

# Body Symbolism in the Book of Margery Kempe

Susan Morgan

## THE BODY IN LATE MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

In her recent book *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Caroline Walker Bynum once again delineates with consummate skill the profoundly and peculiarly bodily character of Christian medieval piety. The cult of relics with its veneration of the dismembered limbs of saintly people, the belief in the curative powers of bodily effluvia, the austere self-disciplinary practices of certain male and female ascetes — observances such as these are cited by Bynum as illustrating the medieval notion of the human body as a locus of sacrality. The concurrent theological development of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the conviction that behind the external accidents of bread and wine lay the actual flesh and blood of Christ, also laid emphasis upon the corporeal and led to an increasing sense of the eucharist as 'symbolic cannibalism' in which communicants 'ate God'.<sup>1</sup> Christian art and iconography of the period reflected a similarly literalist approach to the humanity of Christ, often drawing attention to his genitalia for example, or depicting the Passion scenes with a force of graphic detail quite repugnant to modern minds.

According to Bynum each of these three strands, theology, piety and art, brought out the religious significance of the body in an unprecedented manner during the Middle Ages as a means of access to the divine, but whilst physicality was a theme which ran throughout all medieval spirituality, it was taken up with particular enthusiasm and intensity in women's lives and writing. Women, it would appear, were unable to avoid being inculcated with contemporary androcentric articulations of their association with the body, weakness, lust and irrationality.<sup>2</sup> The well attested dualism of the western theological tradition, for example, taught that 'spirit is to flesh as male is to female', a concept borne out by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell's statistical study of saints in which they observe that medieval theologians and hagiographers viewed female sin as intrinsically bodily and sexual, emanating from within the woman, whereas male saints were portrayed as being tempted externally by a foreign enemy.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein scientists of the period professed the

Aristotelian theory of conception, i.e. that the mother provided the physical matter of the foetus and the father its life or spirit. In the light of such theological and scientific intellectual thought therefore, women's religious expressiveness was, not surprisingly, more body-related.

Whilst it would be wrong to over-accentuate the differences between male and female piety, Bynum outlines certain ascetic modes of behaviour in which the body functioned as a means of grace as almost exclusively female. These were predominantly food-related forms of asceticism, identified by medieval male mystics interestingly enough, as the specific domain of their female counterparts. Bynum's comparative study of male and female writers in the Franciscan and affective spiritual traditions suggests that even men such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi or Richard Rolle whose religiosity most resembled that of women's in its highly physiological language, did not attribute any central significance to food as a religious metaphor. Indeed, it was through food imagery and more specifically through the symbols of fasting and eucharistic devotion that medieval female spirituality manifested its most distinctive qualities.<sup>4</sup>

There are both ideological and practical reasons for the proliferation of food-related metaphors in the writing of female mystics. Medieval thought not only identified the body with woman, it also identified woman's body with food. The cult of the Virgin's milk, probably at its height during the late medieval period, typified popular fascination with the act of lactation, leading to the portrayal of women's bodies through art and devotional literature as analogous with food and nourishment.<sup>5</sup> On a more pragmatic level, food formed the parameters of the female social sphere, constituting the greater part of women's daily experience. Consequently, both in its preparation and distribution food was an obvious and accessible motif for women to draw upon.

An important point to note in understanding the body-related significance of food asceticism in the writings of medieval female mystics, however, is the traditional association of women with the preparation and provision of food rather than its consumption. As Bynum remarks, 'to prepare food is to control food'.<sup>6</sup> As one of the few commodities over which women did exercise some degree of control, therefore, food became an all-important symbolic vehicle for manipulation both of one's own body and one's circumstances.

*The Book of Margery Kempe* greatly illuminates in literary form this principle of food as an agency of personal control and as a means by which the medieval woman achieved a semi-autonomous governance over her everyday environment. It will be the purpose of this article, therefore, to conduct a detailed examination of Kempe's narrative,

concentrating particularly on those passages that illustrate the interplay between fasting, eucharistic devotion and the female body. I will conclude by offering comment on the theory that the body-defined piety of the medieval female mystic represented a powerful alternative envisioning of the divine encounter.

### **FOOD ASCETICISM AND BODY SYMBOLISM IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE***

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography to be written in the English language, is an account of a fifteenth century laywoman's aspirations to holiness, although one that reflects none of the customary abstract or profound theological reflections typical of orthodox mystical texts.<sup>7</sup> It is instead a polemical piece of writing, a justification of the unconventional, religious and social behaviour of a well-to-do housewife and socialite whose new-found spiritual vocation becomes the centre of controversy amongst the local church and people.

Margery Kempe was born in 1373, the daughter of John Brunham, a wealthy businessman and five times mayor of Lynn in Norfolk. When a series of visions impel her to reject the cultural norms of a comfortable familial, commercial and parochial life, Margery is accused by her contemporaries of insanity, heresy and hypocrisy. She leaves her husband after twenty years of marriage and fourteen children and embarks upon a nomadic existence, travelling extensively throughout England in 1413 and journeying on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Rome. Returning home in 1431 to nurse her husband, who was by then paralyzed as the result of a fall, Margery begins work on her autobiography, dying some time after 1438.

The literary construction of Kempe's autobiography has long been a cause of academic interest, not least because the book represents our sole source of information concerning her life. Over sixty years old when she began dictating her story to two scribes, the issue of its authenticity is highly problematic. Ascertaining how much of the material is her own work and how much the influence of her clerical amanuenses, as well as the difficulty of retrospective composition, all pose irresolvable questions regarding memory, influences and motives. Anthony Goodman has described the book as 'a manifesto in favour of one sort of clerical reaction to current manifestations of feminine piety which were provoking alarm and controversy'.<sup>8</sup> It is true that the prevalence of ecstatic behaviour associated with female asceticism had provoked an ambivalent response from the church. On the one hand, the clergy sought to encourage the eucharistic devotion of women as a means of maintaining control and supervision over their activities, but the paramystical phenomena that so

often accompanied female reception of the host became an increasingly threatening form of charismatic legitimation. Thus, whilst Margery was able to gain the support of a group of Norwich contemplatives including Julian, Richard Caister [vicar of St. Stephens, Norwich] and Carmelite monk William Southfield, the more conservative clergy and churchgoers as well as the urban elite, were consistently hostile towards her sudden sanctimonious conduct.

Interwoven with this confrontational socio-religious drama is an account of Kempe's own personal spiritual odyssey and it is within these particular passages that the centrality of food-related behaviour to Kempe's own self-understanding and her body-defined epistemology becomes clear.

For Margery Kempe, the symbolic power of food and eating was in its very antithesis — denial and hunger. Like many medieval holy women, Kempe appears fearful of her own bodily sensations and through fasting found an effective means of controlling and repressing those aspects of her physicality which rendered her most vulnerable to temptation. For some female visionaries it was the sensations of hunger and thirst that were abhorred, resulting in extreme penitential forms of food deprivation. For others, harsh regimes of fasting were necessary to suppress undesirable bodily excretions, particularly menstruation. Kempe, however, utilised control of one bodily appetite, hunger, by fasting, as an explicit means of controlling another bodily appetite, sexual desire, by abstinence.

The use of starvation as a way of asserting power over one's body has led many writers to comment on the close resemblance between traditional accounts of female asceticism and the contemporary eating disorder *anorexia nervosa*.<sup>9</sup> Both seek autonomy and definition outside of the feminine image given to them by the world, both view food as a source of power and strength and both subsequently renounce food in a symbolic rejection of external modes of dominance. The link between eating and sexual domination has a long history in the Christian tradition of course and was not new to medievalists. The connection had previously been made by the Desert Fathers, particularly Jerome who praised those women who made their 'whole life a fast'.<sup>10</sup> When women such as Margery Kempe fasted therefore, they were, in accordance with established teaching, subverting the dominance of lust over their bodies, punishing and disciplining their flesh in pursuit of the higher goal of asexuality or chastity.

Kempe's quest for sexual abstinence began soon after her first visionary experience when she records:

And after this time she never had any desire to have sexual intercourse with her husband, for paying the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather have eaten and drunk the ooze and muck in the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of obedience.<sup>11</sup>

Chastity did not come easily to Kempe, however. Prior to her conversion she was a woman, as she herself describes, 'set in great pomp and pride of the world'.<sup>12</sup> Proud, vain and ambitious, Kempe made her husband John feel significantly inferior and failed disastrously at two separate business ventures in order to maintain her customary costly lifestyle. Her greatest weakness was her extravagance of dress and we find amongst Kempe's first references to her physicality a self-confessed attitude of indulgence that considered the body a medium of sensuality, display and worldly arrogance.

Even after her initial revelations, Margery was beset by fears of her own carnal appetite. Lecherous thoughts and temptations entered her mind at frequent intervals, usually in the form of a spiritual challenge or chastisement, for as she commented, 'our spiritual enemy does not sleep, but busily probes... wherever he finds us most frail'. Two years after her conversion, she was invited to become the mistress of 'a man whom she liked'.<sup>13</sup> After much mental vexation, for she recognised this as a test of her virtue, Kempe was overcome and consented, only to be rebuffed in the most humiliating manner. On another occasion, she was afflicted with twelve days of evil thoughts as a punishment for disbelief:

She now had as many hours of foul thoughts and foul recollections of lechery and all uncleanness, as though she would have prostituted herself with all manner of people..various men of religion, priests and many others, both heathen and Christian, coming before her eyes so that she could not avoid them...<sup>14</sup>

Despite these momentary weaknesses of the flesh, however, Kempe was firmly committed to attaining the state of chastity. Thus, when Christ announces to her that she is pregnant once again, her response is one of despair and contrition and Christ comforts her saying, 'rest assured that I love wives also, and especially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will'.<sup>15</sup>

Margery's revulsion from sexual relations with her husband may well have been as the result of repeated pregnancies, inflicting upon her an almost unbearable degree of physical and mental suffering. Severe post-natal psychosis after the birth of her first child was exacerbated by the guilt of an unconfessed sin which tormented Kempe intermittently throughout her life. This was in all probability the shame of previously enjoyed sexual activity within marriage, for when she nurses her husband

through incontinence and senility during his last days, she washes his soiled clothes in penitential fashion:

She thought to herself how she in her young days had had very many delectable thoughts, physical lust and inordinate love for his body. And therefore she was glad to be punished by means of the same body...<sup>16</sup>

Margery, initially unsuccessful in her attempts to convince her husband to abstain from physical pleasure, is compelled to pray for chastity for several years whilst engaging in 'great bodily penance'. She is shriven daily, spends many hours in contemplation and wears a hair-shirt secretly beneath her gown, but it is her renunciation of food that finally gains her her wish.

The whole episode in which Kempe achieves her desired sexual chastity appears as a rather clandestine and manipulative plot between herself and Christ. Christ promises that he will slay all sexual desire in Margery's husband if she in turn will fast on Fridays from all meat and drink. Margery agrees and after several weeks of refusing to eat at her husband's table, this ascetic practice so embarrasses and annoys John Kempe that Margery is able with Christ's permission to cajole him into striking a bargain:

They they went on towards Bridlington....And as they came by a cross her husband sat down...calling his wife to him and saying..."Margery grant me my desire, and I shall grant you your desire. My first desire is that we shall still lie together in one bed as we have done before; the second, that you shall pay my debts before you go to Jerusalem; and the third, that you shall eat and drink with me on Fridays as you used to do." "No sir", she said, "I will never agree to break my Friday fast as long as I live". "Well", he said, "then I'm going to have sex with you again". She begged him to allow her to say her prayers, and he kindly allowed it...

And then our Lord Jesus Christ with great sweetness spoke to this creature, commanding her to go again to her husband..."And he shall have what he desires. For, my beloved daughter, this was the reason why I ordered you to fast, so that you should the sooner obtain your desire... I no longer wish you to fast and therefore I command you in the name of Jesus to eat and drink as your husband does."<sup>17</sup>

Margery offers to pay all his debts and give up her fast if her husband will rescind the conjugal debt and make her body free to God. John Kempe agrees to this and the couple eventually solemnize their vow of chastity before the Bishop of Lincoln. Having resolved her husband's financial affairs as promised, Kempe embarks upon a pilgrimage to the Holy Land — in this way fasting indirectly enabled her to not only gain

control of her own body, but of her environment as well.

Many other medieval women used fasting as a means to redefine the shape of their lives — to escape a domestic role, to challenge the authority of parents or husband, or perhaps to reject an unwanted suitor. Bynum cites Dorothy of Montau, Ida of Louvain and Catherine of Genoa as examples of women who successfully coerced family members through ecstatic trances induced by fasting.<sup>18</sup> But there was a high physical and psychological cost to pay for this type of ascetic autonomy. Margery Kempe incurred great suffering and hostility as a result of her persistent refusal to eat meat or drink wine. Her bouts of fasting included long periods of illness, often stricken so badly with dysentery and vomiting 'that she could not hold a spoon in her hand'.<sup>19</sup> Against a background of an increasingly assertive female lay piety, outspoken women like Margery who denounced priestly failings and seemingly threatened to usurp the male prerogatives of the priesthood, were treated with scorn for their pretensions to holiness. Kempe was frequently ostracised by priests, confessors and travelling companions because of her penitential austerity, yet she viewed such persecution as a vindication of her chosen spiritual path. Christ's warning of these impending trials clearly reiterates Margery's understanding of herself as body and as food — 'you shall be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world just as any rat gnaws the stockfish'.<sup>20</sup>

### **FEMALE EUCHARISTIC DEVOTION AND BODY SYMBOLISM**

Food was not simply a symbol of self and the world to be renounced at moments of great crisis, however, nor was fasting merely a method of controlling the flesh. Ultimately, the food asceticism of female mystics was not a flight from the body, but a journey into the body, a conjoining with the humanity of Christ in which women's illness and self-starvation became extensions of the agonising drama of the cross. As Bynum suggests:

In renouncing ordinary food and directing their being toward the food that is Christ, women moved to God not merely by abandoning their flawed physicality, but also by becoming the suffering and feeding humanity of the body on the cross, the food on the altar.<sup>21</sup>

Abstinence was therefore preparatory to and complementary with holy eating, as this directive from Christ to Margery Kempe implies:

...also my daughter, you must give up that which you love best in this world, and that is the eating of meat. And instead of meat you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the

sacrament of the altar. This is my will, daughter, that you receive my body every Sunday, and I shall cause so much grace to flow into you that everyone shall marvel at it.<sup>22</sup>

Crucial to the theme of substituting holy food for physical food was the doctrine of transubstantiation. By the late Middle Ages, the sacrament of the eucharist had achieved an unparalleled status amongst the religious practices of medieval Christians, an event of increasing mystery and awe with the host now fashioned into a potent symbol of the physical presence of the suffering Son. In the process described by mystics as *imitatio Christi*, the eucharist, locus of the union or fusion with Christ, was fervently sought after by female ascetics and the centrality of the eucharist to European women's devotions has been well documented. During a period in which monthly communion was considered both frequent and irreverent, weekly reception of the eucharist would have been a unique privilege for a lay person, a mark of religious distinction or perhaps a quasi-official recognition of saint-like status. Kempe's determination to achieve this took her to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel in late 1413, whereupon he eventually granted her authority 'to choose her confessor and to receive communion every Sunday'.

Bynum illustrates the way in which the creation of various eucharistic cults that venerated the host with elevation, genuflection and the introduction of the monstrance were surrounded by an atmosphere of extreme spiritual and psychological intensity. She comments that this incorporated both 'a frenzied hunger for the host and an intense fear of receiving it'.<sup>23</sup> There is certainly much evidence of this heightened psychological state in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. It becomes apparent for example that Margery is under some sort of divine mandate to prove the devout nature of her spirituality to a suspicious clergy and public by the copiousness of her tears upon receiving the host. Numerous references are made to her 'great weeping, loud crying and violent sobbing' when partaking of communion. Indeed, these emotional outbursts and convulsive weepings became so disruptive that on one occasion priests resorted to administering communion to her privately, out of people's hearing, in the Prior's chapel at Lynn. In this instance Margery records that:

she cried...as if her soul and her body were going to be parted, so that two men held her in their arms till her crying ceased, for she could not bear the abundance of love that she felt in the precious sacrament, which she steadfastly believed was very God and man in the form of bread.<sup>24</sup>

Against such an elevated and mystical doctrine of communion, the



mass was understandably an occasion for regular paranormal occurrences. Eucharistic visions and miracles were so frequently experienced by women mystics as to be considered commonplace. Bynum records that miracles in which the host had an appetitive effect upon the senses, smelling or tasting sweet and filling the mouth with honey were reported by female ascetics throughout Europe and Kempe also uses a similar type of mystical feeding metaphor to describe her state of spiritual ecstasy when receiving the host:

Then her soul was so delectably fed with the sweet converse of our Lord, and so fulfilled with his love, that like a drunk she turned herself first on one side and then on the other.<sup>25</sup>

This was a period in which the heightened significance of the eucharist also demonstrated the growing power of the priesthood. Consequently, it is not difficult to imagine how these ecstatic occurrences functioned as an effective form of charismatic empowerment for women, both bypassing male clerical authority and endowing female lay status with greater spiritual import. Denied access to the altar, Kempe and others acquired through ecstatic behaviour a form of metaphorical priestliness and the irritation shown by Kempe's priests and confessors to her impassioned outbursts could well have been as a result of her persistent disregard for clerical authority.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, the eucharist was not merely an opportunity for Kempe to engage in ecstatic behaviour. It was, more importantly, her point of encounter with the humanity of God. This was a mystical union with Christ in all his corporeality, the absorption of flesh into flesh as she ate God through the host, substituting the body of Christ for the physical meat she denied herself in fasting. Medieval women conjoined with the humanity of Christ as the physical Jesus from his birth to his death. Many envisioned him as a baby, holding him, bathing him, playing with him or suckling.<sup>27</sup> Others imaged him as a young man — as their bridegroom or lover — and all experienced Christ suffering and dying on the cross.

Kempe's book demonstrates most of these visionary models. In Rome for example, at the sight of a mother sitting full of sorrow and sadness whilst breast-feeding her son, Margery bursts into tears feeling as though she had seen Mary and the child Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Kempe also saw with her 'spiritual eye' the manhood of Christ in the face of many handsome men, so much so that it was painful for her to look at them. Jesus spoke to her as her lover, her husband, her son — a multi-faceted substitute for unsatisfactory family relationships:

Therefore I must be intimate with you and lie in your bed with you.  
Daughter you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly when you

are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.<sup>29</sup>

Nowhere is the female mystic's fusion with Christ greater than in the suffering of the crucifixion. Kempe's eucharistic visions of the passion of Christ are amongst some of the most striking passages in the book, written in powerful language that is almost brutal in its expression:

...she saw them [the Jews] pull off his clothes and strip him all naked, and then drag him before them as if he had been the greatest malefactor in the world... And there they bound him to the pillar as tightly as they could, and beat him on his fair white body with rods...whips and... scourges.

Then she saw the Jews with great violence tear off our Lord's precious body a cloth of silk, which had stuck and hardened so firmly and tightly. . . with his precious blood that it pulled away with it all the skin ... and renewed his precious wounds, and made the blood to run down on every side... and then they took a long nail... and set it on one hand, and with great cruelty they drove it through his hand... how his precious body shrank and drew together with all the sinews and veins... for the pain that it suffered and felt.<sup>30</sup>

Both suffering and ecstasy then merge for Kempe in the reception of the eucharist. We read on one occasion, for example, that as she takes the body of Christ into her mouth, she is so overcome with love and joy that she induces upon herself violent convulsive fits and paroxysms, gasping for breath, sweating and turning 'all blue like lead'.<sup>31</sup>

I have spoken already of the psychological and physical cost of constant fasting, illness and asceticism. This type of self-mortification, as well as the pain endured by Kempe throughout multiple pregnancies, gave her, as many other women, an unsurpassable ability to absorb into her own bodily being the most tragic and painful aspect of Christ's humanity — his death. Whether or not this ability constituted a pointless form of tortuous spiritual masochism, or was in fact the means to an elevated and enhanced ontological state will be considered in the following discussion.

### **BODY OF WOMAN, HUMANITY OF CHRIST: AN EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

It has already been noted that some absorption of the prevailing ideology of body/spirit dualism was inescapable for medieval female writers and we have seen from the previous section how dominant the theme of

physicality is in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Can we assume though, as so many religious historians have done, that the medieval female's perception of herself as "body" was nothing more than an internalisation of contemporary misogynist attitudes? Were the practices of food deprivation, illness and frenzied reception of the eucharist merely impassioned reactions by medieval women to the alleged inferiority of their gender?

From the evidence proffered by Margery Kempe it is clear that she did eschew her own physicality and that a fear of her body's seemingly irrepressible erotic tendencies resulted in a systematic attack upon the flesh through self-induced starvation and illness. The asceticism of Kempe would appear at first glance then to be self-evidently pathological, an effort to reject or destroy her body in order to unite as asexual spirit with God. Indeed, one could argue that the imagery of Christ as Margery's lover was the inevitable reaction of a sensual woman to a life of chastity and suppressed sexual desire. However, we need to abandon our twentieth century assumptions before approaching medieval mentality towards the body. Contemporary attitudes, particularly as regards women's bodies, tend to equate physicality with sexuality, construing any discipline or control of the body as a denial of one's genderedness. This carries with it very negative overtones that are simply not present in the texts under scrutiny. One must consequently go beyond interpretations of medieval female bodily asceticism as sheer tortuous spiritual masochism or ontological self-alienation.

I have shown that Kempe described her mystical experiences in what would be considered stereotypically feminine roles — she is mother to the infant Jesus; she lays with him as a lover; she is bride to the Godhead; she is handmaiden to Mary during the birth and passion of Christ; she is nurturer and comforter; provider of food and drink. As a recent article by Ellen Ross confirms, Kempe portrays herself in primarily domestic and familial language — as mother, daughter, sister, spouse.<sup>32</sup> Yet this does not necessarily imply disempowering conformity to misogynist values. Kempe's exclusive use of traditional female language to name her relationship to the world and the divine not only reflects the intimate relation in the medieval world between family ties and personal identity — it is also a highly effective legitimisation of her public activity through conventional and acceptable models of being female. Kempe does not exhibit any strong sense of binary oppositions or an imposed, restrictive gender-based association of certain social and biological characteristics in these passages. Rather, one gains the impression that Kempe is only able to encounter the divine at all by embracing more fully her own self, her own womanhood — extending and consummating her female earthly

roles through union with Christ. As Christ indicates to her in one of her visions:

When you strive to please me you are a *true* daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and passion, then you are a *true* mother having compassion on her child; when you weep for other people's sins and adversities, then you are a *true* sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a *true* spouse and wife; for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company.<sup>33</sup>

The sense of release and freedom expressed in Margery's erotic encounters with Christ is striking. We have seen how she used her body and its related ascetic practices extremely successfully in the confrontation with her husband over chastity, gaining for herself a hitherto unprecedented degree of social independence. Perhaps in addition to the external pragmatic effects of asceticism that enabled women a measure of control over their own environment, Kempe is enabled to be on a spiritual plane what she cannot or will not be in the temporal world? Perhaps by willingly disempowering the body in her earthly life, she empowers it in her charismatic existence through and in conjunction with the humanity of Christ?

Bynum argues that this type of spiritual empowerment, so prevalent in women's writing, can best be understood in terms of 'symbols of continuity'.<sup>34</sup> She does not believe that the religiosity of women such as Kempe was affected or shaped in any fundamental way by ecclesiastical or cultural misogyny. If anything, 'women drew from the traditional notion of the female as physical a special emphasis on their own redemption by a Christ who was supremely physical because supremely human'. Female writers, including Kempe, who did utilise dualistic gender constructions in which the imaging of femininity was that of the patriarchal mindset, did not express the identification of womanhood and corporeality with any debilitating sense of inadequacy. Rather, women elaborated such corporeal images of the self so as to conjoin with the physicality, i.e. the humanity of Christ in a powerful continuity of experience.

This fusion of the female body with a male Christ was a continuity of gender and body/soul relationship only possible in the light of certain contextual attitudes. Bynum argues that overall the polarities between male and female, body and soul, were far less significant in medieval thought than has been suggested by scholars previously. She argues that medieval thinkers envisaged humanity not as exclusively male or female, but as non-gendered physicality, working with a highly fluid understanding of gender imagery. Thomas Laqueur's study, for example,

shows that medieval philosophers viewed men and women as of the same physiology — women were an inferior version along the spectrum certainly, but there was no apparent acknowledgment of an essential distinction between the sexes.<sup>36</sup> Reinforcing the ethic of gender fluidity at a divine level, art and iconography of the Middle Ages often depicted a male Christ lactating or giving birth to the Church.

Bynum is not arguing for a 'golden age' for women here — medieval writers *did* make use of asymmetrical gender identities and draw extremely negative conclusions from these re the status of women. It is also clear that holy women like Kempe felt the need to reject much that was considered appropriately female, including family life, marital relations and childcare [a strange irony considering the predominance of familial metaphors in Kempe's writing]. Bynum's overall thrust is, however, that the woman/body association during the high medieval period is far more complex than simply forming the basis of a misogynist culture. If, as she suggests, medieval visionaries like Kempe were able to affirm themselves as both fully human and capable of spiritual growth *because* of their female gender and not in spite of it, by stressing symbolic continuities between their own humanity and that of Christ's — then this presents a fascinating counter-argument to the theory that religious women have needed to take on symbolic maleness in order to achieve any advance in spiritual stature. Kempe appears to have absolutely revelled in relating to Christ in the roles of mother and wife, her piety grounded in what might be described as a 'body-defined epistemology'. Unlike orthodox mystical thought which so often declares union with God as non-bodily, intellectual experience, so the spirituality of medieval laywomen like Kempe incorporated no such dualism. Margery's physical encounters with the divine were not inferior expressions or interpretations of an authentic, speculative knowledge of God, they *were* knowledge of God.

Ultimately then, medieval female mysticism was not a spiritual culture borne primarily out of defensive, gender-based frustrations — on the whole, women saw themselves less in terms of gender and more in terms of physicality and humanity. Thus, when Hildegard of Bingen wrote in apparently dichotomous terms of the male as symbolic of Christ's divinity 'and woman his humanity', she along with Kempe and many other medieval female writers was able, through continuity of symbolic expression, to extrapolate from a potentially misogynist concept an alternative route to the Christic encounter in which the contemporary emphasis on the body of Christ offered women a unique opportunity to image themselves as divine and affirm the sacrality of the female.

- 1 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, London, Univ. of California Press, 1987, p.208.
  - 2 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, Zone Books, 1991, p. 185.
  - 3 See Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M.Bell, *Saints and Society: Christendom, 1000–1700*, Chicago and London, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982, p.236.
  - 4 See, for example, Bynum, 1987, pp. 94–112, in which she observes that renunciation of money and material possessions, i.e. poverty and nakedness were far more important metaphors in the spirituality of Francis and his male followers. Bynum also suggests that the guarded admiration of many male mystics towards the extreme ascetic experiences of their female contemporaries was due in part to their own difficulties in attaining consistency in the practice of fasting.
  - 5 For an interesting if selective account of the iconography associated with the cult of the nursing virgin, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, London, Pan Books, Picador edition, 1985.
  - 6 Bynum, 1987, p.191.
  - 7 In this article I am working from B.A. Windeatt's translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, London, Penguin Books, 1985, afterwards referred to as 'Kempe'.
  - 8 Anthony Goodman, 'The piety of John Brunham's daughter of Lynn', in Derek Baker [ed.], *Medieval Women*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1978, p.349.
  - 9 In addition to Caroline Walker Bynum's treatment of this phenomenon [*Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, 1987], see, for example, Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985 and Judith van Herik's article, 'Simone Weil's Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating', in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret Miles [eds.], *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1985, pp.260–282.
  - 10 Jerome, Epistle 45.3, *Select Letters of Saint Jerome*, Eng. trans. by F.A.Wright, Loeb Classical Library, New York, Putnam, 1933.
  - 11 Kempe, p.46 .
  - 12 *ibid.*, p.38.
  - 13 *ibid.*, p. 49.
  - 14 *ibid.*, p. 183.
  - 15 *ibid.*, p.84.
  - 16 *ibid.*, p.221.
  - 17 *ibid.*, p.59–60.
  - 18 See Bynum, 1987, pp. 220–226.
  - 19 Kempe, p. 176.
  - 20 *ibid.*, p. 51.
  - 21 Bynum, 1987, p. 5.
  - 22 Kempe, p.51.
  - 23 Bynum, 1987, p.58.
  - 24 Kempe, p.177.
  - 25 *ibid.*, p. 135.
  - 26 Consider, for example, Kempe's retort when summoned to appear before the bishop of Worcester — 'When she came into the hall, she saw many of the Bishop's men in clothes very fashionably slashed and cut into points. Lifting up her hand she blessed herself. And they said to her, "What the devil's wrong with you?" She replied, "Whose men are you?" They answered, "The Bishop's men". Then she said, "No, truly, you are the devil's men". [Kempe, p. 146]
- On another occasion and on trial for Lollardy, Kempe engages in a heated discussion with the Archbishop — 'Then the Archbishop said to her, "I am told very bad things about you. I hear it said that you are a very wicked woman." And she [Margery] replied, "Sir, I hear it also said that you are a very wicked man. And if you are as

- wicked as people say, you will never get to heaven, unless you amend while you are here.' [Kempe, p. 162].
- 27 Ida of Louvain bathed Christ and played with him, Tiedala of Nivelles received Jesus at her breast and Margaret of Faenza enjoyed holding the baby Jesus so much that she could not bear to give him up. See Bynum, 1991, pp.130–131.
  - 28 Kempe writes, 'when she saw women in Rome carrying children in their arms, if she could discover that any were boys, she would cry, roar and weep as if she had seen Christ in his childhood', Kempe, p.123.
  - 29 *ibid.*, p. 126. In fact, so tangible was the physicality of Kempe's erotic visionary experiences that one night she felt the toes of Christ 'as if they had been really flesh and bones', p. 249.
  - 30 *ibid.*, p. 230, 232.
  - 31 *ibid.*, p. 179.
  - 32 See Ellen Ross, 'Spiritual Experience and Women's Autobiography: The Rhetoric of Selfhood in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LIX / 3, pp. 527–546.
  - 33 Kempe, p. 67.
  - 34 Bynum, 1991, p. 147.
  - 35 See 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the later Middle Ages', in Bynum, 1991, pp. 181–238 for a fuller discussion of this contextual background.
  - 36 See Thomas Laqueur, *Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* 1987.

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