Did Mystics Have Sex?

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Of all the conventionally created objects of historical interest, the thing called the 'Middle Ages' is by far the most peculiar, counter-intuitive, and deadening to the imagination. In saying this I don't mean that I think the domestic, social, or political arrangements prevailing during the 'medieval' centuries were notably strange; they are, in fact, easily recognizable to us. Nor do I find the medieval pursuits of agriculture, industry, or commerce foreign to my understanding, or anyone else's. And even the most distinctive (in the sense of distant and exotic) features of medieval culture—a theocentric universe revealed through sacred writings and doctrinal tradition; an international religious institution claiming exclusive privilege to teach and guide humanity to salvation; special forms of art and literature which reflect and comment on a world understood as divinely created and intelligible to the mind in elaborated analogical tropes—even these most distinctively 'medieval' constructs are readily available to our basic comprehension, and, indeed, sympathy, with only a moderate exertion of the imagination fortified by some acquired knowledge.

And yet our approach to the lives and suffering of men and women who lived, say, seven hundred years ago is rigidly contained and channelled in intellectual structures whose purpose almost perversely works to dehumanize and etiolate this human past. The period of time this chronological 'middle' conventionally covers (from the sixth to, or through, the fifteenth century) is unintelligibly protracted. This amoebic construct is justified by nothing firmer than the uneven thinning out and eventual demise of Roman provincial government in Western Europe for a begin-

ning, and, at the other end, the self-congratulating pronouncements of a few Italian intellectuals that they definitely wrote a better Latin than anyone who had lived since Cicero (or perhaps Saint Augustine). To assist us in handling this thousand-year object, we have the intellectual precision instruments of internal divisions; the Middle is articulated (in what might almost be a deliberate parody of Aristotelian unity) into the early-middle, the 'high' or middle-middle, and the late-middle. (Compare this morphological vacuum with the comparatively sensible and evocative divisions of Graeco-Roman antiquity: Classical, Hellenistic, Republican Rome, and so on.) And we might consider that the imposition of form on the ineluctable seriatim of time is the mental act which announces and accomplishes the primal human demand for meaning, for meaningfulness as a condition and quality of human life over the generations. Chronology is the first fiction. And we medievalists are stuck with a chronology of 'middleness' which announces as its contribution to the meaningfulness of history that something interesting happened long ago, in some 'beginning' before the great Middle, and interesting things resumed happening much later on, after the protracted vacancy of Middleness had finally concluded. This is almost the chronology of a clinical depression on a hideously enlarged scale.

Medievalists complain about this with ritual regularity; it’s one of the things we do, a part of the professional obligation. And it should not matter as much as it quietly does. No one cares any longer about the artificial Ciceronian Latinity of Italian humanists. Few people even care about the Renaissance any longer in the old way; that Renaissance is rapidly losing its metaphorical romantic substance and is being engulfed in the rapacious maw of the Early Modern academic machine. (One increasingly hears of Early Modern Florence and Rome now.)

But let us pause a moment to contemplate (with shameless, un concealed envy) the miracles of generation that have come from that twice-happy name, The Early Modern Period. This designation now covers some five hundred years of European history, and it is hardly necessary to describe its magnetic attraction, at least at graduate-study and scholarly levels. All the exciting topics seem to cluster and multiply there. The Early Modern is variously credited with the invention of homosexuality, heterosexuality, neurosis, perversion, tension, subversion, the white-hot fuel core of the modern psyche. But what has been involved in infusing such energy and fascination in what was never so compelling when it was called only The Age of Absolutism, or The Northern Renaissance, or The Reformation or The Ancien Regime (names that cling to life with the pal-
laid inertia of textbook chapters)? The open secret is, of course, attaching the idea of modernity to 'something' at the invisible heart of political, social, economic, and domestic arrangements which, on the face of them, have nothing familiarly or recognizably 'modern' about them.

The baffling and boringly opaque manifest levels of past societies we cannot imagine living in, and historical persons whose ambitions and tastes are lost on us, are made crystalline translucent once we recognize their incipient modernity, and the latent meaning turns out to be excitingly inelligible, recognizable, almost familiar, almost ... ourselves! This triumph of and by the professoriat -- for, make no mistake, it is a triumph -- makes me wish that medievalists would sweep the Middle Ages into the recycle bin along with the Ages of Absolutism, Wars of Religion, and all that; take command of our semiotic destiny; and rename our entire field 'The Really Early Modern Period.'

This may sound like a joke, but if it is, it's a serious joke, or one that ought to get serious when we consider what calling five hundred years of distant history The Almost Modern Period has done for the field that depends on the medieval for its point of departure and first condition. For surely some wonderful hermeneutic sleight of hand has been pulled when so many overeducated people agree to grant historical 'earliness' to the seventeenth century.

I know that the hermeneutically sophisticated must agree that the entire historical Past is equally, ontologically Not-There, unrepresentable in any rigorous sense, and thus medieval historians have nothing more to lament than anyone else in a similar line of work. But it is also true that the plight of absence afflicts our sense of medieval life more acutely than any other period. In a much-noticed article in a special issue of *Speculum*, Lee Patterson sharply criticized the uncritical and unscholarly tendency of historians now to accept the 'master narrative' of Western cultural history which assigns, as a novel historical development, 'the emergence of the idea of the individual' to the Renaissance. And not merely the idea of the individual as social unit or citizen, but the very human experience of individuated subjectivity, of interior being, of complex and autonomous consciousness, of mind, is made contingent on historical developments in the fifteenth, or sixteenth, or seventeenth century, depending on which old or new historian you are reading. For the enthusiastic quarrels of revisionist scholarship have surprisingly left untouched this one idea: that, in the Middle Ages, people were profoundly different from us. It helps to return to the *locus classicus*, Burckhardt's famous passage from *The Renaissance in Italy*.

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness -- that which was turned within as that which was turned without -- lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession ... Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation -- only through some general category ...5

Burckhardt's medieval psyche (the Self under a perpetual self-denying ordinance) exists only rhetorically, a grey, dull ground of barely individuated human matter against which 'the psychological fact' (his term) of the free play of personality, subjectivity, individuality can emerge like fireworks in the Renaissance state.

This view is curiously close to that of Foucault and the Foucaudian New Historicism, who assert, virtually as a premise, that the individuated subject is the social-cum-epistemological precondition for the nation-state, for political rights, authorship, private property, sexual identity (that is, modernity); and this same individuated subject is constituted or created by the pressures brought to bear by the processes and discourses associated with the historically 'modern.' The cause/effect aspects of this theory are disconcertingly interchangeable: 'the modern' constructs persons who think (falsely) that they are autonomous subjects; and persons who think (falsely) that they are autonomous individuals accept and reinforce the modernness of society. Whether scholars concentrate on the social discourses of power or the social construction of sexuality, Burckhardt's 'psychological fact' of the absence of the medieval individual -- which he used only as a rhetorical fact -- is the premise. Among a generation of poststructuralists who refuse binary opposites as a description of reality, the Modern exists over against the (suppressed) Medieval, rather as the masculine takes form against the feminine in another discourse of power.

The assertive, conflicted, tensely erotic Modern rests against a Medieval of collective identity, undeveloped subjectivity, and no sexuality at all, under Burckhardt's undifferentiated 'common veil.' The interiorized self (presumably unneeded by medieval social, cultural, economic, and political conditions) was waiting in some platonic sphere to be summoned to its historical debut to preside over pre-capitalist formation and the birth of the bourgeoisie. The Early Modern narrative actually, and quite naïvely, accepts as a premise that the standardized prescriptive doctrines of official religious culture in the Middle Ages (the routine condemnations of pride and self-assertion, of sex, money, and pleasure, issued by the celibate class of professional ecclesiastics) as a literal and sufficient
description of medieval human reality, against which everything modern (and interesting) can begin. The infusion of modernity in the Early Modern Period is precisely the interiorized conflicted self, the subject whose death is so often announced now in some quarters, and that is what is absent from everyone’s concept of the ‘medieval.’ I say ‘everyone’s’ because it is one thing to dismiss Burckhardt’s romantic metaphors or deconstruct the discourse of Early Modernity, and quite another to offer anything else in their place, anything else as powerful. I am conflating here and being a little unfair, but the overwhelming impression given by medieval studies, by medievalist scholars, is of a world of past persons we really cannot recognize: we can describe their institutions and learn their semantic codes, but they are not human to us. We medievalists are not entirely the victims of the narrative aggressions of scholars in trender fields. We collaborate even in our best efforts at empathetic understanding, in our reluctance to offend the dead, in our genteelness disguised as scholarship, and especially in our reluctance to explore the full range of meanings of religious experience. Thus, the question in the title of my essay about mystics having sex is so basically foreign to the medievalist enterprise that it strikes even me as simply crude.

My question is addressed to that most distantly religious and ‘medieval’ form of experience: mysticism – direct encounters between humans and God. This is surely a topic which evokes a distinctively medieval culture: intense religiosity, an otherworldly world-view, disdain of secular life, bodily austerities. Mystical experience, in its medieval (and later) Christian forms, was culturally sanctioned, and thus culturally constrained and culturally defined. It had a secular literary tradition reaching at least as far back as the sixth book of Virgil’s Aeneid; a special poetic vocabulary from the Old Testament Song of Songs, a crucial New Testament anchor in Paul’s cryptic utterance in 2 Corinthians (12:2) about the man who was raised up to the third heaven; the institutional approval of Gregory the Great; theological orthodoxy and an elaborated religious psychology from the pseudo-Dionysius, Richard of St Victor, and others, and I have only sketched in the foreground of a densely occupied cultural landscape.

Thus, all specific, recorded instances of mystical experience approach us deeply wrapped and packaged in layers of what we call ‘Cultural Context.’ The task of historical understanding is usually conceived as one of unpacking the layers of context: biblical, literary, theological, philological, text-exegetical, devotional, social, and so on; arranging and describing them in a paraphrase of contemporary concepts; and then demonstrating how the specific mystical event under investigation makes a coherent, self-explanatory, ‘fit’ with its contextual packaging.

This is the approach taken by current scholarship to the famous and famously conflicted life of Margery Kempe, mayor’s daughter and burgess’s wife of King’s Lynn in the early fifteenth century. Margery, as most medievalists know, was the courageous and feckless woman who, one night, jumped out of her marriage bed proclaiming that it is far happier in heaven, felt a sudden and complete revulsion from intercourse with her husband (she would sooner ‘have eaten and drunk the ooz and muck from the gutter than consent to intercourse’ – but with her husband only, this revulsion did not encompass other men, as she candidly admits), and embarked on the career of a visionary witness of God’s grace, extended even to sexually initiated women. ‘I love wives also,’ Jesus assured her once they were on intimate terms and she lamented the loss of her virginity, which left her undeserving of his attentions. Margery’s visitations from Jesus were explicitly sexual from the first time he ‘ravished her spirit’ and commanded her to call him ‘Jesus, your love, for I am your love’ until, years later, when he insisted that he ‘must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you,’ where she was to love him as a wife does her husband and kiss his mouth, his head, and his feet.

The case of Margery Kempe as a mystic, once an embarrassment to secular and religious scholarship, now rehabilitated along feminist lines, is more interesting for what it reveals about the state of medieval scholarship than for its relation to the medieval mystical tradition, which is really quite straightforward. All the numerous studies of Margery Kempe’s life which I have read proceed from the same premise: that Margery experienced a special kind of experience called ‘mystical’ which can be understood only in the terms the mystical tradition offers us for understanding it. My sentence is circular because the reasoning of this approach is circular. Mystical tradition offers us a coded language: the core or controlling concept is that of an event in which the Soul (gendered female always) ‘knows’ God in a direct access of ‘Knowledge,’ more complete and satisfying than any humanly received knowledge, but which is wholly incommunicable, or ‘inexplicable’ in the classic term. Once the ‘inexplicable’ of the event is established as the premise, the event may be lingeringly and minutely described in metaphor: the Soul languishes with desire, sick with longing; she sighs, weeps, lies awake at night; she is naked and surrenders to the advent of her lover; then union, ecstasy, ravishing, the kiss, eating and tasting; and the prolonged delights, the ‘familiarities’ of feel-
ing, touching, smelling, and hearing the beloved; finally rest, sleep, death – and rebirth.¹¹

This language is regarded as a metaphorical code for the supernatural by doctrinal fiat: a scheme of linked metaphor whose ultimate referent is outside the range of human perception and understanding, and thus can be approached only through figuration, paraphrase, comparison, and displacement. Catholic tradition assures us this is so, and modern scholars comply, whatever they really think about the possibilities of God entering into such direct relations with individuals. Willingness to divulge opinions on this subject seems to violate some deep academic, if not religious, decorum. I frankly admit that I am unable to conceive of a God, under any serious monotheistic conception, who favours individuals in this way, with flattery and gratifications, or even special knowledge unavailable to anyone else. Other medieval scholars who share religious beliefs with the subjects of their studies may well regard my unbelief as a limitation, but this is a case in which I think that authors should come forward and say where they stand, and they rarely do.

Even the anxious candour of Margery Kempe, who wanted to tell us about irrepressible sexual desire, frustration, and pleasure, is primly reconfigured into a known matrix of orthodox, pious meaning. And the primitiveness and piety are not essentially changed when the religious orthodoxy of the fifteenth century is reformulated into the feminist orthodoxy of the twentieth. It is true that current scholarship emphasizes Margery’s protofeminism: her brave and stubborn insistence on living the life of her own choice; her perseverance in the face of ridicule and threat; her defiance and self-defence against male authorities, and especially her ingenuity in producing her book. Still, the expressive centre and locus of her life, the sexual encounters with Jesus, are treated only in gingerly paraphrase and left wholly uninterrogated as something ‘mystic.’ In every essay I have read, the blunt word ‘sex’ is absent, replaced by the politely distant ‘erotic’; the act of intercourse is euphemized as ‘marriage,’ or disembodied as ‘union,’ and there are no orgasms at all. The case of Margery Kempe is unusual only in the social and domestic circumstances of the mystic herself; her language and expressive emotions are only a shade less sublimated and disguised than those of more ‘respectable’ mystics, including her contemporary Dame Julian of Norwich.

The issue of mystical experience is not of major importance in medieval life, but it does offer an interesting test case for a culture in which so very much experience was filtered through the concepts, language, images, and expectations of a specific and institutional religion. Talking about mysticism makes us, or ought to make us, come directly to terms with what it is we think we are approaching in the recorded experiences of medieval Christians. Once in a while – not too often, of course, but once in a while – it is not a bad idea to pause in our erudite parsing of the pseudo-Dionysius, or Bernard’s meditations on the Song of Songs, or the Victorine concept of negating the soul, or even Foucauldian discourse analysis, and ask rather crudely just what in the world we think we are talking about?

Placing mystical experience in its self-designated and self-defining cultural context, as we are all taught to do, arrives at a paraphrase, not an interpretation. Since the paraphrase-language is derived from the sanctioned, orthodox realms of medieval literature and religious usage, this paraphrase activity of unpacking the ‘cultural context’ can not only open the way to understanding the specific religious self-interpretation of mysticism, but open out to the social functions of mystic experience in medieval society: the personal authority a mystic could attain; the solace and excitement such an authority could offer the laity outside the normal channels of Christian institutions. All successful mystics understood this, and Dame Julian tried to explain some of it to Margery Kempe, who never managed to turn her fraught, intense ‘visions’ into social capital.¹²

The anthropologist J.M. Lewis, whose erudite and sympathetic book, Ecstatic Religion, makes an excellent starting-place for scholars interested in cross-cultural studies of mystical states, is explicit and enlightening on religious ecstasy as a ‘social fact.’¹³ The ‘social fact,’ distinctly observable and endlessly recorded, is a pattern (repeated across centuries and cultures) in which a certain kind of mental affliction is ‘valiantly endured and, in the end, transformed into spiritual grace,’ and – a special vocation as priest, prophet, shaman, saint.¹⁴ Thus, for our purposes, the line leads directly from Paul on the road to Damascus to Julian of Norwich lying in bed with her body dead below the waist but her thoughts on God.¹⁵ The social transformation achieved by the infliction of spiritual ecstasy on the receptive Soul: from outsider to insider, margin to centre, obscurity to fame, and passivity to authority was a career path notably open to women and to subordinated or marginalized (i.e., ‘feminized’) men. And among the marginalized, we must include all monastic men, no matter how respected, not forgetting that medieval society never quite overcame a deep ambivalence to the celibate, constrained, demasculinized male.

But social function, a useful concept borrowed from anthropology, is not yet meaning, which is a hermeneutic activity and requires a different translation language to approach the mind. Anthropology offers an interpretation language which moves outward from the conflicted private emo-
tional event to recognize the opportunities different societies open to mystics once the secret crisis is reconfigured into a publicly available language. But this ignores the question of meaning with respect to the mind that created and endured its ordeal of pleasure.

In Ecstatic Religion, Lewis does consider, cursorily but with more sympathy than most anthropologists would give in the 1960s or 1970s, the psychological possibilities of interpretation. Many more anthropologists today are ready to listen to their own colleague Georges Devereux, pioneer of psychoanalytic anthropology from the 1940s until his fairly recent death, in his basic premise that

... in the study of Man ... it is not only possible but mandatory to explain a behavior, already explained in one way, also in another way, - i.e. within another frame of reference ... The simple fact is that a human phenomenon which is explained in one way only is, so to speak, not explained at all ... and this even - and, in fact, chiefly - if this phenomenon’s first explanation has made it perfectly comprehensible, controllable and foreseeable in terms of its own specific frame of reference.

Devereux, both a psychoanalyst and a field-work anthropologist, dismissed with contempt the conceptually mushy ‘additive, fusioning, synthetic, or parallel’ attempts at ‘hyphenated’ interdisciplinary approaches to human behavior, and insisted on a rigorous ‘double discourse’ which would construct two complementary explanations, each complete and valid within its own frame of reference. (To strengthen the epistemological argument, I would refer readers to Louis Mink’s discussion of multiple modes of comprehensión.)

Thus, when Julian of Norwich tells us of her three petitions to God – to ‘know more of the physical suffering of our Saviour’; to suffer a physical illness to the point of dying, suffer bodily and mentally, but not die; and to receive three ‘wounds’ of a metaphorical nature – we do not have to conform immediately to her frame of reference and her own allegory of her desires. Nothing is being dismissed, permanently ignored, reduced, explained away, or insulted when we note, to begin an interpretation, the allegory of sexual fears and frightening desires spoken through Julian’s strong images of Christ’s body punctured, torn, gouged, multiply penetrated in her explicit visions, and the repeated concentration on blood, fresh, copious, flowing, draining from face and body. The Culture authorizes and offers its own code for Julian’s ‘passional devotion,’ but we know that meaning in any strong hermeneutic sense, is never what announces itself. The frame of reference and symbolic code offered to us at the manifest level of human self-explanation are significant in cultural and social ways, but are not the meaning of the mind’s silent and hidden life.

Julian’s longing for pain, her equation of suffering with love (interestingly similar to the erotic doctrine of Andre Cappellanus’s Art of Love, in which love is a sickness contracted by looking too much at beauty), issued in an illness involving anesthesia and paralysis of the lower body, a sinking towards coma so apparently irreversible that her family sent for the parish priest, difficult breathing, encroaching blindness, and then the sudden reversal and end of all symptoms with no after-effects, except for the memory of the visions she had been granted. Excluding the visions, this pattern, notably including the affliction of the limbs, is familiar from the silent mimetic choreography of the classic case histories of hysteria.

This is not a pattern reserved only for women. Two centuries earlier, in 1194, a young monk in the monastery of Eynsham, near Oxford, became ill, finally lapsed into a coma for nearly two days, and when he awoke, invigorated and mysteriously restored to health, he intimated that his soul had visited places not of this world, and his revelations became the substance of a book written by his brother, Adam, known as The Vision of the Monk of Eynsham. The visionary, named Edmund, had suffered from anorexia, acute revulsion from food, and a painful ulceration on his leg that would not heal, until he awoke when it healed spontaneously. The period just preceding his ecstatic trance state was reported by him to have included midnight sessions of corporal discipline from older monks, which filled him with such pleasure, such ‘unbearably sweet sorrow’ with each stroke, that he wanted more, and when he next discovered a bleeding crucifix in the church, he acted on another overwhelming desire and ate the blood. The older monks steadily denied all of these events. Edmund’s visions of the Other World are notable for the number of homosexuals he discovered there, the severity of their fate after death, and his exclamatory discovery that women too are involved in this sin, numberless multitudes of them condemned to obscene tortures for eternity. In spite of the efforts of Edmund’s brother, Adam, a talented writer (author of the Life of St Hugh of Lincoln) who championed his brother’s cause, the mystic’s ambition of fame and authority eluded Edmund. The monks of his own house distrusted him, and he is not generally included in the honour roll with Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, and Julian. Like Margery Kempe, Edmund of Eynsham was too undisguised, insufficiently sublimated.

Observers may not have had our same psychological vocabulary, but
they knew; the uneasiness and diffuse suspicion that surrounded Margery and Edmund plainly tell that these aspirant mystics carried an aura of sexual anxiety. It was also only too obvious that Edmund, like Margery, coveted the social profits of his private ecstasy. (The social history of mysticism tells us that undisguised desire for respect and social position are fatal to the ambition.)

But anyone who wishes to examine the detail of the visions will see that the revered Dame Julian and the too easy-to-dismiss monk Edmund are psychic twins, however different in their social achievements and command of theologized poetics. The pressures of the unconscious mind, however thoroughly repressed, cannot be erased, and will, under certain conditions, demand some form of expression. And although that expression will run through culturally characteristic channels, and use the vocabulary and social forms available to the personality living in its historically local moment, it will still speak of the psychic unity of our kind.

Some of George Devereux’s three decades of work in ‘enthnopsychiatry’ – cross-cultural studies grounded in both cultural anthropology and psychoanalytic theory – should at least be considered before Freud’s concept of the mind, of the unconscious and conscious mind in its dynamic process of struggle, is dismissed as a bourgeois patriarchal delusion. Similarly, the work of Gilbert Herdt, another psychoanalytically informed anthropologist, on male initiation rites in New Guinea supports the idea that cross-cultural psychiatry has a clear analogue in transhistorical studies. When people who never encountered a European in their isolated mountain villages until the 1950s are discovered to have a social/sexual culture based on a founding myth about the first Man and Wife, and their lustful Son who wished to have sex with his mother, causing the anger of the father... one has to consider the idea that Oedipal conflict may not be merely an aberration of nineteenth-century Vienna.

Mysticism has always wanted to tell us what it is about psychically without acknowledging it. In the manner of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter,’ this cultural expression of the unconscious has paraded itself in an explicitly sexual language whose actual meaning is blandly denied by recoding it as Metaphor for the Ineffable. But, as Georges Devereux insists, the psychic unity of mankind is both assumed and proven by the congruence of cross-cultural studies and psychoanalytic depth studies; Edmund’s embarrassingly explicit unbearable pleasures, the ‘unspeakable sweetness’ of his hallucinatory episode of being whipped by men, were inadequately coded but the psychic equivalent of whatever rarified sensations inform The Cloud of Unknowing.

The psychoanalytic language which allows the passions of the mind to speak openly is not an instrument of modern twice-fallen decadence inflicted on the past. It is from a medievalist’s point of view, the language of love which Augustine used in the Doctrina Christiana to explain the dynamic structure of the universe – from the microcosm of the soul tempted to love what it should only use, to the self-contemplating divine love. It is a language analogous with the syntax of desire with which Dante’s pilgrim came to understand himself in the divine economy. Freud renewed these languages for the Western tradition, for the explication of modern hearts, so that the invisible things once more can be understood through the opaque film of reality.

The religious culture which offered medieval people a language with which to express their longings found its culminating expression in Dante’s poem, which describes a world moved by love at every level, from the incoherent and undisciplined desires of each heart to the harmonious movements of the heavens. This was a world in which human desire, rightly directed to the sole object deserving to be loved for its own sake, found its meaning in the objective correlate, of the universe created by God. This is a world which no longer exists in unselfconscious serenity. The fully articulated medieval universe has shrunk to an artefact, a reconstructed ‘context,’ made of overlapping texts, posited of and by literature. This God-driven universe of desire is now a ‘thing’ in our universe. It no longer contains us. The literal signs of an invisible reality point inward now, but still to a shared and intelligible world of desire and its objects, negotiated anew by each soul. The unresolved drama fixed timeless in the unconscious centre of each life in time finds its dignity in the universal drama of human life – moved by desire, thwarted by reality.

Mystical experience is always about desire, about the indefatigable search of the mind for the satisfaction of wishes that are emphatically not to be fulfilled, that must at once be denied and yet diverted and expressed, often in allegorized and mimetic forms. Extreme states tell us as nothing else can about: the deep and characteristic patterns of mental life in a specific society, but only if we are willing to move beyond paraphrase as our critical activity. Medieval mysticism wants to tell us about the heavy weight of sexual restriction, sexual guilt, and conformity to difficult rules of self-constraint carried by monks and nuns, and by all women, but especially those whose religious conuctions were sensitive and genuine. The mystic crisis wants to tell us about the fault lines in the medieval construction of ideal mental life. Frankly using a psychoanalytic language of libidinal drives, sublimations, and displacements, acknowl-
edging in medieval people the full mental structure of the unconscious as well as conscious personality, will restore to the life stories we write of and for them the depth, complexity, and fellowship with ourselves they deserve.

NOTES

1 For a philological inquiry into the origins of the ‘middle’ nomenclature, see George Gordon, ‘Medium Aevum and The Middle Age,’ Society for Pure English Tract No. XIX (Oxford 1925), 3–28.
2 Hayden White’s amusing and deliberately provocative suggestion that we regard the medieval annal form as an authentic and unmanipulated expression of reality works nicely as focal centre for his discussion of the constructedness of narrative form: ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,’ in The Content of the Form (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1987), 1–25.
4 See Patterson’s scathing comments on the predominantly Marxist analysis which has created the absurd idea of a human society without individuated citizens: ‘Margins,’ 93–7.
5 Jacob Burckhardt. The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row 1958), 143. Burckhardt appropriates Dante for the Italian renaissance of individuality: ‘Dante’s great poem would have been impossible in any other country of Europe, if only for the reason that they all still lay under the spell of race.’
7 The Book of Margery Kempe, trans. B.A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985), 46. It should be noted that, by the time she composed her book, Margery was quite conscious of her vulnerability to accusations of doctrinal disobedience, and even heresy, and so she made it clear that she never positively refused her husband’s demands, however distasteful they were to her: ‘And so she said to her husband, “I may not deny you my body, but all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone”’: Book, 46. The Middle English original is currently available only in the

8 Book, 84–5
9 Ibid., 51, 126–7, for the long and explicit passage which makes clear the nature of Margery’s experiences: ‘For [Jesus tells her] it is appropriate for the wife to be on homely terms with her husband. Be he ever so great a lord and she ever so poor a woman when he weds her, yet they must lie together and rest together in joy and peace. Just so must it be between you and me ... Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you ... when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son ...’
12 The Book of Margery Kempe, 77–8. Margery’s version of her conversation with Dame Julian seems blurred and self-serv ing, but also preserves what might be the core of Julian’s counsel: ‘The anchor ... advising this creature to be obe-
dient to the will of our Lord and fulfill with all her might whatever he put into her soul, if it were not against the worship of God and the profit of her fellow Christians [my emphasis]." There is a gentle advice here to conform better to outward decorum and not shock people.


14 Ibid., 67, and ch. 3: 'Affliction and Its Apotheosis'


16 Lewis's ch. 7 'Possession and Psychiatry,' *Ecstatic*, 178–205) is both sympathetic to psychoanalytic concepts (many of which are quietly incorporated into his own interpretations; see p. 71, 'what begins as an illness ... ends in ecstasy ...') and quarrels with it on various fronts.

17 George Devereux, *Ethnopsychoanalysis: Psychoanalysis and Anthropology as Supplementary Frames of Reference* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1978), 1, and he continues: 'Moreover, it is precisely the possibility of a human phenomenon being explained 'completely' in at least [my emphasis] two (complementary) ways which proves, on the one hand, that the phenomenon in question is both real and explainable and, on the other hand, that each of these two explanations is 'complete' (and therefore valid) within its own frame of reference.' Another readily available collection of essays by this extraordinarily interesting scholar is *Basic Problems of Ethnopsychotherapy*, trans. Basia Miller Gulati and George Devereux (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980).

18 Devereux, *Ethnopsychoanalysis*, 2


20 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 63


22 This interesting vision is printed in vol. 2 of *Eynsham Cartulary*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1907), 255–371, with introduction and notes. It offers a detailed and full instance of a case of male hysteria in very recognizable form; the material concerning the monk's illness, his behaviour just before and after the vision/coma, and his assertions about activities with senior monks at night are found in the introductory and epilogue chapters to the *Vision*, chs. 1–13, and 57–8; homosexuality is encountered in chs. 25 and 26.

23 Gilbert Herdt, *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1987); this fascinating and well-presented record of field-work and interpretation among an isolated tribal people by a psychoanalytically informed anthropologist deserves to be read and seriously considered by historians of distant times and cultures. If a psychoanalytic paradigm works with flexibility and subtle results for cultural anthropology, there is a distinct argument there for historical studies.

24 Herdt, *Sambia*, 167–8, for the foundation myth of the Sambia and its obvious Oedipal form