has suggested that the preference for Dionysian over affective piety has led to value judgments which inevitably affect assessment of Margery's mysticism. She cites Dom Knowles, who provides an historical overview of these mystical traditions in The Religious Orders in England:

This stream [of pure spirituality] continued to flow till the reign of Henry VIII but there is some evidence that from the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards it was contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behaviour deriving partly from the influence of some of the woman saints of the fourteenth century, women such as Angela of Foligno, Dorothea of Prussia and Bridget of Sweden. The most familiar example of this type in England is Margery Kempe. (Atkinson, 222-23)

The "contamination" of positive mysticism is one that is generally associated with women, as it is in this quotation: "the austere mystical theology of antiquity with its negative way on the one hand and its platonism on the other did not lend itself to the feminine temperament which is by nature so much more attracted to the sensible and the personal" (Graef, 242). The way negative mysticism approaches its objects, and the transformations
and tensions it discovers in confronting and recognizing the impossibility of its own mystical project, constitute an enormous area which I have no room to treat in the short space of this essay. The point here is that in the representation of mysticism the polarization of negative and positive mysticism and their accompanying sexual polarization is a mystification. Negative mysticism, by insisting on the unrepresentability of the Other (God), refuses the return to the social sphere. Indeed, this is the source of its transcendence: a God outside time and language and history is inviolable to change, the perfect legitimation of the system of which he is the transcendental center and support. Positive mysticism has the potential to embarrass that claim to unrepresentability and reveal the extraordinarily heavy ideological investment in the immateriality, the unrepresentability of God in his function as the Other. Of course, the claims of the mystical project, on an excess beyond the confines of the social and symbolic order, the possibilities it embodies for those dissatisfied with that social order (mysticism then as an “expression of real distress and the protest against real distress” experienced in society), are vital to those for whom the social order remains so patently inadequate. Indeed, for some modern critics it is the very numinosness and immediacy of the mystical experience that guarantees mysticism as a “dissident ideology,” “site of the revolutionary possibilities of the Christian religion” (Ozment, 1). And for many influential late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pioneering theorists of mysticism, it was precisely the loss of confidence in institutionalized religion that led to this view of mysticism as a spiritual experience unsullied by the confinements and compromises of its sanctioned and official incarnation (Gimello, 86). Medieval mystics often presented a source of intense anxiety to the Church, which regarded itself as the “keeper of the Word,” an anxiety intensified in a period of increasing lay literacy, where mysticism was a vital form of religious distress and dissent. But often mystics and the mystical experience could just as readily be used as a “bulwark against heresy.” Fulk of Toulouse’s interest in communities of religious women had precisely these aims in mind. 

To posit mysticism then as a natural source of resistance to orthodoxy is dangerously ahistorical, both because the function of mysticism varies with the social and historical conditions in which it is produced and reproduced and because, over and above this, the very quality of mysticism that can empower its bypassing of official structure, its immediacy, its numinosness, its ineffability—in other words, a conception of it in terms of a direct or supralinguistic encounter of God with the disembodied human soul—removes both God and the human soul from history. Mysticism has been taken at its Word and the dominant assumption about the discourse of mysticism seems to be imbued with the transcendental trajectory that was mysticism’s goal. In the words of one anthologist of mysticism, this view sees it as a “perennial philosophy,” a “break through the world of time and history into one of eternity and timelessness” (Happold, 18).

It is in the work of the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray that the most powerful and attractive claims have been made for mysticism, here linked with femininity as a natural source of dissent and a place in which the social and symbolic order is dissolved. According to Irigaray, the feminine is repressed in patriarchal discourse, posited as man’s other, the mirror image that presents to man his own reflection. Incapable of subjectivity herself, she is the static, motionless, and emotionless figure whose movement might potentially disrupt the system of patriarchal discourse, reflection, and self-reflection. Irigaray argues that mysticism, where the self and subjectivity are dissolved, is particularly attractive to women whom patriarchy places as, in any case, “outside representation.” And yet it is this very (mystificatory) association that again places “woman” beyond the pale.

For as Toril Moi has argued in a discussion that links Irigaray’s notion of mysticism to an accusation of her essentialism: “is she not caught up in a logic which requires her to produce an image of woman which is exactly the same as the specular constructions of femininity in patriarchal logic?” In a brief but suggestive comment, Moi points out that the frequent use of mirror imagery in mystical writings represents the reentry of specularization into the mystical project. It is via an analysis of mirror imagery in the works of Margery’s contemporaries and its place in mystical theology that mysticism can be seen as the site of a complex play and interchange of roles, and that far from being the site of a dissolution of subjectivity, it is the place where a new subjectivity is evolved, through the contradictions, rather than the transcendental evasions, of the social and symbolic order.

Mystical Reflections

We now see by means of a mirror in an enigma, but then face to face.

(St. Paul, I Corinthians 13:12)

The mirror image was a crucial one in medieval theological writings. Its enormous suggestive power comes partly as a result of the ambivalences it was able to represent within a Platonic philosophical framework that viewed the whole created world itself as a reflection, a shadow of an ideal form. Christian Platonism (combined most influentially in the works of St. Augustine) viewed the world as a reflection of God’s glory. Thus as a com-
ment in the entry on the mirror image in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* indicates, the image represented exemplarity, and existed by virtue of its relation to an origin—God. “Tout archetypé s’exprime par une image dont il est l’origine et qui est son terme. L’image représente ce dont elle procède” (*Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 7.2, 1428). But St. Paul’s words in Corinthians, which echo and reecho in medieval theological writings, use the mirror image to insist both on likeness to and distance from this origin. His use of the image describes and accounts for the necessity of mediation and the possibility of a partial representation of God accommodated to human capacity, yet at the same time laments the very partiality of that mediation in the lack of (and therefore desire for) the heavenly harmony of face-to-face communion. The mirror image represents and embodies the “manifestation of the transcendent in the immanent” (*Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 10.2, 1293). It is because of this manifestation, because of the notion of resemblance between creator and created, that analogy, represented in the mirror image, can enact the possibility of ascent to and communion with God. The mirror image is for this reason frequently linked with the notion of the ladder: “When we wish to ascend we naturally use a ladder, we who are men and are unable to fly. Then let us use a ladder, the similitude of visible things, so that the things we cannot see by direct vision we may come to be able to see from this watchtower and as though in a mirror” (Goldin, 8). The mirror image, then, stresses both identity and difference and it is this tension in the ladder of analogy that provides the necessity for and the means of ascent. But it is the human soul itself that must become aware of its resemblance to its maker, must make its mirror mind clear and polished, transparent and receptive to allow and participate in resemblance to its divine origin. The human soul and mind can therefore only come to know itself truly as an image of its maker, and it is this important notion that links the growth of self-consciousness to the knowledge of God. In the words of St. Bernard: “Thus the knowledge of thyself will be a step to the knowledge of God: He will become visible in His Image, which is renewed in thee; whilst thou, beholding with confidence as in a glass the glory of the Lord art changed into the same image from glory, to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (Eales, 237). It is both the resemblance and dissemblance of the soul to God that allows the “self-knowledge” to come into existence.

A similar dialectic of alienation and identification is formulated in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan. His notion of the “mirror stage” is crucial to his account of the birth of subjectivity. According to Lacan, a child undergoes a “mirror phase” of development between the ages of six to eighteen months in which it comes to see its body, which is still uncoordi-
to human understanding. The book the *Myrou of the Blessyd Lyf of Christ* indicates the extent to which Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection are described for the "edificacioun of hem the ben of symple understandyngye": "to the whiche soules as Saint Bernard saith contemplacioun of the manhede of God is mor lyking more spedeful and more siker than hige contemplacioun of the godhede. And therefore to hem is principally to be sette in minde the ymage of Cristes incarnacioune passion and resurrection . . . so that a symple soul that kan not thenke bot bodies or bodly thynge maye have somewhat according to his afeccioun wherewith he may fede and stirre his devocioun" (Powell, 9). This book, the *Meditaciones vitae Christi*, was an enormously popular Franciscan text, translated into Middle English by Nicholas Love in 1430 in a translation authorized by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury. The book had an important part to play in the privatization of devotion in a pedagogic initiative that attempted to limit that space even in its creation. It was part of an attempt by the Church to feed an increasingly literate lay audience who were looking to heretical sources to provide them with reading material in the vernacular. The reader is expected to play the role of spectator at Christ's Passion and he or she is carefully stage-managed in this relationship ("but now be ware . . . now with inward compassion behold . . . go forthe with him") (Powell, 9) to identify with Christ with the ostensible purpose of realizing the extent of Christ's love in his act of redemption.

It is here again that the relationship of the mystic to Christ in this book can be seen to be structured like a reenactment of the mirror stage. The closed dialectic of spectatorship and identification is repeated in this image of the reader both observing and identifying with Christ in his Passion, misrecognizing him— or herself. Elizabeth Salter has emphasized the extent to which Love's work constitutes an attempt to counteract Lollard heresies and to co-opt and contain the faithful. Thus the mystical subject is called upon to misrecognize herself as whole in this dyadic relationship with Christ so as to quell the discord of heresy. The ideological function of such a misrecognition is also apparent in the way in which the humanity of Christ is often stressed to counteract prevailing continental heresies where the heretic could all too easily forget his or her creatureliness to assume identity with God. Emphasis on the abasement of Christ's flesh, on his humiliation in the Passion, indeed the very willingness of his subjection, was a useful counter to such tendencies.

The analogy of the mirror stage to the relationship of the mystic to Christ may help to reveal this ideological function—a potentially fluxive relationship is represented as a dyadic one of one-to-one imaginary identification that encloses and contains a potential otherness in the image of the same. This identification, mimesis, resemblance, never achieves the identity with its creator which is its goal; and it is this gap, this permanent alienation, that perpetuates the mystical desire as it explores the profundity of its own lack of and distance from its creator. However, the relationship of the mystic to Christ cannot be simply typified by a process of one-to-one identification.

The fact of God's Incarnation allows him to be represented in a series of social and familial roles that extend the repertoire and flexibility of the mystical relation to Christ. Much of the pedagogic devotional literature of the late Middle Ages is concerned with the sanctifying and absolutizing of social roles, a function that is clearly seen in its deployment of what may be termed the Holy Family Romance. The absolute is domesticated. In particular the female mystic is encouraged to see herself as mother to the infant Jesus, as his wife and sometimes his daughter in ways that clearly solidify her in these social roles. (The most startling example of this domestication of piety is found in the Prussian saint Dorothea of Montau, who kindly offers her own skin as a suitable diaper for the infant Jesus.) The literature appears to be both a response to the potentially subversive nature of female desire and a way of domesticating and internalizing it. Women form a new audience for this kind of literature. Richard Rolle wrote his *English Psalter* and his tracts, *Ego dormio, The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living*, for nuns or recluses. Richard Misyn translated Rolle's *Incendium amoris* for a recluse; the first part of Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* was written for a nun. *The Chastising of God's Children, Remedies against Temptation*, and *The Myrou of the Blessyd Lyf* all have female audiences in mind. In addition, though much of this literature was translated for nuns or recluses, there is a growing pedagogic preoccupation with those who wished to lead a contemplative life while also remaining in the world. Analysis of wills reveals the extent to which many of these books were found in private houses and were therefore reaching a lay readership. Indeed, such a text as the *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* is "founded in a place that is cleped conscience" (Blake, 88). Much of this literature was written for the creation and monitoring of that very conscience.

What such texts appear to do is to find an outlet for dissatisfaction but then recuperate that very dissatisfaction by redirecting it toward objects that finally support the social order. Thus Christ functions as a central image of one-to-one imaginary identification but is also used as a figure in a social drama, a way of absolutizing and eternalizing social norms, in particular deploying the Holy Family to underpin, sanctify, and interiorize the
emergent bourgeois family space, which itself is both a symptom of and a factor in the changing familial relationships that accompany a nascent mercantile capitalist economy.

The existence of this body of literature is a salutary reminder of the extent to which mystical relationships with God are not immune to relations of power, and that far from being direct and unmediated, dissolving subjectivity in an escape out of the social and symbolic order, they only take place through the social relationships that mediate them.

Irigaray’s contention that female mysticism celebrates women’s specific access to the Imaginary, that subject-object positions dissolve in an undifferentiated mystical jouissance, can be seen to have problems when the specific context of late medieval female mysticism is examined. Indeed, it is the image of extreme objectification that remains from this literature as its dominant motif, the extreme objectification that constitutes the spectacle of Christ and the female mimesis of his Passion.

Where the lives of Margery’s contemporaries and models are available, it is plain that male hagiographers emphasize tableaux that most spectacularly depict the female saint in the pose of suffering, and that without these crucial representations of pain, her visions would be accorded no credibility. Raymond of Capua’s account of the life of St. Catherine of Siena privileges detailed accounts of Catherine’s modes of self-mortification over descriptions of her interventions in the public affairs of ecclesiastical policy. It is clear that women’s access to the visionary, far from deriving from their place outside representation in patriarchy, derives instead from the very specific representative function given to them in medieval culture, the specific representation of themselves as associated with the debased matter of the flesh, which they see valorized and redeemed in Christ’s torture on the cross, a redemption through physicality.

In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir has some interesting comments to make on the particular affinity women found with the crucifixion image: “In the humiliation of God, she sees the dethronement of man, inert, passive, covered with wounds, the crucified is the reverse image of the white, bloodstained martyr exposed to wild beasts, to daggers, to males, with whom the girl has so often identified herself; she is overwhelmed to see that man, man-God has assumed her role. She is who is hanging on the tree, promised the splendour of the resurrection” (de Beauvoir, 686). De Beauvoir sees the identification of the devotional woman with Christ as based on a common identity as excessively vulnerable, passive, victimized. As suggested before, I think we can add to this analysis the idea that it is also Christ’s physicality, and the Passion as redemption through the carnal, that attracted devotional woman, so closely identified with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But mystical women’s special attraction to Christ can also be seen to derive from his position in the psychic structure of the Passion story. For in his Passion, Christ is acted upon rather than acting, and his body becomes the site onto which desire is projected. Like woman (as constructed by patriarchal discourse) he is the “gateway to the infinite and the measure [of a man’s] finite nature” (de Beauvoir, 175). His submission to the Father acts as a public token that God’s power is unchallenged and he functions as an exchange object to guarantee and ratify the mutually beneficial hierarchy of God and man. To understand this as a feminization, we may trace a series of parallels between these structures and the position of women in medieval patriarchal society. Women were traditionally acted upon rather than acting, their bodies were the site onto which desire was projected (as in the vast literature of courtly love). Marriage for medieval women was an exchange from one man to another, from father to husband. Women’s bodies in every way functioned as substitute objects to act as a locus for desire and as a guarantee to underwrite complex property deals between families.

Margery’s Passion

This identification of mystical women with Christ is not simply embraced by them; it is also required of them. For Margery, identification with Christ has a central enabling function. It is only by virtue of this relationship that she is allowed a voice in the first place. Margery’s book was written at a time when literacy and learning were still dominated by a male clergy explicitly trying to maintain this privilege against lay encroachment. To be a lay woman compounded the threat. John Gerson writes: “The female sex is forbidden on apostolic authority to teach in public, that is either by word of mouth or writing. . . . All women’s teaching is to be held suspect unless it has been examined diligently and much more fully than men’s. The reason is clear, common law—and not any kind of common law—but that which comes from on high forbids them. And why? Because they are easily seduced and determined seducers, and because it is not proved that they are witnesses to divine grace” (Colledge and Walsh, 151). Women could not speak as themselves, but only as visionaries (the instruments or medium of God’s voice), and even then only with great difficulty, for they always had to convince the male ecclesiastical authorities of the validity of their special relationship to God. One of the guarantees of this special relationship was their own self-abnegation; a demonstration of self-hatred could save the authorities some work. Margery’s frequent arrests as a Lollard, her quar-
rels with the ecclesiastical authorities, derive in part from the problematic nature of self-abnegation. For she refused confinement in an anchoress’s cell, yet insisted simultaneously on her claim to a holy reputation. It is her identificatory relationship with the Passion of Christ that is both a demonstration of her self-abnegation and a typically Christian inversion, a laying claim to a different kind of power.

Margery’s book is a dense source of responses to the Passion. For this very reason it is particularly useful in offering a grammar of available female responses to the Passion, from a lay woman who has continued to worship in the world, and so it enables us to examine the potential function of the Passion in a late fourteenth-century woman’s life—a potential that can only by realized by a choice that involves certain tensions and sacrifices.

Margery identifies with Christ to such an extent in her book, that she claims that he claims that her voice is his: “þei þat worship þe þei worship me; þei þat despyssyn þe þei despyssyn me, & I schal chastysen hem þerfor. I am in þe and þow in me. And þei þat heryn þe þei heryn þe voys of God” (23). It is an identification bought with a share of his sufferings that engenders a reciprocal caring: “þu hast so gret compassyon of my flesche I must nede haue compassyon on þy flesch” (183). But Margery’s sufferings are not simply an accident of her life, a side effect of her mode of worshiping—they are a constantly sought source of identification with Christ: “Hyȝ pow[t] sche wold a be slayn for Godys lofe, but dred for þe poynt of deth, & þerfor sche ymagyned hyr-self þe most soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, þat was to be bowndyn hyr hed & hyr fet to a stokke & hyr hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Godys lofe” (30). She compels herself to imagine pain to comprehend and share his Passion. The moment where this identification is most acute is during Margery’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she is taken by the friars, whose task it was to guide the pilgrims to the holy places, to Mount Calvary, the site of Christ’s crucifixion: “þan þe freys lyfryd up a croys & led þe pylgrimys a-bowte fro place to an-oþer wher owyr Lord had sufferyd hys . . . passyons . . . & þe forseyd creatur wept & sobbdy so plentlyvously as þow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodlyy ey sufferyng hys Passyon at þat tyume” (68). As Margery walks the Stations of the Cross, her identification with Christ becomes a mimesis:

whan thorw dispensacyon of þe hy mercy of owyr Souereyn Savyorw Crist lhesu it was grawnnyd þis creatyr to beholdyn so verily hys precyous tendyr body, alto-rent & toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wowndys þan euyr was
duffehows of holys, hangyng vp-on þe cros wyth be corown of thorn vp-on hys heuyd, hys blysful handys, hys tendyr fetes nowled to þe hard tre, þe reuyers of blood flowyng owt plenteowysly of eyvery membre, þe greysly & grevows wownde in hys precyows syde schedyng owt blood & watyr for hir lofe & hyr saluacyon, þan sche fel down & cryed wyth lowde voys, wondrfully turnyng & wresstynyng hir body on eyvery syde, spredynig hir armys a-brode as yf sche xulde a deyd, & not cowde kepyn hir fro crying,—and þese bodily mevngys for þe fyer of lofe þat bren so feruently in hir sowle wyth pur pyte & compassyon. (70)

It is here that Margery first begins her tears through which she visibly participates in the Passion. Margery’s identification with Christ is most explicit in this literal imitation of the Passion as she stretches out her own arms in the shape of the Cross. And it is an identification that is highly dramatic, functioning to claim a status for her as a participant in the Passion. The first mode of identification subjectifies Christ’s experience. But it is also the starting point for a number of developments in her relationship with Christ that introduce an objectification of Christ (as object of desire) and so necessarily enter the complexities of social relationships through which any subject-object relationship must be mediated. For inextricably bound up with the initial display of cries is Margery’s “gostly labowr,” her conception of spiritual childbirth. After her description of her journey through the Stations of the Cross, and before the climactic description of Christ’s torn and bleeding body, Margery specifies that it is here, at Calvary, that her tears begin, and describes the pattern of their development.

And þerfor, whan sche knew þat sche xulde cryen, sche kept it in as long as sche myght & dede al þat sche cowde to withstond it er ellys to put it a-wey til sche wex as blo as any leed, & euyr it xulde laborwryn in hir mende mor and mor in-to þe tyyme þat it broke owte & what þe body myth ne lenger enduryþ þe gostly labowr but was ourycome wyth þen spekebliffe þat wrot wol so feruently in þe sowle, þan fel sche down & cryed wondyr lowde, & þe mor þat sche wolde laborwryn to kepe it in er to put it a-wey, mech þe mor xulde sche cryen & þe mor lowder. (69)

Thus at Calvary, with the onset of her cries, Margery both identifies with Christ and simultaneously gives birth to him. What supports the view of the “gostly labowr” as a simultaneous identification and parturition is its location in the process of the shifting of the cries from identification to a response to young male children. The sight of a male baby in its mother’s arms is enough to trigger Margery’s identification with the Passion, and
here she is clearly identifying as a mother to Christ. In chapter 35, where she discusses her preference for the manhood of God over his Godhood on being asked by the Father to marry his Godhood, she says: “Sche was so meche affectyd to pe manhode of Crist þat whan sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her armys, 3yf sche myth wetyn þat þei wer ony men children, sche schuld þan cryin, roryn, & wepyyn as þei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode. And yf sche myth an had hir wille, oftyyn-tymes sche wolde a takyn þe childeryn owt of þe moderys armys & a kysyen hem in þe stede of Criste” (86). She continues: “And 3yf sche sey a semly man, sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym les þan sche myth a seyn hym þat was bope God & man. And perfyr sche cryyd many tymes & oftyyn whan sche met a semly man & wept & sobbyd ful sir in þe manhod of Crist as sche went in þe streтьсяs at Rome.” Here she is clearly identifying herself as a lover of Christ with Christ’s attractiveness imaged in attractive men she happens to pass in the streets around her. For once Christ is an object of love for Margery, she is forced into the position of defining the type of loved being that Christ is (son, father, lover, husband, mother), and so her own identity must shift according to the social relationship that love constitutes (i.e., as a mother to the Christ-child, as daughter to God the Father, a lover or wife to Christ). The interchangeability of her roles is developed extensively throughout the book. In chapter 14, Christ makes explicit reference to the permutations of his relationship with her:

þe he neuyr so gret a lorde & sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth hir, þat þei must ly togedir & rest to-gedir in joy & pes... Þe perfyr most I nedys be homly wyth þe & lyn in þi bed wyth þe. Dowtyr, thorw desyrest grety to se me, & þu mayst boldly, whon þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þy weddyth husband, as thy derworhly derlyng, & as for thwe sweyte sone, for I wyl be louyd as a sone schuld be louyd wyth þe modyr & will þat þu loue me, dowtyr, as a good [wife] owthy to loue hir husbone. & perfyr þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi solwe & kysyen my mowth, myn hed & my fete as swetly as thow wilt. (90)

The multiplication of the role of the love object—Christ as lover, son, husband, father—undoes the social codification of desire by its incestuous simultaneity. “She is no longer capable of separating the sensual from the spiritual,” says Wolfgang Riehle disapprovingly (Riehle, 111).

In a particularly startling mingling of the spiritual and the sensual, she hallucinates what most of her critics have preferred not to see, let alone comment on—”prestys membres”—the genitals of the priestly caste:

And, as sche befor had many glorows visyonys & hy contemptacyon in þe manhod of owr Lord, in owr Lady, & in many oþer holy seynys, ryth euyyn so had sche now horbyyl syghtys & abhominabyyl, for anythyng þat sche cowde do, of behelyng of mennys membrys & swech oþer abhominacyons. Sche sey as hir thowth veryly dyers men of religyoun, preystys, & many oþer bothyn hethyn & Cristen comyn be-for hir syght þat sche myth not enchewyn hem ne putyn hem owt of hir syght, schewyna her bar membrys vn-to hir. & þerwyth þe Deuyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle & sche must be comown to hem alle... . þes horbyyl syghtys & cursyd mendys wer defectabyl to hir a-geyyn hir wille. (145)

Incapable of repression, the sexuality of the priestly caste returns to plague her in the form of her desire and her fear. One would like to take her hallucination as a symptom of her subversion; just as she insists on the sexuality of God in the rest of the book, upsetting the specious claim of his transcendent impassivity, so here she might be seen as lifting the veil, the priestly skirts that hide the Phallus which reproduces priestly law as God. She shows it to be merely a penis, or in her own words an “abhominably membure.”

But Margery’s hallucination is more the sign of her shame than her subversion. It is sent as a punishment, a period of chastisement, because of her difficulties in accepting God’s damnation of sinners, all who do not obey his law. It is a sign, less of her transgression, than the unconscious effects of
subjection to that very law. Coming from the devil, not God, it is juxtaposed with her “gloryows visyonys” from God, Our Lady, and the saints, only to be discarded, appearing in the form it does because of the necessity for its sublimation. By returning to and insisting on grating domestic hierarchies against the transcendent, Margery Kempe’s positive mysticism embarrasses the myth of God’s neutral transcendence. And her embarrassing foregrounding of the insistently physical emphasizes the contradictions rather than the miraculous resolution of flesh and spirit in the Passion.

By approximating herself to Christ, misrecognizing herself in him, by living a life that is itself a mimesis and remembrance of the Passion, the female mystic may gain access to the Word, or to those more human expedients, words. It is a strategy that never attempts, that is unable to attempt, to break the mold of its subjection. Indeed it cannot, for it is the very equation of victimization, passivity, subjection with femininity, that allows the Christian inversion its paradoxical triumph. But like a serf becoming king, it is a deposition, a usurpation that changes the terms but never the structure; and so the nature of the change must remain severely limited. Indeed, it may be argued that by underpinning that subjection with a heavenly guarantor, that very subjection is validated and perpetuated on earth, if it is not in the heaven deferred to in these writings.

A feminist analysis of medieval women’s mysticism must seek to explain the historical attraction of neo-Franciscanism for women. In doing so it must move beyond the sanctification of the marginal to an interrogation of the structures of power, the boundaries and definitions that enforce marginality onto women.

Notes

1. This term is notoriously vague because of the extended use to which it is put across a diverging range of theoretical discourse, from de Beauvoir’s existentialist categorization to Lacan’s psychoanalytic reformulation. The term has been redeployed by French feminist theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, who use a version of Derrida to deconstruct the sexual hierarchies they see in all binary oppositions. This sense (the one I use here) carries the meaning of the Other as a fantasy, because there is no stable site of meaning over against which a stable identity can differentiate itself. (See second epigraph.)

2. See Toril Moi (in Aers, chap. 2) for a feminist examination of Capellanus’s Art of Courly Love, which demonstrates how this process of differentiation and construction operates at the level of class as well as gender. There is also a fascinating account of the relationship between the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, read as a redeployment of courtly love from an ideology concerned with the cultural construction of a masculine warrior identity to an ideology concerned with the construction of a new, interiorized, privatized, and specifically feminine mode of fantasy and wish fulfillment, in Fradenburg, “Wife of Bath’s Passing Fancy.” For an account of the mirror analogy in courtly love literature, see Goldin, Mirror of Narcissus.

3. Eagleton, 187–88. Lacan’s (in)famous divisions are the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary is used to designate a prelinguistic stage (which is not necessarily restricted to any particular chronological moment but intersects with the Symbolic), where the child exists in a state of one-to-one identification with its mother or objects around it, where it cannot think separation, but where there is a fluid confusion of its own identity and the people and things around it. With the Oedipus stage the child enters the Symbolic order through the intervention of a third term, which, by breaking the closed circuit of imaginary identification, subjects the child to language and social imperatives. It is through this process that the unconscious also comes into being. According to Lacan, any attempt to live outside the symbolic will render us psychotic. One of the key debates surrounding Lacan’s terminology is of course the extent to which it functions as description or prescription.

4. The anchoress’s cell was a space attached to a church or monastery in which a woman would be enclosed, after a ceremony in which she would be symbolically buried (to die to the world) and married to Christ, as a way of dedicating her life to contemplation and worship. The anchoress’s cell provides an interesting spatial symbolism for the liminal position of women mystics in medieval society, both structurally supporting the church in their position under the eaves and a potential pocket of subsidence. Margery was particularly unpopular with Thomas Nettter, the Carmelite Provincial who supported individual holy women on the condition that they were both silent and enclosed. See Allen and Meech, Book of Margery Kempe, notes to 168, l. 5, and 170, l. 7.

5. Of course, the decentering and destruction of ego that is crucial to the anti-humanist project of establishing a mystical subjectivity make this ascription highly problematic.

6. It is clear from this quotation from Knowles that the exclusion of women saints of positive piety is instrumental in the very construction of a “pure spirituality.” The one is excluded so that the other can come into being. But it is also clear that even in the very attempt at this shutting off, this closing down, the forbidden body returns in the latent image of mysticism as a body open to contamination.

7. See Bolton, “Vitae Matrum.”

8. Goldin, Mirror of Narcissus, 8. The quotation is from Richard of St. Victor’s De Trinitate 5.6.

9. Ego dormio. The Commandment, and The Form of Living are reprinted in Allen, ed., Writings of Richard Rolle. For Misy’s translation of Rolle’s Incendium amoris, see Harvey, ed., Fire of Love. For an edition of the Scale of Perfection, see Kuriyagawa, ed., Eight Chapters on Perfection. For the Chastising, see Bazire and
Colledge, eds., *Chastising of God's Children*. For the Myrour, see Powell, *Myrour of the Blessyd Lyf of Christ*.

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