

FEMALE MYSTICS AND VIOLENT LOVE:  
*BODYTALK, BATTERING, AND BIOLOGY*

By

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation  
to my mother, Marina, who taught me about patience,  
perseverance, and inner-strength.

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This research examines, through historical analysis, medieval medical narratives and religious rituals which provide a framework for the source of female mystics' violent, eroticized language. Furthermore, this study describes the symbiotic relationship of medicine and the Church which created a monopoly for manipulating the social and religious status of bodies, specifically the female body, and these theories became a regular part of medieval discourse. In addition, although these theories were linked to misogyny, violence, and inequality, they were internalized by medieval mystics, which is evident in their verbalization of violent love and the expressions of their bodies. However, these descriptions do not only originate from the medicine-religion affiliation, but from medieval

culture's epistemology on marriage, which legalized and sanctioned violence and rape within the confines of that institution. These marital codes were internalized by mystics in their articulation of union with or marriage to God; therefore, their language expressed union in violent erotic terms. Additionally, in discussing medieval culture's influence on female mystics' violent language, recent research demonstrates that feminist scholars valorize, miss, or dismiss the violence because of their feminist agendas. Also, in adding to this recent research, this study also addresses the tendency of feminists to interpret mystical imagery as a type of *gynocentric hermeneutic*. Moreover, some feminists disregard the fact that mystics were subject to and believed in a religious hegemony that warranted a dying to or lack of self and autonomy. Furthermore, feminist studies insist on asserting that medieval mystics used their violent language for promoting womanist ideologies and *bodytalk*; thus, the language allowed mystics to subvert medieval patriarchy via self-empowerment. This research, however, contrasts these feminist ideas.

CHAPTER 1  
MEDIEVAL MYSTICS AND VIOLENCE: MEDIEVALISM,  
FEMINISM, AND MYSTICISM

**Introduction**

Certainly, as we contemplate the end of the twentieth century and we estimate our expectations so far of the twenty first, we would surmise that we have witnessed immense violence and brutality against the body which most believe to have its origin in religious intolerance *vis á vis* religious approbation. These exploits make us aware that culture, or religious culture, plays a significant part in structuring the body's practices through life, and also it is a very important part in orchestrating pain and death. Tom Beaudoin's *Virtual Faith*<sup>1</sup> looked at the religious milieu of the popular Generation X, and he discovered that X's culture is infused with religious iconography of the kind found in medieval Christian paintings pregnant with symbolic and often violent messages. He claims that this generation possesses a type of faith not located in traditional

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<sup>1</sup>Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Press, 1998).

institutions but is embedded in society via pop-culture's media, video games, and MTV videos. This immersed faith creates a fine line between the transgressive and provocative, juxtaposing religious and sexual imagery. In that same vein, most young people today, believers or non-believers of the Christian faith or religion in general, seem to have some idea, conscious or unconscious, of the suffering Christ. In fact just recently, the controversial and extremely violent film, *The Passion*, created hysteria last February 2004, where the story about the suffering Christ was resurrected highlighting Jesus' wounded, bleeding, and cadaverous body that colludes with the religious lived body in religious self-mortification. Also, Christ's body is put up as a symbol of hope and pure endurance against the evil forces in the world. Since the Middle Ages, Christians have been fixated on the suffering and bleeding body of Jesus, deeply wanting their bodies to share his suffering and create their own ecstasies of pain and near-death experiences. Medieval Christians aspired to suffer and to experience stigmata, and thereby through their bodies create their own eroticized fantasies of desire for a love relationship with God and for the perfection of their soul. It is this same obsession of the body, and through this religious culture, that medieval Christian mystics

practiced *imitatio Christi*,<sup>2</sup> through the mortification of the flesh, and valorized through eroticized language and self-mortification. However, it can be argued that violence against the body in general is still present today, though now more through the obsession of the body's perfection, via the beauty standards and plastic surgery in today's Hollywood culture.

However, whereas in the Middle Ages, violent censoring of the body might have merited sainthood, in today's society this violence, self-harm, and assault of the body practiced by individuals on their own bodies, or other bodies in general, are controlled by institutions of psychiatry or the law-or so it seems. In 2001 a conservative, orthodox, and

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<sup>2</sup>Imitating Christ's suffering is the simplest understanding of this practice. However, medieval notions are quite complex. For instance Karma Lochrie in *Margery Kempe* notes that there are three different kinds of *imitatio Christi* which entailed self-flagellation, self-defilement and fasting. They were voluntary, involuntary, or "most familiarly demonstrated in life," (15). See Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994). See also Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 98. Also Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 265. Bynum argues from a gender based hermeneutic, that is, based on both Aristotelian and Galenic grounds, Christ was seen as taking his flesh from Mary and therefore conforming to Christ was facilitated by widely held beliefs of the day.

secretive Catholic organization, *Opus Dei—The Work of God*—originating in Europe in 1928 and now in Manhattan with its 55 million-dollar headquarters—went public via ex-female American members. These members claimed that they had to practice corporal mortifications, by wearing a cilice (a spiked chain worn around the upper thigh for two hours each day, except for Church feast days), practice flagellation by whipping their “naked buttocks” to control their carnal desires, and besides monetary commitments, sleep on wooden boards, since its founder, a Spanish priest, believed that women had passions that required more discipline to tame. Their teachings are aimed at helping people find God in daily life. Their belief system, similar to medieval mystics and written by their founder, incorporates such beliefs that valorizes or encourages inflicted pain on the body:

1. Blessed be pain. Loved be pain. Sanctified be pain. . . Glorified be pain! (*The Way*, 208)
2. No ideal becomes a reality without sacrifice. Deny yourself. It is so beautiful to be a victim! (*The Way*, 175)
3. To defend his purity, St. Francis of Assisi rolled in the snow, St. Benedict threw himself into a thornbush, St. Bernard plunged into an icy pond... You... what have you done? (*The Way*, 143)
4. If you realize that your body is your enemy, and an enemy of God's glory since it is an enemy of your sanctification, why do you treat it so softly? (*The Way*, 227)

5. Your worst enemy is yourself. (*The Way*, 225)  
(*Opus Dei Awareness Network*)<sup>3</sup>

However, amidst this cry for public social awareness and for help against the group's questionable practices, *Opus Dei* seems to be authorized by reputed people in American society who adamantly defend *The Work of God*. In particular, three such men are listed in the current news articles: one is Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent accused of spying for Russia, who is an *Opus Dei* member; the FBI Director (2001) Louis Freeh whose child attends an *Opus Dei* school;<sup>4</sup> and finally, the Rev. John McCloskey who has received public attention through his converting senators to Catholicism. He has recently converted Senator Sam Brownback, who was in opposition to cloning. McCloskey has a practice just beyond the White House and is known as the "spiritual K Street lobbyist" who lobbies for souls.<sup>5</sup> And

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<sup>3</sup>Opus Dei Awareness Network, "Opus Dei's Questionable Practices," *Opus Dei Awareness Network*, 16 Nov. 2003, 31 July 2004 <[http://www.odan.org/questionable\\_practices.htm](http://www.odan.org/questionable_practices.htm)>.

<sup>4</sup>Shawn Cohen and Gary Stern, "Opus Dei: A Journal News Special Report," *The Journal News*, 22 April 2001, 31 July 2004 <<http://www.thejournalnews.com/OpusDei/o42201/22opus/>>.

<sup>5</sup>Chris Scullentrop, "The Rev. John McCloskey: The Catholic Church's K Street Lobbyist," *Slate*, 9 Aug. 2002, 31 July 2004 <<http://slate.msn.com/id/2069194/>>.

last but not least, *The Work of God* prides itself in the fact that in 1982 Pope John Paul II granted *Opus Dei* the Status of *personal prelature*

a canonical term meaning the jurisdiction covers the person in *Opus Dei* rather than a particular region. In other words, it operates juridically much as religious orders do, without the regard for geographical boundaries. This unique recognition—it is the only personal prelature in the Church—demonstrated the high regard in which it is held by John Paul II as well as *Opus Dei*'s standing in Vatican circles. But has also prompted critics to ask why a professedly lay organization would need such a status. Today *Opus Dei* Counts 77,000 members (including 1,5000 priests and 15 bishops) in over 80 countries. (Martin 2)

Therefore it seems that in today's complex and legalistic society, rules for/against the body have not changed in some religious circles. Also, it is important to note that these questionable practices are *legalized*, dismissed, or made admissible by the persons or institutions that endorse these practices, specifically here, the Church.

One wonders why in our culture we advocate emaciated anorexic girls as models of beauty or the reverse of that: why movements like "real bodies real women" and "love your body" rhetoric, in trying to further the cause of size acceptance, present all other body-types as negative. Therefore, in trying to empower overweight people in our society, overweight rhetoric makes the same mistakes as the "too skinny" rhetoric: the empowerment of size acceptance

tries to subvert the dominant discourse that shapes the way society teaches us to think about women's bodies; however, it only disrupts by duplicating the hierarchical ordering of those dominant signifiers and disgust and hatred is turned on the "too-skinny" instead. Also, by asserting that bodies of overweight women are "real bodies," this rhetoric creates a prescriptive type of body and makes it the only type of body for real women.<sup>6</sup> This empowerment is good, as I will discuss with Medieval mystics; however, its advocates miss the harmful underlying messages produced by our culture that promote a specific rhetorical construct of femininity, which might be detrimental to society. Sandra Bartky notes, "We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement 'a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh'" (132). The female body, then, in this example, is femininity's, or any rhetorical system's, site for struggle and its vehicle for expression and for coercion. Although we have seen the end of whale-bone corsets and foot binding, some things have not changed.

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<sup>6</sup>I am referring here to the complicated issues in "Love your body" rhetoric as argued in Elspeth Probyn's "The Body Which is Not One: Speaking as an Embodied Self." *Hypatia* 6, 3 (1991): 111-24; and *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

For instance, in the medieval period where bodies, and specifically for this dissertation, women's bodies, were described and marginalized via their biological parts (breasts and uterus), women, to a certain extent, are still measured by their body parts. This measurement creates an identity via fragmentation or dismemberment in order for women to be acknowledged/re-membered in society. Therefore, modern society, via contemporary femininity standards in culture, measure women via their body parts. For example, women's breasts shape their lives and breasts are simultaneously adored and despised;<sup>7</sup> in addition, breasts describe women via the sacred and erotic as well as the domestic and political.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there seems to be an ideology of the naturalness of femininity at work functioning through the female body or our contemporary society. Judith Butler's approach is helpful here in addressing this rhetoric of femininity. Just as Butler demonstrated that gender is constructed through a "stylized repetition of acts," femininity is also performed and "must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures,

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<sup>7</sup>Meema Spadola, *Breasts: Our Most Public Private Part* (Berkeley: Wildcat Canyon Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup>Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Random House Inc., 1997).

movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion" of a perennial femininity (403). In other words, social graces, dainty maidens, all contribute to the rhetorical illusion of femininity. In addition, femininity, as defined by feminist studies, is a construction that regularly hides its origin. The unspoken collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions, whereby the construction compels one's belief in its justification and naturalness (Butler 405). In other words, there is an appearance of naturalness, and it is difficult to deconstruct because it seems to be common sense. We will see later how cultural constructions of the body become embedded in, not only medieval society but contemporary as well. As we will discuss with feminist scholarship, there is a certain type of feminine in feminist studies. Therefore, it seems that in culture there is an ideology, via rhetorical systems, suspect of camouflaging negatives or even violence.<sup>9</sup> In this process women's bodies are

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<sup>9</sup>I use Gravdal's terminology and meaning here from, "Camouflaging Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in the Medieval Pastourelle," *Romantic Review* 76 (1985): 360-73.

indirectly used or inadvertently needed to measure up to a specific standard. For instance, arguments for pornography prove that it is a lucrative industry for the American economy.<sup>10</sup> However, hidden behind this agenda lies the harmful effects which locate a connection between pornography and aggressive attitudes and behaviors.<sup>11</sup> In the eighties and nineties, radical feminist activists and scholars such as Andrea Dworkin,<sup>12</sup> Catharine MacKinnon,<sup>13</sup> Diana Russell,<sup>14</sup> and Laura Lederer<sup>15</sup> argued that pornography

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<sup>10</sup>F. S. Lane, *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Estimate for worldwide sales are as high as \$56 billion (Forbes, 14 June 1999: 214).

<sup>11</sup>E. F. Einsiedel, "The Experimental Research Evidence: Effects of Pornography on the 'Average Individual.'" C. Itzin, ed., *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties. A Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 248-83; D. E. H. Russell, "Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model." D. E. H. Russell, ed., *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (Buckingham: Open UP, 1993) 120-150; J. Weaver, "The Social Science and Psychological Research Evidence: Perceptual and Behavioral Consequences of Exposure to Pornography," C. Itzin, ed., *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties. A Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 284-309.

<sup>12</sup>Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989); *Letters From a War Zone*, (1988; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>C. A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987).

<sup>14</sup>D. E. H. Russell, *Dangerous Relationships: Pornography, Misogyny, and Rape* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998);

"eroticizes domination and subordination, objectifies women's bodies, and legitimizes sexual violence" (Kimmel and Plante 370). Also, these critics pointed out the harm "'in living in a culture in which pornography reinforces and sexualizes women's subordinate status'" (Dworkin and MacKinnon qtd. in Kimmel and Plante 370). However, although there is validity in these research findings, pornography still pervades American society because it provides big-business for the American economy and thus works within its cultural context.

Phyllis Tribble's *Text of Terror*<sup>16</sup> relates this working of the cultural acceptance of violence in biblical culture as she focuses on different biblical texts and the violence against the female body in the accounts of rape. She concludes that the violence is justified by the blessings of holy men. Therefore, the violence is *blessed* or *enshrouded* within the society so that it may be culturally acceptable. Most importantly, Tribble aims, via the recovery of these

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*Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*  
(Buckingham: Open UP, 1998).

<sup>15</sup>Linda Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women and Pornography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980).

<sup>16</sup>Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

stories, to stimulate awareness and active work for victims of such cruel acts. This working of violence via biblical culture, in biblical stories, and the rhetorical construct of femininity, can be connected to medieval culture through medieval mystical eroticized literature and its severe asceticism. By investigating the medieval social climate via medieval medicine, religious literature, and the Church, I will gain proper grounding as to the rhetorical system of medieval femininity which demonstrates how female mystics' lives were shaped and their bodies were read in their society. Also, it will assist me in analyzing the idea of violence that is culturally permissible. Additionally, this idea would allow me to answer the question as to why contemporary feminist do not critique the violence. This concept of permissiveness, caused me to query why most feminist theory syllabi on medieval female mystics, via my numerous searches on the internet, do not address the problem of violence posed by the mystical literature and its practices, or at least the professors who do, they do not question the violence or highlight it as problematic. Furthermore, most feminist scholars,<sup>17</sup> who analyze mystical

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<sup>17</sup>See Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The*

literature, render feminist interpretations to meet their immediate agendas. However, most scholars definitely agree that this rhetoric of eros is filled with violent images of the sensual and spiritual, juxtaposing religious and sexual imagery, and self-inflicted and self-invoked suffering and illness. As mentioned earlier, most feminist analysis do not address the violence as problematic, but seem to agree that female mystics have accomplished autonomy or agency, and they subvert the systems which describe them as abject. Therefore, mystics experience a type of empowerment that shatters the *glass ceiling* of medieval religious patriarchy or medieval patriarchy in general. Julie Miller's article, the only one to date, has paved the way in proving that there is a lacuna in the way feminist scholars interpret the eroticized violence in mystical literature, and she notes that most feminists agree that the literature is "not

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*Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women, and Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Elizabeth Herbert McAvoy, "Julian of Norwich and a Trinity of the Feminine," *Mystics Quarterly*, 28.2 (2002): 68-77; Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1996); Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell, 1992); Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*; Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

thought to be merely allegorical" (25). Instead of an analysis of the erotic violence in these texts, according to Miller,

[w]hat we often find is a reluctant acknowledgment of it followed by a quick dismissal of the need for any rigorous critique. Or it is celebrated and upheld as reflective of a peculiarly 'feminine' experience. (27)

Therefore, this analysis may leave the reader with the idea that this discourse is neither "prevalent nor problematic" (Miller 27).

Let me review Miller's findings, since it is important to my project. Miller expresses that these experiences are thought to be, via feminist analysis, "intrinsically erotic" and that the erotic is often considered to be an inherently favorable, steady, and self-expressive classification. In Caroline Bynum's various works on women mystics, Miller has demonstrated that Bynum has numerously emphasized the inherent erotic in mystical discourse and experience. Bynum notes that "'from a modern view point [women mystics]. . . blur the line between the spiritual or psychological, on the one hand, and bodily or even sexual, on the other'" (qtd. in Miller 26). Also, although most scholars have surmised that these experiences reflect a somehow "sublimated desire," Bynum presumes different; it is an incorrect way of explaining these events, since "'in the Eucharist and in

ecstasy, a male Christ was handled and loved; sexual feelings were . . . not so much translated into another medium as simply set free'" (qtd. in Miller 26).

Furthermore, Miller addresses the fact that Grace Jantzen aggressively claims that male mystics' "'intellectualized'" use of erotic speech is different from female mystics' "'highly charged, passionate encounter between Christ and the writer. The sexuality is explicit, and there is no warning that it should not be taken literally'" (Jantzen qtd. in Miller 26). Jantzen reemphasizes her case by stating that there is "'no intellectualizing or spiritualizing, no climbing up into the head or using the erotic as an allegory hedged about with warnings'" (Jantzen qtd. in Miller 26). Therefore, Miller argues that few scholars would be willing to declare the point as strongly as Jantzen, since

women mystics skillfully and frequently utilize allegory and metaphor to describe their experiences. But [Jantzen's] conviction that these experiences were primarily sexual, albeit also spiritual, affirms the general consensus among contemporary scholars that the erotic element of these experiences cannot be discounted or denied. (26)

However, as Miller notes, "what is surprising is that few feminist scholars have analyzed or critiqued this discourse of eroticized violence in any sustained manner"

(27),<sup>18</sup> since the language medieval mystics use to express suffering was "often brutally violent, replete with descriptions of assault and annihilation, agony and affliction" (27). Miller states that she is interested in researching "how this rhetoric served to develop and support the ideology that women enjoy the physical and spiritual violence done to them in the name of love" (28), and how it "shaped and legitimated gendered notions of subjectivity and love relationships within the medieval context and more importantly today" (29). However, she attempts neither via her research, instead she apologizes and states that her "goal" in the article is "much more modest and discrete to two tasks" (29). Miller demonstrates, via the continental medieval mystics, how the language is violent and she states why she believes, via a historical perspective, that feminist scholars have yet to analyze these texts from this viewpoint. I believe that Miller offers instructive insights into looking at the eroticized violence of medieval mystical literature via a whole new perspective. This

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<sup>18</sup>I do agree with Miller that there are exceptions which include those who utilize the theories of the French feminists Julia Kristieva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. However, these theories, which focus on the "abject and transgressive excess," limit "its usefulness for problematizing the negative aspects of this rhetoric of eroticized violence" (27 n. 12).

perspective stems from the ideology of feminist theory and the way feminists interpret violence in the contemporary setting. Therefore, Miller's work establishes a helpful context from which to build this project, which will argue from a sociocultural perspective of contemporary culture or the climate of feminist studies. Furthermore, I will work out the rhetorical system of contemporary femininity which bias feminist analysis to highlight, in my opinion, the abject status of woman, gender issues, body theory, and gynocentric<sup>19</sup> hermeneutics, which I believe merits some exploration. I believe the reason for these interpretations might lie in the fact that, as we analyze literature, we create our interpretation/cut in accordance with the social and cultural climate.

#### **Thesis and Outline**

This dissertation focuses on the symbolic and material female body as a cultural site and rhetorical site on which, from which, and through which meaning is negotiated both in the medieval and contemporary setting. I am interested in

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<sup>19</sup>Gynocentric: Woman-centered. A Brand new concept. So new that it is not normally found in dictionaries. Feminists are not yet agreed as to the proper spelling of this word. It is sometimes found as "gynecentric" or "gynocentric." Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991).

looking at society/culture which is often used to describe patterns of beliefs and behaviors shared by a social group.<sup>20</sup> I would like to investigate the social milieu of medieval mystics in order to understand the climate that inhibited their cultural and rhetorical ideologies which normalize violence in order to make it socially acceptable. Similarly, I will look at the sociocultural climate of contemporary feminist scholarship, not only to add to the reasons why feminist analysis misses, dismisses, or valorizes the violence, but to investigate the contemporary idea of femininity and feminist's propensity to dismiss the violence in order to romanticize it. I am primarily concerned with the female body and physical and symbolic violence via medieval female mystics amorous rhetoric and practices, and the contemporary interpretations that mold re-memering of them. Feminist are influenced by contemporary theory, typically the theories of French feminists. Thus, their interpretations emphasize and valorize the female mystic's *choice* to verbally articulate her body via the language of eroticized violence. However,

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<sup>20</sup>I use culture here in reference to its meaning in cultural studies: "culture is ordinary." Michael Green, "Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies," *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 6 (1974): 31-48.

these theories, in its rhetoric of empowerment for women-women's bodies-have affected the ability of feminists to recognize violence in texts. I believe we cannot champion most mystics as models for today, that is, use them as proto-feminists, since their lives, the way they expressed their bodies, and their rhetoric of love and relationships were very problematic. In valorizing their expressions of the body and their violent ideas about love as standards for feminist/feminine ideals in the twenty-first century via choice, feminists run the risk of exposing

new or even more insidious ideological constructs-such as the notion that the female/feminine desires and even requires violence and pain to achieve its ultimate pleasure-constructs which ultimately serve the same patriarchal purpose. (Miller 45)

In addition, the propensity to analyze female mystics' violent articulation of their bodies and love, via French feminist theory, not only reinscribe the abject elements in mystical discourse, but it encourages the use of a contemporary model of femininity and the body to explain the complex medieval model which will be explained later in the chapter "Female Mystics and *Bodytalk*."

Thus, in this dissertation, I hope to raise awareness that violence does not occur in isolated acts, and I feel it is important to address it, since as scholars, whether we are cognizant or not, we bring different cultural

constructions of bodies and ideas to our research; our academic lives are shaped by the worlds we live in as well as our agendas shape the worlds in which we live. I would like to raise awareness of the medieval mystical body within feminist agendas and viewpoints, via their analysis of that body and its practices. This awareness, in turn, would allow the mystical body to be read as a piece of forensic history in order to understand the complexity of that body. Moreover, this realization would enable us to learn how mystics internalize medieval culture which shapes their expressions of love relationships.

Therefore, this dissertation entails looking at the subtleties of violence in mystical literature and experience. These subtleties will be looked at via the medieval understanding of the medical body in order to grasp how women's lives were shaped via medieval Christianity. The importance of discerning the aspects of the medieval body makes the acts of violence, against the soul, a more realistic endeavor upon the body, and indeed it was. Medieval Christianity regarded the body<sup>21</sup> as a measuring

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<sup>21</sup>In Caroline Bynum's works, she makes note that the medieval understanding of the body is very complex and in fact she warns readers not to take a simplified unhistorical view of the body: (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Fragmentation and Redemption*). Also, Karma Lochrie's "The

stick for the soul and the body/flesh played a central role in the soul's perfection and the body's violent cleansing of pollution which is researched by Dyan Elliot in *Fallen Bodies*;<sup>22</sup> therefore, the violent acts and God's assaults on the soul was often experienced via the body, symbolically or literally. These assaults via the eroticized literature consisted of violent bodily suffering and illness that was self-invoked or self-inflicted. Also, these assaults, via the language of eros, suggest an ideological function of violence: the assault of God on the soul leads to the assault of the body and eventually, for my reference, the

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Language of Transgression: Body, Flesh, and Word in Mystical Discourse," *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies* ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1991) 115-40, and Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, add to this complex notion of the medieval body. Lochrie notes that, sometimes the body was not often tainted, but the flesh often was and women were more often associated with the flesh. Also, in Dyan Elliot's, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press) 1999. Elliot interchanges the two, body and flesh, or at least gives us the understanding of this through the idea that by denying the flesh, medieval people placed extraordinary emphasis on the body/flesh. In this paper I will interchange body and flesh via Elliot's idea.

<sup>22</sup>Read Dyan Elliot's "Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray," *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Although medieval female mystics are not the highlight of this chapter, she does go into detail about the censoring of the body via the Church penitentials for female, but more so male clerics.

assault on female body/woman. Elliot describes the Church's obsession with, and fears of, pollution, sexuality, and demonology and also how the female body represented the main material presence of sin. This obsession led to the Church's power of censorship which became a praxis-oriented feature of everyday life, and this regime contributed to the system of guilt or hatred of the body in the medieval period.

Therefore, the medieval milieu of mystics will be discussed via medieval mystical texts and the symbiotic relationship of the Church and medieval medicine. Through this discussion, I will demonstrate that the Church-medicine relationship laid the foundations for creating a monopoly, at least by modern standards, on men's, and more so on women's bodies in medieval society. Also, this relationship located identity within the biological fate of the body and created a connection between men and women that was essentially hierarchical. This hierarchy promoted the understanding of the genre of mystical literature and its violent expressions. My purpose here is to use this information: the cultural, biological, and religious societal constructions, to focus on the functioning of systems and on shared beliefs and behaviors in these social systems that work out their own ideological function of

violence. For instance, through this filter, violence against women is a reflection of attitudes shared by a group that govern interpersonal interactions and permeate all spheres of activity (religious, medical, political, familial). This filter also answers questions as to the construction of the female body and the ideology that enabled women to practice *imitatio Christi* and to express *delectio*<sup>23</sup>. It will also demonstrate how medieval mystics borrow the language of eros from the courtly love literary tradition.

Therefore, this dissertation will be divided into three parts: "The Anatomy of Violence in Mystical Texts: Piercing Masochism, Potent Passion, and Penitent Women"; "Religion and Medicine: Female Mystics and the Medieval Expression of the Body"; and "Female Mystics and Bodytalk: A Feminist Critique." Firstly, in chapter two, "The Anatomy of Violence," I will discuss and give examples of mystical rhetoric at work. At the core of mystical spirituality is the eroticized violent expression of love which is centered

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<sup>23</sup>"*Dilectio* [is] a certain love in which God is loved for his own sake . . . [This love] might [also] be envisaged with Augustine as *concupiscentia*, desire (for God); [and] with Dionysius as *amor* (eros in Greek). See Fergus Kerr, "Charity as Friendship," *Language, Meaning and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Chapman, 1987) 6.

in censoring the body and focusing on the Passion of Christ. Female mystics experience Christ's suffering via God's violent assaults on the body and soul. In their poetic descriptions of these violent acts, mystics acquiesce to these assaults. In addition, by looking closely at their epistemology of love, we find that the violent element is situated in the society's definition of love and marriage. Secondly, in chapter three, I will give an historical analysis of medieval medical narratives dealing with the body. I will specifically deal with women's bodies in order to understand the source of how women were treated or represented in medieval society, that is, via the Church-medicine relationship. This investigation will emphasize not only a specific aspect of thinking about the medieval body, but the stratification of bodies in medieval society that places man as the head and woman as the body. Also, this study will enable me to explain why female mystics, in this hierarchal structured society, not only expressed religious piety, but expressed love and union/marriage to God violently. Thirdly, in chapter four, I will discuss the current status of feminist scholarship and the sociocultural climate of feminist studies. In this analysis, I will examine how feminists argue via their biased agendas, which I believe to be apparently centered in gendered and

gynocentric hermeneutics. I will demonstrate how feminists have been occupied by three major theoretical leanings which overshadow their ability to recognize or discuss the violence in female mystical texts: gynocentric hermeneutics and the desire to let the "body be heard" via *l'écriture féminine*; woman's empowerment, choice, agency, and the ability to subvert and challenge patriarchal ideologies and abject images of their bodies through their bodies; and, the authority of female bodily expressions to suppress gender stereotypes, reconstruct, and reconfigure the phallogocentric<sup>24</sup> system of Western culture. Therefore, feminists miss, valorize, or dismiss the erotic violence in order to prove that mystics were responsibly choosing to poetically express their bodies and thereby gain empowerment. This thesis on choice highlights for

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<sup>24</sup>Phallogocentric is a term coined by Cixous and Irigaray combining 1. *phallogocentric*: the structure of language that is centered by the Phallus and 2. *logocentric*: Derrida's idea that the structure of language relies on spoken words being privileged over written words. Thus a phallogocentric culture is one which is structured by binary oppositions-male/female, order/chaos, language/silence, presence/absence, speech/writing, light/dark, good/evil. In this structure, the first term is valued over the second term (Laugh of the Medusa 311-312). See Mary Klages, "Helene Cixous: 'The Laugh of the Medusa,'" *Poststructuralist Feminist Theory*, 24 Nov. 1997, 1 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENG2012Klages/cixous.html>>.

feminists, the idea that mystics, through self-empowerment, were choosing/utilizing the *unique feminine approach*. However, this contemporary approach has a tendency to be viewed as copying the conventions of the medieval medicine-Church connection. And the approach reinforces the notion of medieval female sensuality and desire. Also, this contemporary approach inadvertently unleashes a negative rhetoric of the contemporary feminine and female body as a construction which inherently chooses or desires, via empowerment, violence.

On that note, the idea that acts as the umbrella for this project is the trajectory of violence in medieval societies, and through feminists research, we can hint at our own society. For example, when dealing with the problem of rape or spousal abuse,

male supremacy, ideology and conditions confer upon men the sense of entitlement, if not the duty, to chastise their wives. Wife-beating is, therefore, not an individual, isolated, or aberrant act, but a social license, a duty or sign of masculinity, deeply ingrained in culture, widely practiced, denied and completely or largely immune from legal sanction. (Copelon 116)

Therefore, as I analyze the environment of medieval women mystics, I will try to underline below the main ideologies working in the society of the medieval period. I have already mentioned briefly Elliot's findings on the pollution of the body where she addresses the Church's obsession, via

the penitentials, to annihilate the body through violent censorship for the soul's perfection. As we investigate this religious model along with the medical constructions of the medieval body, we will observe that these models offered mystics-female mystics-a vocabulary that created their spiritual descriptions.

### **Trajectory of Violence in Medieval Literature**

In order to understand eroticized violence in medieval mystical literature, we would have to analyze the medieval cultural meaning of the violence-sexual violence-and the cultural acceptance of it. Let me invoke Kathryn Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* which gives excellent information on the study of rape in the Medieval period, specifically dealing with Medieval literature and law. Gravdal allows me to connect the idea that feminists acknowledge that mystics were influenced by the courtly love tradition or use its eroticized rhetoric. I intend to demonstrate that within mystical literature the same cultural forces of violence, in Gravdal's findings, are at work.

I will try to summarize Gravdal's findings here, as this work has already been done for me and provides the basis for connecting violence to mystical literature. Gravdal demonstrates that medieval discourse made rape

admissible through different literary techniques, and these approaches were manifested through humor and aestheticization and sometimes through cultural, social, and political themes. However, the approbation of rape is particularly most accepted through the romanticism of rape scenes, specifically emanating from the genre of courtly love. Gravdal

scrutinize[s] the cultural ideology that supports rape as a stock narrative device in various medieval genres. In the course of that examination, it explores the relations between signifier and signified, between text and society, from a new vantage. (1)

Gravdal does not seek to answer the question of

whether medieval poets were proponents of sexual violence, but that of the relation between rape and literary genre: how does it happen that the representation of sexual violence is built into a variety of medieval genres and what purpose does it serve? (1)

Gravdal takes the reader through the "archeology of rape," and its linguistic meanings through European, and mainly French, literary history using philology so that she can demonstrate how "language founds and grounds an asymmetrical relationship between women and men, coding sexual violence in ways that make it culturally acceptable" (2). This idea of acceptability is reemphasized in Cixous's definition that "[l]anguage conceals an invincible adversary because it is the language of men and their grammar. We mustn't leave

them a single place that's any more theirs alone than we are'" (qtd. in Gravdal 2).

Gravdal starts with the etymology of the word *rape*, which was associated with words like *enforcer*, used in the medieval period to denote sexual violence but by the sixteenth century was used to describe someone striving mightily to do something and eventually the word lost its connection to rape. Also, rape was described by using the words: *rapere* (classical Latin), *ravir* (old French) and *raptus* (1155 Latin), they were used to mean: to abduct or to be taken away by violence-usually a virgin. However, eventually *rapere*, *raptus*, and specifically, *ravir*, were transformed into the thirteenth-century meaning of *ravishment*: the action of carrying off a woman. By the fourteenth century *ravishment* comes to have a spiritual or religious sense: the action of carrying off a soul to heaven (5). Thus, Gravdal asserts that meaning attached to the words used for rape is eventually given a religious connotation and also is romanticized when used in French and English romances, and even today in modern romance. According to Gravdal, when the term is transferred to the figurative "it is the female who is ravishing, who causes the male to be 'carried away' and is responsible for any ensuing sexual acts. Therefore, the moving force behind

rape becomes the beautiful woman" (5). Also in modern French and English, *ravishing* is intended to be associated with flattery,

a compliment in which the male speaker implies that the female, object of his admiration, has captured his power . . . . [Therefore] the French conflates rape and ravishment as early as the thirteenth century, and the literal meaning of sexual violence is erased behind the romantic troping of ravishment. (5)

Gravdal addresses the blurring of distinctions between forced and voluntary sex via hagiographic literature, and furthermore, "in both legal and literary texts, the violence of the male is construed as an expression of conflicted love, the stuff of which romance is made" (41). Gravdal allows the reader to understand the power play in gender relations of "female sexuality and male brutality" (42). What is significant is that Gravdal demonstrates how rape-sexual violence-operates as a battery for romance literature. Also, in the romance literary genre, "ravishment" becomes subdued, unobtrusive, and "aestheticized and moralized" (14). Thus, the work on a whole deals with the archeological immensity of the knowledge of rape in literary discourse and its relation to medieval culture on sexual violence. In addition, she addresses the cause of legal concern about rape that it does not stem from trying to protect a woman's body, but rape is

only part of a larger dilemma: that of maintaining order and strength in the hierarchical feudal world. Gravdal makes this idea clear in her introduction referring to one incident when a girl was abducted from her Father's house. In trying to define the rape under the law, although the rape was accomplished by violence, the medieval lawmakers were concerned primarily with the protection of the father's rights rather than those of the daughter. Also, at some point in time, medieval culture and law considered *raptus* as a crime against male property and even "disallowed the punishment of forced coitus in marriage" since women consented to coitus at the time of marriage (9).

The pastourelle illusion also creates a discursive space in which "one can laugh at the spectacle of rape" or dismiss it (104). Gravdal investigates audiences' reactions to the text and how sometimes humor in a work is the key to the troping of sexual violence; the reader/audience is never allowed to stop and contemplate the horror of the rape situation (17). She also notices that similar studies of rape, based on the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, found that rape was considered as an "extension of customary victimization of women: a fact of life that is inscribed in the clinical language of the court records" (19). Therefore, Gravdal investigates the question of what is

literature's relation to the law, and she concludes with the idea that rape laws were paralleled to literary ideas of rape and therefore missed the true understanding of how terrible the crime was:

Some of the records reveal a poetic troping of rape reminiscent of that of the pastourelles. It is not surprising that clerks would draw on the pastourelle form, which both obeys and establishes the medieval conception of rape. (139-140)

For example, in some church records, "rape is minimized almost to the point that its violent character is dismissed through clinical and distant summary" and in the secular registers, "the texts work to make images of violence against women tolerable not by minimizing them but by troping them poetically" (140). Gravdal concludes that medieval law follows medieval literature and "even so closely as to echo it, in the construction of discursive strategies that make linguistic paradigms of male violence against women acceptable to the learned legal audience and perhaps even pleasurable for the scribe" (140).

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, there is a camouflaging of violence in the erotic literature and bodily practices of medieval mystics, since, logically, it follows that feminist scholars do acknowledge that female mystical discourse was influenced by the courtly love tradition. In her chapter on "Mystical

Theology and the Erotic Other," Jantzen does acknowledge the presence of the erotic and acknowledges that both Hadewijch and Julian are "influenced by the courtly love tradition" (147). Julian speaks of God as "her courteous Lord," and both show signs of "similarities to one another [. . .]" (Jantzen 147). McAvoy addresses and situates this "eroticized mystical union," by which the female mystic is "especially subject," and is

wholly in keeping with a hermeneutics of the feminine which we find incorporated within Julian's own text and which reflects her own uniquely feminized approach towards an understanding of a Trinitarian God. (68 emphasis added)

We shall see however, that contemporary feminist analysis becomes engrossed with describing this *uniquely feminized approach*, as the mystic's strategy for empowerment. Also, just as the medieval culture is engrossed with their ideal of the feminine, so to are contemporary feminists via the language of *l'écriture féminine*. Some feminist scholars use the language to promote their own feminist viewpoints by arguing that the language serves to empower female mystics. Also, they argue that the language politically subverts the medieval religious and patriarchal systems. Other feminists argue that this empowerment provides an avenue for a female mystic to define herself through the abject biological functions,

body parts, and constructions that shape her body. However, what is interesting is that feminist efforts to consolidate this *uniquely feminized approach* of the erotic through rationality, responsibility, and self-empowerment, indirectly dissolves into a disturbing preoccupation and use of the complex model of the medieval body to represent a contemporary construction of the female body. In addition, in missing, valorizing, or dismissing the violence, and choosing only to highlight this *unique feminine approach* as the site of empowerment, feminists indirectly replicate the negative conventions of medieval medicine and reinforce the notions of medieval female sensuality, which inadvertently exposes a negative type of contemporary rhetoric of femininity, and places the female body inherently desiring *ravishment/violence* under the guise of empowerment.

CHAPTER 2  
THE ANATOMY OF VIOLENCE IN MYSTICAL TEXTS: PIERCING  
MASOCHISM, POTENT PASSION, AND PENITENT WOMEN

**Introduction**

This chapter is an exposition on mystical texts which will demonstrate and give examples of the disturbing aspects of mystical rhetoric. The rhetoric, as scholars admit, exhibits erotic violence, and violence in general, in the way the mystic understands love. However, scholars are more interested in emphasizing the mystic's ability to verbally articulate her body in language and demonstrating how the mystic finds ways to write about her pleasure-her *jouissance*-over against analyzing the specific "content and structure of that pleasure" (Miller 46). Therefore, scholars end up "reinscribing and affirming the erotically violent and abject elements within it" (Miller 46). I should note that although there is much more evidence in mystical texts to demonstrate the violence in mystical language, I will discuss only those mystics that are highlighted in my chapter "Female Mystics and *Bodytalk*: A Feminist Critique." In addition, I would like to add that the purpose of this chapter is to examine mystical texts in order to review the contents. Furthermore, this review will

reveal more of a complete understanding of the violence and disturbing ideology in mystical imagery and language. I refrain from giving an exposition on the physical practices of mystics, which may offer a clearer understanding of the language itself. However, the topic of masochistic, physical behavior of mystics has been exhausted, so I will not try to reconstruct the negative ramifications associated with mystics' physical practices.<sup>1</sup> I hope that this exposition about the language adds to the exhaustive study on the physical practices by demonstrating how mystics internalized violence poetically. Also, mystical language paints a picture of the mystic's fears and violent understanding of commitment, union with Christ in love, and the erotic.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Western Christianity made a huge shift in its traditional roots and its ascetic tendencies towards the body and sexuality. This shift is characterized by Bernard McGinn in *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and*

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<sup>1</sup>See Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1987; Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*; Ralph Frenken, "Childhood and Fantasies of Medieval Mystics," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 28.2 (2000): 150-172; Ralph Frenken, *Kindheit und Mystik im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2002).

*Women in the New Mysticism*, as the "new mysticism"<sup>2</sup> of the Middle Ages. The shift had, as one of its main characteristics, a leaning towards an "affective spirituality" which incorporated a spirituality that was very emotional, sensual, maternal, and erotic, as opposed to traditional spirituality, which was more intellectual and speculative. According to McGinn, male and female mystics both used the language of the new mysticism;<sup>3</sup> however, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the language of female mystics. At the core of this *affective spirituality*, medieval female mystics centered around the practice of *imitatio Christi*, which focused on the body and suffering via Christ's suffering. The female mystic experienced Christ's suffering via God's violent assaults on the body

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<sup>2</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism* (1200-1350), vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 12-30.

<sup>3</sup>McGinn admits that both male and female mystics used the language of the "new mysticism"; however, they had different uses. Men used the language to complement their image of authority with that of the maternal and women used the language for the physicality, since they did not have authority in a misogynistic society; see McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism* 19-20. However, Bynum's understanding of the connection between a specifically female spirituality and embodiment has been criticized by McGinn. See McGinn's review of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* in *History of Religion* 28 (1998): 91-92.

and soul. Therefore, in this case, the mystic seems to be symbolically dis-membering her body via severe asceticism, desiring suffering and death, and willingly accepting God's assaults in order to re-member Christ's body and to be in union with his body via three main headings: "Violence of *Imitatio Christi* and Fear of Abandonment"; "Dying to Self, Suffering in Love, and Painful Death"; and "Erotic Imagery and Desire."

#### **Violence and *Imitatio Christi* and Fear of Abandonment**

Female mystics aim to experience, literally or figuratively, the passion of Christ. Most mystics write about Christ's suffering as if it were their own suffering. Therefore, Christ's suffering during his life and his crucifixion is repeatedly celebrated and monumentalized in mystical texts. Julian of Norwich's spiritual experience, as with other mystics, is one in which there is an intense struggle of the soul and body against suffering and violence. In Julian's depiction of this violent struggle, she experiences God's assaults via bodily sickness. In fact, Julian asks God for this *gyfte* of bodily sickness in her youth so that she might experience or partake of the suffering of Christ even unto death. Julian states that she had a "wilfull desyre to have of God's gyfte a bodily sicknes. I would that that sicknes were so hard as to the

death" (LT 2, Baker 5). However, Julian's terminal illness is not to be viewed via anger towards God, but in Julian's theology, God's assaults must be translated as God's love and mercy, which the mystic/believer deserves. In addition, the assaults not only act as a purification process to test the believer's forbearance or honor, but they act as a form of reward towards better living or union with God:

I desyred to have all maner of paynes, bodily and ghostly, that I should have if I should have died, all the dredys and temptations of fiendes, and all maner of other paynes, save the out passing of the sowle. And this ment I, for I would be purgied by the mercie of God and after live more to the worshippe of God by cause of that sicknes.<sup>4</sup> For I hoped that it might have ben to my a reward when I shuld have died, for I desyred to have ben soone with my God and maker. (LT 2, Baker 5)

Julian's prayer emphasizes her wish "for a 'recollection of the Passion,' that is, a vision of the suffering and death of Jesus in such a way as to be a participant in events, not a detached observer" (Jantzen 166). According to Julian's belief, God's assault can also take the form of temptation by demons or fiends. When Julian first experiences her assault of sickness in the body, she mentions that she was

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Spearing, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998). Spearing translates the last sentence as "I wished to be purged by the mercy of God and afterwards to live more to God's glory because of that sickness" (43).

mistaken in thinking that the assault of bodily illness was "the tyme of my temptation" that "by the sufferance of God and with his keping be tempted of fiendes before I should die" (LT 4, Baker 8).

Similarly, Mechthild of Magdeburg experiences the violence of God's assaults in which "she is repeatedly assaulted and wounded, tormented and abandoned" (Miller 30). However, the mystic demonstrates masochism when she speaks of God's love being measured by His assaults or the "higher the love, the holier the martyr" (Mechthild 94):<sup>5</sup>

O Lord, you pamper to excess my dank prison  
 In which I drink your water of the world and eat  
 in great misery  
 The ash cake of my frailty,  
 And am wounded to death  
 By the beam of your fiery love.  
 Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery,  
 My wounds untended, in great torment.  
 [. . . . .]  
 I . . . shall give myself to you completely and  
 shall give myself to you forever  
 Expecting nothing in return, just as you will.  
 (Mechthild 94)

As Mechthild tunes into the passion of Christ, she not only describes Christ's suffering, but she puts herself in his

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<sup>5</sup>*Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1998). All quotations demonstrating Mechthild's works, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Tobin's translation. The difference will be noted in the chapter when it is just Mechthild's words or Tobin's words dealing with his critical study on Mechthild from the translation.

place and becomes a participator incorporating new dimensions to that scene of suffering. That scene is described in terms of physical battering, sexual passion, and self-destruction:

She is captured in the first experience  
 When God kisses her in sweet union.  
 She is assailed with many a holy thought  
 That she not waver when she mortifies her flesh  
 She is bound by the power of the Holy spirit,  
 And her bliss is indeed manifold.  
 She is slapped with the great powerlessness  
 Of not being able to enjoy without interruption  
 eternal light  
 She is brought to judgement trembling with shame  
 Because God so often avoids her  
 Because of the stains of her sins.  
 [. . . . .]  
 When she recognizes herself to be worthless and  
 unworthy  
 And despises herself with the great army of her  
 thoughts.  
 [. . . . .]  
 She is buffeted and beaten with severe blows  
 When she must return to the body.  
 She is stripped of all things  
 [. . . . .]  
 Her eyes are bound with her body's baseness  
 Because she is so utterly imprisoned in its  
 darkness.  
 [. . . . .]  
 With the hammer of the chase of love she is nailed  
 so fast to the cross  
 That all creatures are not able to call her back  
 again.  
 Her body killed in living love  
 [. . . . .].  
 (Mechthild 117-118)

Mechthild does not refrain from expressing her violent suffering and utter despair. In the *Preface* to Frank

Tobin's translation of Mechthild's poetry, Margot Schmidt comments on Mechthild's belief that

[i]t is primarily the superior power of the God's love which causes inexpressible suffering: 'Bright love of playful flood . . . causes [the heart] to die without death' (III 13). The agonies of this love are compared in detail with the passion of Christ, with the result that devotion to the passion turns into a mysticism of suffering in which pain loses its bitter quality as one concentrates on following Christ and on his suffering as redemption and reparation—all the more so when the heart itself is affected. (xxxii-xxxiii)

Furthermore, like Julian, Mechthild demonstrates that suffering, via God's assaults, acts as a measuring stick for the mystic's honor, forbearance, and reward; therefore, suffering should be received in good spirit by the mystic, which is a demonstration of love and the test of patience from God:

Whoever in pain complains of his burdens  
Is either blind in knowledge  
Or spineless in forbearance.  
His love has grown cold  
And he is jaded in virtue,  
Or his mind is dull  
And blunt as to good words. (Mechthild 240)

Therefore, as Mechthild concludes with God's words, she paints a picture of a relationship with God as marked by pain and rejection and the constant sense of torment because of her subordinate status in Christ: "When [the believer] is sick, he should honor, serve, and love me alone with

cheerful forbearance. When he is scorned, he should love me and wait patiently" (Mechthild 240).

Likewise, St. Umiltà of Faenza is repeatedly assaulted and wounded, tormented, and abandoned. In her writing she describes herself as an "unhappy and desolate soul, struck on every side!" (248). She mentions that her progression into this mystic spirituality causes her to descend

into the dark shadowy valley. [. . .] I am poor. I no longer have anything for myself, [. . .] my friends have abandoned me, [. . .]. My face that was luminous is now dark. O unhappy me! [. . .]. O unhappy me and more than desolate! Abandoned to the waves of the sea, my grief is greater than the sea itself. (Umiltà 248)<sup>6</sup>

Umiltà is so distraught and afflicted by her aspiring efforts to quench her burning desire for love, that she pleads with Christ not to "delay" in rescuing her and she besieges God not to abandon her: "Christ, supreme love, have compassion for me and do not abandon me" and "delightful love, do not abandon me!" (250, 253). However, Umiltà's affliction only causes her to express what the mystic *should*

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<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Petroff, "Saint Umiltà of Faenza: Sermons," trans. Richard J. Pioli, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986). All quotations demonstrating Umiltà's works, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Petroff's chapter. The difference will be noted in the chapter when it is just Umiltà's words or Petroff's words dealing with her critical study on Umiltà from the translation.

express: love for God amidst afflictions. Therefore during the tumult, Umiltà cries out in terms of endearment to her oppressor-god: "come then, O Jesus, sweet lover, and do not delay. [. . .] Jesus [. . .] enflame me with your love and make me luminous like a torch that can cast brightness into any kind of darkness" (250).

In addition, Hadewijch of Antwerp, also describes her spiritual experience via the discourse of violence and love. In fact, Hadewijch praises Love's<sup>7</sup> violent assaults and longs for Love's success in violence:

Oh! I am inflamed in mind, hoping for success  
 In the blessing of belonging fully to Love.  
 Oh! To be wise in violence, that is success-

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<sup>7</sup>Miller explains that "[a]mong the Beguines, God is often referred to by use of the traditional masculine appellations 'Son' or 'Lord,'" but God is often "personified in the feminine, as 'Love' (*minne*), 'Lady,' or 'Queen.'" (31 n. 22). In addition, "'Love' can refer not only to God but also to the power of God's love for creation," which is a "seemingly distinct entity or energy 'belonging' to God but not necessarily or wholly able to be equated with God." (31 n. 22). Furthermore, Miller asserts that "'Love' can also refer to a more generalized 'divine power that pervades the universe.'" (See McGinn 202). And it is for these reasons, the "grammatical, conceptual and gender relations found in the writing of the Beguines are often complex and enigmatic" (31 n. 22). Miller refers to McGinn's *Flowering of Mysticism*. Also, for further reading on "Lady Love"-*Minne* read Tanis Guest, "Hadewijch and *Minne*," *Poetry of the Netherlands in Its European Context, 1170-1930*, ed. Theodoor Weevers (London: Athlone Press, 1960) and Elizabeth Petroff, "Gender, Knowledge, and Power in Hadewijch's *Strophische Gedichten*," *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

Yes, to be free in the violence of Love. (351)<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Miller notes that Hadewijch "tells of the violence one must learn to endure-and even to desire-if one is to become worthy of Love's attention, for that is simply how Love operates" (31). Hadewijch not only believes that the mystic should endure the violence, but like Julian and other mystics, Hadewijch measures the violence as a reward or sign of progression:

He who wishes thus to progress in love  
 Must not fear expense, or harm,  
 Or pain; but faithfully confront  
 The strictest commands of Love,  
 And be submissive with faultless service  
 In all her comings and in all her goings:  
 Anyone who behaved thus, relying on Love's  
 fidelity,  
 Would stand to the end, having become all love in  
 Love. (Hadewijch 218)

Ultimately Hadewijch's wish, like Julian who wished for illness, is to experience God's or Love's assaults, since the mystic's holiness is measured by the intensity of those assaults. Hadewijch also demonstrates a belief that the mystic should be submissive in cruelty and reveals an ideology parallel to the medieval world-view operating in

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<sup>8</sup>Columba Hart, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist, 1980). All the quotations for Hadewijch are taken from Hart's translation. The difference will be noted in the chapter when it is just Hadewijch's words or Hart's words dealing with her critical study on Hadewijch from the translation.

the *Man of Law's Tale* reflected in Constance's responses to her suffering.<sup>9</sup> Hadewijch becomes convinced that:

the more Love loves her, the more numerous will be the painful strikes and aggressive assaults Love will 'lovingly' grant her. She insistently maintains that Love 'deals her blows in a wonderful way: the greater her Love, the more crushing her burden!' Hadewijch finally accepts that brutality is Love's preferred *modus operandi*, if her soul wishes to gain Love's favor, she must humbly submit to Love's assaults. The soul has no other choice than to embrace both the 'sweetness and cruelty, joy and sorrow' that Love dispenses at her whim, for Love is all we have. (Miller 31-32)

Another mystic who believed that patient suffering via God's assaults is the answer to receiving a virtuous status and God's reward is Angela of Foligno. Angela's understanding of this principle is clearly understood in her

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<sup>9</sup>Constance's character imitates the Christ-like example of patient suffering by Constance's submission to God's will (assaults). The virtuous believer must suffer patiently. Therefore the suffering or violence is moralized, since it bestows upon Constance the reward of being virtuous. Therefore Constance's, and indeed the mystic's, responses to suffering demonstrate *positive* spiritual growth. There is some debate on whether the *virtuous* suffering of Constance should be seen as positive or negative. However, for a closer look at the *Tale* examining Constance's display of virtue as a parallel to the medieval world-view, an aspect of spiritual growth, and a positive acceptance of fate and authority respectively, see Thomas Bestul, "The *Man of Law's Tale* and the Rhetorical Foundations of Chaucerian Pathos," *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 216-26; Eugene Clasby, "Chaucer's Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic Life," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1979): 221-33; and Sheila Delany, "Womanliness in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 63-72.

book of *Instructions* in the section called "The rule of perfect love consists of being in the companionship of the Lord, that is a life of penance with him" (302).<sup>10</sup> In this passage, Angela states that God speaks to her saying:

[d]o penance, so that you can come to me, the same kind of penance that I, the Son of God, did on earth to save you. [. . .] You do so [penance] in the hope of obtaining an infinite reward from me. (302)

Angela's assaults were also realistic in her "encounter with total despair, one in which body and soul tremble in uncontrollable agony" (Lachance 68). Angela cries out in "final abandonment, the words of Christ on the cross as the only one fitting to articulate her groans of anguish. She wails and cries out repeatedly: 'My son, my son, do not abandon me, my son!'" (Lachance 68, 69). In fact, Lachance mentions that in Angela's despair "the horrible darkness" is so great that it "plummet[s] [her] into the abyss of utter loneliness and despair" (67). Also, Angela is in such a state of ruin that she describes her desperation in such gruesome imagery as of a man being hanged from the gallows:

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<sup>10</sup>*Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (New York: Paulist Press, 1993). The difference will be noted in the chapter when it is just Angela's words or Lachance's words dealing with his critical study on Angela from the translation.

the only comparison that came to her mind to describe her state of desolation was that of 'a man hanged by the neck who, with his hands tied behind him and his eyes blindfolded, remains dangling from the gallows and yet lives, with no help, no support, no remedy, swinging in the empty air.' (Lachance 67)

However, although Angela is in "horrible darkness," she demonstrates how she accepts and embraces the violence when she states, "this love . . . generates a great zeal in me, one which is painful and makes me suffer" (Angela 272).

The mystics that were discussed in this section understood and experienced love only under a conditional premise: they must experience vehement suffering in order to experience divine love. God states, as Angela's writing suggests, that "I will never leave you, if you love me" (141 emphasis added). Therefore God's goodness and kindness is measured by the intensity of His assaults, which the mystic must accept, willingly, in order to prove herself worthy of love in return or receive glory.

#### **Dying to Self, Suffering in Love, and Painful Death**

This section will overlap with the first section on suffering and the mystic's struggle to please God. Miller

describes mystics' theology as "paradoxical"<sup>11</sup> since the mystic's soul is only victorious

insofar as it submits to the pain and violence of God's love. Its success is predicated upon its own annihilation. The soul becomes united with God only to the extent that its own sense of self is wholly, or nearly, obliterated. In the end it is God who conquers, and it is only God who remains. (Miller 38)

Based on these findings, this ideology requires the mystic to give up self in order to be rewarded by Love/God, since "[i]n a tradition going back to Paul, Christians are exhorted to die to themselves and to the world in order to rise again with and in Christ" (Tobin 15). Mechthild demonstrates the influence of such an ideology through her courtly love imagery wherein "the closeness of love and death is a frequent theme. [. . .]: I would willingly die of love / If it could happen to me" (Tobin 15). She also speaks of "Suffering pain willingly for God" (Mechthild 52). Therefore, in Mechthild's theology, not only is God's love implemented as a condition to the acceptance of violence,

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<sup>11</sup>Miller notes that the "the concept of the paradox [. . .] has much to do with the elision of the oppressive and exploitive character of patriarchal ideology." Therefore, wherever paradox is aforementioned, "that is precisely the point at which [Miller's] feminist hermeneutic of suspicion sits up and takes notice" (38 n. 54).

but that love is achieved through the violence of self-sacrifice:

I long to love him to the death, boundlessly and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul, for your Life has died for love of you. Love him so fiercely that you could die for him. (15)

Mechthild also constructs her entire experience within this discourse of suffering and death. In her chapter "Love Shall be Deadly, Boundless, and Unceasing; This is the Folly of Fools," Mechthild submits to suffering and painful death caused by Lady Love:

I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him to the death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. (53)

However as Mechthild continues, she embodies the view which causes her to regard the body as tainted:

O Love, Lady, help me  
That I may die in his arms which now embrace me.  
But still, willingly shall I suffer the pain of death  
In my sinful body. (164)

Thus, in Mechthild spirituality, the mystic's responses to suffering demonstrate her spiritual growth so much so that the mystic is continually tormented by the desire to continually prove her status in Christ, no matter the cost:

I would willingly die of love  
If it could happen to me.  
Him whom I love I have seen  
With my beaming eyes  
Present in my soul. (69)

Mechthild pleads with God to have mercy on "one who has been consumed here in the fire of your love and has been absorbed in your humility and has been annihilated in all things" (252). God speaks to Mechthild and His responses epitomizes, in Mechthild Christian world view, the mystic's success as being dependent on her acceptance of God's fate and authority, no matter the consequences:

My Godhead burned you;  
 My humanity recognized you;  
 My Holy Spirit sanctified you in your poverty.  
 Those who love much like to remain silent.  
 Those who do not love have always been schemers  
 against love. (252)

As Mechthild continues to write about her betrothal to God, we find her experience with Divine love to be one in which, she is continually sacrificing self and the language of love is very persuasive and commanding:

Then the Lord got very angry with little me and  
 asked me for my judgment:  
 'Now tell me, are you mine or not?'  
 'Certainly, Lord, that is what I long for from  
 you.'  
 'Shall I then not do with you what I want?'  
 'Yes, Dearest to my heart, gladly; even if I  
 should thus become nothing.'  
 Then our Lord said: 'You shall obey and trust me  
 in these matters, and you shall also become sick  
 for a long time, and I shall take care of you.'  
 (143)

Thus, this mystical spirituality is formed in a paradox which Hadewijch describes in her poem, "Paradoxes of Love," as having a masochistic love affair with Love/God wherein

the mystic is drawn to Love's tempestuous and violent characteristics: she asserts what is the "sweetest in Love is her tempestuousness; / Her deepest abyss is her most beautiful form" for "to die of hunger for her is to feed and taste; / Her despair in assurance" (344). Also Hadewijch, like other female mystics, parallels her union or marriage to Christ with that of subjective suffering: "I must suffer to the death with Christ in Love" (115). She also expresses the desolation in participating in and enduring such brutal terms of Love:

Bitter and dark and desolate  
 Are Love's ways in the beginning of love;  
 Before anyone is perfect in Love's service,  
 He often becomes desperate:  
     Yet where he imagines losing, it is all gain.  
 How can one experience this?  
     By sparing neither much nor little,  
 But giving himself totally in love.  
 (Hadewijch 224)

Hart explains the awareness of such a sacrifice that Hadewijch

never relinquishes her conviction that if Christ as Man freely willed to live in human misery and sufferings, we likewise must accept human misery and sufferings because he did so. She [Hadewijch] well knows that the pain, grief, suffering, affliction, blows, even cruelty of which she complains are God's gifts to her, by which she participates in the sufferings of Christ's Humanity, and through which Love is being communicated to love. She invariably ends on the note of submission and acceptance in love. (38)

Hadewijch's belief parallels Julian's theology of suffering, as discussed earlier, in that suffering acts as a prerequisite for God's *gftye*, reward, or glory. Julian asserts that "the harder oure paynes have ben with hym in hys crosse, the more shalle our worschippe be with hym in his kyngdom" (LT 21, Baker 33).<sup>12</sup> In addition, Jantzen also indicates Julian's passion for pain since this passion allows Julian a glorious reward:

For [God] regards sin as sorrow and pains for his lovers, to whom for love he assigns no blame. The reward which we shall receive will not be small, but it will be great, glorious and honourable. (Julian qtd. in Jantzen 154)

Therefore, like Julian, Hadewijch sees perfection in suffering and believes that the mystic should "suffer gladly many vicissitudes" (339). Hadewijch also believes that

it is great perfection to suffer all things from all people. But, God knows, the greatest perfection of all is to suffer from false brethren who seem to be *members of the household of the faith* (Gal. 6:10). (55)

Thus, Hadewijch's theology is formulated in a continual struggle of perfecting self by annihilating self, accepting

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<sup>12</sup>Spearing translates this line as follows: "And the worse the pain we have suffered with him on his cross, the greater the glory we shall enjoy with him in his kingdom" (72).

death, and suffering in love. Hadewijch writes that she will gladly suffer all for Love and

although I die often.  
[ . . . . . ]  
I endure everything with joyfulness in play:  
Affliction or mercy. (170)

Hadewijch believes in this love because for her

He whom high Love's nature touches  
Always suffers gladly,  
As in his deeds clearly appears;  
He ever thinks them imperfect.  
[ . . . . . ]  
Her (Love's) fairest enlightenments are heavy  
burdens,  
Her sharpest assaults, renewed pleasures. (222)

Hadewijch also affirms that

He who has confidence in his God  
Loves counsel and loves commandment;  
All pain is pleasant to him;  
For he gladly won perfection  
Whereby he contented God,  
[ . . . . . ]  
And you are wholly patient to the death.  
You shall not only endure  
Adversity without complaint,  
But you must not know that it is to your  
advantage,  
[ . . . . . ]. (Hart 326)

Therefore, Hadewijch admonishes that the mystic should "Suffer sadness gladly, / And know that it is Love's mode of action" (330).

Hadewijch's theology summarizes the masochism in mystical texts and practices, that is, the mystic does not only suffer willingly in order to gain a reward, but she

must go hunting for suffering in patience. Hadewijch claims that the process of growth in love is evident in the soul:

The second month is joyful suffering  
 For the sake of perfection, and keen efforts  
 By which one can learn perfection.  
 Therefore do not spare even coming to blows;  
 Where you can, go hunting for suffering;  
 [. . . . .]  
 How one can exercise greater love;  
 For patience most causes to grow and dilate  
 That bosom in which Love is received. (347)

Therefore in mystical spirituality, these mystics demonstrate their virtue by accepting the fate of suffering and death so that the intensity of their "blows" warrants a hierarchal measuring of reward or union with God. Hadewijch sums up this mystical belief when she speaks of having life in death:

How they who love can shudder  
 When they know themselves thus lost in love!  
 They are conquered so that they may conquer  
 That unconquerable greatness,  
 And this at all times causes them to begin  
 That life in new death. (163)

#### **Erotic Imagery and Desire**

Female mystics spiritual experiences tended to be an expression of intense eroticism, and mystics expressed love from an erotic premise based in violence and suffering. In "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," Dyan Elliot discusses the ecstatic raptures of female medieval

mystics,<sup>13</sup> and she connects their spirituality with their sexuality. Also, McGinn emphasizes that the *new mysticism* is specifically characteristic of Dominican women whose ecstasies and raptures<sup>14</sup> were recorded in the *Sister Books* of late Medieval Germany.<sup>15</sup> These ecstasies and raptures are also examined by Jantzen who affirms that

Hadewijch's deep desire for union with God, 'fruition' of God, as she understands it. Her experiences in the visions are sometimes intensely erotic, as we would expect from what we have seen of her poetry. They are strongly participatory. (165)

Mystical betrothal is described in terms of erotic love; a love that can free the mystic's soul from emptiness or the mystic's body from being earth-bound. This is why female mystics, including Julian and Hadewijch, "emphasise [. . .] the physical and sensual and material" (Jantzen 147). In addition, "sensuality in Julian does involve bodiliness, but

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<sup>13</sup>Dyan Elliott, "The Physiology of Rapture and Female Spirituality," *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (York: York Medieval Press, 1997) 141-174.

<sup>14</sup>See my chapter one on Gravidal's study of the word *rape* and its unstable meanings in medieval society and law. The etymology of the word *rape*, in Gravidal's study, demonstrates that other words define the term: *rapture*, *raptus*, and *ravish*. I would also like to use the term loosely to indicate violence-harm done to the body-erotic violence or sexual violence.

<sup>15</sup>McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism* 304-319.

it also involves consciousness, the life of the senses and the mind" (148). Also Julian states that "Jesus, in sharing our humanity, shares our sensuality" (qtd. in Jantzen 148). Therefore, the female mystic, experiences God through the sensualities, and she affirms and accentuates sensuality and sexuality (McGinn 21).

Julian's assault by God "conjure up sexual intimacy which relies, in part, on the bed imagery but it is also heavily imbued with an invocation of the love-bower of the biblical Song of Songs" (McAvoy 151). Julian visualizes her bed soaked with blood, and there are

aspects of her depiction of her prone body lying beneath that of the suffering Christ on the animated cross which also bear the eroticised resonances of the bride of the Song of Songs awaiting the embrace of her heavenly bridegroom. (McAvoy 151)

Likewise Tobin asserts that the

vehemence of [Mechthild's] passion is often expressed in erotic images. In the dance with her Lover the soul hopes to 'leap with abandon' before she comes 'into the bed of love' where she shall 'refresh' herself with her Lover. She wants to drink 'undiluted wine' and go to her Lover as a 'full-grown bride.' When she enters the secret chamber, our Lord bids her: 'Take off your clothes.' For  
 Nothing shall come between them:  
 That a blessed stillness  
 That both desire comes over them.  
 He surrenders himself to her,  
 And she surrenders herself to him. (16)

Indeed, the passion of Christ is expressed in an erotic reality where the mystic envisions the actions of two lovers—God and mystic—consummating their union.

However, the sensuality and sexuality that is expressed via spiritual mysticism by these penitent women are expressed masochistically through tormented desire and violent sexual passion which plague the mystic's desire to love, to forbear, and to be satiated in Christ. These passionistic expressions are directed toward describing a relationship with God and was based on imitating Christ; thus, the danger of the violence expressed may not be realized or may be "aestheticized or sanitized," and the violence is camouflaged under the umbrella of spirituality.<sup>16</sup> As discussed earlier, penitent women not only understood that they must suffer because Christ suffered, but they desired to willingly experience suffering. Their biographers prove that suffering, for mystics, is not only evident in what they wrote but it was

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<sup>16</sup>Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and its Alternatives* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999) 9-28. I take this phrase from Wolfthal's book where she discusses how artists and art historians have traditionally "sanitized and aestheticized rape" (9, 28). Therefore, according to Wolfthal, Medieval and Renaissance artists camouflage the violent and sexual aspects of certain rape themes and suggest a happy ending.

manifested in what they physically did. In "Mystical Acts Queer Tendencies,"<sup>17</sup> Lochrie acknowledges that there is "violence and disturbing darkness of mystical love and sex in women's texts" (182). She also notes that although mystical literature imitates the sensual imagery of the *Song of Songs* tradition and the romantic conventions of courtly love, mystical sex is far more gruesome and "for many female mystics, [. . .] mystical sex [. . .] was a frightening, violating, and debilitating experience" (186 MA). Lochrie asserts that Hadewijch of Antwerp and Angela of Foligno's poetry contain some of the most erotic and perturbing images

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<sup>17</sup>Lochrie seeks to argue that "mystical sex" constitutes to a form of queering in the medieval period, that is, that mystical sex is the "contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy" (180). I am using Lochrie's article to demonstrate how scholars do admit or realize that there is erotic violence in mystical texts. Miller notes that Lochrie asserts that mystics use the discourse of courtly love to express their spiritual desire and therefore these female mystics reveal "'what has always been 'there' in courtly conventions—the suffering and ennoblement [suffering] produces'"; therefore, they "'queer' this discourse and remove it from its 'idealizing ideological framework' (186)." Miller states that Lochrie contends that the queering results in "'mystical sex [which] is not just 'sex as we know it,' but that more troubling field of experience that strays into the realms of violence, suffering and torture.'" Thus, this "experience is 'unrecognizable to modern sensibilities' and so is rarely commented upon or problematized by contemporary scholars (183)" (46 n. 85). See Lochrie's "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 180-200.

of mystical sex. Therefore, for Hadewijch, love is a "hell of suffering, even of disgust" (184 MA) and is never satisfied:

As Hell turns everything to ruin,  
 In love nothing else is acquired  
 But disgust and torture without pity;  
 Forever to be in unrest,  
 Forever assault and new persecution;  
 To be wholly devoured and engulfed  
 In her unfathomable essence,  
 To founder unceasingly in heat and cold,  
 In the deep insurmountable darkness of Love.  
 This outdoes the torments of hell. (qtd. in  
 Lochrie 184 MA)

Lochrie notes also that Angela of Foligno's spiritual experience with Love is also similar to Hadewijch:

And then at once she was filled with love and inestimable satiety, which, although it satiated, generated at the same time inestimable hunger [. . .], so that all her members were unstrung and her soul languished and desired to fly away [. . .]. And she wished neither to see nor to feel any creature. And she did not speak and did not know whether she could speak, but within she spoke, clamoring that God not let her languish in such a death, for she thought life to be death. (qtd. in Lochrie 184-185 MA)

Lochrie therefore asserts that in Angela's ideology, "sexual consummation is achieved with a violence which she mistakes for death itself" (185 MA).

Additionally, Mechthild also expresses her union with God in the violence of death and asserts that she will "love him to the death, boundlessly, and without ceasing" (53). Mechthild's poetry is pregnant with vivid images of a "soul

imprisoned and tormented by its own desire" (Miller 35); however, the desire appears to be somewhat melancholic and is wrapped with the rhetoric of unrequited love, which incorporate images of desperation and a lack of self-worth:

How painfully I long for you  
 When you want to spare me;  
 This all creatures would not be able to express to  
 you fully  
 If they were to lament on my behalf;  
 For I suffer inhuman anguish  
 Human death I would find more pleasant.  
 I seek you with my thoughts  
 As a maiden secretly does her lover.  
 I shall fall terribly sick from this  
 For I am bound to you.  
 The bond is stronger than I am,  
 Thus I cannot become free of love.  
 I cry out to you in great longing,  
 [. . . . .]  
 I hope for your coming with heavy heart  
 I cannot rest I am on fire,  
 Unquenchable in your burning love.  
 I pursue you with all my might.  
 [. . . . .]  
 Leave me, at least, through grace that same gift  
 That you have given to dogs through their nature-  
 That I might be loyal to you in my misery,  
 [. . . . .]. (Mechthild  
 93)

However, although Mechthild experiences violence in her relationship with Love, Love is made to seem erotically appealing. Mechthild expresses the body's torment via God's assaults when striving for a relationship with God; however, Mechthild uses erotic imagery to describe her torment:

My body is in great torment, my soul is in sublime bliss; for she has both gazed upon and embraced her Lover in her arms. He causes her, poor

wretch, torment. [. . .]. Then the body speaks to the soul:  
 'Where have you been?  
 I can't take it anymore.'  
 And the Soul says:  
 'Quiet, you are a fool.  
 I want to be with my Lover,  
 Even if it means you would perish.  
 I am his joy, he is my torment." (44)

In addition in Mechthild's view, the body's torment is expected, since mystical love involves "separation" and is as "essential to love as union" thus the soul's love for God should be *bound*. Mechthild disregards "unbound love" since its power does not wound; however, abandonment, separation, torment are the good fruits of bound love (Tobin 14). Tobin notes that "[f]or Mechthild [. . .]. Bound love transcends the senses and denies the body its will. In it the soul listens for the divine voice, sees the divine light, and seeks the divine will" (Tobin 14). Mechthild's understanding of love requires ecstasy and pain and, as discussed earlier, continual abandonment and estrangement from God. Thus for Mechthild, mystical spirituality consists of continual pain via the ecstasy of love-this is the mystic's way of life.

Miller describes Mechthild's desire as a "powerful weapon" which forces God to "fill her longing"; Mechthild is disheartened by the "torment of her desire" and God assures her that her "suffering desire" will not be ignored" (37):

My dear Dove, now listen to me!  
 My divine wisdom is so utterly upon you  
 That I direct all my gifts to you,  
 As much as your frail body can bear.  
 Your secret sighs shall reach me.  
 Your heart's anguish can compel me.  
 Your sweet pursuit shall so exhaust me  
 That I shall yearn to cool myself  
 In your limpid soul,  
 To which I have been bound. (qtd. in Miller 37)

Mechthild also speaks about the sacrifices that must be made when under the spell of "burned love":

Ah dear Lord, have mercy on one who has been  
 consumed here in the fire of your love and has  
 been absorbed in your humility and has been  
 annihilated in all things. God Speaks:  
 My Godhead burned you;  
 My humanity recognized you;  
 My Holy Spirit sanctified you in your poverty.  
 Those who love much like to remain silent.  
 Those who do not love have always been schemers  
 against love. (252)

Mechthild's understanding of God reveals a love based on a system of merit: Love/God requires the mystic to be absorbed in humility and annihilated in self. However, if these sacrifices are not made, the mystic will be branded as false or a "schemer" in love.

Mystics not only express erotic imagery in terms of physical bondage and self-sacrifice, but they express the erotic in terms of penetrating, wounding, or piercing of an

arrow or blade into the mystics body/soul.<sup>18</sup> Mystics therefore refer to Love piercing a blade, or love as the penetrating of a blade, into the mystic's body or soul: Mechthild states in her poem: "She is pierced in the side by a blind man / With a sweet spear of innocent love" (118). Likewise, Hadewijch's poetry depicts Love as repeatedly wounding her heart with its penetrating arrows:

For the heart noble Love has wounded.  
 How can the noble soul keep on-  
 Yes, it is the noblest of all creatures,  
 Which of its nature must love in the highest  
 degree-  
     When it does not have its Beloved?  
 As Love's arrows strike it,  
     It shudders that it lives.  
 At all times when the arrow strikes,  
 It increases the wound and brings torment.  
 All who love know well  
     That these must ever be one:

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<sup>18</sup>Elizabeth McAvoy discusses the erotic imagery of Julian's text when she is asked to penetrate the "vagina-like wound" in Jesus' side (167-168). See McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004); Julie Miller notes, in her article, that medieval mystics "utilized the explicitly sexual imagery of penetration-by arrows darts, swords, and rays of divine love" (32). See Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15:2 (1999). Also, in "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies" Lochrie explores "mystical sex" and its explicit sexual imagery via the "transitivity of Christ's wound to vulva/vagina" (190). Lochrie asserts further that the wound of Christ represents an "object of violence, suggested in the acts of violence inflicted not only on the body of Christ, but also, by implication, against the feminized wound/vulva" (190).

Sweetness or pain, or both together,  
 Tempestuous before the countenance of Love. (162)

Umiltà also speaks to her beloved Saint John, and her desire to be "bound" with his "chain"; she describes herself as a "worthless leaf" and parallels John's action of renewing their love with the action of a blade penetrating the body: "Be mindful of that lovely blade you have fashioned; it is love and not a scourge. You have plunged it into my heart and firmly held it there" (253). Similarly, Miller notes that Angela of Foligno speaks of the "'arrow' and 'sword' of love" (32). Also, in her spiritual romance, Angela ponders whether the "beloved is also stricken as deeply by the same arrow of love" (227). Lachance also makes note of the wounding of the soul in Angela's poetry:

The first arrows of God's love that pierced Angela struck fear in her soul. When she began on the road of penance, Angela's soul was in a state of chaos and disarray—a seething cauldron of undifferentiated emotion. In this Dantean 'dark wood,' fearing that she was being damned to hell, Angela took cognizance of her sins and wept profusely. (56)

In fact, Angela's "passionate love affair with the 'suffering God-man,' the crucified Christ, is the central and organizing principle of her journey" (Lachance 85), and Angela's struggle to reach God and have a love relationship with him was a sacrificial preoccupation with

purification, the necessary elimination of everything that stands in the way of progress

toward union with her newfound lover. Set ablaze by Christ's love for her and feeling its heat, her soul 'cries out and moans' like 'a stone flung in the forge to melt it into lime, which crackles when it is licked by the flames, but after it is baked makes not a sound.' (Lachance 59)

Furthermore, Angela of Foligno is plagued by her "state of languor" (Miller 35) which is propelled by her desire, since her great desire for love causes her to suffer greatly:

Angela bluntly puts the blame for her pain on love: 'Love has done this, because the more something is loved, the more one desires that it be possessed. Therefore, because with my whole being I desire to have you before the divine majesty, I languish. Moreover, this love . . . generates a great zeal in me, one which is painful and makes me suffer.' (qtd. in Miller 35)

Similarly Hadewijch's experience with violent love does not crush her desire, but awakens erotic desire within her:

For Love, his pain become pure profit  
 [. . . . .]  
 But he who spares any pain for Love,  
 [. . . . .]  
 Inevitably finds his service burdensome.  
 How does noble Love make assault and blow  
 Always welcome, night and day?  
 Because we can fall back on nothing else  
 But confidence with reliance on Love.  
 [. . . . .]  
 How the Beloved and the loved soul embrace each  
 other  
 And have fruition in giving themselves to each  
 other. (221, 223, 225)

Hadewijch is also plagued with the harrowing pain of desire which causes the soul that loves to be powerless:

Here the soul that loves Love cannot defend  
 itself;  
 We must sustain her kingdom and her power,

However we fear to go to ruin in love;  
 This is unknown to aliens;  
 So the higher the palace of desire is,  
 The deeper yawns the abyss.  
 In the law of Love, it is written;  
 He who strikes shall himself be struck;  
 [. . . . .]. (163)

Indeed, Hadewijch's poetry describes a depressing image of desire which is likened unto

unattainable fruition, which Love has always given me for the sake of fruition of Love, has injured me and wounded me in the breast and in the heart: [. . .] that is, the innermost of the arteries of the heart, with which we love; and [. . .] that is, the innermost of the spirits by which we live, and the one sensitive to the greatest preoccupation. (115)

Hadewijch's theology sums up the mystical belief that allows the mystic to become virtuous before God. Thus the mystic should desire and yearn for suffering in order to improve her status in Christ

And if you wish to turn with me to Love,  
 See in what suffering I have borne  
 What you were unready to suffer.  
 Come, desire to suffer in order to ascent. (329)

The epistemology presented here situates the position of the mystic as a condition that only through suffering will the mystic ascend or be glorified in and with Christ.

These examples should give an overview of the violence in mystical texts and should also demonstrate the internalized misogyny expressed by female mystics. I believe that their analysis of love-divine love-gives us a

picture of the medieval understanding of how women, and even medieval society, comprehend love: mystics poetically pour out their fears and create images of violence in an effort to understand or bridge the gap between God and mystic. Therefore, violent expressions become fundamental to the discourse for expressing love, the erotic, and union with God.

### Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, God's love was expressed not only in terms of the erotics, but the continual acceptance of violent assaults, torment, and suffering in order to gain reward or be in union with God. In "Mystical Acts," Lochrie discusses how Richard of Saint Victor (1173)

describes the insatiability, violence, and persecution of his mystical love in his treatise, the *Four Degrees of Violent Charity*. Each of the four degrees of love-wounding, binding, languishing, and finally, disintegration of mind and soul in its unification with Christ-is characterized by a form of violence, and, in fact, Richard views this violence as one of the main distinguishing features of holy love from other kinds of love [ . . . ]. (185-186)

I would like to ponder Richard's view of mystical love, that is, that violence is "one of the main distinguishing features of holy love." And it seems that this violent love is used to express union with God or constitutes a type of mystical foreplay to consummate the mystic's marriage to

God. In concluding this chapter, I would like to comment on this violent, holy love, and the mystic's use of it via nuptial themes. Therefore, the mystic's epistemology of love is dependent on the mystic's status as bride and her union or marriage to Christ/God. She also upholds this status in a whirlwind of continual doubt, suffering, and lack of self-worth, which she should accept gladly because the suffering is eased by the label of *virtuous*. Consequently, this label is dependent on the acceptance and intensity of that violent suffering. Lochrie states that mystical female spirituality is characterized via "erotic, nuptial, and maternal themes" (181 MA), so mystics did use, in their texts, the erotic to express their union with Christ or God. McAvoyn indicates that "Julian's treatment of her mystical encounter with Christ" contains "sexual and nuptial overtones," and it "has a lot in common with traditional Jewish exegesis of the Song [. . .]" (151 AFB). In addition, Jantzen further notes that the erotic imagery became a fundamental principle in describing union with God and is described not only via the erotic but "ravishing"<sup>19</sup>:

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<sup>19</sup>Again, see my chapter one describing Gravidal's research on the etymology and instability of the word *rape* in medieval society and law.

The soul becomes the bride, God the divine bridegroom. God embraces the soul, she yearns for him and for the 'kisses of his mouth', he wounds her with the wound of love. The use of erotic language allows the language of passion and desire to become a part of Christian spirituality, and to see the longed-for union with God in terms of ecstasy and even ravishing. (90)

Thus the mystic's comprehension of union with God is grounded in erotic violence. Jantzen's research confirms that female mystics articulate the interpretations which were started since the twelfth century via affective spirituality, that is, that most expressions involving Christ were interpreted via imagery of Christ's marriage with humanity.

In light of the mystic's articulation of erotic sexual violence to explain union with God, I would like to explore this concept of violence and marriage in mystical spirituality. Thus, let me review the concept: affective spirituality expresses, or mystics internalize, erotic violence to express union or marriage to God. Assaults from God are by God but can also take the form of assaults from false brethren, *fiends*, or demons who could commit violence towards the body or soul in the form of suffering, illness, or even physical assault.<sup>20</sup> Whoever the *oppressor* might be,

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<sup>20</sup>Earlier in this chapter I noted that Julian mentions the fear of assault by fiends: "the tyme of my temptation"

one aspect of mystical spirituality is the realization that the mystic should willingly experience physical violence or suffering in the world so as to test her strength in patient suffering in hope of a reward-union with God. Thus, logically speaking, violence becomes the seal or the rite-of-passage in order to be in union with God.<sup>21</sup>

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that "by the sufferance of God and with his keping be tempted of fiendes before I should die" (Baker 8). See Denise Baker, *Julian of Norwich Showings: Authoritative Text Contexts Criticism*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005). In *Authority and the Female Body*, McAvoy notes that Julian's two encounters with the fiends amount "to an attempt at demonic rape"; however, although other scholars dwell on the sexuality of the encounters only, she, McAvoy, aims to demonstrate that the sexual overtones or rape are "used by the author to throw into relief the positive and productive qualities of Christ and Julian's own responses to him" (153). McAvoy mentions the "other scholars": Jay Ruud, "'I woulde for thy loue dye': Julian, Romance Discourse and the Masculine" in Sandra McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland, 1998) 183-205; David F. Tinsely, "Julian's Diabology," *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* 207-237; Judith Dale, "'Sin is behovely': Art and Theodicy in the Julian Text," *Mystics Quarterly* 25.4 (1999): 127-146. Finally, it is also interesting that Wolfthal notes that "rape was on the minds of medieval and early modern women" (*Images of Rape* 1). Wolfthal also mentions that "Margery Kempe voices her fear of rape and her strategy for avoiding it" (1). Also, Umiltà's fear of assault because of her calling to the Franciscan order is alleviated because she knows that suffering for Christ will give a glorious reward and will unite her to Christ (213).

<sup>21</sup>Again I am trying to connect Gravdal's research as in the troping of violence to female mystics camouflaging of violence poetically; thus, they construct their experience form the discourse of erotic violence to articulate nuptial themes between God and mystic. In Gravdal's study she

In chapter one, I discussed Gravdal's research in *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. To reiterate, Gravdal demonstrates how rape/violence operates as a battery for romance literature. She discusses how "[i]n romance, 'ravishment,' becomes aestheticized and moralized" (14). Additionally, in some church records, "rape is minimized almost to the point that its violent character is dismissed through clinical and distant summary" (Gravdal 140). Also, in the secular registers, "the [poetic] texts work to make images of violence against women tolerable not by minimizing them but by troping them poetically" (Gravdal 140). It is at this point that I want to connect mystical literature to Gravdal's study, since the dynamics in mystical texts parallels the dynamics in Gravdal's research: "images of violence" are troped poetically. Therefore, mystical spirituality hinges on troping violence through poetic

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accounts for a connection between violence and poetry: a few of the records disclose a "poetic troping of rape reminiscent of the pastourelles"; therefore, it comes as no surprise that "clerks would draw on the pastourelle form, which both obeys and establishes the medieval conception of rape" (139-40). Gravdal concludes that Medieval law follows Medieval literature and it is so close that it echoes it via the formation of "discursive strategies that make linguistic paradigms of male violence against women acceptable to the learned legal audience and perhaps even pleasurable for the scribe" (140).

expressions in order to express mystical sex or mystical union with God. Gravdal contends that, in the twelfth century, under the guise of Christian love, the "fate of the rapter" (rapist) was eased and the "ravisher, by way of penance for his crime could simply marry his victim, if she consented. In other words, *raptus* becomes once more a way to contract a legal marriage" (9).<sup>22</sup> Consequently, this law provides one view of marriage, that is, the act of marriage is produced through violence or sexual assault. Perhaps it is at this point where mystical literature parallels society, law, or even Church decorum, since mystical union and love are mediated through violence-erotic violence.

Given all this information, it should come as no surprise to see how the significant shift in understanding the connection between marriage and violence and, more so, how violent themes become subdued and unobtrusive. Through Wolfthal's research in *Images of Rape*, she discusses the association of violence/rape with marriage, not in the poetry, but in paintings. She asserts that by the fourteenth century, the European world-view embraced

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<sup>22</sup>Gravdal also mentions that "[i]n 1200, Pope Innocent III allowed marriage subsequent to rape, if the victim consented" (9). Also, Gravdal notes that "if the ravisher can flee to a church he is promised immunity from secular prosecution" (9).

violence-heroic rape-as a seal of marriage. Wolfthal claims that one of the functions of heroic-rape imagery was to illuminate marital doctrine and, as early as 1465, clearer understandings of these themes were realized via the "aestheticization of rape; the sanitization of the violent and sexual aspects" through art (9). For example, Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women* and Botticelli's *Primavera* was commissioned to commemorate the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici to Semeramide d'Appiani in May 1482 (10, 12). In fact, Wolfthal states that these violent images of rape had a specific message:

[i]n part, as several scholars have shown, [violent images] functioned as lessons for the bride: they served to visualize the ideal traits that were expected of a new wife. Chief among these was chastity, but images such as the *Rape and Reconciliation of the Sabines* also idealized submissiveness to husband, sacrifice for family and country, and woman's role as peacemaker within the family. (13)

Therefore, the images of explicit sexual violence acted as a symbol for women's subordinate status in marriage and encouraged a misogynistic understanding of women's place in that union. Although the medieval mystics discussed in this chapter lived between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, and some women might not have been aware of Wolfthal's findings, her research demonstrates how the use of the

violent erotic to express marital themes continued in Europe and even so how these theories changed as they survived.

CHAPTER 3  
RELIGION AND MEDICINE: FEMALE MYSTICS AND THE  
MEDIÆVAL EXPRESSION OF THE BODY

Not only does medicine emerge as one of the foremost fields of the articulation of discourse and of the natural world: deep down, it acts as a grammar of the human body. (Marie Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, 36)

Honor the physician for the need thou hast of him: for the most High hath created him. For all healing is from God, and he shall receive gifts of the king. The skill of the physician shall lift up his head, and in the sight of great men he shall be praised. The most High hath created medicines out of the earth, and a wise man will not abhor them. Was not bitter water made sweet with wood? The virtue of these things is come to the knowledge of men, and the most High hath given knowledge to men, that he may be honoured in his wonders. By these he shall cure and shall allay their pains, and of these the apothecary shall make sweet confections, and shall make up ointments of health, and of his works there shall be no end. For the peace of God is over all the face of the earth. My son, in thy sickness neglect not thyself, but pray to the Lord, and he shall heal thee. Turn away from sin and order thy hands aright, and cleanse thy heart from all offence. Give a sweet savour, and a memorial of fine flour, and make a fat offering, and then give place to the physician. For the Lord created him: and let him not depart from thee, for his works are necessary. For there is a time when thou must fall into their hands. And they shall beseech the Lord, that he would prosper what they give for ease and remedy, for their conversation. He that sinneth in the sight of his Maker, shall fall into the hands of the physician (Ecclesiasticus 38. 1-15). (qtd. in Joseph Ziegler, "Introduction" *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, 3)

### Introduction

The first part of this chapter is historical and involves an analysis of medieval medical narratives dealing with the body in order to understand the source of how women were represented, or re-presented themselves. The analysis also demonstrates how medieval culture constructed itself discursively via medicine and religion. I would like to highlight the medieval tendency to use the body as a metaphor for describing different aspects of medieval society or the tenacity to use bodily description in all aspects of life. Also, the framework from which these bodily descriptions originate—religion and medicine—is important, since control of the body was exercised the doctrines of the Church and medical theories. In addition, the Church even exercised control “over almost all aspects of medical activity” (Rawcliffe 3), and thereby manipulated the way medieval society read and expressed the body. Therefore, medicine and the Church/religious society collude in the regimentation and disciplining of the body and demonstrates, in this period, a symbiotic relationship between medicine and religion. This relationship helps us to understand the bodily descriptions, common to mystical rhetoric, which is embedded in the medieval world-view.

Also, we are able to see why it was a normal part of medieval discourse.

Rawcliffe asserts that the concept of the medieval body becoming a metaphor for medieval society creates an epistemology whereby the medieval mind-set

follows a long established tradition in identifying different body parts with specific social and economic groups, starting with the prince at the head and ending predictably enough, with farmworkers and laborers at the feet. (30)

However, the reading of the medieval body goes beyond just societal representation, and includes a reading consequential of divine judgement, and as far as the diseased body is concerned, represents a "divine displeasure" and also might constitute a "sign of grace" (Rawcliffe 30). Also, scholars of medieval medicine assert that the body reflects a person's state of health physically and spiritually. David Areford has wonderfully demonstrated that "medieval *mappae mundi* often situate the entire known world within the body parts of Christ, suggesting that parts contain whole, that enumeration is incorporation" (Bynum 22 VM).<sup>1</sup> Also, the body's connection to medicine and religion,

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<sup>1</sup>*mappae mundi* (plural) is a map of the world of a kind produced in the medieval and early Renaissance periods. The best-known example, preserved in Hereford Cathedral, England, is a 13<sup>th</sup>-cent. circular map showing Jerusalem at the centre. Geographic accuracy appears to be of less

via anatomy/fragmentation, could be summarized, in the words of an English poem in the fifteenth century. The poem

speaks to each body part as a well or refuge within which the soul can hide—well of mercy (right hand), well of grace (left hand) etc.—but also accompanies each verse with a little drawing of the wound [Christ's wound] in question, making the anatomizing visual. (Bynum 22 VM)

Customary uses of bodily descriptions or even using severed parts to represent the whole entities/bodies in medieval discourse mirrored the Church's doctrine of concomitance<sup>2</sup> and also paralleled, in my opinion, medieval medicine's innovations and discoveries in anatomy and dissection or vice versa. Isidore of Seville's (560-636) *Etymologiae*, an encyclopedic treatise, designed to impart all knowledge of the period, was a very influential work, specifically discussing or giving a description for the parts of the body

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importance than details of cosmology, mythology, and history: the map features numerous superimposed drawings and writings illustrating the (supposed) races, creatures, phenomena, etc., of the world (Online OED). See *Online OED*, 2005, Oxford English Dictionary, 21 June 2005 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/entrance.dtl>>. See Bynum, "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety," *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 30 (2002): 34 n. 24. Bynum tries to show how in the violent devotional rituals, severed parts stand for the whole as in the religious epistemology expressed in the doctrine of concomitance: see footnote below.

<sup>2</sup>Concomitance: The idea that the "whole Christ is present in every particle of the eucharist" (Bynum, *Violent Imagery* 22).

via anatomy. Isidore's method differed from modern medicine's nomenclature, which started from the nineteenth century with the idea of organic function. The difference was

from the point of view of medieval physiology, based on the mechanism of humours and forces transmitted by the spirits [ . . . ], organs were considered merely as channels, receptacles or vehicles. Their existence was explained in terms of their purpose, and not any specific function they might perform. (Jacquart and Thomasset 8)

Therefore, Isidore ranked parts via religious/social stratification as they were associated with the (whole) body and as to their purpose in God's universe (Jacquart and Thomasset 8-13):

[i]ndeed, in medieval discourse even the body politic itself was held to function in exactly the same way as the human body with its classified parts and was described in terms of a hierarchy of 'noble' and 'ignoble' parts. (Rawcliffe 11)

By perusing medieval medical texts, I want to focus on the ideology of the female body. Through this ideology, I hope to determine how these medical concepts or the coalition between the Church and medicine influenced or advanced spiritual *perfection* and social mores (moral attitudes of institutions, specifically the institution of marriage). Also, I would like to investigate how the ideology affected the literary presentation of women,

specifically female mystics, in their expression of love and union with God. I agree with Vern Bullough that

it was not only Christianity or the unsupported prejudices of the medieval clergy which led to medieval [. . .] misogynism but also the medical and scientific assumptions of the ancient world that were incorporated into medieval thinking with but little challenge. (44)

Bullough asserts that Aristotle believed "he had scientific evidence of female inferiority and held that women were not only intellectually but morally inferior to men" (45).

Aristotle believed that his proof came from nature where the "male of each species" was stronger than the female, and from this he, Aristotle, concluded that

male domination was the will of nature and to try to challenge nature in the name of an imagined principle of equality was quite contrary to the interests both of the individual and of the community. (Bullough 45)

Therefore, Isidore's codification of anatomized body parts/organs in the *Etymologiae* became the institutional medical model that created a hierarchy, not only physically between men and women's bodies/parts, but also socially, that is, in the civil relationships between themselves. And the codification eventually legitimized the religious hierarchy that had already existed in the form of the Adam-and-Eve rhetoric. Medieval medicine held Galen's theory of heat in high regard and believed that heat was of critical importance. Indeed, when the body possessed heat, it was a

"sign of perfection, of one's place in the hierarchical great chain of being" (Laqueur 4) or stratification of nature. Human beings reign supreme above all animals and men were "more perfect than women by reason of their 'excess of heat'" (Laqueur 4). Men and women, in this model, were specifically the same in kind, but in the codification and configuration of their organs: "the male is a hotter version of the female, or to use the teleologically more appropriated order, the female is the cooler, less perfect version of the male" (Laqueur 4). This theory of heat developed from Galen who stressed two main ideas: the belief that women were "less perfect" than males because they were colder, and after dissection<sup>3</sup> and research, medieval medicine concluded that the female sexual organs-her parts-are not fully developed like a man's organs, and this validates her inferior status of the whole body (Bullough 50). Thus, one persistent medieval idea of the physical

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed it seems that Galen himself had never dissected anything other than monkeys, and could thus be criticized for applying to the human body observations that had been carried out on animals" (Jacquart and Thomasset 26). Pigs were used in the same manner as well, and it was from the dissection of animals that physicians determined the purpose of the male and female organs (Jacquart and Thomasset 30). See Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1988).

composition of the reproductive organs of women propelled the idea that women's bodies were secretive or should be kept a secret; therefore Galen concluded, "[w]oman is thus a failed man, with a defective nature" because of her inward parts (Lemay 48).

Therefore, medieval medicine developed an epistemology of femininity grounded, not only in scientific study, but one that was connected to Christianity. Women are not only viewed as lacking, scientifically, but also religiously. Thus the relationship between the male and female medical model—that is, man is superior and hot and woman is inferior and cold—paralleled the relationship in the male and female religious model, which is described through anatomical partition: "Adam is seen as the head and Eve as the body" (Robertson 147). Woman's association with the body thus fostered a belief regarding childbirth and gynecology: "women's sickness [was] women's business" (Rawcliffe 105), and women's medical studies were "divorced from the world of academic medicine and subsidiary to it" (Rawcliffe 105). With this understanding, stress was placed on hiring women to help with the birthing process who were of "good character" (Rawcliffe 105). Also, medicine collaborated with religious laws and even sometimes stress was placed on hiring women for the moral and the spiritual rather than for

the skill they might possess. The first oath for Midwives in 1567 placed "Godliness above all other qualifications and makes no mention whatsoever of practical qualifications" (Rawcliffe 107). Therefore, women's bodies were under strict "supervision" as to what "ailment" related to their social and spiritual well-being or lack thereof. In the process of re-presenting woman's health issues or "woman's diseases," organized medicine in the Middle Ages constructed "women's diseases in a shroud of secrecy" (Green 6 WS).

This habit began in the twelfth century with the introduction of references to the "'secret places'" of the female body and then to their "'secret diseases'" (Green 6 WS). Furthermore, these "adjectival uses provided the standard terminology for referring to the genitals and their diseases up through the end of the medieval period" (Green 6 WS). As the secrets-of-women tradition flourished,

[t]he fuller ramifications of the transformation remains to be explored, but it is clear even now that the cooptation of gynecological literature served more to buttress entrenched 'structural misogyny' of authoritative traditions than to challenge them. The adoption of the title *secrets of women* did not enshroud women's bodies with a protective barrier to the male gaze; rather, it rendered women's bodies open for intellectual scrutiny in ways that, quite understandably, may have left certain observers with concern that

medical discourse had more power to harm women than to help them. (Green 7 WS)<sup>4</sup>

For instance, *Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum* was one popular treatise throughout the late middle ages that promoted the idea of the *secrets of women*, and it also reified the opinion that women were inferior to men because of their inward organs. The treatise explains women's *secrets* as they were interpreted by medieval commentators, and its goal was to relay the subject of human reproduction to instruct celibate medieval monks on the facts of life and the ways of the universe. However, the treatise harshly, and judgmentally, focuses on female reproductive parts and transmitted information that women were evil and licentious seductresses who, among other things, tried to tempt men

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<sup>4</sup>Green suggests other texts for further reading in order to understand the way in which medical knowledge shapes different opinions and concepts of the female body: for the concept of "structural misogyny," see Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 236. For some of the connections between the "secret of women" tradition and later medieval and early Renaissance misogyny, see Monica H. Green, "'Traittié tout de mençonges': The *Secrés des dames*, 'Trotula,' and Attitudes towards Women's Medicine in Fourteenth- and Early-Fifteenth-Century France," Marilyn Desmond, ed., *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 146-78; and Katherine Park, "Dissecting the Female Body: From Women's Secrets to the Secrets of Nature," *Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Jane Donawerth and Adela Seeff (Newark, N. J.: University of Delaware Press, 2000).

into sexual sin (Lemay 56). In addition, the main idea of *Secrets* is based on a theory about the composition of the female; "she is an inferior creature, rendered base and impure by her menstrual essence which poses a constant danger to others" (Lemay 35). Also, this idea becomes "incorporated into natural philosophical treatises, [and] theologians [made] use of these treatises in order to rationalize the persecution of women as witches" (Lemay 35). Thus, the commentaries end, not only with describing in detail how evil and deceitful women are, but with "their deliberate acts of aggression against the male, often aimed directly at his sexual organs" (Lemay 35).

Theologians such as Jerome and Augustine adopted and reasserted medical views, and also reified Aristotelian and Galenic theories which especially pervaded biblical writings on Genesis in the Middle Ages. Gradually, the ideology behind the *secrets*-tradition was assigned to women in general. Also, through the transmission of women's medicine, this ideology was by the thirteenth century commonly believed and "enshrined in learned scientific tracts" (Lemay 35), and these ideas remained an "axiomatic assumption on the part of the medical establishment as a whole until the end of the nineteenth century" (Rawcliffe 11).

Therefore, this chapter will further affirm recent conclusions in contemporary medieval studies that Christianity is not the only institution involved in developing a rhetoric of medieval femininity, specifically the femininity of spiritual women, in the Middle Ages. However, medicine also contributes to that model of femininity, and to spiritual women's description and expressions in mystical texts. As medieval medicine reads and writes the female body, women's bodies are marked by pejorative labeling sometimes already understood via religious beliefs and finally legitimized by medicine. Therefore, the medical female body was based on preconceived ideas grounded in the Church's view of men and women. This religious and medical alliance represented a structured coalition that legitimized, religiously and scientifically, the hegemony on bodies (men and women) and placed them in a hierarchal framework that justified and validated the terms by which men and women operated in that society.

This chapter does not attempt to argue or re-establish the concept of woman's marginality in the Middle Ages, but seeks to add to the origination of that framework via the coalition of religion and medicine to acknowledge that misogyny was present, but more, it was embedded in medieval society's norms and customs. Nor does this chapter seek to

re-establish the idea that women were defined via their bodies: the chapter also acknowledges that fact. The chapter, however, does seek to demonstrate that there was a symbiotic relationship between medicine and religion which created a monopoly on the social and religious status of bodies, specifically the female body, and these theories became a regular part of medieval discourse. Also, although these theories were connected to misogyny, violence, and inequality, they were internalized by medieval mystics, proven by their articulation of violent love and the expressions of their bodies. Consequently, feminist scholars, in their research, attempt to demonstrate how medieval mystics successfully and responsibly exploit these gendered ideologies of the female body through their bodily language.<sup>5</sup> Also feminists stress the mystic's ability to subvert the medieval abject descriptions of the female body. In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate mystics' internalization, not subversion, of the medieval understanding of the body. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into two sections: "Biology, Anatomy, and the Secrets of Women"; and "Religion, Biology, and Female Mystics": their sub sections also correlate with each other.

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<sup>5</sup>See my chapter four: "Female Mystics and *Bodytalk*: A Feminist Critique."

In the first section, I will investigate how the symbiotic relationship of medicine and the Church creates a parallel between both institutions' methods of operation and analysis. I will examine Isidore's *Etymologiae* to demonstrate medicine's necessary and biased codification of severed parts, which not only designated the divine purpose for parts but the divine purpose for the whole body. This concept mirrors the Church's doctrine of concomitance and the medieval world-view of thinking about the body in parts to explain the whole. In the Second section, I will look at medieval female mystics via the connection between the two institutions (medicine and the Church) and examine female mystics internalization of medical theories in the way they describe, gruesomely, their devotion to Christ, and also in the way they express union with God. Although I take a different angle, I will come to the same foundational conclusion set forth by Elizabeth Robertson in her article, "Medieval Medical Views of Women", that is, that "medical ideology shapes the literary representation of the feminine in mystical works" (142). However, although I agree with her conclusion that Julian's writing "had no revolutionary intent," I do not agree with her generalized conclusion that Julian (or female mystics in general) "sought to undo assumptions about women, and to provide, in an Irigarayan

sense, a new celebration of femininity through contemplation of Christ's 'feminine' attributes" (161). In this chapter, I wish to assert that female mystics did not seek to "undo assumptions" in an "Irigarayen sense," but internalized norms about their bodies that pervaded medieval society.

### **Biology, Anatomy, and the Secrets of Women**

This section will discuss the degree of *normalcy* of misogyny in the Middle Ages. In this section, I would like to stress the correlation with the Church's doctrine and medicine's methods of function.

In today's society, the medicalization of women is common and permeates women's lives; however, as Kevin White suggests, the words used to describe women in medical books are still derogatory:

Take for example, 'infantile' uterus; 'failed' trial of labour; or placental 'insufficiency'. As Pfeffer points out, there are also 'irregular' menstrual cycles, hormonal 'imbalance', 'hostile' cervical mucus, 'irregular' shedding of the lining of the uterus, along with 'blighted' ovum and 'incompetent' cervixes. (Pfeffer qtd. in White 135)

White believes that medicine's tenacity to describe women's health in "pejorative terms" stems from the forces that comprises that society: religion, sexism, classism:

a web of social assumptions underline medical thinking about women. Women are less likely to receive treatment for physical conditions and are diagnosed as having 'psychosomatic problems.' (135)

As discussed earlier, medieval society also used "pejorative" labels to describe women's diseases and the

inferior status accorded to women was in part a reflection of ecclesiastical opinion, which blamed Eve for the fall of man and regarded her daughter (the entire female sex) as equally culpable for bringing sin, disease, and death upon mankind. (Rawcliffe 12)

***Parts standing for Whole***

Anatomy was linked to the doctrine of teleology, which was used to explain, or rather, designate the purpose of the anatomical parts in nature and legitimize medicine's conclusions that God had designed it to be so. Consequently, this designation of the one part or parts represented a validated status for the whole person. For example, woman's genital organs were inward and therefore these organs were seen as undeveloped and inferior to the male's organs; thus, woman as the whole person was inferior and man as the whole person was superior. The ultimate objective in anatomizing body parts was to dictate human beings' relationship with and to God's universe and to "exalt the benefits of God's wisdom" (Jacquart and Thomasset 11). Through anatomical parts medieval medicine found a "methodical quest for purpose" (Jacquart and Thomasset 12) and a

language was established that revealed a certain conception of woman; a man was already proclaimed

as the complete being who held no mystery; and all this was done with a method and a language of formidable efficiency. (Jacquart and Thomasset 14)

As a result, the ranking of severed parts literally and metaphorically represented God's design for the whole body or person; this was the way God designed it:

[t]he way each organ, with its own characteristic qualities, corresponds adequately to its final purpose, reveals a harmonious physiological conception of human life, in which the teleological impulse is never found wanting. (Jacquart and Thomasset 11)<sup>6</sup>

Isidore's *Etymologiae* and medieval medicine's understanding of anatomy as it relates to teleology legitimized the medieval body's divine purpose in medieval society. In the *Etymologiae*, Isidore situated men and women according to God's design. He believed that language is of divine origin and

needed to be deciphered so as to yield the truth concealed in it—a truth that constituted a final argument. [. . .] etymology [. . .] was by itself perfectly capable of leaving its imprint in people's minds. (14)

In the section dedicated to anatomy in the *Etymologiae*

the state of the human body was determined by an equilibrium between the humours (temperamentum). Thus was established the principle of a correspondence between microcosm (the human being)[-the whole person-] and macrocosm (the

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<sup>6</sup>This idea belonged to Isidore (Jacquart and Thomasset 11).

universe), an idea that can be found in Isidore's thought. (Jacquart and Thomasset 11)

Isidore named man *vir*, from his force, *vis*, but woman was named *mulier*, and derived her name from her softness, *mollities*. Woman was designated as physically weaker so as to make her subjected to man; she should not "repel her desire"-sensual desire-for him. If man was rejected, by woman, he might then "turn to other objects" (Jacquart and Thomasset 14), thus making women responsible for sustaining man's sexual need and responsible for man's corruption. Therefore, in this design, females were regarded as more sensual than males, which was similar to schema in animals (Jacquart and Thomasset 14).

#### **Genitalia and Theory of Heat (Hysteria/Uterus/womb)<sup>7</sup>**

The *loins* are the seat of lust because of the lewdness of desire, and in the woman, the seat of lust is in the navel-the *erogenous zone*-since it is at the center of the

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<sup>7</sup>I will eventually create a link connecting medicine and the Church's epistemology of the body. For example, the doctrine of concomitance is mirrored, to a certain extent, to medicine's method of thinking about parts and whole. Also, this concept operates in female mystics' internalization of this epistemology, specifically the theory of heat and hysteria dealing with the wandering womb. Through this theory of heat, female mystics cry out for the "burning love of Christ" and the physical needs in marriage become metaphorically experienced in female mystical imagery.

body; thus woman's core is incorporated with lust. Finally because women bear children, the female *genitalia* were called *pudenda*-shameful parts. Consequently, these shameful parts were associated with woman's whole being and cause her marginal status in society (Jacquart and Thomasset 13). However, man's *veretrum* (penis) is explained as *virī est tantum* (it is proper to the male) and therefore attest to man's parts as proper, which makes man perfect.

Therefore, via scientific study, there was now "the concrete proof of the physical inferiority of women, at least in the medieval mind" (Bullough 51), since, as Galen asserted, women were "turned inside out" and "'woman is less fully developed than man'" (Bullough 50). In addition, Aristotle claimed that the "female was little more than an incomplete male" (Bullough 45), and because of a "lack of heat in generation, her sexual organs have remained internal, she is incomplete, colder and moister in dominant humours" (Maclean qtd. in Robertson 145). Physicians and philosophers not only established a medical theory of the body, affirming man's superior status and woman's inferior status, but, conspired with the beliefs of the Church to uphold and sustain the institution of marriage, mainly through the theory of heat, moisture, and hysteria and the wandering womb.

Firstly, Galen asserts that the female is inferior because she is colder and the "colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer" (Bullough 48). Therefore women should obtain heat, which is essential for conception:

Heat is of critical importance in the Galenic account . . . sexual excitement and the 'very great pleasure' of climax in both men and women are understood as signs of a heat sufficient to concoct and coningle the seed, the animate matter, and create new life. . . . Sexual heat was but an instance of the heat of life itself, and orgasm in both sexes the sign of warmth sufficient to transform one kind of bodily fluid into its reproductively potent forms and to assure a receptive place for the product of their union. (Laqueur qtd. in Robertson 146)

Therefore, the concept of heat maneuvers sexual pleasure and fertility. While "heat was desirable for both sexes, because the female had less of it her need for it was perceived to be greater than the male" (Robertson 147).

Robertson asserts, therefore, that

this insufficiency of heat led commentators to argue that women existed in a condition of perpetual desire. Women were believed to be driven by their craving for the hottest, most complete being, that is, the male. Aristotle emphasized the essential need of the female for the male in a basic precept, 'matter desires form as the female the male.' (147)

Evidently, the cure for lack of heat, stresses that the female must have regular sexual activity with the male, in order to stay healthy. Therefore medical theory, in my opinion, legitimizes union/marriage between the male and

female, and it validates the necessity of the sexual act under that institution. In order for

woman to remain fertile she had to be kept moist, [. . .] the one way that nature had provided for women to be kept moist was through sexual intercourse. [. . .][so that] unless women engaged regularly in sexual intercourse the uterus would dry up and lose weight [. . .]. (Bullough 51)

According to Robertson, the insatiable desire in women led medieval physicians and society to conclude that women were "believed to feel a more burning desire than men" (Robertson 147).

Lastly, another theory that reinforced union/marriage as a definite prerequisite to women's health, was the theory of the wandering womb, which is connected to the theory of hysteria. If women did not keep moist through sexual activity, some commentators of the humoral theory believed that the

uterus would dry up and lose weight and in its search for moisture it would rise towards the hypochondrium-whatever that might be-thus impede the flow of breath. If the organ came to rest in this position it would cause convulsions similar to those of epilepsy. If it mounted higher and attached itself to the heart, the patient would feel anxiety and oppression and begin to vomit. (Bullough 51)

Thus Bullough concludes:

[o]bviously the uterus was difficult to explain and to the medieval clerical writer much of the difficulty was due to the fact that the usually prescribed cure for hysteria, the malady that

continually troubled woman, was intercourse and pregnancy. (Bullough 51)

Although to the modern reader these ideas might seem bizarre, to the medieval reader, it projected the society's beliefs and represented, scientifically, women's ailments and cures. Bullough mentions that Trota/Trotula,<sup>8</sup> the female physician in *The Trotula*, "picked up on this same notion" of the womb, when she discusses that womb problems happened because

too much spoiled seed abounds in them and it changes to a poisonous character. Especially does this happen to those who have no husbands, widows in particular and those who previously have been accustomed to make use of carnal intercourse. It also happens in virgins who come to marriageable years and have not yet husbands for in them abounds the seed which nature wished to draw out by means of the male. (*The Trotula* qtd. in Bullough 53-54)

Bullough's suggestion that Trota endorsed or believed in the wandering womb theory and its cure insinuates that these

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<sup>8</sup>Bullough's quotation is taken from the "Condition of Women" which is one of the texts from *The Trotula*. Green states that there is speculation about the authorship of this section, since it may have probably been of male authorship; however, "the possibility of female authorship is not in and of itself far-fetched, as there is plenty of evidence to suggest that women practiced medicine in eleventh-and twelfth-century Salerno" (195). See *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, Monica H. Green, ed. and trans., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

views about women were internalized by women in society, as is the case of female mystics.

**Anatomizing/Enumeration is Incorporation, Revelation, or Possession<sup>9</sup>**

Eventually, the "study of anatomy developed into a real science" (Yalom 212 HB) when Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) began dissecting cadavers in Padua. By this time, Katherine Park states, dissection was being done on humans, and the source was "mainly executed criminals fresh from the gallows or bodies stolen from local tombs" (38). Anatomy not only demonstrated the concept that the whole body's meaning is founded in its parts, but it placed medieval physicians in a position of autonomy, not only to dis-member the body, but to enter into the body to re-member, re-unite, and re-configure the human body. Also, this power in dissection granted surgeons the authority to *possess*, or at least

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<sup>9</sup>I want to connect, later on, the innovations in human dissection to the religious understanding of incorporation. There was an awe of entering into the body and there was an impact on surgeons, as in Vesalius's case and maybe in others (we will see this with Nero). I would like to connect this awe in medicine to the Christian act of incorporation in female mystical texts, and the entering of Christ's wound-not only to possess his power of holiness, but to be incorporated and become one with him, by him, in him and thereby possess his being or the essence of his suffering. This mirroring of the act of thinking about the body as in medical dissection (or vice versa) demonstrates the correlation of thought-religious and medical-in conceptualizing the body in medieval society.

proclaim to possess, the female body or its secrets. For example, Park discusses the repercussions associated with the printing of the title page of Andreas Vesalius's famous *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543). Vesalius "embodies his own vaunted reform of anatomy" with a picture demonstrating his exposure of the entrails of a "female cadaver to an unruly band of male colleagues and students" (Park 29). Vesalius' attempt to discover the secrets of women, according to Park, paralleled an "apocryphal episode from the life of the Roman emperor Nero," in which Nero dissected his mother Agrippina, in order to reveal "the place where he was conceived" (Park 32).<sup>10</sup> Park asserts,

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<sup>10</sup>Nero's story is not found in Roman sources. Instead it is "medieval invention, an elaboration of the accounts of Agrippina's death by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius" (Park 32). The first time the story appears is in German sources, "in the long twelfth-century poems known as the *Kaiserchronik* and *Moriz von Craün*, but it spread quickly and over the next three centuries made its way into French, Italian, English, and Scottish works as well" (Park 32). There were many medieval texts that describe this scene, but the three most "frequently illustrated were those of Jean de Meun, the German chronicler Enikel (ca. 1380), and Laurent de Premierfait's early fifteenth-century translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *On the Falls of Illustrious Men*" (Park 32). Park also asserts that "Premierfait's version of Boccaccio inspired another type of visual representation: a scene in Eustache Marcadé's French play *The Revenge of Jesus Christ* (ca. 1415)," which performed Nero's dissection of his mother (Park 32). This play was so successful that it appeared in seven editions from five different Parisian printers between 1491 and 1539 (Park 32). See Park, "Dissecting the Female Body: From Women's Secrets to the

that Nero and Vesalius demonstrate a "preoccupation" like some "early modern scientific writers with exploring the "secrets of nature," imagined in anatomical terms" (32). This preoccupation "grew in part out of a late medieval concern with what were often called the 'secrets of women'" (Park 32). However, while they both sought to satisfy anxieties of the patriarchy, they both had the same and different reasons. Among the many stories circulating at the time, Park states that Nero dissected his mother Agrippina as a means of understanding generation and reproduction in order to prove the legitimacy of his son. Therefore by entering the uterus, Nero believed that he could possess the secrets of the female body, or that its secrets would be revealed, and "eliminate all female participation in the act of generation, producing a 'male child that resembled him'" (Park 35). In most of the mythical stories surrounding Nero, after this brutal act, he even tried to become pregnant, but he failed, since he never was truly able to possess the *secrets* because they were never revealed to him.

Vesalius, on the other hand, authenticated himself in the *Fabrica* as "the man who succeeded where Nero had failed" (Park 39). Therefore, he flaunted and paraded "masculine reproductive autonomy, and a corresponding denigration of the woman's part" (Park 39). Vesalius's placing of the picture of a woman's empty uterus on the title page of his medical treatise,

suggested that its mysteries were illusory, just as he rejected *Women's Secrets* as an 'ignorant book' in his chapter on that same organ. The principal secret of women was that the uterus held no secrets at all. (39)

Therefore, Vesalius did possess the secret of the female body after all. Park asserts that Vesalius contrasted Nero in his actions because he, Vesalius, made his title page into a "celebration of his own creativity, elaborated in terms of fantasized male capacity for reproduction without the mediation of a living woman" (39).

#### **Biology, Religion, and Female Mystics**

In this section, I would like to use some of the ideas set forth in Caroline Bynum's "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety" to discuss the correlation between medieval medicine and religion. Also, I would like to discuss the connection between this correlation and the imagery of female mystics. Bynum's article was presented at the 2001 Annual Lecture at the *German Historical Institute* (GHI) in

Washington D.C. In the lecture Bynum acknowledges, as mentioned through this dissertation, the fact that violence (erotic violence and violence in general) pervades medieval religious life. Thus violence was a central part of medieval religious culture in its texts, images, and customs. Believers sought redemption and tranquil communication in the fragmentary remains, not only in necessary religious relics, but in the imagery of anatomizing Christ's (and saints') body parts. Through severed parts, medieval believers were able to re-member and re-unite Christ's body believing that these fragments represented Christ's whole body: "[t]here was in the Middle Ages, it is true, an enthusiasm for dividing the bodies of the saints in order to spread the power of holy bodies as widely as possible" (Bynum 14 VM). In fact, this rhetoric of severed bodies permeated the medieval temperament that "even the bodies of non-holy but prominent figures-kings and queens, nobles, cardinals-were for similar reasons divided for multiple burials" (Bynum 14 VM). Thus, medieval religious ideology was grounded in the fragmented body of Christ and, specifically, his pierced wound/s. Also in medieval piety, the bloody "wound becomes Christ's body" (Bynum 20 VM). Medieval Christians cherished and idolized Christ's wound/s believing that the precision, in numerous

paintings, "represented an authentic measurement of Christ" (Bynum 18 VM). Thus these paintings were "repeatedly kissed" since it was the "mesure of the wounde that our Ihesus Christus suffered for oure redemption" (Bynum 18 VM). In the fifteenth century, on a woodcut of the wound of Christ (*The National Gallery* in Washington D.C.), the scroll reads: "'This is the length and the width of Christ's wound which was pierced in the side on the cross. Whoever kisses [it] . . . will have . . . seven years of indulgence . . . .'" (Bynum 18 VM). In addition, medieval piety took seriously the images of entering into the wound of Christ so as to demonstrate union with Christ's passion or as a means of possessing Christ's body or his glory. Bynum notes that just as the religious observer takes

into himself [herself] the suffering, guilt and protection of Christ's agony, [. . .], so he [she] enters Christ's wounded parts themselves incorporating as he [she] is incorporated into God. (22 VM)

Mitchell Merback comments on Bynum's lecture and asserts that these religious violent demonstrations consisted of

penitential pantomimes performed with whips, chains and nails; mystical woundings, visionary incorporations and ecstatic interpenetrations; cold awakenings to the horrors of the world and the inevitability of death and judgment; and the ever present spectacle of blood, visibly spraying or palpably flowing—all of these images of late medieval religion reveal a morbid fascination, a collective preoccupation with sin and punishment bordering on the obsessive neurotic. They are the

symptoms of an emergent 'Western guilt Culture,' as Jean Delumeau has dubbed it, and yet they are also part of a religious system. (37)

And this medieval religious system is built on a paradox, since it is via this guilt-system of violent abject acts that medieval religious culture denies the body; yet, it is through this violence that the culture labels itself as principled and moral. In the medieval Christian world-view the side-wound of Christ was

presented as an independent body part. The sexual overtones modern viewers find in such depictions may have been apparent also to medieval viewers, who frequently spoke of entering into Christ's side as into a womb. (Bynum 278 FR)

**Parts standing for Whole and Incorporation, Revelation, and Possession**

Images of the bleeding Christ permeate medieval Christianity and Christians are inspired to meditate on the fragmented and bleeding bodies, "both the bodies of saints and the body of Christ, which are everywhere in late medieval devotion" (Bynum 5 VM). Medieval religious piety consisted of believers practicing *imitatio Christi* rituals of guilt-ridden poetic meanderings mixed with joyful redemption. And also, saints lives are depicted in devotional literature through gruesome tales of sacrifice, death, and dismemberment. Additionally, saints lives were told through tales of

virgin women who, defending themselves against both apostasy and rape, were described as 'intact' and 'integral' to the end despite drowning, burning, the severing of breasts and lips, and finally decapitation. (Bynum 5 VM)

Poets wrote about their obsession with recollecting woman's fragmented bodies-breasts, tongue, lips, or eyes-and placed women in the shrines of men's hearts for the purpose of celebrating and monumentalizing them. Similarly, "poems to the wounds of Christ named and counted his parts, making them one with the soul, his lover" (Bynum 20 VM).

Additionally, Spearing demonstrates this idea of wholeness and incorporation when she asserts, referring to Julian of Norwich, that Christ's wound was a symbol that gave entrance to Christ's heart and "was a favourite topic of medieval devotion" (184).

Angela Foligno demonstrates this religious practice when she envisions and experiences Christ's Passion via the horror of the bloody imagery of the crucifixion:

[w]hile [Angela] was in a state of ecstasy, the crucified Christ appeared to her as if he had just been taken down from the cross and she saw graphically depicted the wounds his body had suffered, from which the blood seemed to flow. The effect of this vision was to transform her into the double state of his life, human and divine, and to allow her to experience simultaneously the sweetness of God and the pain of his crucifixion. (Lachance 89)

However, Angela's vision does not only dwell on the wound of Christ, but the enumeration of body parts standing for the

whole. As Angela catalogues Christ's severed parts, these parts represent the whole suffering body of Christ. Thus Angela is miraculously incorporated into experiencing the suffering of Christ's whole body: "God's power fully draws the soul to himself" and she is absorbed into the "fathomless depths of God" (Angela 245). Angela's vision becomes clearer "piece by piece by bloody piece" (Bynum 5 VM)<sup>11</sup>:

[h]is [Christ's] blood flowed fresh and crimson as if the wounds had just recently been opened. Then she saw how the joints and tendons of his blessed body were torn and distended by the cruel stretching and pulling of his virginal limbs [. . .]. The bones and sinews of his most holy body seemed completely torn out of their natural position; and yet his skin was not broken.

At this heartrending sight she was transfixed to the marrow with such compassion that in truth it seemed to her that she was totally transformed in spirit and body into the pain of the cross. At the sight of the dislocated limbs and the painful distension of the sinews, she felt herself pierced through even more than she had been at the sight of the open wounds. [. . .]. The sight of the crucified body of the good and beloved Jesus stirred her to such compassion that when she saw it, all her own joints seemed to cry out with fresh laments, and her whole body and soul felt pierced anew from the painful impact of this divine vision. (245)

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<sup>11</sup>Although Bynum was not referring to Angela of Foligno, the quotation is appropriate to describe Angela's vision. Bynum uses the quotation to describe medieval devotional discourse in general (5 *Violent Imagery*).

Angela's vision demonstrates what Bynum asserts, that is, "[e]numerating parts, anatomizing the body [Christ's body] was, moreover, a means of possessing it, of re-uniting the fragments and incorporating them into oneself" (Bynum 20 VM). Angela's incorporation/union with Christ-in Christ-also echoes the violence in union with God. Angela instructs her followers to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist because

[t]he Eucharist, then, is a major source for Angela's incorporation into Christ and mystical union with him. In this sacrament, she had received the 'All Good,' the expression that most aptly condenses her Eucharistic experience. (Lachance 90)

The Eucharistic experience was for medieval Christians very important, and more so for medieval mystics, who experienced, in their opinion, the literal union with Christ's complete suffering body. Thus the

tendency of medieval piety to metonymy was undergirded by a central doctrine of learned theology, the doctrine of concomitance (the idea that the whole Christ is present in every particle of the eucharist). (Bynum 22 VM)

Therefore, Angela's actions demonstrate a medieval worldview that connects religion to medicine when she identifies parts as whole which is similar to medicine's concept of the body.

Furthermore, I discussed in "Anatomy of Violence in Mystical Texts" (my chapter two), that these images of

penetrating and of entering into Christ's wound are wrought with erotic overtones. However, what is significant, in this chapter, is the manner of thinking about the body-Christ's body-via that violence: touching, penetrating, entering or becoming one with that body through its parts. Julian experiences a vision where Christ looks into his wounded side and explains the wound's importance. At the same time, he, Christ, describes himself via his "side" and "heart":

[v]ery happily and gladly our Lord looked into his side, and gazed, and said these words, 'Look how much I loved you'; as if he had said, 'My child, if you cannot look at my Godhead, see here how I let my side be opened, and my heart be riven in two, and all the blood and water that was within flow out. And this makes me happy, and I want it to make you happy. The Lord revealed this to make us glad and joyful. (Spearing 20)

Julian elucidates that the "Lord" reveals these bleeding parts to act as a synecdoche for his full "Godhead," since she might not be able to look at his full glory. In addition, in the *Long Text*, Julian has matured and the vision changes in that Christ asks Julian to penetrate his wound. Julian's visions describe Christ's parts and dwells on the beauty of his form: his "glad face," his "side," and his "wound" (Spearing 76). However, as Julian recollects Christ's suffering parts by entering his wound, Julian's penetration stresses incorporation into Christ's "sweet open

side" (Spearing 141), and she is incorporated into his wound, so that she may possess "some part of blessed Godhead," which is "revealed" to her (Spearing 76).

Additionally, Mechthild also envisions entering the wounds of Christ. As she proceeds to enter Christ's wounds, she is incorporated into his suffering so much that he reveals himself to her:

[i]n my days of suffering, God revealed himself to my soul, showed me the wounds of his heart, and said: 'See how they have hurt me.' (252)

Through this experience, Mechthild possesses the *secret*<sup>12</sup> of Christ's wounds and his suffering is revealed. The secret is not that the "world should [have] rightfully been redeemed by it [wounds]," but that Christ's "divinity was present in all members of his body" and that an "eternal image" of his humanity might be envisioned (252). Mechthild also describes Christ's suffering with erotic violent overtones, and she is so overwhelmed that she incorporates herself in his suffering:

She is brought to judgement trembling with shame  
[ . . . . . ]  
She is beaten at her trial

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<sup>12</sup>In all these visions of parts, whole, penetration, incorporation, and possession, Mechthild asserts that God has revealed himself to her and it correlates with the medieval epistemology of understanding the connection with the open body as in Vesalius's aim to look inside the body-female body-to possess/reveal its secrets.

When the devils try her spiritually.  
 She is sent to Herod  
 She is delivered up to Pilate again  
 [. . . . .]  
 She is buffeted and beaten with severe blows  
 [. . . . .]  
 She is ridiculed in holy simplicity  
 When she is completely dissolved into God  
 [. . . . .]  
 She carries her cross on a sweet path  
 [. . . . .]  
 Her head is struck with a reed  
 [. . . . .]  
 She suffers terrible thirst on the cross of love  
 as well  
 [. . . . .]  
 But they all come thronging and offer her gall.  
 Her body is killed in living love  
 [. . . . .]  
 she is pierced in the side by a blind man.  
 (Mechthild 117-118)

This vision, in Mechthild's opinion, epitomizes the passion which is suffered by "every soul that in holy moderation of all her activity is truly permeated by genuine love of God" (119). Also, Mechthild comments on the pain that killed Christ's "glorious body" and his "sweet heart" in order that she may understand, through these severed bleeding parts, "all of [her] interior suffering" in Christ's total love (289-290).

Likewise, Hadewijch demonstrates the cataloging of Christ's body parts in the horrific, erotic scenes of cannibalism where medieval spiritualism evokes intimacy with God through images of incorporation. Bynum has asserted that food and food practices in the Middle Ages prompted

women to connect their experiences of God's violence with the erotic and passionate raptures of divine union and love, and the Eucharist provided mystics the avenue to do so. Hadewijch recounted experiences of eating and being eaten by Christ as a type of literal/mystical incorporation into the suffering wound/flesh of Christ. She described her soul "melting erotically into the beautiful human Jesus at the moment of eating and drinking his body in communion" (Bynum 154 HF). Bynum states that in Hadewijch's poem, "Love's Seven Names," Hadewijch asserts that

We do eat God:  
 . . . love's most intimate union  
 Is through eating, tasting and seeing interiorly.  
 He eats us; we think we eat him,  
 And we do eat him of this we can be certain.  
 (Hadewijch qtd in Bynum 156 HF)

In Hadewijch's opinion, the believer sought union with a

human Christ [. . .]. For such union, both hunger and eating were powerful images. Hadewijch wished to express the total incorporation of humanity into humanity-divinity (eating of God by the self and of the self by God), yet she also felt an aching desire that yearned for a filling beyond satiety. (Bynum 154 HF)

Finally, Hadewijch believes that Christ "gave himself to be eaten and drunk" so that believers might "consume him" (97). And also, that in penetrating and devouring him, the believer may possess his truth, that is, the truth that "he may be with us in Love and in fruition" (Hadewijch 97). Thus, it would seem, there is a general medieval

understanding of parts and whole in the discussion of the medieval body-Christ's body-and a certain awe of entering and incorporating, penetrating and revealing, the secrets of the body in medieval culture as demonstrated in medieval medicine and religion.

**Theory of Heat, Hysteria/Wandering Womb and Union/Marriage with God**

In "Anatomy of Violence in Mystical Texts" (my chapter two), I demonstrated how violent discourse and expressions became the fundamental discourse for expressing love, the erotic, and union with God. Also, I connected this violent discourse to the way mystics internalize love-divine love-or love in general, since they interpret union with God in terms of violence. In this section, I want to demonstrate further how female mystics understand and internalize union/marriage via medieval medicine or via the medicine-Church relationship. In the medical theory of heat, women are thought to possess a perpetual longing or desire. From the first section we learned that medieval medicine considered women to be moist because they were colder than men, and heat was needed for conception; therefore, women needed regular sexual activity to stay healthy.

Consequently, I concluded that medical theory colludes with Church doctrine in an effort to promote the union of the male and female and in medieval terms this translates,

positively, as marriage. Jacquart and Thomasset emphasize the importance of the notion of heat in the development of the body: "heat is an attribute that can easily find its place in the interplay of qualities that contrast female and male" (Jacquart and Thomasset qtd. in Robertson 146-147). Therefore, the woman's need for heat was greater than the male and the "insufficiency of heat led commentators to argue that women existed in a condition of perpetual desire" (Robertson 147). As Robertson asserts,

women though colder and moister than men, were believed to feel a more burning desire than men; it was in fact thought to be insatiable, in part because, as Jacquart and Thomasset point out, women were thought to experience 'a pleasure that was greater in quantity, but lesser in quality and intensity than men's.' The insatiability of feminine desire, an idea that has its roots in medical theory, permeated medieval thought and literature and reinforced male fear of female sexuality. (147 emphasis added)

The connection between religion and medical theory is evident in the *Ancrene Wisse*. As Robertson asserts,

[r]edemption [. . .] is made possible not only through the purgation of excess feminine moisture, but also through heat, the heat brought about through sexual union with Christ. While heat, or the fire of love, the *incendium amoris*, is a motif that pervades twelfth-century affective works, the centrality of sexual union with Christ in this particular work suggests the male author's concern to address the perceived needs of female readers, including their biological need for heat met through union with the male. (151)

Robertson, through the *Ancrene Wisse*, interprets the need for heat, or heat, as penance in order to be in union with God; therefore, "God will thus win the anchoress with his implicitly erotic flaming sword" which is "hot and red" and delivers "pain that afflicts the body" (151). Robertson states that "Christ is particularly associated with fire, the fire of desire presented in medical texts as necessary for conception" (151). I would like to add to the concept of heat, in mystical imagery, to demonstrate how female mystics internalize the medical concept of the need for heat.

In Angela's "horrible darkness" and "her encounter with total despair, one in which body and soul tremble in uncontrollable agony" (Lachance 68), she is allowed to experience total incorporation with God as she enters into the horror of Christ's final "agony and abandonment on the cross" through "Christ's burning love for her" (68). Christ's "burning love," via suffering, seals her union with him and she is allowed to be incorporated in his suffering.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>In my chapter two, I mentioned that mystical union and mystical love/sex are violent and mystics act out this theory, in violent expressions of perpetual desire. Their need for heat is unfathomable and takes them, like Angela, into "horrible darkness." Also their concept of incorporation and violence promote the idea that suffering

Similarly, Umiltà cries out for the visiting of her heart by "divine love" and tells Christ to

[f]ill [her heart] with divine grace, and cause my mind and my soul to be joined and burn always in you who are flame without smoke, wholly resplendent. Draw near to me with your love, or most exquisite fire that makes fruitful, and draws forth the seeds from the dry ground; the earth that you fertilize may indeed be called blessed for its blessed fruit. Hear my voice, o good Sower; my heart asks of you only the seed of love, which immediately increases and gives the best fruit. (Umiltà 250)

Umiltà's dedication, "In Honor of Jesus Christ" has no doubt its share of agrarian imagery; however, its erotic overtones cannot be overlooked because in the medieval period, union was expressed through the language that defines nature.

Umiltà's cries to Christ concentrating on the fire of his love and in that fiery union, Umiltà wishes for fruitfulness-conception. The passage acts as a mirror into the medieval understanding of male and female union and the medical understanding of that union. Umiltà further asks Christ to "enflame me with your love and make me luminous like a torch that can cast brightness into any kind of darkness" (25). Furthermore, she asks that Christ should "grant me a good portion of the fire of your love and make me strong" (250). Heat was a sign of health and when the

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is a prerequisite for union with God.

female received the right amount-she would be healthy and would conceive. Here again is the tendency of female mystics to internalize the medieval world-view, which gives us a clear picture not only of their concept of love, but their concept of the medieval medical body.

Lastly, Mechthild also expresses the desire for "burned love" (252). She describes her experience as being totally consumed by the fire of that love, and the unity/marriage causes annihilation:<sup>14</sup>

'[a]h, dear Lord, have mercy on one who has been consumed here in the fire of your love and has been absorbed in your humility and has been annihilated in all things.' (252)

Mechthild also mirrors the idea of perpetual desire, for she notes that she is "unquenchable in [Christ's] burning love. / I pursue you with all my might" (93). God answers Mechthild and makes her aware that the union is paradoxical, since it causes ecstasy and pain: "'no matter how softly I [Christ] caress you, / I [Christ] inflict immense pain on your poor body. / And so, the higher the love, the holier the martyr'" (94). Within this union we cannot help but see the similarities of the violence in union/marriage and of

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<sup>14</sup>Again, there is the tendency to associate marriage with violence.

Constance's faith.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Mechthild expresses the acceptance of the truth for bodies in medieval culture; they are tied to their "nature." Mechthild's religious belief-system is intertwined with the medieval medical epistemology: she accepts her nature just as all animals must. And spiritually, she cannot resist this concept in her union with Christ, just as animal's have a specific calling in nature:

A fish in water does not drown.  
 A bird in the air does not plummet.  
 Gold in fire does not perish.  
 Rather, it gets its purity and its radiant color  
 there.  
 How, then, am I to resist my nature?  
 I must go from all things to God  
 Who is my father by nature  
 [ . . . . . ]  
 My bridegroom by love,  
 And I his bride from all eternity.  
 Don't you believe I feel him intensely?  
 He can both burn powerfully and cool consolingly.  
 [ . . . . . ]  
 Then the bride of all delight goes to the Fairest  
 of lovers in the secret chamber of the invisible  
 Godhead. There she finds the bed and the abode of  
 love prepared by God in a manner beyond what is  
 human. (61-62)

Mechthild connects the imagery of violence, of burning love, and of insatiable desire to her inhuman need and to a bride hungry for her husband. And thus, Mechthild's demonstration

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<sup>15</sup>See my chapter two for female mystics' understanding of perpetual desire which causes them to act out the medical beliefs about the body in devotion to God. However, the union is dependent upon violence.

of this imagery and the imagery of penetrating, incorporating, and entering into the wound of Christ suggest her internalization of the medical religious view of parts standing for the whole. Also, she connects her imagery to the internalization of the reality of a husband chastising his wife, since, for Mechthild, incorporation is dependant on suffering. Yalom asserts that, in the medieval period,

[b]attering was an accepted practice, sanctioned by law and custom, that allowed husbands to enforce authority over their wives. It was a staple of folk wisdom and literature, and provided comic caricature in the popular reverse images of wives beating their husbands. But the reality was far from comic, as shown from court records that often condoned behavior of brutal husbands abusing their wives as a matter of course. (47 HW)

Indeed a husband "had the legal right to beat [his wife] if she did not accede to his wishes" (Yalom 46 HW). Thus, the law, or the idea of a wife's subordinate status, would have been on female mystics' minds in their marriage to God.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the historical analysis of medieval medical narratives and its connection to religion demonstrate the medieval world-view about bodies. Although these descriptions are linked to misogyny and inequality, these theories of the body still pervaded medieval society, and they were utilized by spiritual women. Therefore, the medicine-religion relationship projected specific ideas

about the body, and these ideas became part of regular medieval discourse.

In the first section of the chapter, I investigated this symbiotic relationship between medicine and religion, which created a parallel between both institutions' epistemology and method of operation and analysis. This parallel was discussed through Isidore's *Etymologiae* to demonstrate medicine's necessary and biased codification of severed parts, which designated the divine purpose for parts and the divine purpose for the whole body. The medical concept mirrored the Church's doctrine of concomitance, which I discussed later in the second section with eucharistic imagery. The mystical imagery of the body is profoundly similar when discussing the medical body. In addition, the theory of heat taught that women possessed a perpetual desire. This insatiable desire is internalized by mystics who hopelessly need Christ's "burning love." Lastly, mystics emphasized their fiery union with Christ, which intersects with the concept of violence in marriage.

Although I took a different angle, in contrast to Robertson, I do believe that "medical ideology shapes the literary representation of the feminine in mystical works" (Robertson 142). However, although I agree with her conclusion that Julian's writing "had no revolutionary

intent," I do not agree with her generalized conclusion that Julian (or female mystics in general) "sought to undo assumptions about women, and to provide, in an Irigarayan sense, a new celebration of femininity [. . .]" (161). As I have demonstrated, Julian, and female mystics in general, internalized medieval culture via the epistemology produced out of the religion-medicine relationship. Moreover, Robertson's reading omits Julian's and other female mystics' Christian epistemology, of which "subordination and the surrendering of autonomy were explicit goals" (Long 2 EF). Barbara Newman's *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ* suggests that "'religious women whose lives are known to us did not question God's right to punish'" (qtd. in Long EF). Likewise, as Newman argues, "medieval women's concepts of themselves as women and as human and in relation to the divine is necessary in order to triangulate their womanist ideologies and commitments" (Long 2 EF). In like manner, mystics' Godly convictions allowed them to view the world around them based on their relationship to God in medieval theological terms. Robertson's conclusion that Julian, or female mystics in general, "sought to undo assumptions about women, and to provide, in an Irigarayan sense, a new celebration of femininity," echoes feminist scholarship that

places too much weight on Julian's expression of "Jesus as mother."<sup>16</sup> Bynum asserts that

it was not women who originated female images of God. [. . .]. Although the most sophisticated use of the theme is Julian of Norwich's trinitarian theology, there is no reason to assert, as some have done, that the theme of the motherhood of God is a 'feminine insight.' [. . .]. Bridal imagery is more common in women's writing than in men's in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, [. . .]. (140 JM)

Thus, Bynum concludes that

medieval theory acknowledged the 'permeability or interchangeability of the sexes,' although 'the male body is paradigmatic,' and even Julian of Norwich, for whom Christ was Mother, still consistently referred to him with the male pronoun." (Bynum qtd. in Long 5 CM)

In addition, Julian repeatedly referred to the "blessed Manhood of Christ"<sup>17</sup> using a male noun to describe the "bodily emphasis of [her] vision [which] goes so far that she sees the whole Trinity within Christ's Humanity" (Spearing 182-183).

Additionally, Robertson concludes that "Julian further associates Christ's feminized body, 'oure moder Cryst,' with sensuality" (156). Julian's meaning of sensuality is

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<sup>16</sup>This idea will be discussed in detail in my chapter four: "Female Mystics and *Bodytalk*: A Feminist Critique."

<sup>17</sup>See Spearing's *Julian of Norwich*: "blessed Manhood of Christ" (18, 72) and "blessed Passion, all are Christ's Manhood" (122).

translated by Spearing and Baker, as the "physical and temporal existence in [Christ's] assumption of human nature" in order to atone original sin (Baker 91 n. 2).<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, Julian's statement echoes the religious concept of Christ being the Word which was made flesh and lived among men/society (John 1:14),<sup>19</sup> to which Robertson agrees (157). However, she adds that this sensuality, for Julian, is specifically "woman's sensuality" and it is especially redemptive for women because it is Julian's idea of the "feminized body of Christ" that "redeems" the body (156).<sup>20</sup> However, Bynum makes clear that "it was not women who originated female images of God" (140 JM). In fact she states that

although the most sophisticated use of the theme is Julian of Norwich's trinitarian theology, there is no reason to assert, as some have done, that the theme of the motherhood of God is a 'feminine insight.' Moreover it is not at all clear, although many scholars assume it, that women are particularly drawn to feminine imagery. Bridal imagery is more common in women's writing than in

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<sup>18</sup>Spearing translates it with the same meaning as Christ taking on "our sensory being" (138).

<sup>19</sup>In Julian's *Long Text* 3, Julian states that Jesus was "willing to become a mortal man for love, so I wanted to suffer with him" (Spearing 45).

<sup>20</sup>See my chapter four "Feminist Critique." I discuss the feminist tendency to over-emphasize the "feminized body" of Christ so as to appropriate their feminist agenda.

men's in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries  
[. . .]. (140)

Lastly, Robertson believes that Julian

rather than accepting male views of women, ultimately subverts them, and rather than being an essentialist herself, she takes an 'essentialist' stance only as a strategy, in an Irigarayan sense: she mocks male views by mimicking and hyperbolizing them, and undoes them by overdoing them. (159)

Robertson's monopolizing of Julian's femininity and the femininity of Christ's body as the key to redemption fails to address Julian's Christian conviction. This conviction resonates in Julian's text. After Julian states: "I am a woman ignorant, weak and frail," she denounces self/her femaleness and her self-interest and announces to her audience: "you must quickly forget me, a paltry creature, you must not let me hinder you, but look directly at Jesus, who is teacher of all" (Julian qtd. in Spearing 11).

Julian's maturity teaches her the reality of her own words and it is evident in the *Long Text* because she only refers to herself as "the creature." Medieval Christians would have understood that Christianity required a dying to self. Therefore, they would have had some understanding of what Julian confesses: "look directly at him," since they would have seen themselves as one in union with Christ; not as

male, not as female, but in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Thus, medieval spiritual women would have expressed themselves via their incorporation with Christ.

Joseph Ziegler notes that "[t]hroughout the Middle Ages physicians possessed one fundamental source upon which they could draw when asserting the legitimacy of their profession, the Bible, [ . . .]" (4-5). In fact, Ecclesiasticus 38 defines the "place of medicine and the physician in a divinely ordained world" (Ziegler 5) and

could be (and was) used as a starting point for elaborating on the nexus sin-disease, punishment-pain and suffering. But could also be used to supply scriptural authority to a general argument in favour of the medical profession in Christian society, which would also draw on the authority of 'The Philosopher', Aristotle. (Ziegler 5)

Therefore, Julian, and female mystics in general, might not have tried to subvert medical theories of the female body, but they internalized them because of its authentication via religion. Thus, Robertson's reading fails to analyze the medieval body via the medicine-religion relationship. And

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<sup>21</sup>*Latin Vulgate* (Galatians 3:28): "non est iudaeus neque Graecus non est servus neque liber non est masculus neque femina omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu." Translation, *King James Version*: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus." See John Hurt, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians," *Parallel Greek New Testament* 2004, 28 June 2005 <<http://www.greeknewtestament.com/B48C003.htm>>.

she misses the most important aspect of her subject, Julian's Christian convictions, and also the convictions of female mystics in general, to merge, to incorporate, to possess, to lose themselves in Christ; and thus, loose their self-interests dictate the idea of a religious-unified Self. Therefore,

Julian reveals little of her life, beyond certain details that authenticate her religious experiences. [. . .] in LT she omits even some of the few personal items mentioned in ST. (Spearing ix)

CHAPTER 4  
FEMALE MYSTICS AND *BODYTALK*: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

In this 'mystical love noir,' suffering becomes the 'bridal bed' as pain and violence, and the erotic become indistinguishable. (Amy Hollywood and Caroline Bynum qtd. in Miller 40)

We have already seen, briefly, from my introduction and Miller's findings that "scholars have acknowledged, albeit somewhat begrudgingly at times, that a 'messy entanglement' exist between eros and violence" (Miller 39). This chapter will not try to reestablish what Miller has already discussed, but will seek to understand and to add to the reason why scholars have valorized, missed or even dismissed the language as problematic. While Miller has dealt with the continental mystics, I will discuss aspects of the continental and English as well, specifically Julian of Norwich. However, before understanding the sociocultural climate of scholarly analysis that makes this lacuna possible, let me review Miller's findings as to the fact that some scholars do make a note of the merging of eros and violence, but they do not problematize it; they romanticize it. Like Miller, I do not wish to critique the mystics *per se* but contemporary feminist scholars who miss or dismiss the violent language and practices or valorize it on the

grounds that via agency and choice, mystics are empowered through *bodytalk*<sup>1</sup> or the "new language of the flesh."<sup>2</sup> Miller states that Caroline Bynum<sup>3</sup> continually makes note of the union of pain and ecstasy, and connects it to the "delicious suffering" characterized in medieval spiritual women's writing (39). For example Bynum argues that Beatrice of Nazareth "tortured herself in extreme asceticism-flagellating herself, sleeping on stones, walking on ice, binding thorns between her breasts and around her

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<sup>1</sup>I use Jane Burns's term *bodytalk* here. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). In *Bodytalk*, Burns argues that female protagonists in medieval texts authored by men can be heard to talk back, via their bodies, against the stereotyped and prescriptive roles that their fictive anatomy is designed to convey.

<sup>2</sup>Taken from Lochrie's idea of *fissured flesh*. See Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 44.

<sup>3</sup>I chose not to deal with Bynum in my chapter since Miller deals extensively with Bynum. Miller argues that Bynum is "undoubtedly the most influential scholar" using the approach of "reclaiming medieval women's subjectivity from the grip of those who view it as peculiarly masochistic" (47). However, although I do agree with Miller, I still feel that even if Bynum dismisses the violence and falls into some of the pitfalls discussed, she does hint at or tries to warn against appropriation in her research. In Bynum's works, she does make note that medieval understandings of the body are very complex and in fact she warns readers not to take a simplified, unhistorical view of the body: (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and *Fragmentation and Redemption*). Also, Bynum's, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: ZoneBooks, 2001), which I quote in this chapter warns against appropriation.

loins" (39). Therefore, it is not surprising that Bynum describes Beatrice's mystical experience as one that was "both awful and intimate, intensely erotic and excruciatingly painful" (Miller 39-40). In fact Miller concludes by quoting Bynum and Amy Hollywood<sup>4</sup> that "In this 'mystical love noir,' suffering becomes the 'bridal bed' as pain, violence, and the erotic become indistinguishable" (40). In turn, Elizabeth Petroff's investigation reveals that Hadewijch's poetry connects her to "spiritual joy and pleasure" with "tormented desire," "madness" and the "violent becoming one in love" (39). Amy Hollywood points out that "the often excruciating experience of 'alienation and ecstasy' displayed in mystical text is 'grounded on the erotic model itself'" (Miller 39). Finally, in Richard Kieckhefer's *Unquiet Souls* he acknowledges the fact that scholars have interpreted medieval women's spirituality as "sublimated sadomasochism," but, as Miller notes, Kieckhefer veers from the issue of erotic violence and suffering to a situation of "intensity" and "imbalance" (2):

he explains the emphasis on suffering and pain in medieval hagiography and autobiography as resulting from the era's cultural and theological atmosphere of 'otherworldliness.' Believing that

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<sup>4</sup>Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

redress from the miseries of this life lay ultimately, and only in the afterlife, medieval saints engaged in a 'strenuous and often frustrating quest for holiness' characterized by ascetic and penitential practices. And, in an effort to motivate ordinary Christians to undertake the difficult moral reform necessary to warrant themselves a place in the heavenly afterlife, medieval hagiographers and autobiographers repeatedly illustrated and emphasized 'dramatic example[s] of outlandish sanctity.' For Kieckhefer, then, the eroticized violence and 'sado-masochism' of these texts are not problematic in themselves. Rather they become a concern only because the emphasis on penitence and suffering is not countered by an equally strong understanding of God's grace and the resurrection. (Miller 41-42)

Miller concludes that

Over and over again in the writings of medieval and early modern women mystics, we find the violence of God and the pain of Love-though at times rather severely resisted-ultimately glorified, celebrated, and welcomed. The language of violent erotic love-of burning desire, of penetrating, piercing pleasure, of delightful wounds and ravaging, ecstatic bliss-constructs the religious experience of these women; in the end, pain and violence, submission and surrender, assault and torment are thought to go naturally hand in hand with erotic love and spiritual joy. (40)

Therefore, based on Miller's findings this chapter will seek to discuss and add to the reasons why, as Miller suggests, there is an "inattention to or even celebration of this language" (41). Miller sees this inattention as mainly due to the preoccupation of modern feminists to deal with the historical silencing of women, that is, feminist scholarship's urgency to give women a voice and reclaim

women's subjectivity. I want to add that the sociocultural climate of academic theory and scholarship today have taken that preoccupation into the realm of the body-the female body-and body theory. Current feminist scholarship perceives the body as a site of inscription where women are the agents negotiating, and where the "body can be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles" (Grosz 19). So rather than a body that is generic or mass-produced within patriarchal ideologies, the body then for contemporary feminists operates on a system of choice and is a self-produced object. Therefore this concept of the body spurs feminist interpretations of medieval female mystics.

Additionally, I would like to demonstrate the ideology that the inattention creates by establishing how contemporary feminists *glose*<sup>5</sup> the merging of violence and

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<sup>5</sup>As used in the *Canterbury Tales*: *glose* means interpretation. However I would like to use the term as used in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*- to use circumlocution 111: 26-27, 509. Carolyn Dinshaw expresses the meaning of "glossing" in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*: "Glossing is a gesture of appropriation; the glossa undertakes to speak the text, to assert authority over it, to provide an interpretation, finally to limit or close it to the possibility of heterodox or unlimited significance" qtd. in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 122. In this case I am trying to use the term as to the action of modern feminists speaking authority over the text in favor of their own agenda. Therefore, they dismiss the violence and instead romanticize the language.

eros as problematic in favor of, among other reasons, *auctoritee of female experience*<sup>6</sup> via the female body to create a type of *bodyvoice* or, to use Jane Burns' term, *bodytalk*. As these views become center stage in feminist research, this *auctoritee of female bodily experience* spurs self-identity; however, it seems that these theories affect the ability of feminists to argue against or problematize violence-erotic violence-against women. Also, through these contemporary theories based on self-identity and individualism, these forms of violence are reestablished positively as choice or agency. Practices of violence are dismissed, missed, or simply not seen as problematic, since they are justified under the rubric of consent. Therefore, sadomasochism/masochism, as noted by scholars, is the only access to the divine, and the premise of prostitution is the logical and only parallel interpretation for the dynamics of love/divine love. These concepts are not understood in terms of a repressive ideology for exploitation, nor are they viewed as violently harmful. But they are portrayed, via contemporary research, as female creativity or the

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<sup>6</sup>See Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*: I believe contemporary feminists make a similar argument for mystics, championing the mystic's female experience to express spiritual ecstasy versus medieval theological authority or spirituality (III: 1).

female body's fluidity or excessive expression produced for women's enjoyment rather than being harmful. Therefore, for feminists, it is not an issue of harm or violence, but an issue of self-fulfillment and empowerment. Contemporary feminists, who deal with medieval female mystics in this manner, are guilty (directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly), of essentializing and anachronizing the female body and female experience which unearths the question of essentialism: do women inherently love violence and choose suffering and pain in erotic love?

Liz McAvoy asserts that the "eroticized mystical union serves to create a female baseline" in the mystic's text so much so that it is in keeping with the "hermeneutics of the feminine" by which the female mystic is "especially subject" (68-69 TF). McAvoy does admit that medieval women's epistemological spirituality is at the center of bodily suffering and erotic suffering. Also her research legitimizes the notion that desiring violence is inherently contained within the feminine-medieval feminine-and the female body. For the mystic, the language of eros and violence is not only viewed as an erotic love experience between God and the soul but, as most scholars attest, it is borrowed from the language of the courtly love literary tradition. The rhetoric also constructs the medieval and,

as scholars seek to convey their *truth* to modern women writers/readers, a modern ideology of amor, sexuality, and the female body. And it perpetuates destructive cultural concepts of the feminine and female body, such as placing and affirming women in the realm of suffering and desiring the violent erotic.

I also believe this lacuna in feminist research is due to the priority given to the deconstructive project, to dismantling the mind/body split of Western philosophy or debunking gendered symbols and dichotomies of the phallogentric system. However, in trying to establish medieval women's spirituality via their *unruly bodies* and place it in opposition to male spirituality, feminists run the risk of appropriating and accepting ideological instabilities about the female body and are guilty of creating inherent and essential traits without proper historical grounding. For some feminists, as we will see with Grace Jantzen, Elizabeth Petroff and others, their definition arises out of the distinction between female spirituality and male spirituality. Therefore feminists fall into the trap of basing their argument on a context of binaries since their argument desires to demonstrate the meaning of something via its constructed opposite (body/mind, flesh/spirit). However, there is a certain disenchantment

when feminists attempt to dismantle the binaries in the masculine system. Although the reconfiguration, as feminists argue, is fundamental to their attempts to subvert and challenge the binary matrix of the patriarchal system, it does not challenge, it only disrupts by flipping the terms, since it duplicates the hierarchical ordering of readable signifiers, or it includes rather than excludes those terms from which feminists first wanted to escape. For instance, feminists claim that these women find empowerment through the acceptance of the body's abjection-Eve's abjection. In addition, it follows that the mystic's theology is one in which redemption is that which can only be attained via sin and pleasure and thus can only be attained via pain. In my opinion, women, via this process, do not redefine themselves through identifying the danger of the abject nor do they subvert or critique the cultural and religious myths about themselves; they only accept it. Furthermore, this argument demonstrates how the belief of women as *abject* beings is transmitted and endorsed by the religious, cultural, and social and academic discourses in medieval/modern society, since it is only via

the acceptance of that ideology that women can have freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In "Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City," Grace Jantzen discusses the mystic, Marguerite Porete and her execution, via the eyes of Jantzen's contemporary male scholar, Jean Leclercq, who, as Jantzen asserts, for the sake of "scholarly evidence" does not read into Marguerite's historical situation. She stresses that her concern is "not simply with a lapse of scholarship or even with its underlying misogyny" but

What formation of the concept of religion is being endorsed when an otherwise meticulous scholar is so willing to acquiesce in a woman's execution in the name of what he sees as true religion? How is such a conception of religion, reinforced by purported 'historical evidence,' serving a disciplinary function in modern society, and what alternatives could be generated? (42)

Jantzen's questions can be applied to feminist scholarship in relation to the interpreting of medieval women's spirituality as well, by querying the role that feminist scholarship plays in developing a conception of medieval and modern ideas of female nature, the feminine, the female body, and romantic love. Furthermore, what "formation" of the concept of the female body, female nature, or romantic

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<sup>7</sup>McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body* 139-145 and Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 38-47 and 71-72.

love is being endorsed when feminist scholars are willing (directly or indirectly) to "acquiesce" in violence against women in the name of what they see as woman's true identity, excess/fluidity, choice, agency, or empowerment? And how is such a conception of violence and the female body "reinforced" by the mixing of purported *historical and theoretical* evidence "serving a disciplinary function in modern society, and what alternatives could be generated?" I will try to answer these questions in this chapter.

According to Thomas Long, modern and postmodern feminists have claimed mystics as proto-feminists. For instance, Francis Beer, in *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* proposes that

Julian most dramatically reveals her femaleness in her understanding of the motherhood of God . . . Julian explains that the Trinity actually includes a female component; as well as being the Son, Jesus is our Mother, who feeds and nurtures us, and looks after us during our lifetime . . . Are these sorts of 'female' observations the result of 'nature' or 'nurture', of biology or social conditioning? Impossible (as always) to say with finality. . . . [T]he fact that Julian may have been brought up to equate womanliness and motherhood with gentleness, and may herself have had a particularly close bond with her own mother, cannot in itself have given rise to her understanding of Jesus as Mother, which was (and still is) in direct contradiction to the orthodox view of the Trinity. (qtd. in Long 1 EF)

However Long, in "Julian of Norwich: Essentialist and Feminist?," rebuts Beer's statement by saying that though it

might be appealing for a "contemporary feminist spirituality, it is both simplistic and anachronistic." Furthermore, Long insists that "Bynum and Ritamay Bradley have fleshed out in detail earlier observations of André Cabassut and Paul Molinaro" who stated that the trope is widely used among Judaeo-Christian spirituality: Therefore, Julian's trope of "Jesus as Mother" is a

widely attested figure in Judaeo-Christian spirituality with such varied nuances that it does not per se signify an egalitarian attitude toward 'Woman' or women. Placing Julian of Norwich's deployment of the trope in a tradition derived from Anselm, Bynum points out that this tradition trades on three of these stereotypes of the female or mother-pregnant and sacrificial, loving and tender, nurturing (*Jesus as Mother* 131)-and that these terms are most often used by men to talk about themselves. Furthermore, she cautions that the trope of God's motherhood, 'Too long neglected or even repressed by editor and translators . . . is perhaps now in danger of receiving more emphasis than it deserves.' (Bynum qtd. in Long 1 EF)

Additionally, the "deployment of the trope" can be seen in other mystic's who also associate Jesus' attributes with the character of a mother. For instance, Petroff notes that Marguerite d'Oingt, the prioress of the Carthusian convent of Pelotens (born in 1260), speaks of Christ in her *Pagina Meditationum*, as her mother (216-217):

For are you not my mother and more than my mother?  
The mother who bore me labored in delivering me  
for one day or one night but you, my sweet and  
lovely Lord, labored for me for more than thirty  
years. (217 n. 35, Petroff's translation)

Elizabeth Spearing mentions that "As early as Isaiah, God was presented as mother of his chosen people, asking, 'Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? [ . . . ]' (49:15)" (xxiii). Spearing also notes that

in the New Testament Jesus rebukes Jerusalem for its callousness by contrast with his own motherly concern: 'How often would I have gathered together thy children as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldst not? (Matthew 23:37). (xxiii)

In fact Beer mentions that the "earliest recorded Christian references to God as mother were articulated by those pillars of the establishment (sic), the Church Fathers" (152).<sup>8</sup> These were Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, and Augustine. Clement states:

God himself is love; and out of love to us became feminine. In his ineffable essence He is Father; in His compassion to us He became Mother. The Father by loving became feminine . . . The Body of Christ . . . nourishes by the word the young offspring, which the Lord Himself brought forth in

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<sup>8</sup>Spearing's *Julian of Norwich* also mentions that Saint Anselm of Canterbury also followed this example. Anselm's *Prayer to Saint Paul*, sent to Countess Mathilda of Tuscany in the eleventh century begins from the "image in Matthew of Jesus as a hen protecting her young:

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?  
Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers  
her chickens under wings?  
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;  
[ . . . . . ].  
(xxiii)

throes of flesh . . . The nutriment is the milk of the Father . . . The Father's breasts of love supply milk. (Beer 152)

Similarly, Ambrose in the fourth century makes mention that "Christ is the virgin who entered into marriage, carried us in her womb, gave birth to us, and fed us with her own milk" (Beer 152). Lastly, Augustine also employs the maternal image, but Beer asserts that "he stipulated that its use was metaphorical." Augustine notes: "Just as a mother, suckling her infant, transfers from her flesh the very same food which would otherwise be unsuitable to the babe, . . . so the Lord, in order to convert His wisdom into milk for our benefit, came to us clothed in flesh" (Beer 152).

Nevertheless, Beer does not credit the Fathers with an understanding of the maternal nor a particularly feminine sensitivity. The "deployment of the trope" within the Fathers' rhetoric does not seem to have the power to challenge the gender codes revealed in their mimesis or imitative written *performance* of the maternal self. However, the same trope, as noted by feminists, produces different dynamics when uttered by spiritual women, since the female body is fluid and operates on fluidity and excess performances. Beer, and specifically McAvoy, champion Julian's deployment of the motherly trope as peculiarly and

inherently feminine since the female mystic or "Julian was herself a woman" which has

given her the particular sensitivity to experience and articulate the maternal aspect of the godhead so fully, even as we have seen Hildegard and Mechthild's individual understanding of their Creator to be enhanced by their womanhood. (Beer 152)

Beer is keen on noting that "until the mid-1970s, Julian's translators and editors tended to dismiss her treatment of the motherhood of God as 'a mere metaphor'" (153).<sup>9</sup> But Beer bestows on Julian and other female mystics a type of *authentic self*, since the ability to achieve the maternal *identity-trope* is credited to the fact that Julian is a woman and this inherently gives her culturally (biologically?) an advantage for a *female sensitivity* to perform the maternal *identity*. Butler<sup>10</sup> asserts that if identities have become fluid and performative, they are not required to conform to the *right* body nor are restricted by

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<sup>9</sup>Beer quotes scholars James Walsh and Clifton Wolters. See Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, trans. James Walsh (London: Burns and Oates, 1961) 10. And, Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 34.

<sup>10</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

it. Beer's argument champions the fact that Julian is a woman, and places that fact as a prerequisite for Julian's knowledge of the *identity* of motherhood; the concept insinuates that this *identity* trait of motherhood should correspond with the *right* body or the *right* cultural construction of that body. According to feminists, it is because of being female or a woman that the "Jesus is mother" trope was uttered and understood via female mystics. If feminists first argue that woman's identity is achieved through fluidity or repeated performances of a *fictive self*, then there cannot be an *authentic self*, since it is instituted and inscribed upon the surface of the body. Therefore, the argument that women have an advantage for a *female sensitivity* to perform the maternal *identity* debunks the idea of female fluidity and inadvertently creates an *authentic self* in the process. Consequently, in believing so, feminists try to attach motherly attributes associated with Christ to the *right* body—a female body: it follows that Christ's body should become a female body. There is no reason why a male body cannot inhabit or signify the *maternal* or the *feminine*. However, this argument inadvertently extends to the idea that the violent erotic and bodily suffering is a trait of the feminine/female/maternal, since female mystics demonstrated

"a female identified insight" (McAvoy 13 AFB). In fact, Roslyn Diprose in her book, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics Embodiment and Sexual Difference*<sup>11</sup> discusses the complexity of identity and how a man, fairly recently, won a women's beauty contest resulting from his more realistic portrayal of the femininity judged at the contest.

Therefore, what is ultimately risked in the process of arguing under this umbrella of current feminist discourse is an interpretation of the feminine that allows the female body to be thought of as inherently possessing a desire for the violent erotic. Also, the inherent constructions of womanhood via motherhood that these theories support bear a dependant relation to the way in which woman, via the academic institution, is defined, and they act as a confining standard against which women's behavior is judged. In light of all this information, I believe that feminists' fetishization of the female body has lead to the championing of empowerment via choice. This concept has also lead to a consolidation of this *uniquely feminized* approach through

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<sup>11</sup> See the Introduction to *The Bodies of Women: Ethics Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (Routledge: London, 1994). "In Australia in June 1993 Mr. Damian Taylor won the Miss Wintersun Quest. Not only did he win the 'charity queen' category, but he took out the overall title, allowing him to go on to contest the Miss Australia Awards" (Diprose vii).

the deconstructive project, which indiscreetly dissolves into a disturbing preoccupation with the use of the contemporary female body of Irigaray and Cixous to represent a complex model of the medieval body. I believe as scholars we must be cautious in attempting to appropriate the past to our contemporary agendas. I agree with Caroline Bynum, therefore, who asserts that

[o]ur research is better when we move only cautiously to understanding, when fear that we may appropriate the 'other' leads us not so much to writing about ourselves and our fears as to crafting our stories with attentive, wondering care. (74 MI)

In addition, in missing, valorizing, or dismissing the erotic violence, and choosing, under the guise of empowerment, to highlight the *unique feminine approach*, feminists indirectly replicate the negative conventions of medieval medicine.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in their research, feminist scholars reinforce the notions of a medieval female sensuality and inadvertently expose, for today, a negative type of contemporary rhetoric of the female body. They also promote the idea that woman inherently desire *ravishment/violence* under the guise of empowerment.

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<sup>12</sup>See my chapter three: "Religion and Medicine: Female Mystics and the Medieval Expression of the Body," which discusses medieval medicine's influence on the female body, and mystics internalization of those theories.

Thus, feminists have been concerned with and clouded by three major theoretical leanings which act as an umbrella for their work: 1. Gynocentric hermeneutics and the desire to let the "body be heard" via *l'écriture féminine*;<sup>13</sup> woman must write herself and must discover for herself what her body feels like and how to write about that body in language. 2. Woman's empowerment, choice, agency, and the ability to subvert and challenge patriarchal ideologies and abject images of their bodies through their bodies. 3. The authority of female bodily expressions to suppress gender stereotypes and reconstruct and reconfigure the phallogocentric system of Western culture. The following paragraphs will demonstrate how feminists have been concerned with these areas of research, and therefore

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<sup>13</sup>Cixous argues that *l'écriture féminine* corresponds to the use of the literal and metaphoric. The woman must write herself, must discover for herself what her body feels like, and how to write about that body in language. Specifically, women must find their own sexuality, one that is rooted solely in their own sexuality, one that is rooted solely in their own bodies, and find ways to write about that pleasure, that *jouissance*. In addition, when women speak/write their own bodies, the structure of language itself will change; as women become active subjects, not just beings passively acted upon, their position as subject in language will shift—that is they will be creating a new signifying system that is more fluid than the existing rigid phallogocentric symbolic order (Laugh of the Medusa 311-312). See Mary Klages, "Helene Cixous: 'The Laugh of the Medusa,'" *Poststructuralist Feminist Theory*, 24 Nov. 1997, 1 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENG2012Klages/cixous.html>>.

valorize, miss, or dismiss the violent eroticized language and practices of mystics. As you will notice, all three points overlap in their work, so I did not demarcate sections for each. All the feminist research that I am going to discuss starts from the premise of Kristeva's abject<sup>14</sup> and lead to Cixous' *l'écriture féminine*. Also, feminists assert that as the mystic manipulates the *new language of the flesh* they experience *jouissance-pleasure*, but only through masochism, pain, and suffering. Collectively speaking, most of the feminist research discuss to a greater or lesser extent the female body's excess via sexuality and/or the maternal-internal sensitivity of woman. Additionally, they discuss the ability of mystic women to break through the patriarchal habits imposed upon the majority of medieval women, and lastly, mystics' tendency to express themselves through bodily metaphors and the subversion by inversion of Christ's body.

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<sup>14</sup>The "abject" is that which threatens us by transgressing bodily boundaries between self and other, challenging our bodily identity. Or the abject, in reference to Eve, or women in general, constitutes whatever is considered to be tainted, evil, and sinful.

In *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*,<sup>15</sup> Karma Lochrie expounds on the theory of the body and connects it to medieval female mystical spirituality via Augustine's idea of "fissured flesh,"<sup>16</sup> which labels the female body as a dangerous locus for corruption. Lochrie demonstrates that according to Augustine, who was heavily influenced by Paul's concept of the "flesh" as a metaphor for flawed humanity,<sup>17</sup> the flesh was culpable in causing human will to rebel against God and formed the basis of human concupiscence. The body's role, because of the fall from God, was to assist in fleshly rebellion; this rebellion was brought on by Adam and Eve, who gave way to their own desire instead of God's.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this rebellion there is a continual struggle against the impulses of the "flesh" and human desire which have led to this irrevocable fissuring of

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<sup>15</sup>Part of this summary was taken from McAvoy's *Authority and the Female Body* 135-136.

<sup>16</sup>Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 19-23. For a further look at Augustine's theory look at Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Colombia UP, 1998) 387-427.

<sup>17</sup>Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Phillip Levine, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1968) XIV: ii and see Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 19).

<sup>18</sup>Brown, *Body and Society* 418.

flesh. Therefore, Augustine did not see the "flesh" as ultimately synonymous with the body. However, according to Lochrie, he regarded the relationship between body and soul a fundamentally good one, but of course the relationship is constantly at risk via the urges of the wayward flesh which were aided by the body's sensual nature. Also, Lochrie mentions Augustine's notion of "fissured flesh" being often interpreted in gendered terms. For example, Augustine characterizes the unruly flesh as a disobedient wife: "(your flesh is like your wife. . . . It rebels against you, just as your wife does, Love it, rebuke it, until it is made into one harmony, one bond [of flesh and spirit.])"<sup>19</sup> Therefore, by looking at the theory of the body in medieval theology, Lochrie concludes that women were associated not only with the body but that aspect of the body that was unruly-the flesh-which Augustine claims was fissured at the Fall of Man. So the flesh represented the part of defilement and was the disruptive and vile aspect of the body and soul in medieval Christian thinking. Lochrie aims, in her research, to demonstrate within this framework how Kempe, and other medieval female mystics in general, successfully exploited

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<sup>19</sup>Augustine qtd. in and trans. by Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* 19. See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. D. Eligius Dekkers and Iohannes Fraipont, CCSL 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956) 2037.

the gendered ideologies of this disruptive flesh through the action and language of their bodies.

Additionally, Lochrie capitalizes on Cixous' *l'écriture féminine* and Kristeva's abject as the result of this action/language of the body which blossomed into a type of *gynocentric hermeneutic* or "new language of the flesh" (44 MTF). Lochrie expresses that this new bodily language is produced by the mystic's desire and revulsion (40 MTF). Also, the language stems from the mystic's union which comes through abjection and "at the cost of fragmentation" or defilement of the body (41 MTF). Therefore, the mystic gains victory/redemption only through the defilement of her body. Lochrie argues that this language of the body subverts, since it relies on that which is transgressive or which is outside or excluded in medieval institutional and social discourse or medieval Christianity (46-47 MTF). Therefore the female mystic as writer/body-writer exploits the "bodily excess through fleshy excess" and she therefore "exploits the same ideology, and threatens the very structures of power that ideology is meant to reinforce" (4 MTF). In addition, through taking advantage of her position as flesh, the mystic has resources to a "power derived from the taboo which defines her and which she breaks" with her bodily speech (4 MTF). Also via the *logic of imitatio*

*Christi*, by using this *language of the flesh*, the mystic does not experience divine worship and love without "masochism" (26 MTF). Lochrie insists that although the mystic's masochistic ritual, via the language of the flesh, violates spatial boundaries, the mystic "does not then, become victimized by her practice; rather, she unsettles the very terms of victimization" (56 MTF). Thus, though the "mystic's ordeal of abjection is masochistic, it is not in the service of the self-loathing that the Ancrene Wisse encourages," but the mystic takes this "abjection for the sublime" (39-40 MTF). Thus, in doing so, the mystic challenges the patriarchal system's underpinnings of the flesh.

Lochrie seeks to expound on the different aspects of the body via the *fissured flesh* in the female mystic, since she argues that it also leads, to use McAvoy's term, to an "Irigarian 'blind spot'" (McAvoy 24) in, medieval and modern patriarchy. Also, Lochrie (and McAvoy) are concerned that this *fissured* concept of the medieval female body eventually leads to a modern reading and writing of these women as also *fissured*. Thus, Lochrie asserts that without looking at the body from an historical perspective or an "historical construction," feminist scholars will be inclined or even "forced" to "adopt positions ironically adjacent to medieval

patriarchy" (15 MTF). However, by not critiquing the violent erotic and subsuming a modern construction of the female body for a medieval one, Lochrie does adopt "positions ironically adjacent to medieval patriarchy." Lochrie not only imitates medieval patriarchy's credo, but she affirms it, and places the female body and the feminine at the center of excess suffering via her claim that it challenges the phallogocentric system. Therefore, her argument does not

challenge the patriarchal ideology that has constructed the female as sufferer [. . .]. The female still remains that which suffers, that which is body, although now it is asserted that her excessively suffering and fissured body 'tumbles over' into spirit as well. Although this excess may certainly make men nervous and may allow women a spiritual voice, it is a highly circumscribed voice. Moreover, it is one which, I believe, has only advanced the notion that women enjoy—both spiritually and erotically—the violence and suffering they endure within patriarchal cultures. To admit, as Lochrie does, that the 'woman mystic's ordeal of abjection is masochistic' but then to effectively deny this masochism because it is taken as 'the sublime' rather than as self-loathing (pp. 39-40) does much to legitimate the notion that through (and only through?) masochistic behavior, historical women and the feminine reach the heights of spiritual and erotic pleasure. (Miller 44 n.76)

And indeed Lochrie's argument does situate the female body and the feminine back into the ideology of *fissuring flesh*, since the mystic's pleasurable union with God, via her *language of the flesh*, only comes at the "cost of

fragmentation," or defilement (41 MTF). For example Lochrie mentions, without critique, when discussing Julian's vision of her spiritual assault and union with Christ, that it induces "ravishment,"<sup>20</sup> since the abjection for Julian give place to sympathy but not *without* the "physical tokens of defilement," that is, suffering and tears (41 MTF). Thus, Lochrie's ideas does provide a picture of the medieval, religious female psyche; however, her argument as to their language or actions challenging the patriarchy seems to be in question, since her argument inadvertently does more to align the female with the general medieval religious climate of which suffering is mandatory.

Liz McAvoy is heavily influenced by Lochrie via this *language of the flesh* or Cixous' *l'écriture féminine*, and she expounds on the abject status of the mystic's body and the female body in general. McAvoy seeks to argue that Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and other mystics were saturated in a culture keen to the dynamics of prostitution. Therefore, these mystics strategically emulated and described love-divine love-based on this premise as a means to empowerment. McAvoy, like Lochrie, investigates the

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<sup>20</sup>See the "Introduction" in my chapter one for the complex meaning of the term *ravishment* in the medieval period.

abjection, *fissure*, or to use her term, *slippage*, of the female body in order to demonstrate that the "ideological instability of the female body was ripe for exploitation by the mystic" via her own "fleshy embodiment of body and soul" and via *imitatio Christi* (Lochrie 136 MTF). This exploitation, according to McAvoy, allows the mystic to reconcile or resolve the *slippage*-traditional epistemology versus experiential epistemology of the female body-as she struggles to "oppose the phallogocentric discourse of traditional Western thought" (95 AFB). McAvoy is also interested in the connection that Lochrie describes as the association of women with the flesh which puts "'their desire to imitate Christ in a different position from the equivalent male desire'" (136 MTF); women were subject to a gendered ideology, socially, culturally, and spiritually: "'men begin from a position of the spirit and women from a position of the body'" (136 MTF). However, McAvoy's sincere attempt to demonstrate difference between male and female spirituality creates, what I described earlier as an argument for an authentic self. McAvoy, in my opinion, reads Julian and other mystics as having a type of *genuine self*, since mystics demonstrate a "female-identified desire for *imitatio Christi*" based on their femaleness, as opposed to male identified desire. Also it is because that *identity*

fits the *right* body: "we are our bodies (more so than we like to admit) [. . .]" (McAvoy 26 AFB). This concept, feminists argue, demarcates female mystics' spirituality, or spiritual language, from male mystics' as *uniquely feminine*, since the feminine/female must be associated with the *right* body. McAvoy desires that "the potential of that [female] body to provide a means towards female empowerment and its articulation" will facilitate a greater understanding of medieval women (26). In addition, mystics can "reconstruct the female body in their own image and imbue it with lasting authority" (27) as opposed to the constructions in the patriarchal system.

If we do accept McAvoy, and other feminist scholars' claim that there is a demarcation between male and female spirituality and based on that fact, female mystics were able to understand a feminine god, then, there is an existence of a *phallically organized spirituality* and, no matter how many new ways a religious woman sets out to worship as a woman, she will be defining herself in terms of what she is not: a phallically-focused male mystic. Thus, it is not only a question of the risk of essentialist readings such as mapping femininity onto nature and flesh. But, if feminist research merely highlights the parts and meaning that are just masculine and just feminine or

demonstrate that the phallic is bad compared to the feminine; it creates a hierarchy between male and female spiritual pleasure (we do get an idea from feminists that feminine erotic pleasure is better than that of masculine), and thus, this only serves to reinscribe the old male-female binary, or it simply inverts the terms. Instead of being subversive, it simply invents a category of opposition which inadvertently upholds the patriarchal structure based on that binary. We will see this dynamic being played out in feminist research.

As McAvoy aims to show how the "potential of the female body" can provide "an effective hermeneutic for women writers and female mystics in particular" (26 AFB), she interprets the mystics, in each of her sections, from a "particular aspect of widespread, if not universal, female experience which was subject to paradoxical and therefore problematic definition in the Middle Ages": motherhood, female sexuality (prostitution), and the wise woman (26 AFB). However, although McAvoy tries to recoup the female body from the abject status of medieval theological epistemology, she falls victim to the same pitfalls as Lochrie. Firstly, she describes how female mystics, as a means to their empowerment, embody binary concepts to describe their worship, which is similar to Lochrie's pain

and pleasure: pleasure coming only at the risk of pain/fragmentation/defilement. Among other binaries, McAvoy, stresses sin and redemption or punishment and redemption, since "sin is not only inevitable, it is also desirable indeed essential" (TF 71) to the mystic's redemptive experience. And in order for the body to be redemptive or become a free commodity, it must be a body that is a "tradable commodity" (AFB 150). Sin is that which is redemptive; redemption is that which is sinful/transgressive and "suffering could be read in terms of both punishment and redemption" (150 AFB). Julian, in McAvoy's opinion, uses this *feminine intellect* in her "request for illness" and suffering, which is accredited to Julian's familiarity with "the concept of trading on the resource of her body" (150 AFB). Therefore, the logic of female empowerment is as follows: in order to obtain divine redemption, Julian's *feminine intellect* instructs her to sinfully choose to "trade her body" and suffer in order to expedite her "feminized route to salvation" (150 AFB). Julian, and most mystics, did not seek to champion the feminine-self, nor gain authority, since the medieval, and maybe even the modern, concept of Christianity required subordination and the relinquishing of autonomy. Therefore, the mystic is reinscribed into the medieval Christian

ideology and does not subvert medieval patriarchy, but affirms the "abject" nature of the mystic's experience. In addition, McAvoy does not critique the system which places sin and punishment as the only prerequisite for gaining access to divine love. McAvoy also argues that Julian chooses to strategically use her "female sexuality" and combine it with her treatment of "God's motherhood" (71 TF), and thus was able to "effect both authority and a powerful redemption of the female body" (71 TF). Hence, according to McAvoy, Julian's actions "provided a convenient, accessible and highly contemporary set of specifically female hermeneutics" (71 TF). This line of argument, in my opinion, does not do much for feminist authority, since Julian is placed back into one of the gendered spaces assigned to women by the patriarchy-prostitution, and her so-called "female hermeneutic" of "God's motherhood" originated from male writers and was used by male and female writers as well. Also, it is "clear that such language is in no way the special preserve of female writers" (Bynum 140 JM). Thus, her argument does not "rescue the female body from the realm of the abject to which the 'language of the world' had relegated it" (71 TF).

In *Proverbs of Ashes*,<sup>21</sup> Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker demonstrate how God's sacrifice of his son Jesus stabilized and standardized the Church's belief, and the idea of being born to suffer which justifies abuse and suffering. In addition, Joanne Brown and Parker in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* discuss the Church's tendency to blame women or put the burden on women to redeem the terrible death of "our redeemer," the suffering Christ and savior. The ideals of Christianity are passive acceptance of suffering, humility, sacrificial love and these do not only exemplify the qualities of our savior, but also reinforce the scapegoat syndrome for women:

The burden is on the believer to redeem Jesus' death from tragedy, but the believer cannot be redeemed without the example of the tragedy. This is the kind of double bind in which women find themselves in Christian culture. (13)

Brown and Parker discuss the danger of various contemporary and traditional interpretations arising from this "passion of Christ." All these interpretations place suffering and pain as a priority to achieving happiness or redemption and as a requirement to faithfulness and communion or else there

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<sup>21</sup>Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, ed., *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

is a "threat of death" (13).<sup>22</sup> This "threat of death, however, should not be called moral persuasion but should be identified as the most pernicious evil form of coercion and terror" (Brown and Parker 13).

Additionally, McAvoy's use of the prostitution trope inadvertently legitimizes and valorizes Julian and other mystic's choice of "tradable bodies" which attains empowerment through violence and suffering as the only means to redemption and more so female empowerment. McAvoy dismisses any cause for critique of the violence when she states that "despite their [mystics] being scapegoated by traditional patriarchal thinking, these areas of experience [fluidity, bodily suffering, and pain] which were identifiably female were not always conceived as negative by

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<sup>22</sup>Joanne Brown and Rebecca Parker. "For God so Loved the World?" *Christianity Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990). Brown and Parker assert that this idea of redemption via suffering was proposed by twelfth-century philosopher and theologian, Abelard, and is called the "moral influence theory of atonement" (11). Abelard had "rejected the satisfaction theory of atonement," started by Anselm, in "favor of saying that the barrier preventing reconciliation between God and human beings is not in God but in human beings" (11). Brown and Parker conclude that the moral influence theories of the atonement "sanctify love/hate relationships. Redemption is not to be found in intimate relationships; only vicious cycles of violence may be found (13). These theories "holding over people's heads the threat that if they do not behave someone will die" and this requires "occasional fulfillment of the threat" (13).

the women themselves" (27). However, the potential perniciousness of that empowerment is not recognized. McAvoy's argument is a common view that could be argued by both misogynist male theory and by recuperative feminist theory, that female identity, as a consequence of its receptive sexuality (or maternal role) has always been fluid, more fluid than male identity. In addition, McAvoy's argument that through the dynamics of prostitution, Julian finds redemption or female empowerment, is shaped by decontextualization and inconsistency, since in the dynamics of prostitution, modern research demonstrates that this type of empowerment is only "illusionary or conditional" in the dynamics of modern prostitution (Anthony 87). Moreover, this can also be applied to medieval prostitution. The medieval period accepted prostitution, but adopted the Aquinian standard of prostitution as a necessary evil (*Medieval Sourcebook on ST 2-2*, 153,2). Although prostitutes were afforded a place in society, prostitutes were excluded from the Church if they continued their work, but there was always hope of their conversion.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, McAvoy assumes that Julian's mentioning of Mary Magdalene, a

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<sup>23</sup>Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (New York: Crown Books, 1987).

saved prostitute, warrants the championing of the prostitution trope as a means to empowerment: Julian's desire was to "have beene that time with Mary Magdalene and with other that were Crists lovers' (146 AFB).<sup>24</sup> Kim Sawchuck notes that scholars should mature beyond the concept that the "meaning" of the body is either significant or symbolic of the "real." For instance:

One cannot assume that a crucifix worn by Madonna is an expression of her essentially Christian nature, or that the wearing of high heels reflects a woman's identification with patriarchal sexual economy. (67)

Therefore, McAvoy's attempt to champion the dynamics of prostitution as a "feminized route to salvation" (150 AFB)

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<sup>24</sup>When Julian mentions Mary Magdalene, Julian's utmost priority and object of her devotion was not Magdalene per se. Magdalene was in the Middle Ages, as Spearing notes, identified as the "'sinner' who washed Jesus's feet" (182 n. 18), but she was also identified at Jesus's resurrection and at the crucifixion. Therefore the object of Julian's devotion was the place where Magdalene had been: the Crucifixion. Julian wanted to be there to experience the Passion of Christ. See Spearing's Penguin translation of *Julian of Norwich: Revelation of Divine Love*. Spearing writes in the word "crucifixion" in her translation. In fact, the line that McAvoy quotes is just part of Julian's whole thought. Here is the whole quote from Frances Beer's translation: "I wished that I could have been there, with Mary Magdalene and the others who were Christ's lovers, that I might actually have seen the passion our lord endured for me, and have suffered with him, as did those others who loved him" (25). See Frances Beer's *Julian of Norwich Revelations: Motherhood of God* (New York: D. S. Brewer, 1998). Translated from the British Library Additional MS 37790.

is based on an assumption that Julian's mentioning of Magdalene, who was worshiped for her redemptive acts and her association with the passion of Christ rather than her sinful acts, "reconfigures itself within what can be read as a discourse of divine 'prostitution'" and provides Julian with a feminist hermeneutic of "empowerment and authority" for women of her time (147 AFB).

While discussing Julian's assaults and suffering, McAvoy admonishes the scholar Jay Ruud for giving an androcentric reading of the text because of his use of the dynamics of courtly love which "reinforces traditional binaries by rendering the female as inevitable victim and the masculine [. . .] as inevitable victor" (154 AFB). She then writes a footnote which informs the reader that:

For an alternative reading of the applicability of the ethics of courtly love to the female mystical discourse of sex, see Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts,'<sup>25</sup> especially p. 185: 'The terms of courtly love are simply not adaptable to the discourse of women mystics because they are gendered, and we must be careful not to subsume the violence of the sexual language in their writings to the masculine uses of the language of courtly love.' (154 n. 83 AFB)

Ironically, McAvoy is guilty of the same "traditional dynamics" when she celebrates and appropriates Julian's maturity in the *Long Text*, as an acquired feminist self-

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<sup>25</sup>Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies."

identity: she celebrates, what she claims as, Julian's female/feminist actions, through the language of exploitation and prostitution, which is the trading of Julian's body for divine love and redemption. According to McAvoy, this is how Julian, in her maturity and only through her own choice and insightfulness as woman, works out her "feminized route to salvation." Therefore, she acquires her self-identity through the language of exploitation and the discourse of prostitution-divine prostitution (147 AFB). Ironically then, Julian matures from being a prostitute-"holy prostitute"-possessing her lover-Christ-by means of her "own individual suffering" to procurer-holy procurer-that "procures the quasi-sexual services of her divine lover for a myriad of 'evencristen' inscribing upon the *feminized* Christ the additional role of ultimate and transcendent 'holy whore' in the process" (169 AFB). McAvoy does not realize that she is guilty of what she accuses Ruud; she too "subsumes the violence of the sexual language in their [mystics'] writings to the masculine uses." Julian becomes now the exploiter/the procurer which validates, in my opinion, within the masculine system that McAvoy's parallels, a masculine type of power which is grounded in the language of sex and exploitation. Also, Julian matures and chooses the "position" for herself in her agency. This

action of choice to become a "tradable commodity"/prostitute, and then mature into procurer, does not do much to subvert the masculine system; it only mirrors it and simultaneously epitomizes the dynamics of a "gender-based exploitation" (Anthony 86). Thus, it only disrupts by duplicating the hierarchical ordering of the dominant signifiers and exploitation is turned onto Christ/God instead. Additionally, if the feminine can only express power through the dynamics of procurer, this logic enforces the belief that female power is usually notorious power and does not demand respect. Also it reinforces, what I call, the Grendel-mother's syndrome<sup>26</sup> which the masculine system enforces when describing strong women. Lastly, in reference to Julian's acceptance of her assaults, McAvoy states that it was an "increasingly confident invocation of the feminine" (155 AFB): McAvoy asserts that this acceptance of suffering "constitutes a familiar topos within the writings of medieval religious women" (155 AFB).<sup>27</sup> And indeed, this statement provides us with a glimpse of the historical

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<sup>26</sup>Grendel's mother from *Beowulf* was warlike and strong; however, because she is a woman in this position, she is depicted as a monster.

<sup>27</sup>McAvoy quotes David F. Tinsely, "Julian's Diabology," ed. Sandra McEntire, *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland, 1998) 207-37.

milieu available to mystics that influence their imagery. However, I question the applicability of feminist statements and French feminist theory, specifically, the theory of *l'écriture féminine* that seek to qualify these experiences as responsible feminist actions and articulations of a medieval female body.

Similarly, Miller notes that Petroff also bypasses any reason for the critiquing of the violent eroticized language in Hadewijch's poetry by insisting that "Hadewijch is simply utilizing a view of sexuality that has long been found in European erotic poetry" (Miller 41). Petroff does not problematize the language of assault, combat, and erotic violence since the academic climate of feminist scholarship blinds her research and persuades her to celebrate *bodytalk* instead. Petroff celebrates the violent language and seeks to examine these medieval mystics in order to investigate what their texts say "about bodies" and to compare their poetry to the *parler femme* as termed by Cixous and Irigaray<sup>28</sup> (204). She notes

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<sup>28</sup>Petroff states that her thought process in her research as been influenced by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1985), and *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell UP,

In reading these medieval women's texts, I am guided by the concept of *l'écriture féminine* (sic), or *writing the body*: the notion that in putting body into writing, by the use of bodily imagery along with the rhythms and cadences of speech, a writer allows repressed contents to emerge from the unconscious into the light of the text. In other words, in using the language of the body the medieval writer may be able to say unsayable or unthinkable things. (204)

Again, Petroff is more concerned with interpreting and celebrating the mystic's eroticized language within the concept of *l'écriture féminine* and does not critique the "unsayable or unthinkable things." Additionally, Petroff is more concerned with Ann Jones' definition of western thought: "Western thought has been based on a systematic repression of women's experience" (qtd. in Petroff 205). Thus, "in spite of cultural repression," Petroff considers these women, via their bodily words, as "visionaries" (205), since

'the discourse of the female mystic was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body, and it is, paradoxically, through these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power . . . [and] fashioned . . . the means of transcending [her] . . . own secondariness.'<sup>29</sup> In other words, women

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1985); and Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, ed., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980). Her research demonstrates my premise of the focus in feminist academics today.

<sup>29</sup>Lochrie quotes Laurie Finke, "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," ed. Ulrike Wiethaus, *Maps of Flesh and*

mystics were extremely active in their enforced passivity, and they used the language of passivity to create a new discourse. Their visions were the source of their power, for they gave women a public language to use "'not just within a 'woman's culture' but in a 'man's world' as well." The process undergone by the mystic was both empowering and dangerous. (205-206)

Petroff is concerned with challenging western thought because of its repression of woman's bodily experience. She therefore concentrates on celebrating the mystic's violent language of the flesh as "visionary" simply because it was uttered by a woman or it celebrates the gynecological functions of a woman's body. Furthermore, in speaking of Umiltà, the Italian mystic of Faenza, Petroff celebrates Umiltà's experience because it is her (female adjective), Umiltà's "own bodily experience," but Petroff dismisses the fact that Umiltà's writing is so gruesome, brutal, and disturbing in its depictions of love. Umiltà describes love, and Divine love for that matter, in such brutal and violent terms. However, Petroff does not critique the language because she believes that it is merely demonstrating a traditional trope and "employs the language of romance and love lyric" or the "women troubadours" (210).

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*Light: New Perspectives on the Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics* (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse UP, 1992) 28-41. The last quotation "'not just within a 'woman's culture' but in a 'man's world' as well" is also from Finke (33).

Similarly, just as Petroff does not critique the mystic's language, Petroff, and feminists in general, should not seek to appropriate these religious medieval expressions as a platform for modern feminist discourse. Petroff further notes that in the story of Umiltà's beloved St. John, Umiltà is "naked and wounded" and "bound in chains," but still the language does not rouse feminist sensitivities, since thankfully, Umiltà is rewarded for her suffering and moves from being "victim to bride" (210). Therefore, the violence remains plausible and is excused, and the language is romanticized.

Also Petroff discusses, Angela's (Franciscan Italian mystic of Foligno) fear of the "risk of rape," poverty, and dying of nakedness and hunger because she must give up all for Christ is soon alleviated. Indeed, she eventually affirms that she will give up all if she could die of hunger, nakedness, and shame (rape), since she knows that she will be *joined in marriage* to Christ: "she makes the commitment[;] she is rewarded by Christ" (213). In fact, Petroff describes that Angela's union with Christ has caused her to desire her "death to be more vile than that of any of the saints" (213) and it completely grieves her, since she believes she is not even worthy of such a vile death. Petroff presents some idea of the internalized misogyny

expressed by female mystics and gives us a picture of their fears—through Angela's fears, but she does not expand the idea. Additionally, Angela's life provides us with an example of the mystic's violent understanding of commitment in love and the erotics. Yet, Petroff is not willing to critique this violent epistemology in women's erotic discourse, but she champions it.

In addition, Petroff is inadvertently misguided by her research to recoup the female body and the *uniquely feminine* actions of Angela, who strips herself and points to each member of her body promising not to sin. Petroff comments on the female mystic's violent practice and language: "their writings feature representations of grotesque bodies that open up and spill forth their contents—blood, milk, excrement—bodies that endure wounding and mutilation" (215). However, Petroff briefly mentions, but glosses over, the fact that Angela is "truly the daughter of St. Francis" (212) because "Francis too dramatized his religious life by publicly stripping himself, [. . .]" (212). Petroff is too quick to legitimize Angela's practice on the grounds that this action is chosen by or inherently within the feminine; she concludes that if indeed the body is being "written by Angela," it is "clearly a female body [. . .]" (215). And again like other scholars, Petroff champions Angela's

spirituality or spiritual pleasure above Francis'. Additionally, Petroff agrees with and creates a binary form of argumentation that includes rather than excludes its opposites; the terms operate on a type of love/hate binary system: Angela's "female body" is really a "doubled body" a body playing the role of "both ardent devourer and humiliated victim'" (qtd. in Petroff 215).<sup>30</sup> So, while the "enduring of wounding and mutilation" become a rite-of-passage essential to the medieval female experience of the spiritual or the erotic, of which I have also discussed, Petroff champions these experiences in the realm of a politically charged feminist discourse and ideology. Angela's semiotic body, battered, mutilated and bleeding, should have been the evidence of medieval patriarchy's negative religious epistemological hold on the feminine and the female body. However, Petroff's tendency to celebrate the language causes Angela's *battered body* to signify nothing of that ideology; it only holds signification about Angela-and it is negative-since it signifies Angela's masochism in wanting to endure wounding and mutilation in order to become a "blissful body experiencing *jouissance*"

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<sup>30</sup>Petroff quotes from Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Text from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 215-216.

(215). Again, there is a tendency to valorize the medieval feminine's understanding of love and the erotic via violence and suffering, or of experiencing the heights of spiritual and erotic pleasure through, and only through, masochism.

However, Petroff assures the reader that s/he should not be alarmed by such violent descriptions: although "you would not expect that some women were experiencing visions of violence and dismemberment, as well as erotic love" it is stereotypical since "although there is obviously a painful side to love imaged as wounding, capture, transfixiation, penetration (the metaphors come equally from the language of the hunt and of the crucifixion)" (56). Additionally, Miller mentions that Petroff does not critique Hadewijch's erotically violent visions because, Petroff asserts,

Hadewijch gains important self-knowledge and knowledge of the divine through this 'self-abandonment to a descent, an abyss of humility,' for in this abandonment she learns that the self is 'capable of experiencing all extremes of existence without being torn apart by them.' Consequently, the violence within Hadewijch's text should be seen as not problematic but advantageous. In the end, [. . .] Petroff inadvertently support[s] the ideology that eroticized violence is not only 'normal' but even beneficial and ordained. (Miller 43)

Similarly, Miller notes that Jantzen, using Hadewijch as her primary example,

never mentions the specifically violent imagery of combat, struggle, assault, and submission intertwined with the erotic rhetoric of

Hadewijch's works. Rather she emphasizes the passionate nature of her writing in a move to recoup the erotic from male spiritualization and sterilization. The only reference she makes to the 'pain and delight of the divine encounter' is to suggest that they result from the mystic's bewilderment at the fluctuation of spiritual experience."<sup>31</sup> (45-46)

To add to Miller's observation, Jantzen stresses the importance of the body in female mystical literature as a sign of its demarcation from male mystical writings, but again does not critique the suffering and assaults associated with Julian and Hadewijch; instead she combines the two on the level of their use of the courtly love lyric where they emphasize a bodily reality in their spirituality which is different from male spirituality (147). Again, the saliency of Jantzen's distinction is achieved within a context of binaries that largely understand the meaning of something by placing it in relation with its constructed opposite. Like Petroff, Jantzen, is concerned with identifying a type of feminist "self-knowledge" which leads to "self-worth" via the "integration" of the body and spirituality in being able to accept "bodiliness but also

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<sup>31</sup>Miller's footnote informs the reader that she makes note of this point at a conference, *After the Body* at the University of Manchester, England in June 1998. Jantzen was the moderator of the panel on which Miller spoke and she, Jantzen, "graciously acknowledged this lacuna in her work" (46 n. 82).

sinfulness" which is "quite different from that of their male counterparts" who "develop a spirituality centering on the mind" within "the tradition of western spirituality" (155-156). In addition, Francis Beer, in her discussion of female mystics, defends Mechthild of Magdeburg's use of erotic imagery (78-108) even though Mechthild's poetry is laden with her experiences of assaults, wounding, and abandonment, yet Beer merely hails the poetry as sublime since it created a disconcerting shift in medieval spiritual writings of the Church.<sup>32</sup> Beer further asserts that although readers, "even twentieth-century ones" are "uncomfortable," there is still a fear of the medieval female as a "dangerous and sub-rational creature" who is still "with us"; however, Beer continues, Mechthild's experience of erotic and spiritual union is described in "ardent, glowing, unequivocally sexual language" (91). Here is an example from Mechthild:

O Lord, you pamper to excess my dank prison  
 In which I drink the water of the world and eat in  
 great misery  
 The ash cake of my frailty,  
 And am wounded to the death  
 By the beam of your fiery love  
 Now you leave me, Lord, lying in my misery,  
 My wounds untended, in great torment. (94)

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<sup>32</sup>I discussed in my chapter two that McGinn's research demonstrated that both male and female mystics used the language of affective spirituality.

I want to stress that Beer concludes that Mechthild, in her use of erotic images, is under

no illusion that she is talking about literal, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, nor does she perceive the least danger that the use of the erotic language will result in physical arousal. (92)

For certainly, Beer concludes, she must have been exposed to the body of courtly literature with its social conventions of idolatry and adultery (93). In addition, Beer describes Mechthild as being drawn to the "erotic metaphor, and her descriptions of ecstatic union are glowingly described in terms of passionate, sexual love" (159). What kind of love I wonder recites and acts out so brutal a treatment of one lover to the next, so much so that feminists romanticize the act and can applaud it as "glowing" simply because the lovers "are equal and of the same nature"? (Beer 159).

Finally, I must reiterate what Miller notes about Lochrie's research in *Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies*. Miller suggests that Lochrie asserts that mystics use the discourse of courtly love to express their spiritual desire; thus, female mystics divulge

'what has always been 'there' in courtly conventions-the suffering and ennoblement [suffering] produces,' and that by doing so they 'queer' this discourse and remove it from its 'idealizing ideological framework' (p. 186). She asserts that this queering results in 'mystical sex [which] is not just 'sex as we know it,' but

that more troubling field of experience that strays into the realms of violence, suffering and torture.' This experience is 'unrecognizable to modern sensibilities' and so is rarely commented upon or problematized by contemporary scholars. (Lochrie qtd. in Miller 46 n. 85)

Earlier in the chapter, I reconstructed Jantzen's questions to her male colleague and redirected those questions to contemporary feminists who interpret medieval women's spiritual writing. In concluding the chapter, let me reiterate these questions. What formation of the concept of the feminine, female nature, or romantic love is being endorsed when scholars are willing to acquiesce, miss, or dismiss violence-erotic violence against women-in the name of what they see as a woman's true identity, excess/fluidity, agency, choice, and empowerment? The concept that is formed is one in which feminists use the medieval religious/medical feminine or female body, which desires violent suffering, to promote a feminist understanding of self-identity. In addition, feminists argue that mystics use these violent expressions (and practices), which constitutes a *unique feminine approach*, for female empowerment so as to exploit and subvert the medieval patriarchal codes. Thus through their research, feminist scholars create their own masochism; they make their own cut and their own interpretation to re-present female mystics as desiring violence because of their

peculiarly feminine sensitivities in the light of female empowerment. However, the theory might mislead modern readers into thinking that the violent language should be valorized and romanticized (maybe even exercised?). Also, the feminine finds redemption not in intimate equal relationships, as suggested by scholars, but in relationships with vicious cycles of violence, since scholars accept and romanticize the fact that mystics poetically describe the feminine/female body which must be read as *fissured* in order to experience the heights of spiritual passion and erotic ecstasy. So how is such a conception of violence and the female body reinforced by the mixing of purported *historical* and theoretical evidence serving a disciplinary function in modern society and what alternatives could be generated? Contemporary feminists intend to state that the mystic's violent, eroticized language is favorable on the grounds that it is peculiarly feminine in the modern understanding of *l'écriture féminine*. Also, this violent language is positive, since mystics chose their self-identity via a "positive attitude of eroticism" (McAvoy, 151 AFB). Feminists hope that modern readers will not interpret the mystics as also *fissured* and aim to demonstrate that this type of erotics was a "female centered insight" (McAvoy 13 AFB). On the contrary, modern readers

must understand that the *medieval feminine* was created in a culture that is vastly different from modern society and was a heavily imbued patriarchal culture that restricted women, or even enabled women to express love in such violent terms. Furthermore, feminists use a modern concept of the female body with its agency via excess and the "new language of the flesh," to describe the medieval female body tied to the religion-medicine relationship. By situating medieval women in a position to make choices which lead to masochistic displays of spiritual and erotic pleasure, feminists place the *blame*, for such violent expressions, on the victims-the mystics-and releases the accountability from the masculine system which is responsible for distributing this ideology: it is the mystic's choice to indulge in masochistic violent behavior for female empowerment and inadvertently the masculine system's responsibility for creating the violence is lifted. Scholars champion medieval female experience because women become empowered and are making their own choice to work out their "self-worth" and "self-identity" and, inevitably, feminists disregard the harm of the language and practices. The logistics of this argument parallels pro-prostitution ideology which is linked to "sexual liberalism" and the stance which "attempts to portray prostitution as a career choice" and as a "form of

empowerment" (Anthony 86, 87). Incidentally, those feminists/scholars who "adamantly promote this view [prostitution] [. . .] do not choose prostitution for themselves: some have abandoned it; some never worked as prostitutes [. . .]" (Anthony 86). In decontextualizing women's choices, *pro-mystic* ideology inadvertently trivializes, champions, and valorizes the seriousness of the mystics' violent practice and language and fail to delve into the serious aspects of culture that produced the behavior. In fact, Lochrie mentions that she finds the mystic's "behavior undesirable as a feminist practice in the twentieth century" (9), yet she romanticizes it and uses twentieth/twentieth-first century feminists attitudes to interpret mystics' practices.

Consequently, if there is such a thing as a "uniquely feminine approach," "hermeneutics of the feminine," or "female-centered insight" in female mystical writing one wonders then, where are the male scribes in all this *feminine writing*, since it is illuminating that we know these women predominantly through the writings of men, notably Jacques de Vitry (1240) and Thomas of Cantimpré (1200/1270). Also, if we consider the complications involved in translation and representation, Chaucer's question posed by the Wife of Bath is always necessary: "Who

peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (WOB Prologue III.692).

Whose viewpoint is depicted in the mystic's feminine writing when male scribes also contributed to the writing down of these spiritual biographies? So are these male scribes given any credit for becoming *mothers/feminine* themselves, re-producing mystic daughters? Is it not possible that if feminists perceive the feminine/female, which is contained in this writing, that male scribes possibly had the perception to detect, recognize, and write this language? And is it not partly commendable that male scribes would have risked being *fissured* themselves since they were writing outside the genre of "traditional male spirituality" in order to impart and impact the *feminine writing* so that the medieval, as well as the modern audience, would recognize it as "the new language of the flesh"? Are these writings the celebration then of women's piety? Or maybe the conclusions can be different based on the violence of the mystic's language: are the writings really a rhetorical manoeuver of male scribes to create a tale of admonishment against female dissension and pride? Or also, it is an attempt to represent women as how medieval society saw them?

I must state clearly that I do not wish to build a case for the concept of masculine intellectual pregnancy as in the depiction of the story of Athena's birth, which has it

roots in Greek mythology. However, I want to stress that based on the readings via the translations written by male scribes, if so clear a picture of this female *new language of the flesh* is attained through female mystical writing, then it is possible that male scribes were allowed or possessed a link to the feminine,<sup>33</sup> since they were able to replicate readable signifiers in their partly written *performance* of this *uniquely feminine* writing.

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<sup>33</sup>Of course the same is true the other way around that female may possess a link to the masculine (based on Butler's theory of the performance of identities).

CHAPTER 5  
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Mystics' violent expressions are valorized, since the language, according to feminists, is *peculiarly feminine* because mystics chose their self-identity via a "positive attitude of eroticism" (McAvoy, 151 AFB). Indeed, feminists hope that modern readers will see the positivity in mystics' poetic expressions. They also wish that modern readers view mystics as women who created and championed a *unique feminine approach*, which sought to challenge medieval patriarchal assumptions of the female body. However, I believe that modern readers must understand that the medieval feminine was created in a culture that was vastly different from our contemporary society, and medieval culture created different restrictions for women or even inculcated mystics' understanding of love and union in such violent terms.

Therefore, feminists use a modern construction of the feminine and the female body with its agency via excess, which produce a contemporary revolutionary concept of *bodytalk* to describe the medieval religious construction of the feminine and female body. In addition, the medieval

spiritual body was grounded in definitions controlled by the Church and medicine. Thus, because of that connection, this research expresses, through historical analysis, medieval medical narratives and religious rituals which provide a framework for the source of female mystics' violent, eroticized language. Furthermore, this study describes the symbiotic relationship of medicine and the Church which created a monopoly on manipulating the social and religious status of bodies, specifically the female body, and these theories became a regular part of medieval discourse. In addition, although these concepts were linked to misogyny, violence, and inequality, they were internalized by medieval mystics, which is evident in their verbalization of love and the expressions of their bodies. However, these expressions do not only originate from the medicine-religion affiliation, but from medieval culture's epistemology on marriage, which legalized and sanctioned violence and rape within the confines of that institution. These violent marital codes were internalized by mystics in their articulation of union with or marriage to God; therefore, their language expressed union in violent terms.

Additionally, in discussing medieval culture's influence on female mystics' violent language, recent research demonstrates that feminist scholars valorize, miss,

or dismiss the violence. Therefore, in adding to this recent research, I specifically dealt with the tendency of feminists to address mystical imagery as a type of *gynocentric hermeneutic*, which champions the mystic's self-identity or a female self-interest to gain empowerment and thereby subvert patriarchal ideology about women. Also, feminist studies insist on asserting that medieval mystics used their violent language for promoting womanist ideologies and *bodytalk*; thus, the language allowed mystics to subvert medieval patriarchy via self-empowerment.

However, I believe that female mystics did not have a revolutionary intent and did not seek to challenge patriarchal codes, but internalized them, or they were projecting their society's epistemology on love, union/marriage, and medieval cultures's scientific understanding of the body. Consequently, in this study, it was necessary to demonstrate how the medieval social constructions of women were formed and used in order to understand how female mystics expressed themselves. Moreover, some feminists disregard the fact that mystics were subject to and believed in a religious hegemony that warranted a dying to or lack of self and autonomy. Also, the religious language of incorporation with and in Christ and the idea that parts contain whole would have produced

the idea of a religious-communal Self (believers and Christ as one). Thus, if feminists claim that mystics championed a self, it was not a self that was immersed in a female self-interest or based on a feminist hermeneutic, but a religious-communal Self, which is comprised of individual selves but is threatened by self-interest. Additionally, since most mystical writings were penned by male scribes writing women, female mystics were probably portrayed as a result of what was appropriate for medieval religious women, or in accordance with medieval cultural beliefs, religious or medical. Therefore, in light of the issue of how men write holy women,<sup>1</sup> Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih assert, in *Gender and Holiness*,<sup>2</sup> that in some cases "the topos of the holy woman's access to Christ through her suffering

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>See Riches and Salih, "Gender and Holiness: Performance and representation in the Later Middle Ages," *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in the Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 7 n. 7. Also see Amy Hollywood, "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and her Hagiographer," ed. Catherine Mooney, *Gendered Voices* 78-98; and K. Scoot, "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God," ed. Mooney, *Gendered Voices* 136-167; see also Amy Hollywood's *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Echart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

flesh appealed more to male hagiographers than to holy women themselves" (2).

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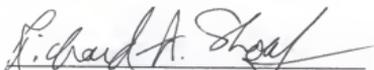
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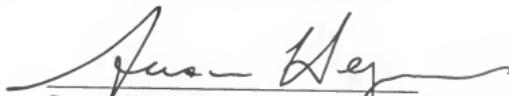
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December 2005

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