

Flesh Made Word:  
Women's Speech in Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends

Brigit C. McGuire

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2015

© 2015  
Britt C. McGuire  
All Rights Reserved

Flesh Made Word:

Women's Speech in Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends

Brigit C. McGuire

This study examines the relationship of women's bodies to their speech in English virgin martyr legends of the tenth to fifteenth centuries. It identifies and traces a long tradition connecting women's virginal bodies to powerful, fruitful speech that begins with late classical writers. This tradition gives rise to the eloquent virgin martyrs of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*, the Katherine Group, and Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, and is one the fifteenth century mystic and contemplative Margery Kempe draws upon to authorize her unconventional performance of sanctity in her *Book*. Far from portraying them as a source of sin or pollution, English virgin martyr legends portray women's bodies as enabling their speech by serving as a dwelling place for God's Word, providing access to his revelation, and becoming the text the virgin martyr interprets for her audience in a lesson in spiritual reading practice.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	9
Embodied Speech and Teaching in Aelfric's <i>Lives of Saints</i>	
Chapter 2.....	62
The Boundaries of the Body in the Katherine Group	
Chapter 3.....	119
Scribe of Mary: Privacy and Preaching in the <i>Second Nun's Prologue and Tale</i>	
Chapter 4.....	162
Like a Virgin Martyr: Reading the <i>Book of Margery Kempe</i> as Virgin Martyr Legend	
Conclusion.....	217
Bibliography.....	221

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All three of the original members of my committee have shaped this dissertation in unique and important ways. I am grateful to Susan Crane for her keen eye for organization and refusal to let a dangling modifier dangle; to Stacy Klein for telling me when I was insightful, but also for telling me I was just plain wrong; and to Patricia Dailey for guiding me to the big-picture insights with every chapter. The fourth chapter, on Margery Kempe, began in a seminar with Carolyn Dinshaw, whose deep familiarity with the literary and theological contexts for the *Book* has influenced my reading. And finally, I have relied on my colleagues in Columbia's medievalist community for support both scholarly and social, but most of all on Sara Murphy, who keeps me sane, keeps me thinking, and always tells it like it is.

## DEDICATION

To my father,  
who refused to let me give up, and made sure I didn't have to,

To my little family, Ricardo and Oliver,  
who provided a soft landing from the tower every day,

And to my mother,  
who gave birth to this dissertation on the day she made a promise to buy her daughters  
“books where the hero is a girl.”

## INTRODUCTION

In 415 A.D., Jerome pens a letter to Ctesiphon, who had asked Jerome for his opinion on some points of Pelagianism. In the course of that letter, between tracing the origins of Pelagianism and condemning it as heresy, Jerome criticizes “silly women laden with sins, carried about with every wind of doctrine, ever leaning and never able to come to knowledge of the truth.”<sup>1</sup> Jerome follows his condemnation with a long list of women who have helped men to spread heresy:

It was with the help of the harlot Helena that Simon Magus founded his sect. Bands of women accompanied Nicolas of Antioch that deviser of all uncleanness. Marcion sent a woman before him to Rome to prepare men's minds to fall into his snares. Apelles possessed in Philumena an associate in his false doctrines. Montanus, that mouthpiece of an unclean spirit, used two rich and high born ladies Prisca and Maximilla first to bribe and then to pervert many churches. (Letter 133, Paragraph 4)

Jerome’s list of women heretics associates false teaching with sexual sin and pollution:

Helena is a “harlot;” bands of women help spread “uncleanness.” And the Church Fathers’ association with women’s teaching with sexual sin is intact roughly 800 years later, when Thomas Aquinas levels as an objection against women teaching publicly: “this is not permitted to women . . . lest men’s minds be enticed to lust, for it is written ‘her conversation burneth as fire.’”<sup>2</sup> Jerome and Aquinas’s quick leap from women’s public teaching to sexual temptation binds women’s bodies and their pedagogical speech, implying that the latter will always be contaminated by the dangerous seductiveness of the former.

---

<sup>1</sup>Jerome, “Letter to Ctesiphon” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 6, ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893). Jerome is collocating *2 Timothy* 4:3 and *Ephesians* 4:14. Ironically, the larger context of *2 Timothy* 4:3 is condemning sinful *men*, for “ex his enim sunt qui penetrant domos et captivas ducunt mulierculas” – of these sort are they who creep into houses and lead captive silly women.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Christian Classics, [1920], 198, Question 177, Article II, Objection 3.

Aquinas's and Jerome's writings are representative of a long tradition of medieval clerical writings portraying women's bodies as dangerous, polluting, and in need of strict enclosure, and therefore particularly unsuited for public teaching or preaching. Yet roughly contemporaneous tradition had produced hagiography in which female virgin martyrs defend their faith before pagan persecutors in highly public preaching roles. This is a tradition in which a virgin responds to her persecutor's request for her silence by asserting that "the living God's words [can] not be stopped or silenced"—and she speaks them.<sup>3</sup> It is one in which a virgin martyr's prayers bring down rain that quenches the fire surrounding her, after which she praises the Lord "with the loudest of voices."<sup>4</sup> This is a tradition that portrays women's bodies as generative of learned, divinely-inspired speech through a mystical marriage to Christ through which the virgin body gives birth to words in a symbolic mirror of the Marian birth of the Word. It coexists uneasily with the medieval misogynist tradition associating women's speech with dangerous bodily pollution.

The critical response to this seeming contradiction has been to minimize the importance of the women's public teaching in medieval saints' lives, particularly when it comes to the question of their exemplarity for female readers. On the question of the exemplarity of the militant virgin of the Katherine Group for anchoresses, for example, critics tend to downplay the saint's public speaking in favor of the virgins' steadfast response to adversity, and her role as the author of private prayer, as the primary locus of her exemplarity.<sup>5</sup> This critical thread accepts the hagiographic hermeneutic of the Church Fathers

---

<sup>3</sup> *Aelfric's Lives of Saints*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Walter Skeat (EETS and Oxford University Press, 1881), *Lucy*, ll. 70 – 75.

<sup>4</sup> *þe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene*, ed. S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne (London: EETS, 1961), l. 672.

<sup>5</sup> Gail Ashton writes that the virgin martyr finds authorization as a model of prayer, which "posits woman as a vessel containing the power of the divine. Woman acts as intercessor." Similarly, Karen Winstead argues that the exemplarity of these tales is to be found in "the long prayers that would have been appropriate for religious



themselves, who responded to the proliferation of virgin martyr hagiography by cautioning that female saint was to be venerated, but not imitated—certainly not when it came to her outspoken public speaking. Alternatively, critics have attempted to reconcile the misogynist and hagiographic traditions by reading saints’ lives as themselves misogynist—as seeking to torture a dangerous female body into submission. In other words, these critics argue, virgin martyr hagiography dramatizes the transformation of a dangerous, polluting female body into something less “dangerous,” because purely spiritual.<sup>6</sup>

However, the representation of female virginity in late classical to late medieval theology provides a corrective to both of these approaches. This tradition portrays the female body as generative of divinely-inspired and theologically-correct speech. By foreclosing the possibility of an earthly bridegroom, the virgin creates space within herself for the Bridegroom Christ. Her intimacy with him gives her special access to his words and provides protection from the supposedly inevitable bodily and spiritual rupture that attends any act of women’s preaching.

The chapters that follow read this tradition “back” into virgin martyr hagiography. Inspired by Anne Clark Bartlett’s characterization of saints’ lives as “heteroglossic—sites of competing genres, registers, and traditions,” they seek to uncover an alternative reading of virgin martyrology that emphasizes the potential of the female body as generative of learned

---

women, especially anchoresses,” theorizing that “their thirteenth-century hagiographers may have chosen to translate the lives of Margaret, Katherine, and Juliana precisely because their legends pay special attention to the saints’ activities in prison—praying, being comforted by angels, and combating demons.” See Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 106. and Karen Winstead, “Sainly Exemplarity,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 337.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of this argument see Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, “Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.1 (1998): 35 – 36; Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany: Suny Press, 2008), 87; and Andrew P. Scheil, “Bodies and Boundaries in the Life of St Mary of Egypt,” *Neophilologus* 84.1 (Jan 2000). 137-156.

speech.<sup>7</sup> Performing this reading of virgin martyr legends clarifies the role they play in medieval women's self-authorization as preachers. It reads the virgin martyr's public preaching as absolutely crucial to her exemplarity for women, and women's bodies as sources of learning rather than corruption.

My first three chapters show how virgin martyr legends articulate this tradition of female virginity by representing women's virgin bodies as generative of learned speech. These lives—Aelfric's legends of Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, and Cecilia; Judith, Juliana, and Margaret in the twelfth-century Katherine Group, and Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*—provide examples of women who occupy preaching roles and successfully negotiate the attendant public scrutiny of their bodies. In my last chapter, I turn from lives written about women by men, to a life written by a woman—the autobiographical *Book of Margery Kempe*. Although my decision to conclude my project with a text so different in form and content from the earlier lives I study may at first seem counter-intuitive, it enables me to demonstrate the vital role that virgin martyr legends play in medieval women's understanding of their bodies' relationship to their sanctity and vocation.

The first chapter, "Embodied Speech and Learning in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*" places Aelfric of Eynsham's tenth-century *Lives* of female virgin martyrs Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, and Cecilia in the context of late patristic writings on virginity and Aelfric's homilies on the relationship of the body to Christian learning and revelation. Attentiveness to these contexts challenges a critical consensus that the female body in Aelfric's *Lives* teaches only by transcending itself. Aelfric inherits a late patristic conception of female virginity as productive of divine speech and revelation; his homilies uphold the role of the body in

---

<sup>7</sup> Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 145.

Christian learning and teaching by affirming the role of the senses in apprehending God's revelation, and in their re-working of Augustine's idea of embodied man as the closest earthly approximation of God-in-Trinity. Reading the *Lives* of Aelfric's virgin martyrs in light of this material emphasizes their portrayal of the female body as productive of learned, divine speech through virginity, rather than as polluting or dangerous.

While the Latin *Lives of Saints* are written for a male monastic audience, and Aelfric's Anglo-Saxon translations for noblemen Aethelmaer and Aethelwaerd, the lives I study in Chapter Two, "The Boundaries of the Body in the Katherine Group," are written for women—specifically, twelfth century anchoresses. This context more explicitly raises the question of the exemplarity of female saints' lives for women. The *Ancrene Wisse*, a rule written for such women, establishes an explicit relationship between bodily practices and spiritual wholeness by representing sin as a penetrative force that makes its way into the soul through insufficient guarding of the bodily entry-points, the senses, with which it groups excessive speaking as a "sin of the tongue." Speech endangers the soul because the open mouth opens the body to penetration. Yet the saints' lives associated with the *Ancrene Wisse* portray women who speak long and publicly in climactic encounters with their pagan persecutors. What exemplary role could these lives possibly play for anchoresses, who enclosed themselves in cells attached to a parish church and lived vows of poverty and chastity in near-solitary confinement? Critical readings of the exemplarity of these lives attempt to gloss over the disparity between exemplar and audience by arguing that their female readers were meant to focus upon the virgins' spiritual virtues rather than their public speaking. But I argue that in fact, these lives model for anchoresses the maintenance of bodily and spiritual wholeness in a highly public role that requires teaching and preaching. A

model of Marian virginity, by which the body becomes fortress against the incursion of sin, open only to Christ, offers virgin martyrs the possibility of speech without inevitable bodily rupture.

Chaucer's *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* expand upon the relationship between Marian virginity and speech by portraying the Second Nun as Mary's scribe. Representing her speech as originating outside herself is a rhetorical move that the Second Nun must make in a context in which women's eroticized bodies make them unsuitable preachers. In the *Tale* itself, Chaucer uses the word 'preche' to describe Cecilia's instruction of her husband and brother where his source text refers only to teaching. In fact, when read through the lens of medieval preaching manuals, Cecilia and the Second Nun are ideal preachers. These manuals lament the lack of perfect congruence between the preacher's personal sanctity and the message he transmits. As a bodily expression of an interior spiritual disposition, the martyr's virginity renders moot the preaching manuals' concerns over the congruity between the surface and substance of the preacher. Moreover, since, as women, both the Second Nun and Cecilia must displace the source of their speech and portray themselves as "mere" vessels of God's word, they achieve what actual preachers cannot: total transference to God's will.

Unlike the women I study in my first three chapters, Margery Kempe is not a physical virgin. But *The Book of Margery Kempe's* unique blend of concepts from hagiography, mysticism, and contemplative spirituality suggests a reading of saints' lives similar to my own. Moreover, Kempe portrays Margery as one of the "company" of virgin martyrs, a status Christ himself affirms when he reassures Margery that he pays no attention at all to what she *has* been, but what she *wishes* to be. Accordingly, Kempe authorizes two potentially controversial aspects of Margery's sanctity—her negotiation of chaste marriage with her

husband, and her public preaching—through the exemplarity of virgin martyrs. But Kempe’s *Book* reveals itself to be most insistently a virgin martyr legend in its focus upon correctly reading the saintly body. She shows the true meaning of Margery’s white clothes and weeping—both intimately bound up with her body—to be inaccessible to those who fail to align their wills with God, or who take an inappropriately literal approach. Kempe’s attempt to inculcate right reading practices in her audience mirrors the focus of virgin martyr legends upon proper understanding of the saint’s body as not wholly physical or wholly spiritual, but the perfect union of both.

In looking at how virgin martyr legends, while admittedly misogynist in some ways, also provide examples of female autonomy that were attractive to medieval women readers, my work builds upon that of scholars such as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Anne Clark Bartlett, Karen Winstead, and Catherine Sanok. Nevertheless, it is distinctive in covering a broad historical time-span. Since the controversy surrounding women’s preaching came to a head around the turn of the fourteenth century, most studies that look specifically at women’s preaching tend to focus upon this time period. By contrast, my study begins much earlier, with Aelfric of Eynsham’s reception of late classical theology in the tenth century. This broader historical scope enables me to track the portrayal of women’s learning in hagiography through historical changes in the actual relationship of women to learning. For example, at the time that Aldhelm writes his *De Virginitate* in the seventh century, he portrays the nuns of Barking as busy bees collecting the wisdom of scriptures, historians, and chroniclers in pursuits every bit as learned and literate as that of their male monastic counterparts. After the conversionary period in Anglo-Saxon England is over, however, pressures toward enclosure of the female monastic which increasingly isolated them from the

centers of monastic learning made learned academic pursuits difficult for women and curtailed not only their ability to engage in a public teaching role, but also to exercise agency over their own spiritual lives.

At the height of the Benedictine Reform, Aelfric of Eynsham anthologizes the *vitae* of thirty-seven saints. Of these, seven are ostensibly devoted exclusively to women, if one counts the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, not attributed to Aelfric and added to the manuscripts in later incarnations. Two so-called “married” lives; Julian and Basilissa, and Chrysanthus and Daria, also deal in some detail with the sanctity of the female saints. Most of Aelfric’s saints are late classical martyrs, which means that not only do their lives usually end in a gruesome death, but also, usually, a scene or two in which the saint defends her faith before her pagan oppressors, often converting large numbers in the process. The married *Life of Chrysanthus and Daria* and the *Life of Cecilia* (which probably ought to be considered a married life, too) contain scenes in which a spouse converts a partner through Christian instruction, in addition to the more standard defenses of faith before pagan oppressors. It is these moments of women’s public speaking in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*—and the bodily practices that enable them—to which I now turn. By beginning my study at this historical moment, it is my intention to identify an early, deeply-entrenched tradition of representing women’s bodies and their speech that later medieval women co-opt and de-historicize to authorize an expanded public role for themselves.

## Chapter 1

### EMBODIED SPEECH AND TEACHING IN AELFRIC'S *LIVES OF SAINTS*

In Rudolph of Fulda's early ninth century *Life of Leoba, Abbess of Bischofsheim*, Rudolph reports how one night the young Leoba has a dream in which

she saw a purple thread issuing from her mouth. It seemed to her that when she took hold of it with her hand and tried to draw it out there was no end to it; and as if it were coming from her very bowels, it extended little by little until it was of enormous length. When her hand was full of thread and it still issued from her mouth, she rolled it round and round and made a ball of it.<sup>1</sup> (Paragraph 3, ll. 1 – 4)

Commenting on the role this dream plays in Rudolf's portrayal of Leoba's sanctity, Stephanie Hollis comments that "in presenting Leoba's visionary dream as a sign of grace that crowns all her other endeavours, Rudolph points in the direction of a shift in the conception of the religious life that would prove less productive of abbesses so famed for wisdom and learning that bishops would seek their advice."<sup>2</sup> She thereby sees this aspect of Leoba's *Life* as the product of a shift in the definition of female sanctity. Rather than the cerebral pursuits of the scriptoria and the public teaching role of the missionary period, women's sanctity after the Benedictine Reform period, claims Hollis, is characterized by strict enclosure and discipline of the body. Although this form of sanctity may provide

---

<sup>1</sup> Rudolph of Fulda, *Life of Leoba* in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodepericon of St. Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface*, ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), accessed online through the *Medieval Sourcebook*, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/leoba.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1992), 280.

visionary experiences like Leoba's dream, these are now signs of God's grace, rather than of a special form of learning.

Hollis's reading of the post-Benedictine reform position of women, and particularly women's bodies, is representative of such scholarship about this time period. According to this scholarship, the increased emphasis on female chastity and strict enclosure both derives from and reinforces a conception of women's bodies as dangerously sexual and carnal, as somehow more *bodily* than those of their male peers. The Benedictine Reform brought about "a division in the ranks of the monastic soldiers of Christ, the eventual severance of women from the monastic brotherhood, when they ceased to be sisters and became instead daughters of Eve, whose sexual frailty was rendered no less threatening by their vocation as brides of Christ."<sup>3</sup> This association of women's bodies with dangerous sexuality, claim scholars such as Hollis, manifests itself in a specific pattern in writing about women, whereby the (presumably male) author attempts to contain the dangerous female body. Hollis shows how, in the *Life of Leoba*, Rudolph portrays the Wimbourne monastery at which Leoba undertook her novitiate as a strictly segregated one adhering to all of the prohibitions against male-female contact, despite this claim's dubious credibility given the time period in question and Leoba's well-attested friendly relationships with men from Wimbourne. So powerful, suggests Hollis, is the ninth century reformer's need to enclose and contain the female body, that he re-writes history to do so.<sup>4</sup>

Another Reform writer of women's lives, 11<sup>th</sup>-century abbot, homilist and hagiographer Aelfric of Eynsham, has been charged with a similar approach to women's bodies in his *Lives of Saints*. "These female lives," write Clare Lees and Gillian Overing,

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 273.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 271 – 272.



“are written at a time when clerical hostility towards women is increasing across Christendom, and when religious women were being enclosed in their convents, while their monastic brethren, by contrast, were extending their influence in the secular world. In a culture wary both of the body and of women, the female body is a double threat, to be guarded against and contained.”<sup>5</sup> In hagiography, Lees and Overing read the response to this threat as a model of sanctity that acknowledges the saint’s embodied nature only in her *transcendence* of her body. They therefore read the elisions from view of the female body, cross-dressing, and transformation of female desire into spiritual discourse that occur in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* as the female saint’s “renunciation of her material, sexual body.” The female body, in this reading, “is a sign not of the flesh but of its conquest.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Helene Scheck reads Euphrosyne’s brothers’ attraction to the cross-dressing young virgin as symptomatic of a “larger anxiety about the feminine as the text firmly asserts the inherent seductiveness of the female body, however craftily disguised, and ultimately reduces even this most holy and spiritual woman to her inescapable corporeality.” In this, she writes, “the legend . . . seeks to control desire and sexuality by controlling the wayward female body.”<sup>7</sup> Because her body is “indistinct, polluted, permeable and communicable,” the female saint’s body must be overcome in order for her to achieve sanctity.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Clare Lees and Gillian Overing, “Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.1 (1998): 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Scheil, Andrew P. “Bodies and Boundaries in the *Life of St Mary of Egypt*,” *Neophilologus* 84.1 (Jan 2000), 137-156. Such an approach to women’s bodies has a meta-critical effect, too, in the emphasis of much of women’s studies scholarship in the Anglo-Saxon period on the Benedictine Reform as the moment at which an always-present ambivalence toward the sexed female body suddenly sprung into sharper focus.

This focus on the female body as a site of sin and contamination produces not only a particular framing of the female body as that which must be enclosed; it also leads to a particular approach to female *virginity* as that which seals off the dangerously permeable female body, that which effects this enclosure. What this framing of female virginity misses, I argue, is a long late classical tradition of thinking about it not only as a practice that “seals off” a body, but also as a method of opening this body to God’s word. Although this tradition begins as a relatively un-gendered one, it becomes increasingly associated with *women’s* bodies so that, when Aelfric writes the *Lives* of his female martyrs, he inherits a well-established tradition of patristic metaphors linking women’s virginal bodies to the word of God.

The idea that women’s bodies might give them a special intimacy with God’s word requires re-evaluation of yet another supposed hallmark of the Benedictine Reform period—the extent to which it put an end to representations of learned women. Historical evidence makes it clear that after the conversion period in England, *actual* women no longer had the same opportunities for leadership and education they previously enjoyed. Prohibited from holding any spiritual office in the church, it was no longer necessary for women “to undergo rigorous training in Latin and the scriptures, which remained an obligation (or privilege) for male monastics. Certainly, female monastics continued to sing the hours and masses, but the kind of intellectual interchange that existed among Aldhelm, Boniface, and Alcuin and their female students and correspondence seems not to have continued into the late Anglo-Saxon period.”<sup>9</sup> Catherine Cubitt links the commonly-held critical view of women’s “dangerous” sexuality to Aelfric’s association of lay, often illiterate clerics with the sin of *unclénnys*,

---

<sup>9</sup> Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 84.

implying that in Aelfric's hierarchy of learning, lay clergy and women share a place at the bottom.<sup>10</sup> Helene Scheck takes the association further, citing Pope Zachary's criticism of the "mad" cleric Adelbert at the Roman Synod of 754, in which he writes that Adelbert "rage[s] with certain womanly notions" as evidence that "womanly sensibilities are associated with madness and heresy" in the early Church.<sup>11</sup> For these critics, women are excluded from learning and erudition not only in "real world," but also in the representational one. Even as they acknowledge the undeniably bodily presence of the female virgin martyrs—women who speak publicly with exceptional learning—they read the virginal bodies of these women as symbols of something else—metaphors, rather than women's bodies.

But does women's exclusion from traditional sources of erudition, now become the provenance of males, entirely exclude them from being learned? Is it *really* the case that "because they were outside of the privileged realm of *auctoritas*, women were reduced to spoken subject [. . .] constructed without benefit of female experience or female bodies"?<sup>12</sup> And moreover, does the increased emphasis upon women's virginity at this time period really come at the expense of women's learning, as Hollis seems to suggest when she writes that the audience for the *Life of Leoba* was "exceptionally fortunate that Rudolph's idea of an exemplar suitable for female edification is dedicated to the pursuit of learning instead of virginity preserved"?<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Pauline Stafford shares this view, writing that the Benedictine Reform "concern with sexual purity readily aligned 'woman' with all the markers of impurity and, specifically, with those which were coming to be seen as markers of the laity." "Queens, Nunneries, and Reforming Churchmen," *Past and Present* 163 (May 1999), 9. She argues that this association was further influenced by the association of women's bodies with the continuation of lineage, land-holding, and non-communal possessions through procreation.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 272.

The interpretation of the dream of Leoba with which this chapter began provides a possible answer. Feeling sure that some important meaning is contained in the dream, Leoba, shy about sharing it, arranges to have a fellow sister report the dream to an aged nun “known to possess the spirit of prophecy.” The prophetess reports that

These things [ . . . ] were revealed to the person whose holiness and wisdom make her a worthy recipient, because by her teaching and good example she will confer benefits on many people. The thread which came from her bowels and issued from her mouth signifies the wise counsels that she will speak from the heart. The fact that it filled her hand means that she will carry out in her actions whatever she expresses in her words. Furthermore, the ball which she made by rolling it round and round signifies the mystery of the divine teaching, which is set in motion by the words and deeds of those who give instruction and which turns earthwards through active works and heavenwards through contemplation, at one time swinging downwards through compassion for one’s neighbour, again swinging upwards through the love of God. By these signs God shows that your mistress will profit many by her words and example, and the effect of them will be felt in other lands afar off whither she will go. (Paragraph 3, ll. 9 – 14)

The prophetic nun’s explication of the meaning of Leoba’s dream is a prediction of the ideal teacher Leoba will become, benefiting many by her teaching and example. Yet in its examination of the way this teaching will occur, it also provides insight into this text’s vision of the manner in which God’s revelation becomes operable in the world. Leoba’s words, the purple threads that issue ceaselessly from her mouth, come directly from her bowels. This figure for the origin of Leoba’s teaching words suggests that they are both independent of her own agency and intimately linked with her body in some way. Despite her reputation as a particularly wise teacher, Leoba’s *Life* provides the reader with very little detail about those mysterious purple threads, the content of the teachings Leoba speaks from the heart. The contents of Leoba’s teaching are transmitted as much through exemplary conduct and her provision of a disciplined monastic and contemplative life for her nuns, as through the spoken word. In fact, as a transmitter of Christian revelation, an object of knowledge supposed to be uniform the whole Christian world over, the content of Leoba’s teaching matters little to her *Life*. For a text concerned with providing an example of Christian living

to its readers, what is most important is how Leoba gains access to this content and how, if her dream is any indication, this body of knowledge is intimately bound up with Leoba's own body.

The *Life of Leoba* also provides a model of teaching that moves beyond the *vita contemplativa* and the ascetic practices that enable it, to a *vita activa*. It portrays Leoba's exemplarity, her works in the world, as just as important to her life as her contemplative swing upward. As the prophetess tells Leoba's nun: "The fact that [the ball of thread] filled her hand means that she will carry out in her actions whatever she expresses in her words," and furthermore, "your mistress will profit many by her words *and example*" (Paragraph 3, my emphasis). The passage explains why the example Leoba sets through her *vita activa* is so important: it is through the combination of the works and words of the teacher that the divine mysteries are "set in motion" in the world. Like the Incarnated Christ, who was the revelation of God on earth not only because of the content of his teaching, but also by the simple fact of his bodily presence in the world, the good teacher provides access to the divine through her exemplarity. It is through this exemplarity that she demonstrates the ability of God's word – the *content* of her teaching – to produce real effects in the world, testifying both to God's power and his continuing presence on Earth among his faithful.

The teacher's body on Earth becomes an important part of her teaching because it communicates the endless repetition of a type of Incarnation, of God's presence on earth enacted through the physical body of his believers. In this light, collections of saints' lives take on a new significance. These collections, in which the account of one saint's actions in the world seem, by virtue of the manuscript's serial structure, to lead to endless iterations of the same actions, over and over again, become a testimony to God's endless presence,

teaching the reader about God's nature and how he works on Earth. Aelfric of Eynsham's *Lives of Saints* are no exception. Story after story of saint refusing to yield to pagan persecutor, and suffering the consequences in a martyr's death, provide the English people with ample evidence of God's continued action on Earth long after Christ has moved on to another world.

The exemplary iteration at work in Aelfric's text – by which I mean the extent to which the life of a saint resembles the lives of the saints that came before it – is perhaps most striking in Aelfric's lives of the late classical female saints, Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy. These lives all conform to what Kathryn Gravdal has called the “sexual plot,”– one in which a young virgin avoids deflowering at the hands of a pagan persecutor, usually undergoing a martyr's death in the process.<sup>14</sup> In these types of saint's lives, the body of the wracked body of the saint takes center stage. During its torture, it becomes the primary focus of attention in the *Life*, put on display for pagan and Christian reader alike. For this reason, and because these lives all include moments in which the virgin saint preaches or teaches before the faithful or her pagan persecutor, the *Lives* of Eugenia, Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy are fertile ground for examining the question raised by Leoba's purple thread – that of the role of the body in relation to teaching and divine revelation.

In this chapter, I argue that we can attribute the overwhelming bodily presence of Aelfric's late-classical female martyrs to the importance of the saint's body to her teaching, to the way this body's intimacy with Christ enables the female saint to serve as his messenger on Earth. Moreover, good deeds performed by the teacher (and her body) provide yet another means of access to God on earth, one that takes its meaning from Aelfric's beliefs about the

---

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 22.

way learning about God, and translating that knowledge into works in the world makes the Christian into an *imago dei* not just of God, but of God *in trinity*. As the Christian directs his memory toward the world he accesses through his bodily senses and the will, confronted with these memories, translates them via the body into actions *in the world*, the Christian becomes a mirror of the Trinity. He also becomes an image of the Incarnated Christ, the Word made flesh, inasmuch as he translates abstract thought into engagement with and presence in the material world.

At every point in the Christian's pathway to knowledge of God, according to Aelfric, the body plays an important role, whether that body is preparing itself to serve as fertile soil for God's word through practicing Christian *cladennyss*, experiencing God's creation through the physical senses, or enacting the intellectual processes through which it most closely approximates God. In his *Lives of Saints*, moreover, Aelfric explores this relationship specifically through the lives of his female virgin martyrs. As the Benedictine Reform scholarship teaches us, women *are* associated with excessive bodiliness at this time period more than are men. But rather than handling this association by using female bodies to teach bodily transcendence, I propose that Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* use women's association with bodiliness to explore the relationship of the body to Christian learning and teaching. Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* attest to a special relationship of the female body to the word of God, one that grows out of a *longue durée* of meanings inscribed upon the female virgin body beginning with late classical patristic literature.

## **I: The Book and the Body: Aelfric's Christian Learning**

Writing at a time when he perceives learning in England to have faltered, Aelfric regards book learning as essential to the Christian's salvation. Lynne Grundy has called attention to the way Aelfric portrays this salvation as attainable to him through a combination of God's grace and learning about his faith in order to be strengthened in this faith. Book-learning is absolutely essential to the Church's continuation, for, as he asks his readers in the Preface to his Latin grammar, "hwanon scelon cuman wise láréowas on godes folce, búton hí on jugoðe leornjon? and hu maeg se geleafa beon forðgenge, gif seo lar and ðeo lareowas ateorjað?" (How will wise teachers come amongst God's people except if by learning in their youth? And how can the faith be advancing, if the teachings and the teachers are lacking?)<sup>15</sup> Learning and teaching are not only tools for the individual to use to secure his own salvation, they are also a duty the individual owes the Church: to advance and spread the faith through instruction.

But in what ought teaching to consist, for Aelfric? We find a hint in his exploration of the parable of the five talents, in a sermon he borrows from Gregory but alters in significant ways. For Gregory, the three servants represent clerics of various levels of ability, whereas for Aelfric they represent laymen, good clerics, and bad clerics. Gregory's clerics use their talents to restrain others from "carnis petulantia; terrenarum rerum ambitu; visibilium voluptate" (fleshly wantonness, earthly ambition, [and] a desire for material goods).<sup>16</sup> But in Aelfric's interpretation the laymen, who are the good servants,

syllað gode bysne oðrum geleaffullum. and symle taecað riht þaes ðe hi magon tocnawan be ðam yttrum andgitum. þeah ðe hi ne cunnon ða incundan deopnysse godes lare asmeagan; And ðonne hí on heora flaeslice lustum gemetegode beoð. and on woruldlicum gewilnungum

---

<sup>15</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Aelfrics Grammatik und Glossar*, ed. Julian Zupitza. (Hildesheim: Wiedmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2003), 6 – 8.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Robert Upchurch "For Pastoral Care and Political Gain: Aelfric of Eynsham's Preaching on Marital Celibacy," *Traditio* 59 (2004): 40-78.



ne beoð to graedige. and eac wið oðrum mannum þurh godes ege hí selfað healdað. þonne styrað hí eac oðrum mannan oððe ma. (CHII.38.54-66)<sup>17</sup>

give a good example to the faithful, and always teach rightly that which they can know through the outer senses or understanding, though they don't know how to probe the inner deepness of God's teaching; and then they moderate themselves in their fleshly lusts, and in worldly desires are not too greedy, and also, with other men, keep themselves in the fear of God. Then they stir [to faith] a few other persons or more.

Aelfric's transformation of Gregory's three clerics into laymen, good clerics, and bad clerics is probably due to his Benedictine reform agenda: He wishes to castigate what he sees as an undisciplined clergy. The implication here is that the truly faithful layman does a better job of strengthening other Christians through his example than even the more learned but morally dissolute cleric who is able to fully explicate the "incund deopnyss" of God's teaching. But just Rudolph of Fulda does in the *Life of Leoba*, Aelfric portrays teaching as a two-fold endeavor, made up of an exemplary lifestyle that "stirs" other men but also, potentially, an *incund andgit* (inner understanding) that provides a deeper, perhaps more intellectual insight into God's teaching. To make the point that these two aspects of teaching go hand-in-hand, at the end of this homily Aelfric has the lord take the inner understanding away from the bad cleric and give it to the righteous layman. The layman's righteous lifestyle, which began with a faithful adherence to God's laws, the knowledge of which was accessible to him through the *ytra andgit*, or "outer understanding," eventually results in the layman's possession of the inner understanding as well. Aelfric shows the deeper knowledge of God to be a reward for righteous living. Righteous living, moreover, consists of a tempering of desires and the will: Aelfric discusses how the laymen "on heora flaesclicum lustum gemetegode beoð. and on woruldlicum gewilnungum ne beoð to graedige," (are measured in their fleshly lusts and are not too greedy with regard to worldly desires). For

---

<sup>17</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Aelfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series; Text*, Malcolm Godden, ed. (London; New York: EETS Press, 1979).

Aelfric, reaching a deeper understanding of God's teaching depends upon regulating the body and its desires. Just as the purple threads of Leoba's wisdom emanate from her very bowels, so the *incund andgit* that is the goal of the contemplative life for Aelfric is bound up with the Christian's ability to temper and regulate the desires of the flesh.

Aelfric connects this deeper understanding of God's teachings to the body in a figurative way as well, when he "uses [the term] *lichamlice* to refer not just to bodily practices but also to a kind of literal understanding."<sup>18</sup> In his homily on the Nativity of Holy virgins, for example, as he discusses the figure of the Christian church as a "virgin" and Paul's words telling her "I have betrothed you to one man in order that you prepare a pure virgin for Christ," he writes, "Nis ðis na to understandenne lichamlice, ac gastlice; Crist is se claena brydguma. and eal seo cristene gelaðung is his bryd" (This is not to be understood bodily, but ghostly. Christ is the chaste bridegroom, and all the Christian congregation is his bride) (*CHII.39.II.87-88*). Aelfric calls the literal reading of a text's words "lichamlic" reading, where passing beyond this literal meaning to the figurative sense underneath is "gastlic." Aelfric is clear about which kind of reading the ideal teacher must practice, referring disdainfully to the unlearned priests who,

gif hi hwaet litles understandað of þam Laedenbocum, þonne þincð him sona þaet hi magon maere lareowas beon; ac hi ne cunnon swa þeah þaet gastlice andgit þaerto, and hu se ealde ae waes getacnung towardra þinga, oþþe hu seo niwe gecyþnis aefter Cristes menniscnisse waes gefillednys ealra þaera þinga þe seo ealde gecyðnis getacnode towarde be Criste and be hys gecorenum. (*Preface to Genesis II. 25-31*)<sup>19</sup>

if they understand some little of Latin books, then they right away think that they can be great teachers, but they don't know anything whatsoever of the spiritual meaning thereto, and how the old law was a sign of future things, or how the New Testament after Christ's incarnation was the fulfillment of all the things the Old Testament betokened about Christ and his chosen people.

---

<sup>18</sup> Shari Horner, "The Violence of Exegesis: reading the Bodies of Aelfric's Female Saints," *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 24.

<sup>19</sup> *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch: Aelfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis* ed. S.J. Crawford (London: EETS and Oxford University Press, 1922).

So for Aelfric, understanding bodily is not just a failure to recognize figurative meanings in a text, but also has to do with a failed awareness of the way Christ's Incarnation, through which he took on a human body, actually fulfills the meaning of these texts in a way that changes our understanding of how one ought to translate them into action. Somewhat paradoxically, to understand texts bodily is to understand them as though God had never taken on a body. To understand them spiritually, by contrast, is to understand everything in relation to Christ.

Aelfric holds this kind of spiritual understanding as essential to those who would instruct the unlearned:

Preostas sindon gesette to lareowum þam laewedum folce: nu gedafnode him þæt hig cuþon þa ealdan æ gastlice understandan, and hwaet Crist silf taehte and his apostolas on þære niwan gecyðnisse, þæt hig mihton þam folce wel wissian to Godes geleafan, and wel bisnian to godum weorcum. (*Preface to Genesis*, ll. 59 – 62)

Priests are set to teach the unlearned people: it befits them now that they know how to understand the old law spiritually, and what Christ himself and his apostles taught in the New Testament, so that they can guide the people well in the faith of God, and set an example to good works.

But how are teachers supposed to reach this spiritual understanding so that they can convey it to their students? Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, reaching the spiritual understanding actually depends on bodily understanding for its beginning, so that once again, we see access to divine knowledge beginning with the body and its senses. In his Homily on Midlent Sunday (*Dominica in Media Quadragesima*), Aelfric discusses the miracle of the loaves and fishes and how the Christian reader ought to approach it:

þis wundor is swiðe micel, and deop on getacnungum. Oft gehwa gesihð faegre stafas awritene, þonne herað he ðone writere and þa stafas, and nat hwaet hi maenað. Se ðe cann ðæra stafa gescead, he herað heora faegernysse, and raed þa stafas, and understent hwaet he gemaenað. On oðre wisan we sceawiað metinge, and on oðre wisan stafas. Ne gaeð na mare to metinge buton þæt þu hit geseo and herige: nis na genoh þæt þu stafas sceawige, buton ðu hi eac raede and þæt andgit understande. Swa is eac on ðam wundre þe God worhte mid þam

fif hlafum: ne bið na genoh þæt we þæs tacnes wundrian, oþþe þurh þæt God herian, buton we eac þæt gastlice andgit understandon (*CHI*.12.64 - 73).

This wonder is very great, and deep in meaning. Often someone sees beautiful letters written, then praises the writer and the letters, and not what they mean. He who knows how to make out the letters praises their fairness, and reads the letters, and understands what they mean. In one way we behold a painting, and in another way, letters. Nothing more is required by a painting except that you look at it and praise it: it's not enough to look at letters; but instead you must also read them and understand their meaning. So it is also with the miracle God worked with the five loaves: it's not enough for us to wonder at this sign, or praise God because of it, except if we also understand the spiritual meaning [of it].

As we might expect, Aelfric exhorts the good Christian reader to pass over and through the physical appearance of the letters on the page to their deeper, spiritual meaning. But in saying repeatedly that it is not enough to *just* stop at the sight of the letters, Aelfric implies that this sight, and the praise of the writer it occasions, may very well be a necessary first step on the path to understanding.<sup>20</sup> Aelfric takes this passage from Augustine's *Tractate 24* on the miracle of the loaves and fishes in John. In Augustine's version, the passage comes between a discussion of the purpose of miracles in which the purpose of the visible is made clear:

Therefore this [miracle] was put before the senses, that the mind might be lifted up to him by it, and it was displayed to the eyes, that the understanding might be put to work upon it so that we might revere the invisible God through visible works, and so that we, lifted up to faith and purged by faith, might desire to see him even invisibly whom, though invisible, we have come to know from visible things. (p. 233)<sup>21</sup>

Augustine clearly delineates a process of exegesis, of reaching understanding of God's works, that begins with the senses, and particularly sight. Augustine finishes his discussion of the purpose of miracles with "Therefore, because we have seen, because we have praised, let us read and understand" (p. 233). Aelfric echoes Augustine on this theme when he writes that

---

<sup>20</sup> Concerning this passage, Paul Szarmach comments, "Aelfric does not discount immediate human response, however unknowing it may be. In fact, he concludes the simile by emphasizing it." "Aelfric as Exegete," *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture* ed. Gallagher and Damico (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 239.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 11 – 27* ed. and trans. John Rettig (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press).

creation declares the presence of God so that those who have never received instruction in the Christian faith “mihton tocnawan þone aelmihtigan God, þurh þa gesceafta þe he gesceop on worulde” (might know the almighty God through the created things which he has made in the world).<sup>22</sup> For both Aelfric’s source and Aelfric himself, coming to understand the world in relation to God, spiritually, is a process that begins with the Christian’s sensory access to the created world through which he first understands God and his works.

Bodily understanding is the beginning of the approach to knowledge about God and his works, which knowledge, in turn, will enlighten the Christian’s spiritual understanding. However, it *is* just the beginning, for if spiritual understanding is the ability to “read” everything in relation to God and the Incarnated Christ, it depends first and foremost upon an intimate knowledge of who and what God is. This knowledge is *not* wholly accessible through sensing and experiencing God’s creation, for although he dwells in his creation, he also exists outside of it, the essential problem for coming to perfect spiritual understanding. For how can man, bound by mortal constraints, arrive at knowledge of God when even the angels who are closest to him cannot know him completely? Aelfric’s problem is to puzzle out how humans, who do not possess the intimacy with God that the angels have, are to come to a true understanding and knowledge of one he himself calls the “aelmihtiga god on þrynesse. and ón annyse. aefre wuniende un-asmeagendlic. and un aseacgendlic” (Almighty God in threeness [Trinity] and oneness, who remains ever *unsearchable* and *unspeakable*?) (13.17-18, my emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Homilies of Aelfric: A Supplementary Collection* ed. John C. Pope (London: EETS and Oxford University Press, 1967), XX.II.413-414.

<sup>23</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Aelfric’s Lives of Saints Vol. I*, ed. and trans. Walter Skeat (EETS and Oxford University Press, 1881).

For Aelfric, as for Augustine, the Trinity provides the key to reaching knowledge of God, not necessarily because of what the Trinity *is*, although this essence is part of its revelatory power, but because of what the soul becomes as it attempts to define what it is. Commenting on Aelfric's discussion in his sermon *De fide catholica*, in which, following Augustine, he expands upon the Trinity at length, Lynne Grundy writes that "when Aelfric's writing on the Trinity is compared with that of other Old English homilists, it is clear that he went to far greater trouble than anyone else to teach this doctrine in a coherent and lively form."<sup>24</sup> Why was the Trinitarian doctrine so important to Aelfric? The answer to this question is related, again, to the importance of pedagogy for him. As someone who viewed good teaching as the key to both the salvation of the individual Christian soul and the continuation of the Church's mission on earth, Aelfric could not ignore Augustinian ideas about the Trinity as an important means of revelation of the divine nature; in fact, he found in it the means of uniting the a knowledge of the external, created world to a knowledge of God, and expressing the connection between the two.

The project of Augustine's *De Trinitate* is to try to come to an understanding of the immaterial God's substance, "which without any change in itself makes things that change, and without any passage of time in itself creates things that exist in time" (I.1.3).<sup>25</sup> He attempts to "understand as far as it is given us the eternity and quality and unity of the Trinity" by explicating various trinities that exist on earth (VIII.3.8). Just as we know what justice is by observing justice in action and extrapolating an abstract principle from it, Augustine thinks we can at least approach the trinity in the same way: by observing earthly trinities in action and extrapolating the essence of trinity from these observations.

---

<sup>24</sup> Lynne Grundy, *Books and Grace* (London: Center for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991), 26.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. On the Trinity* Vol. 8. ed. and trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990).

Augustine considers and rejects various trinities as more or less demonstrative of the divine one before coming to the trinity of the mind's memory, understanding, and willing of itself as the one that most perfectly mirrors the divine Trinity:

When the mind views itself by thought, it understands and recognizes itself; thus it begets this understanding and self-recognition. It is a non-bodily thing that is being understood and viewed, and recognized in the understanding. When the mind by thinking views and understands itself, it does not beget this awareness of itself as though it had previously been unknown to itself; it was already known to itself in the way that things are known which are contained in the memory even when they are not being thought about [ . . . ] These two things, begetter and begotten, are coupled together by love as the third, and this is nothing but the will seeking or holding something to be enjoyed This is why we thought the trinity of mind should be put together under these three names, memory, understanding, and will. (XIV.2.8)

Augustine calls the mind's awareness of itself "memory," and says it is the will (or what he here also calls 'love') that enjoins the thinking part of the mind to direct itself toward itself as an object of thought. Thus all three parts – memory, understanding, and will – exist together in a trinity that creates self-awareness. This trinity is particularly attractive to Augustine as an approximation of the divine Trinity precisely because it always exists. Even when the mind is not specifically contemplating itself, nothing is more present to a person than his own mind. The mind continually remembers and understands itself, even if it is not thinking about itself at a particular moment in time. This perpetual nature of self-consciousness approximates the co-eternal nature of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When Aelfric appropriates Augustine's trinity of mind, understanding and will in his sermon *De Fide Catholica*, he does so after various attempts to explain the three-in-oneness of God.<sup>26</sup> He explains this mystery by comparing it to the sun, whose heat and brightness

---

<sup>26</sup> It is likely that Aelfric receives his Augustine through Alcuin and Alfred. With Alcuin, Aelfric shares a view of the soul's mental powers that insists that "the soul's likeness to God resides in its engagement with the real material world . . . For Alcuin it is the mind's power to remember or imagine people and places that shows its God-like quality." See Malcolm Godden, "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind" in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Lapidge and Geuss (Cambridge: 1986), 286.

cannot be separated from it although they have different functions, before finally turning to a version of Augustine's trinity of mind-understanding-will:

On hwilcum daele haefð se man Godes anlicnyse on him? On þære sawle, na on ðam lichaman. þæs mannes sawle haefð on hire gecynde þære Halgan þrynnesse anlicnyse; forðan þe heo haefð on hire ðreo ðing, þæt is gemynd, and andgit, and willa. þurh þæt gemynd se man geðencð þa ðing ðe he gehyrde oþþe geseah, oþþe geleornode. þurh þæt andgit he understént ealle ða ðing ðe he gehyrð oððe gesihð. Of ðam willan cumað gedohtas, and word, and weorc, aegðer ge yfele gegode. An sawul is, and an líf, and an edwist, seo ðe haefð þas ðreo ðing on hire togaedere wyrcente untodaeledlice; forði þær þæt gemynd bið þæt andgit and se willa, and aefre he bið togaedere. þeah-hwaeðere nis nan ðaera ðreora seo sawul, ac seo sawul þurh þæt gemynd gemanð, þurh þæt andgit heo understent, þurh ðone willan heo wile swa hwaet swa hire licað; and heo is hwaeðere án sawl and án líf. Nu haefð heo forði Godes anlicnyse on hire, forðan ðe haefð þreo ðing on hire untodaeledlice wyrcente. (*CHI.XX.II.193-207*)

In which part has the man God's image in him? In the soul, not in the body. The man's soul has in its nature the image of the Holy Trinity; because it has in it three things; that is memory, understanding [or sense], and will. Through the mind the man thinks [about] the things he hears or sees, or learns. Through the understanding he understands all the things he hears or sees. From the will come thoughts and word, and work, either evil or good. It is one soul, and one life, and one substance, that has these three things working in it inseparably, because where the memory is are understanding and will, and they are always together. However, none of these three *are* the soul, but the soul through the memory remembers, through the understanding understands, through the will wills what it likes; and it is nevertheless one soul and one life. In this, then, it has God's image in it, because it has in it three things working together inseparably.

Aelfric's version of this trinity differs from Augustine's in significant ways. First, although, like Augustine, Aelfric uses this trinity as part of explaining who or what God is, he gets maximum pedagogical effect from it, demonstrating his ever-present concern for good teaching, by extrapolating from it two other important tenets of faith: that God created man in his likeness, and that the soul of man *is* this trinity of mind, understanding and will, through which three things it is "án sawl and án líf" (one soul and one life). Another important difference from Augustine's explication is that with understanding, Aelfric is *not* talking about an inward-directed faculty at this point: he explicitly speaks about the memory as that with which a man directs his understanding toward things he has *heard, seen, or learned*, rather than toward itself. The will, moreover, which in Augustine's trinity was the means by



which memory and understanding were brought together, here becomes the means by which a man translates heard, seen, or learned things into some sort of material result, be it further thought, works, or words.

Later in his *Homily on the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Aelfric speaks again about the powers of the soul, remarking upon the “wundorlic swyftness þære sawle” (marvelous swiftness of the soul) as concerns its ability to “on ánre tide gif he swá wyle besceawað heofonan and ofer sáe flyð land and burga geond-færð and ealle þas þing mid geþohte on hire sihðe gesaet” (at the same time, if it wills it, contemplate heaven and fly over the sea, travel through countries and cities, and in thought set all these things in its vision (p. 19)<sup>27</sup> For Aelfric the soul’s ability to contemplate what is *external* to it, to hold the created world before its vision, is perhaps more wondrous than the self-awareness Augustine explores. Although it should be noted that Aelfric concludes his discussion in the homily with the caveat that the mind lacks God’s ability to be present to all things at once, his exploration of the trinity of memory-understanding-will nevertheless holds out the workings of the mind in its contemplation of God’s creation as the means by which the human being most clearly approximates God’s image and likeness. Aelfric departs from Augustine, though, in his focus on the way the *externally*-directed mind creates God’s likeness in man. For Aelfric, what is most important in the workings of the mind is the way the memory directs the mind toward things it accesses through the bodily senses. The will, confronted with these memories, translates them into actions *in the world* – good works, or evil. Presumably, it is in willing *good* works that the soul of man most closely approximates the Trinity. With this theology, Aelfric adds to our understanding of how the Christian’s good example to other believers teaches. Not only do these good works show other Christians how

---

<sup>27</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Aelfric’s Lives of Saints* vol. 2, ed. W.W. Skeat (London: EETS, 1883).

they ought to behave, and how Christ would behave, providing an *imago dei* in this sense; they also provide evidence of the workings of a soul which, in its memory, understanding, and will, mirrors the Trinity.

Clearly, Aelfric considered not just the content of learning, but also its process—the connection of mind, understanding, and will in trinity—of paramount importance to the Christian life. The content of learning *is* still important, however. In his *Sermon on the Greater Litany, Wednesday*, Aelfric makes clear that the learning which leads to eternal life is directed toward God:

þaes tocnawennys is ece lif, forðan ðe we habbað þæt ece lif þurh geleafan, and oncnawennysse þære Halgan þrynnysse, gif we ða oncnawennysse mid árwurðnysse healdað. Witodlice gif Godes oncnawennys ús gearcað þæt ece lif, swa miccle swiðor we efstað to lybbenne swa micclum swa we swiðor on ðissere oncnawennysse ðeonde beoð. Soðlice ne swelte we on ðam ecan life; þonne bið ús Godes oncnawennys fulfremed, þonne we God geseoð, and butan geswince ecelice heriað. Ac we sceolon on andwerdum life leornian Godes onmcnawennysse, and hine mid estfullum mode herian, þæt we moton becumen to his fulfremedan oncnawennysse and to ðære swincleasan herunge. (*CHII.22.77-87*)

This knowledge is eternal life, because we have the eternal life through faith and knowledge of the Holy Trinity, if we hold this knowledge with respect. Truly, if knowledge of God prepares us for the eternal life, so much the more are we hastening to live as much as we are growing in this knowledge. Truly, we do not die in the eternal life; then is our knowledge of God perfect. Then we see God, and without toil, praise him eternally. But we must learn knowledge of God in the present life, and praise him with devoted mind, so that we might come to perfect knowledge [of him], and to toilless praise [of him].

Aelfric links eternal life to growth in the knowledge of God. On earth, of course, the Christian cannot hope to come to a fullness of this knowledge, which is possible only in God's "house"—the afterlife in which the Christian comes face to face with God and knows him intimately. But learning about God on earth is the means of reaching this afterlife. Knowledge of God *is* eternal life; reaching for that knowledge is how the Christian begins the journey toward eternal life.

The notion that learning about God is valuable to the Christian soul is not a new idea, of course, but I hope that what my discussion of it in conjunction with Aelfric and

Augustine's conceptions of the Trinity has shown, is that part of the reason learning about God brings the Christian closer to eternal life is because of the way the *process* of learning about God enacts a trinity within the soul, through which trinity man most fully participates in the image and likeness of God. This participation, in turn, is a way in which the Christian begins to approach an "identity of content with the Divine Mind," an intimacy with God brought about by similarity with him. For Aelfric, this identity of content with the Divine Mind occurs when the Christian is willing good works in the world, when the will is directing what it understands and remembers outward into an exemplary life.

Now we are in a better position to understand why Aelfric writes in his *Grammatica* that "aelc man, ðe wisdom lufað, byð gesaelig, and se ðe naðor nele ne leornjan ne taecan, gif he maeg, þonne acolað his andgyt fram ðaere halgan lare, and he gewit swa lytlum and lytlum fram gode" (if someone who is blessed and loves wisdom will neither learn nor teach, though he is able, then his understanding cools from holy learning and he departs little by little from God) (p. 3, ll. 3 – 6). For it is the life of the mind that is essential to Christian salvation for Aelfric. Aelfric's ideal teacher is one who practices this life in order to come to a greater intimacy with God by enacting the Trinity within. This intimacy, moreover, enables the Christian reader to interpret all writing according to spiritual rather than bodily understanding, to read everything in relation to the Incarnated Christ, who is God. Reaching this spiritual understanding begins with access to the created world through one's bodily senses, but it also depends upon the Christian's ability to regulate and restrain bodily desires. It is this last mechanism through which *gastlic andgit* (and by implication, knowledge of and intimacy with God) develops that I wish to explore in more detail in the next section. I wish to emphasize that, as I conceptualize the relationship between spiritual understanding and the

body in Aelfrician texts, it is not a transcendence of the body that enables this knowledge, but rather, a special relationship *to* and *with* the body. To interrogate the link between the body and knowledge of God in Aelfric's works, I begin with a summary of the tradition of chastity and virginity Aelfric receives from the late classical tradition, before turning to an exploration of how Aelfric develops this tradition in his exploration of Christian *claennyss*.

## **II: Virginity and Knowledge: "Look to the Body"**

In *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture: Virginity and Its Authorizations*, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne writes that "without simply essentializing virginity into separate meanings for women and men, it is necessary both to recognize the dominant cultural patternings of virginity in historiography and other writings by men, and, given that these are inevitably part of the cultural environment of women, to consider the overlaps and distinctivenesses of virginity's history for women."<sup>28</sup> In applying this insight to the study of Aelfric's hagiography, what immediately becomes apparent is a trend that Sarah Salih recognizes as characteristic of the later medieval period as well, in which "male saints are approvingly referred to as chaste or virginal, but their sexual status is rarely the locus of their sanctity, as is often the case for women."<sup>29</sup> That they preserve their virginity is undoubtedly the most important part of the female saint's performance of sanctity, the reason that the female saint receives the appellation "maiden" throughout her life, but the male saints is called "bishop," "knight," or any number of other terms indicative of social role or profession

---

<sup>28</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150 – 1300: Virginity and its Authorizations*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 17.

rather than sexual status. The question that arises from this distinction relative to my argument is the extent to which this extremely limited model of sanctity represents a constraint to women's agency that prevents them from engaging in literate practices. In her discussion of Benedictine Reform portrayals of virginity, Helene Scheck regards female virginity as an essentially limiting position: "Whereas male saints and heroes act on their own discretion and can hope to be rewarded for their actions, female saints merely stand as receptacles of divine power."<sup>30</sup> What this portrayal of female virginity misses, however, is that virginity as a choice to dedicate one's body to God, *is* an act of the female saints' "own discretion." It is not just "divine power" for which the saints serve as receptacles, moreover. In the patristic tradition of virginity, they also serve as conduits for God's words. To watch the development of this tradition from late-classical to Anglo-Saxon texts reveals an instructive variation in the later period: texts and *boclíc lár* come to replace the more ethereal "words of God" as the form of knowledge to which dedicated virgins have special access. Moreover, the tradition Aelfric inherits is one that accords special significance to the *female* virgin body.

By the late classical period, the idea that dedicated virginity gave the Christian adherent a special intimacy with God's words had become so conventional that among the early church Fathers, "one seldom finds it argued explicitly, but simply repeated as a commonplace fact."<sup>31</sup> Interrogating the precise technology of knowledge implied by a connection taken for granted so early in the history of Christianity is therefore difficult. But it seems certain that Christianity owes the seeds of this connection of the virginal body to

---

<sup>30</sup> Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Neijhoff, 1975), 77.

knowledge, whatever its form, to its birthplace in a Judaic and Pagan world that had long viewed the abstinent body as the most appropriate vehicle for divine inspiration. The incompatibility between a sexual body and the Spirit was due to an envisioning of both sex and spirit possession as sending vital heats and energies rushing through the body; a single body, it was thought, simply could not contain both.<sup>32</sup> Yet this model did not require the successful spirit medium to be *virginal*. Rather, people most often became especially inspired by the Spirit at the end of their lives, coinciding with a natural drop-off in sexual activity as part of their normal life cycle. Moreover, the nascent Church tended to be more invested in martyrdom than virginity as a means of achieving sanctity. Not until the writings of Tertullian in the early third century, penned for an audience for whom the martyr's death was unlikely at best, did sexual continence become codified and celebrated as a special activator and marker of intimacy with the Divine.

Writing to warn his readers against multiple marriages (and convinced, in fact, of the supremacy of no marriage whatsoever), Tertullian counseled the potential husband:

Renounce we things carnal, that we may at length bear fruits spiritual [. . .] For continence will be a mean whereby you will traffic in a mighty substance of sanctity; by parsimony of the flesh you will gain the Spirit [. . .] “For purity,” says she, “is harmonious, and they see visions; and turning their faces downward, they even hear manifest voices, as salutary as they are withal secret.” (Paragraph 10).<sup>33</sup>

For Tertullian, the formula was simple: parsimony of the flesh bears spiritual fruit; the pure have access to visions and voices “as salutary as they are withal secret.” Yet Tertullian did *not* advocate a body/spirit dualism that resulted in abandonment of the flesh; rather, he “believed that it was directly through the body and its sensations that the soul was tuned to

---

<sup>32</sup> See Peter Brown., *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 67.

<sup>33</sup>Ambrose, *On Exhortation to Virginity in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4* ed. Alexander Roberts, trans. S. Thelwall (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), accessed online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0405.htm>.

the high pitch required for it to vibrate to the Spirit of God.”<sup>34</sup> Tertullian’s beliefs about the ideal bodily vehicle for the Spirit were no doubt influenced by his connection with Montanism, a semi-heretical sect of Christianity that touted the age of a “new prophecy” enabled by ascetic practices, particularly fasting and continence. Yet even as the church proper renounced Montanism, the connection Tertullian made between bodily continence and intimacy with the Spirit continued to be influential.

Tertullian’s implicit Montanism was one important conduit by which the doctrine of *virginitas* began to take shape in Christianity; Gnosticism was another. The Gnostics embraced a severe dualism of matter and spirit, regarding the whole created universe, including the body, as so much separation from the divine (and wholly spiritual) Wisdom. If, however, the Gnostic initiate could somehow separate his spirit from his body, he might enjoy in this life a touch of *Anapausis* – the peace of God, which “passeth understanding.”<sup>35</sup> The Gnostics therefore embraced complete renunciation of all sexual activity, not only because they regarded the creation of new matter as an inherent evil, but also because they embraced the abandonment of the body as the means of achieving a Christian *gnosis*, or communion with the Divine Being. Christian monasticism owes its understanding of contemplative prayer as an involvement “of the perfected believer in the relationship of secret knowledge” to the Gnostics. “Both the ancient ideal of *gnosis* and the medieval monastic act of contemplation were once felt to be conditional upon the Christian’s attainment of asexuality, a higher level of being.”<sup>36</sup> The Gnostics’ fetishization of “secret

---

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Body and Society*, 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Bugge, *Virginitas*, 42.

knowledge,” combined with their desire to leave the body behind entirely, created a another link in the chain linking renunciation of sexuality to intimacy with God.

Gnosticism, like Tertullian’s Montanism, eventually fell out of fashion in the early Church, although not without leaving its mark on Christianity’s perception of virginity. Thanks to these traditions, when Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, pens his *On Virgins* in the mid fourth century, the Church has already reached a point at which the special intimacy between the virgin and Christ is so accepted as to be in need of no special clarification. Ambrose’s *On Virgins*, written for his sister Marcellina, who has just taken the veil herself, adds to this tradition a particular focus on women, who take up a privileged role as “Spouses of Christ” in imagery that borrows explicitly from the Song of Songs. The knowledge of God to which the virgin is privy is thereby regarded as merely her “due” as his spouse, “For it is fitting, O Virgin, that you should fully know Him Whom you love, and should recognize in Him all the mystery of His Divine Nature and the Body which He has assumed” (IX.46).<sup>37</sup> In Ambrose’s theology, the Virgin is shown to have special intimacy not only with God, but specifically with the Incarnated Christ, in the “Body which He has assumed.” Aelfric’s spiritual understanding relies upon reading in relation specifically to the *Incarnated* Christ; here is a way in which the Virgin might excel at Aelfrician learning. And indeed, Ambrose’s virgins traffic in the Word / words of God:

Let, then, your work be as it were a honeycomb, for virginity is fit to be compared to bees, so laborious is it, so modest, so continent. The bee feeds on dew, it knows no marriage couch, it makes honey. The virgin’s dew is the divine word, for the words of God descend like the dew. The virgin’s produce is the fruit of the lips, without bitterness, abounding in sweetness. They work in common, and their fruit is in common. How I wish you, my daughter, to be an imitator of these bees, whose food is flowers, whose offspring is collected and brought together by the mouth. (VIII.40-41)

---

<sup>37</sup> Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* vol. 10 trans. H. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth, ed. Henry Wace and Phillip Shaft (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896).



Interpreting Song of Songs 4.11, “Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb,” Ambrose makes the “drops” of this honeycomb the words of God that should emanate from the virgin’s lips through almost no agency of her own as the “words of God descend like the dew” to the one who is deserving. Ambrose obviously subscribed to the idea that bees procreated asexually, and with his transference of their offspring to the dew “collected and brought together by the mouth,” he originated the figure of the asexually-reproducing virgin, replicating herself ceaselessly with the converts she wins through the aid of the Divine words that drip from her lips like honey.

With Ambrose we see the late classical tradition of virginity re-shaped to focus not just upon the virgin’s intimacy with God, but with the *words* of God, which come to her almost of their own accord. In a prose treatise on virginity that may well have been modeled after Ambrose’s *De Virginibus* (a different text than the one cited above, but nevertheless similar in content in terms of its subject matter and overriding concerns), the late seventh-century monk Aldhelm also links virgins to words (and to bees). Writing for the nuns of Barking Abbey at their request, Aldhelm praises their “remarkable mental disposition,” and compares them to bees wandering through fields of flowers,

roaming widely through the flowering fields of scripture . . . now energetically plumbing the divine oracles of the ancient prophets foretelling long in advance the advent of the Savior with certain affirmations; now, scrutinizing with careful application the hidden mysteries of the ancient laws miraculously drawn up by [Moses][ . . .] now, duly rummaging through the old stories of the historians and the entries of the chroniclers. (pp. 61 – 62)<sup>38</sup>

While Aldhelm adapts Ambrose’s metaphor of busy bees to great effect, an important distinction between the two passages is that Aldhelm’s virgins have access to words in specific *texts*: scriptures, laws, the old stories of historians, chronicles. The verbs that he uses

---

<sup>38</sup> Aldhelm, *De Virginitate* in *Aldhelm, The Prose Works*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979).

for the virgins' actions – plumbing, scrutinizing, rummaging—paint a picture of a material archive through and upon which the virgins work. No longer does the word of God descend mysteriously like the dew. Rather, it is contained within these texts, whose mysteries the virgins discover by the labor of their thought. Access to Divine knowledge has taken on a new form, one which depends upon the virginal body's relationship to book-learning. Later Aldhelm deepens the connection of these virgins' literacy to their bodies when he describes their work with these texts as a type of procreation. The bee, he writes

produces her sweet family and children, innocent of the lascivious coupling of marriage, by means of a certain generative condensation of a very sweet juice; and in truth, the Church, striking vitally into the hearts of men with double-keen sword-edge of the (two) Testaments, fertilizes through the chaste seed of the word the offspring who are lawful heirs of eternity. (p. 62)

In this complex passage, the bee signifies both virgin and Church, both of whom become masculine as they “strike vitally” into the hearts of men with their phallic sword of the New and Old Testaments, thus “fertilizing” their offspring with the word. This asexual procreation is the means by which Church and virgins reproduce by producing Christians, in this way replacing the sexual reproduction they have foregone.

Thus the tradition of virginity that reaches Aelfric is one that foregrounds the special relationship between the virgin and the words of God, whether in texts or transmitted through the mysterious dew that flows over and through the virgin body. Aelfric, however, re-works this tradition so that it no longer focuses as much on virginity, or *maegðhad*, as he calls it, as upon *claennyss*, a bodily continence available to married and unmarried alike. For Aelfric, this *claennyss* is the most beloved to God of all virtues; enjoining people to celebrate the feast of Christ's nativity by loving “those things which God has enjoined,” among them lowliness, mercy, righteousness, truth, alms-deeds, temperance, patience, and chastity, he writes

þas ðing lufað God, and huru ða claennysse, ðe he sylf ðurh hine and ðurh þæt claene maeden, his modor, astealde. Swa eac ealle his geferan ðe him filigdon, ealle hí waeron on claennysse wuniende; and se maesta dáel þæra manna þe Gode geðeoð, þurh claennysse hí geðeoð. (CHII.1.II.283-287)

These things God loves, and especially chastity, which he established through himself and through the maiden, his mother. So also all his companions who followed him; they were all living in chastity; and the greatest part of men who commit themselves to God, commit themselves through chastity.

Moreover, chastity to Aelfric is not simply a *physical* continence: as Robert Upchurch has shown, Aelfric defines a spiritual chastity, even maidenhood, that consists in a steadfastness of faith, a “fidelity to orthodox doctrine and practice.”<sup>39</sup> This definition of chastity allows him to give his preaching on continence a relevance even to the married lay people among his audience, as when he writes, “nis na gewunelic þæt maegðhád si gecweden on sinscipe, ac swa-ðeah ðær is þæs geleafan maegðhád, þe wurðað aenne soðne God, and nele forligerlice to leasum haeðengylde bugan” (maidenhood is not usually spoken of in connection with marriage, but, nevertheless, there is a maidenhood of faith, which worships one true God, and will not adulterously bow to an idol) (CHII.29.79-81). Aelfric connects the *claennys* or *maegðhád* of each individual Christian to the corporate *claennys* of the Church in its entirety, which Christ calls to himself as his virgin Spouse.

Aelfric shows how the maidenhood of belief of both individual Christian and the Church as a whole work together to produce spiritual fruit. Explaining how the Church can be called a maiden in his *Homily on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, he writes that she always “hylt þone sincipe þæs soðan haelendes / on gastlice þeawum and on gastlicum bearnteam, / on claennysse wunigende swa swa Cristes bryd” (keeps the marriage of the true Savior in spiritual virtues and in spiritual childbearing, dwelling in chastity as Christ’s bride) (124-

---

<sup>39</sup> Robert Upchurch, “Virgin Spouses as Model Christians: the Life of Julian and Basilissa in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005), 207.

30).<sup>40</sup> This metaphor both equates maidenhood with spiritual fidelity (here, figured as fidelity to Christ) and, in turn, links this spiritual fidelity to spiritual reproduction, or *gastlic bearnteam*. In a similar passage in his *Homily for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*, Aelfric links not only the spiritual fidelity of the Church, but that of individual Christians, to spiritual childbearing and, more specifically, to teaching:

bið . . . gehwylc cristen man gastlice þære halgan gelapunge sunu; seo is ure elara moder and þeahhwæþere ungewemmed maeden; for þan ðe hire team nis na lichamlic ac gastlic; Gehwylc godes þeow þonne he leornað he bið bearn geciged. eft þonne he oþerne laerð he bið moder. (*CHII.39.II.78 – 92*)

every Christian man is a spiritual son of the holy church. She is mother of us all, and nevertheless an undefiled maiden, because her offspring is not bodily, but ghostly. Each of God's servants, when he learns, is called a child; afterward, when he teaches, he is a mother.

With the figures Aelfric uses to discuss proselytization here, he paints the Church as virginal maiden, a status we know from his discussions in other homilies symbolizes her steadfastness of faith. The Church's maidenhood of faith, in turn, produces spiritual children. Finally, the individual Christian believer mirrors the corporate Church when he teaches, presumably by making converts or strengthening other Christians in the faith through his example or knowledge of church doctrines. In this way he, too, can reproduce asexually. But Aelfric's choice of an explicitly gendered metaphor at this point—of the teaching Church as mother, rather than father—connects teaching to the female body in a way that foreshadows the relationship between female virginal bodies and the words of God in his *Lives of Saints*.

Although Aelfric's discussions of Christian chastity often focus on that of the spiritual variety, he does find a place for physical chastity in his preaching. The *claennyss* of the layman, he writes, is “þaet he his áewe healde, and alyfedlice, for folces eacan, bearn gestreone” (that he hold to his marriage, and lawfully, for the increase of people, beget

---

<sup>40</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. Bruno Assmann (Kassel: GH Wiggend, 1889).

children) (*CHII.6.II.136-137*). By “lawfully,” Aelfric means according to the rules and prohibitions of the Church concerning when to abstain from sex – namely on feast days, Sundays, and during Lent. This form of physical chastity is certainly acceptable. But Aelfric reserves the “hundredfold reward” for those who maintain virginity throughout their lives. He makes this clear in his *Homily for Sexagesima Sunday*, in which he discusses the parable of the seed and the sower. Aelfric begins his exposition of the parable by explaining that the seed represents God’s word, the sower, Christ, “who went out to sow his seed, when, proceeding from the bosom of his Father, he came to this world that he might bear witness of the truth, and extinguish worldly error by his holy doctrine” (*CHII.6.II.59-63*). As Aelfric defines it, the seed represents not just God’s word but, more specifically, the holy doctrine that extinguishes error, and the teachings of Christ that bear witness to the truth. The three different kinds of grounds that the seed falls on, with various degrees of success, represent the different kinds of Christian hearts that can receive the word of God. In the first interpretation Aelfric gives of these various soils, one represents the heart corrupted by evil thoughts, another the hearts which embrace the word but lose it due to the distractions of temptation, and the third “those who hold the word of God in a good heart, and bring forth fruit in patience” (*CHII.6.106-107*). Yet Aelfric offers a second interpretation, which he takes from Augustine. In this interpretation, the seeds yield “good works” in proportion to the degree of chastity of the heart upon which they fall: the wedded layman who begets children in chastity yields good works thirty-fold, the widow who lives in chastity sixty-fold, and finally,

þa ðe on claenum maegðháde ðurhwuniað, for gefeán ðaes ecan lífes, hí bringað forð hundfealdne waestm. þes stáepe belimpð swiðost to Godes ðeowum and ðinenum, þa ðe fram cildháde claenlice on Godes ðeowdome singallice drohtniað. (*CHII.6.131-135*)

They who dwell in clean maidenhood, for joy of the eternal life; they bring forth the hundred-fold fruit. This step belongs the most to God's servants, male and female, they who from childhood cleanly and perpetually dwell in God's service.

Aelfric later clarifies just what kind of fruit he has in mind from those who continue in pure virginity, writing that “him gedafenað þæt hí Gode gestrynon ða cild, þe ða láewedan menn to ðyssere worulde gestryndon” (it befits them that they bear children to God, as the laymen bear children to this world), again linking physical to spiritual procreation in a context specifically concerned with the workings of God's words in the human heart. Christian teaching bears children most prolifically when it falls on the souls of those whose bodies are dedicated to God; chastity may be accessible to married and unmarried alike; but, in logic not unlike that of the Gnostic and Montanist practices with which it began, *lifelong* chastity – virginity – produces a moist and fertile soil for the Word.<sup>41</sup>

### **III: The Word and the Body in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints***

Despite the fact that the Patristic tradition Aelfric inherits is an explicitly gendered one, in which *female* virginal bodies have a special relationship to God's word, Aelfric's discussion of chastity and virginity in his homiliary material is relatively un-gendered. The same cannot be said of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*, in which the male saints take multiple paths to sanctity, but the females, only one—virginity, or at the very least, chastity.

That Aelfric should include female virgin martyrs in his collection at all is perplexing if we take the classic view of the post-Benedictine Reform female body as the locus of

---

<sup>41</sup> It is not my intention to suggest here that Aelfric would wish to relate his doctrines on chastity and virginity to Gnosticism and Montanism; he was extremely careful to avoid any hint of heresy in his teachings. Rather, I wish to show a historical continuity to the belief that virginity makes the adherent an especially receptive vessel for God's word, as unconscious as Aelfric may have been of the origin of this belief in heretical sects.

dangerous sexuality, as something of which Aelfric is suspicious, even “fearful.”<sup>42</sup> Cubitt, arguing that virginity has become a “predominantly male attribute” at this time period argues that the virgin’s *passiones* function “not as mimesis but as myth,” and provide an illustration of the anthropological concept that women are ““good to think with—that is to say, as Janet Nelson puts it, ‘women have diverse and opposed meanings inscribed upon them, and lend themselves to such multiple interpretations in ways that men do not’”<sup>43</sup> In this conception of the role of virginal female bodies in the *Lives*, they are always a vessel or a symbol for *something else*, important because of their discursive malleability. Most often, this “something else” is an abstract concept. For Robert Upchurch, for example, the bodily chastity of Aelfric’s married saints is a symbol of Christian fidelity more generally, while in Andrea Rossi-Reder’s postcolonial reading of the lives of Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy, the female body represents the besieged homeland.<sup>44</sup> Kathryn Gravdal reads the “sexual plot,” in which “rape, prostitution, and forced marriage are the signal variations” as a result of the “patristic understanding of female sexuality” in which “woman is the objective correlative both of the sexual body and of human sinfulness. A woman could be saved from her inferior female nature only by renouncing sexuality and becoming like a man, *vir*, through virginity” (22).<sup>45</sup> Although in this conception the woman’s body is the “proving ground” of her

---

<sup>42</sup> Cubitt, “Virginity and Misogyny,” 15.

<sup>43</sup> Cubitt citing Janet Nelson in “Virginity and Misogyny,” 15.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Upchurch, “Homiletic Contexts for Aelfric’s Hagiography: The Legends of Saints Cecilia and Valerian,” *The Old English Homily: Precedent, Practice, and Appropriation*, ed. Aaron J. Kleist (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007). “Virgin Spouses as Model Christians: The Legend of Julian and Basilissa in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005), 195 – 217. “The Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*,” *Studies in Philology* 101.3 (2004 Summer), 250-69. Andrea Rossi-Reder, “Embodying Christ, Embodying Nation: Aelfric’s Accounts of Saints Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Carol Pasternack and Lisa Weston (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 22.

sanctity, her demonstration of its inviolability the means by which she signals her worthiness to be counted among the saints, her body is still *not* a body, but rather, a representation of sexuality and sin. The reading I offer differs from these significantly in that I proceed with the assumption that, inasmuch as they are shaped by the homiliary representation of the body as enabler of Christian knowledge, bodies in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints actually represent bodies*; in a correlative, informed by a tradition that portrays female virginity as opening the Christian subject to God's word, female bodies *actually represent female bodies*.

When critics recognize the female body as such, however, the tendency is often to focus upon its elision, as is the case with readings of Aelfric's *Life of Eugenia*. Allen Frantzen writes that the cross-dressing Eugenia "uses the disguise of a man to transcend a woman's body."<sup>46</sup> According to Helene Scheck, Eugenia has agency only in her male form, since "as a man she speaks three times, but as a woman only once, and then only in a vision. Aelfric deprives her of active voice as a woman in life . . . but allows her to speak once she is no longer bound within her female self."<sup>47</sup> Eugenia seems to personify Gravdal's assertion that a woman must "become like a man." And the character of Melantia, who attempts to seduce Eugenia with her wealth and body, seems to represent the worst misogynist representations of women as rampant sexuality. My reading of the *Life of Eugenia*, however, regards Eugenia's decision to become a man in order to preserve her virginity as acknowledgement of the particular challenges facing women who would live free of men in a society that denies them autonomy and agency, one that sees their bodies as a vehicle for the continuance of lineage and land-holding. The character of Melantia, moreover, can be read as a foil to Eugenia, one who emphasizes the importance of chaste living to Christian learning

---

<sup>46</sup> Allen Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," *Speculum* 68.2 (April 1993), 463.

<sup>47</sup> Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, 93.



and teaching. Moreover, the female body in this tale becomes both an indicator of receptivity to Christian teaching and a powerful vehicle of revelation.

The *Life of Eugenia* spends a great deal of time detailing Eugenia's education, recounting how

Befaeste se faeder philippus tó lare þæt heo ón woruld-wysdome waere getogen aefter gresciscre uðwytegunge and laedenre getingnyssse. Eugenia þa þæt aeðele maeden wel þeah ón wisdome and ón uðwytegunge. þa becom hyre on hand þæs halgan apostoles lár paules þæs maeran ealles manncynnes lareowes. þá wearð hyre móð mycclum on bryrd þuruh þá halgen lare. (*LOSI.2.19 – 25*)

Then her father Phillip set her to learning so that she would be taught in world-wisdom, Greek philosophy and Latin eloquence. Then Eugenia, the noble maiden, flourished in wisdom and philosophy. Then came into her hand the holy apostle Paul's teaching, [that] of the greatest teacher of all mankind. Then her mind was greatly aroused by the sacred teaching.

Eugenia responds to this education by choosing a life of virginity, with which her bishop tells her she has "greatly pleased the Heavenly King" (*LOSI.2.80*). Eugenia prospers in her monastery, eventually becoming its leader. When Melantia appears and attempts to seduce her, Eugenia attempts to teach her about how "the lusts of the body often times seduce, and bring them to sorrow who love them most" (*LOSI.2.68-169*). Melantia, however, does not appear to hear this lesson and, "aefter þissere tihtinge and on oðrum larum beclypte seo myltestre þæt claenum maeden" (after this exhortation and other teaching, the wicked woman embraced the pure maiden") (*LOSI.2.168 – 169*). The repetition of words for teaching here, "tihtinge" and "larum" emphasizes that Melantia is receiving a lesson similar to the ones Eugenia herself received at the beginning of the tale. Melantia's response to teaching could not be more different from Eugenia's: she attempts to indulge in bodily lusts, whereas Eugenia turns away from them. These characters' responses to bodily lusts become indicators of their receptivity to Godly teaching.

Eugenia's interactions with Melantia entail an exposure of the gender she has been attempting to hide. The exposure becomes necessary when her father, Phillip, who is also the town judge and unaware that Eugenia is his daughter, demands to know "heo ana mihte ealle þa gewytan awaegan mid aðe oððe þurh aenig swutelunge hí sylfe aclaensian" (how she alone might turn away these witnesses with an oath, or through any revelation cleanse herself) (*LOSI.2.225 - 226*). Eugenia's response is to explain that she has desired "hi syle bediglian and criste anum hyr claennysse healdan on maegðhade wuniende mannum uncuð" (to keep herself secret, and for Christ alone maintain her chastity, dwelling in maidenhood unknown to man") (*LOSI.2.228 - 230*), and that this is the reason she has worn the costume of a man. Yet Eugenia's words alone are not enough, she tears apart her robes and "aet-aew[e] hyre breoste" (reveal[s] her breast) to her father. (*LOSI.2.233*). The exposure of a breast—the ultimate sign of the feminine body—is the revelation that turns aside the false oaths of Melantia's entire household, evacuating their speech of reason. This revelation is also what prompts Eugenia's family and all of the people at the scene to convert to Christianity. Particularly as Eugenia's family is concerned, the tale represents this conversion as a turning from one body to another. After Eugenia's disappearance, Eugenia's parents, convinced by the "lying tale" of "witches and wise sorcerers" that their daughter has been taken by pagan gods, create a golden idol of her to worship (*LOSI.2.111 - 114*). Once Eugenia reveals her identity, they "adorned the virgin with gold" and "set her up beside themselves" in what is almost a worshipful posture (*LOSI.2.253 - 254*). Eugenia's true body replaces the image of her body for her parents. It exposes the lies of the pagan sorcerers just as it did the false oaths of Melantia and her household. In the *Life of Eugenia*, the female body exposes false speech and serves as a guarantor of truth.

In the *Lives* of Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy, the connection between the body and truthful speech is even more explicit. Because of these saints must not only reject the advances of the people who would possess their bodies, but also explain the meaning of this rejection, the moment of sexual threat is also a “teachable moment” for Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy, one in which the importance of the saint’s words is heightened precisely *because* her body is threatened. As Jonathan Wilcox notes, “the aestheticization of death puts special emphasis on a hero’s or a saint’s last words: transcendence of fear is verbalized by both hero and saint. The requirements of this moment in the life of any saint create a pattern of expectations which is open to variation or emphasis or even to comic play.”<sup>48</sup> The heightened focus on the saint’s speech at these moments combines with a heightened focus on the saint’s body, for in a martyrdom this is, of course, what is most at issue. Daniel Boyarin suggests that we think about martyrdom not as a thing done *to* a body, but as a “‘discourse,’ as a practice of dying for God and of talking about it.”<sup>49</sup> He identifies as a defining characteristic of late classical martyrdom that “a ritualized and performative speech act associated with a statement of pure essence becomes the central action of the martyrology.”<sup>50</sup> What this means for Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* is that the martyrdom becomes the particular nexus where the relationship between speech and the body fuses. In the lives of the female saints, moreover, this body is an explicitly sexed one in a way that it is not in the lives of the male saints. Aelfric’s lives of the female martyrs, then, become an ideal site at which to explore the relationship of the sexed body to the word of God.

---

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, “Famous Last Words: Aelfric’s Saints Facing Death.” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 10 (1993), 1 – 9.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 96

The speech of all of Aelfric's female virgin saints demonstrates a marked power and agency in contrast to that of other characters in the life. In the *Life of Agnes*, for example, the son of the Pagan prefect Sempronius woos Agatha with costly clothing, precious gems, and "worldly ornaments," but Agatha explains that she is already married, borrowing language from the *Song of Songs* to describe her devotion to Christ. Aelfric emphasizes the effect of this speech upon the young man, telling us that

Se cniht wearð ge-ancsumod . and wið-innan ablend aefter þaes maedenes spraece . þe hine spearn mid wordum. He wearð þa gesicelod . and siccetunga teah of niwel-licum breoste . on bedde licgende. (*LOSI*.8.63 – 66)

The youth became vexed and blinded within after the speech of the maiden who spurned him with words. He then became sick, and pulled sighs from deep within his breast, lying in bed. Somewhat mysteriously, Agnes's rejection has caused the young man to become ill; Aelfric draws our attention to the effectiveness of Agnes's speech in lending power to this rejection by referring not only to the "maedenes spraec," but also that she rejected the young man "mid wordum," all in the same line. Similarly, when Agatha endures the blandishments and threats of the madam Aphrodosia and her "team" with which Quintianus has placed her in an attempt to corrupt her, Agatha contrasts the their words with the stability of her will: "Eower word syndon winde gelic / ac hi ne magon afyllan min faestraede gepanc / þe is gegrund-stapelod" (your words are like wind, but they cannot defile my steadfast will, which is grounded immutably) (*LOSI*.8.19 – 21). In contrast to the "wind-like," ineffectual words of the madam and her team, Agatha's words, "cwaed mid wopum" (uttered with a cry) (*LOSI*.8.22), prompt one of the most powerful affirmations of Agatha's faith in the entire *vita*: Aphrodosia's declaration to Quintianus that "Stones may soften, and hard iron / become like lead before the faith / in Agatha's breast can ever be extinguished" (*LOSI*.8.29 – 31). In the *Life of Lucy*, the pagan youth Paschasius entreats Lucy to sacrifice to pagan gods; she

refuses, and also manages to shape this refusal into a rejection of his courtship, before he promises to beat Lucy if she will not “suwian,” or be silent. The shifting of Paschasius’s focus from Lucy’s actions to her speech is a tacit acknowledgment of their power – to infuriate, yes, but also to teach.

By contrast, these three lives go to lengths to evacuate power from the speech of the pagans who oppress the saints; like Aphrodisia and her team’s blandishments and threats, which Agatha likens to the wind, Agnes evacuates Sempronius’s speech of effectiveness with her refusal to be moved by it:

Hwaet ða simpronius mid swiðlicum gehlyde hét hí gefeccan hám to his dóm-setle and aereost  
onsundrum mid geswaesum wordum olehte þam maedene and aefter ðam geegsode. Ac þæt  
godes maeden ne mihte beon bepaeht þurh aenige lyffetunge fram hire leofan drihtne, ne heo  
naes afyrht for his þeow-racan. (*LOSI*.7.81 – 87)

At that Sempronius, in a loud voice, commanded them to fetch her home before his tribunal, and first, separately, with blandishing words flattered the maiden, then threatened her. But God’s maiden could not be deluded by any flattery from her beloved Lord, nor was she frightened by his threats.

In this passage’s focus on speech-acts, beginning with Sempronius’s loudly-issued command to fetch Agnes, followed by “persuasive words,” then flattery and intimidation, the message is clear: Sempronius’s speech does not have its intended effect upon Agnes. In Lucy’s life, once again, the speech of the pagan persecutor is dramatically revealed to be void of power: when Paschasius desires to “his word gefylla” (fulfill his word) to have Lucy dragged to the house of harlots to be defiled, he finds her fastened to the spot by a great weight, unable to be moved (*LOSI*.9.95 & ff.). The immobility of Lucy’s body robs Paschasius of his ability to fulfill his words in a manner analogous to the way Eugenia’s exposure of her breast exposes the falseness of the oaths of Melantia’s household. All of these lives present a contrast between the speech of the virgins, which has its intended effect, and that of the pagan

persecutors, who find their threats, flattery, and sometimes even commands evacuated of power by the single-minded stubbornness, and often, the physical bodies, of the saints.

The key to the power of any saint's speech can be found in its origin, which they themselves characterize as divine. When Paschasius demands that Lucy be silent,

Lucia him cwæð to þæs lifigendan godes word ne magon geswican ne fursuwode beon. He axode ða mid olle, Eart þu la God? Lucia him andwyrde, Ic eom þæs aelmihtigan þinen, forþi ic cwæð godes word, forþan þe he on his godspelle cwæð, Ne synd ge þe þær sprecað, ac srycþ se halga gast in eow. (*LOSI*.9.70 – 75)

Lucy answered him that the living God's words could not be stopped or silenced. He asked her with contempt, "Are you God?" Lucy answered him, "I am the servant of God, therefore I speak God's word, because he says in his Gospel: 'It is not you who speak there, but the Holy Ghost speaks in you.'"

Lucy connects her ability to speak God's words to her special status as God's handmaid through reference to still other words: those of the Gospel, revealing the power of her speech's origin both in her relationship to her God and in the text that established this relationship *as* speech-giving. The key adjective here, moreover, is "lifigendan" – Lucy channels the speech of a "living" God, one who truly possesses the power to back it up.

The divine origin of saintly speech is important for Aelfric's male saints, too. In a scene from the *Life of Basilus*, Basilus prays "þæt he him gewissode þæt he mid agenre spræce him offrian mihte" (that he would show him how to offer to him with his own speech) (*LOSI*.3.106 – 107). He wants to know the correct words for the consecration of the Eucharist, and God responds by filling his mouth with the requested speech the next time he says mass. Just as they do with Lucy, God's words speak through Basil. But at this point in the *Vita*, the narrator has made no mention of Basil's virginity. In fact, this mention does not occur until one hundred lines later and then, almost as an aside: "þes ylca bisceop þe we ymb sprecað saede be him *sylfum* on sumne timan þæt hé naefre on his life ne come néah wífe þurh haemed-þing, ác heold his claennysse" (This same bishop about whom we are speaking

once said about himself that he never in his life came near a woman by cohabiting, but preserved his chastity”) (*LOSI.3.201-204*). This 4-line aside comes sandwiched in between accounts of his intercession on behalf of a poor woman and his confrontation with the emperor Julian. De-emphasized by its placement in the narrative and by its status as hear-say rather than absolute truth, Basilus’s chastity is not the most important aspect of his sanctity, nor is it what activates his access to the divine word.

By contrast, Agatha promises Lucy in a dream that the source of her renown will be her status as a chaste dwelling-place for God: “swa bið siracusa burh þurh þe gewlitegod forðan þe þu gearcodeð criste on þinum claenan maegð-hade wynsume wununge” (so will the town of Syracuse be renowned because you have prepared a pleasant dwelling-place for Christ in your clean maidenhood) (*LOSI.9.31-33*). Lucy explicitly connects this maidenhood to the divine origin of her speech, moreover, explaining to Paschasius that the Holy Ghost speaks through her because she has made herself his dwelling-place by maintaining a chaste lifestyle: “Se apostol behét þam ðe healdað claennysse þæt hi synd godes templ and þæs halgan gastes wunung” – “the apostle promised those who preserve chastity, that they are God’s temple, and the Holy Ghost’s dwelling-place” (*LOSI.9.79 – 80*). Lucy invites God’s word to speak through her when she maintains her body in chastity, while the authorization of this relationship of word to body comes from still other words – those of Scripture. Again, Lucy emphasizes the essentially textually-authorized nature of her relationship to God and the divine word; even as this relationship transcends textual boundaries, existing outside of or in addition to the text, it depends upon God’s word as transmitted through the Gospel for its authorization.

For Agnes, the source of her speech is not just a biblically-established word-giving chastity, but an intimate marriage to Christ. The *Life* represents this relationship as not *just* spiritual, but as requiring the preservation of a chaste body *on earth*:

His bryd-bedd me is gearo nu iú mid dreamum. His maedenu me singað mid geswegum stemnum. Of his muðe ic under-feng meoluc and hung. nú ic eom beclypt mid his claenum earmum. His faegera lichama is minum geferlaeht and his blod ge-glende mine eah-hringas. His modor is maeden and his mihtiga faeder wifes ne breac and him á bugað englas.  
(*LOSI.7.44 – 50*)

His bridal bed is already prepared for me with joys. His maidens sing to me with harmonious voices; from his mouth I receive milk and honey. Now I am clasped in his chaste arms. His beautiful body is coupled to mine and his blood adorns my eyebrows. His mother is a maiden and his mighty father never enjoyed a woman. Before him, angels bow.

This passage depends heavily for its meaning upon the reader's knowledge of a tradition that describes the virgin's marriage to Christ in the terminology of the Song of Songs. Like the words of God that "descend like the dew" to Ambrose's deserving virgin, here, the milk and honey that Agnes receives directly from Christ's mouth represent his divine word. Agnes also has access to the songs of Christ's maidens, to heavenly voices. Yet all this exclusive access depends upon Agnes's preservation of her body for Christ: as she tells her potential suitor, the terms of this marriage contract are that "I may not to His dishonor choose another, and forsake Him who hath espoused me by his love" (*LOSI.7.40 – 41*). Agnes's preservation of a chaste body activates her intimacy with Christ and His word, enabling her to channel it as his privileged mouthpiece. Agnes's virginity results in a moment of union with Christ even before her death: rejoicing in her ability to pass through the persecutors' fire unharmed thanks to God's intervention, Agnes declares that "þæt þæt ic gelyfde þæt ic geseo; ðæt þæt ic gehihte, þæt ic haebbe nú" (that which I believed, now I see; that which I hoped for, that I now have) (*LOSI.7.234 – 235*). Agnes's spiritual marriage to Christ thus becomes literalized in her *vita*; as she proclaimed in her affirmation of this marriage to her pagan



sutor: “I am embraced with His fair arms. His fair body is united to mine.” Agnes’s real bodily intimacy with Christ at the end of her *vita* suggests that we are wrong to read her marriage to Christ as purely spiritual: she (and Aelfric) conceive of this marriage as real and bodily here on earth. It is this (real, physical, bodily) marriage, moreover, which gives Agnes access to the Divine word, transforming this body into a vessel for that word.

In no *vita* that I discuss is this relationship between the saint’s body and access to the Divine word made more literal than in that of Agatha. Agatha’s life emphasizes how her ability to resist her persecutors depends as much on her strong will as upon her chastity: in the brothel scene, Agatha declares the words of Aphrodisia and her minions to be “wind gelic” – like the wind – and unable to defile her “faestraede geþanc, þe is gegrund-stapelod” or steadfast will, which is grounded immutably. Aphrodisia

geseah . . . þæt heo þære femnan mod gebigan ne mihte mid hyre bismorfullum tihtincgum and ferde to quintiane and cwaeð him þus to. Stanas magon hnexian and þæt starce isen on leadesgelicnyse aerðan þe se geleafa maege of agathes breoste beon aefre adwaesced. (*LOSI*.8.26 – 31)

saw that she could not bend the woman’s mind with her shameful allurements, and went to Quintianus and said this to him: ‘Stones will soften and strong iron [become] like lead before the faith in Agatha’s breast can ever be extinguished.’

In a revealing slippage, what Agatha characterized as a “steadfast will, immutably grounded” has become an unbending mind, which has become, in Aphrodisia’s words, the unextinguishable faith in Agatha’s breast. In Agatha, whose will is always Christ-directed and thus, whose mind is likewise inclined, the will and the mind *are* the steadfast faith in Agatha’s breast. Although he uses different language to discuss the concepts of mind and will than he does in his discussion of trinity, (here *mód* and *geþanc* as opposed to *gemynd* and *will*), we know from Aelfric’s trinity of mind-understanding-will that Agatha’s direction of her will toward God is the way in which her body most closely resembles God. Agatha’s

*vita* actually completes the trinity when her persecutors threaten to sever her breast from her body. Then, she asks

Eala ðu arleasosta ne sceamode þé to ceorfanne þaet þaet ðu sylf suce? ac ic habbe mine breost on minre sawle ansunde mid þam ðe Ic min andgit eallunga afede. (*LOSI*.8.124-127)

Aren't you ashamed and most wicked to cut off what you yourself have sucked? But I have my breast in my soul, with which I feed my understanding completely.

Agatha's response literalizes a trope that is implicit throughout all three of these *vita* – of the saint's body's connection to her inner life, or, more specifically, to the understanding and will from which issue the words through which she expresses this inner life. Like the strings of Leoba's teaching, which issued forth from her bowels, Agatha's identification of her breast as that which feeds her understanding validates this mind-body link at the same time as it seeks to move beyond it. Agatha is claiming, of course, that she does not *need* her body to access the Divine. However, as her use of breast-as-metaphor clarifies, she needs it in order to communicate her access to the Divine *to others*. Just as in Agnes's *vita*, her withholding of her body from earthly men signaled her divine marriage to Christ, or in Lucy's, in which her chastity enabled the words of God to speak through her to others, or even in the Aelfrician-Augustinian trinity, in which access to God's nature is located in the workings of the human mind, these women's bodies become the means by which they speak God's word and signal God's presence on earth, to other humans. Their bodies become the means by which they teach. Although the bodies of Aelfric's male martyrs teach, too, their virginity is not the sole, or even most important focus, of their sanctity. They do not participate in the tradition that portrays female virgin bodies as permeable to the word of God which, as we saw in the *Life of Basilus*, means that the male lives do not draw such a strong connection between the saint's bodily practices and his speech.

Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy's access to God's words, which they then transmit to others in their preaching, is made possible by an intimate relationship with Christ that gives them privileged access to his teaching. By withholding their bodies from other men, they ensure that this intimacy will continue. In Aelfric's life of the married saint Cecilia, the female saint also withholds her body from other men because of her dedication to Christ, but this man happens to be her husband, who Cecilia converts to Christ.

Aelfric's married lives are distinct from those of the virgin martyrs, with altogether different concerns. The couples in question become figures of Holy Church. Teaching is of paramount importance because the couples' teaching and preaching win converts that are superior substitutes for the physical children the couple might have had. The *Life of Cecilia*, in particular, is perhaps the most "bookish" of Aelfric's lives in its focus upon doctrines of the faith that only otherwise appear in Aelfric's sermons. Yet even in this life, the body of the believer plays an important role – this time not only in the teaching act, but in the process of conversion. As was true with the virgin martyrs, however, the eroticized body plays a much more substantial role in the life of the female saint—Cecilia—than it does in the two lives focused upon male saints: *Julian and Basilissa*, and *Chrysanthus and Daria*. *Julian and Basilissa* begins with the same scene as does the *Life of Cecilia*: the saint's parents want him to take a spouse; he does not wish to because he loves chastity, and prays to Christ to preserve it, receiving an assurance that it will be so. On his wedding night, the bridal chamber fills with a wonderful scent that causes his wife, Basilissa, to say

Hit is winter-tid nu and ic wundrie þearle hwanon þes wyrð-braeð þus wynsumlice steme  
and me nu ne lyst nanes synscipes ac þaes haelendes geþeodnysse mid ge-healdenre  
clennisse. (*LOSI*.4.35 – 38)

It is winter now, and I wonder greatly about whence the scent of flowers pleasantly  
[comes], and I now desire no sinfulness, but only the holy savior, with preserved chastity.

After Julian explains to her the origin of the mysterious scent, Basilissa declares that she wishes to have the Savior “for her bride-groom” (*LOSI*.4.48). Basilissa’s connection with Christ is the desire (*lyst*) of a wife for a husband; in contrast, Christ answers Julian’s prayer to him before the wedding with a promise to *quench* all desire in him and to be with him on that night, with no hint of eroticism. Julian’s chastity is important throughout this scene, but with the advent of Basilissa, his body recedes from view to be replaced by hers: throughout the *Life* she is called “maiden” to his “knight” or simply, “the holy Julian,” and this scene concludes by saying “thus Julian kept *his bride* unpolluted” (l. 75, emphasis mine). Absent from this scene, moreover, is any hint of a conflict between rival lovers like the ones that occur between Agatha’s bridegroom-Christ and her suitor, or Cecilia’s angel and her husband, Valerian. The effect of this lack of eroticism in the relationship between Julian and Christ is a far lesser focus on the extent to which the male saint’s chaste body activates his sanctity, or his speech, since that body does not serve as a dwelling-place for the bridegroom-Christ.

By contrast, the beginning of the *Life of Cecilia* immediately focuses our attention upon the details of the bodily practices that distinguish Cecilia. It has her agonizing, in typical virgin martyr fashion, over the possibility that her body will be tainted by the touch of a husband:

Hwaet ða cecilia hi sylfe gescrydde mid haeran to lice and gelome faeste biddende mid wope þæt heo wurd gescyld wið aelce gewemmednysse oððe weres gemanan. Heo clypode to halgum and to heah-englum biddende heora fultumes to þam heofon-lican gode þæt heo on claennysse criste moste þeowian. (*LOSI*.34.14-19)<sup>51</sup>

So then Cecilia dressed herself in a hair-cloth on her body and continually fasted, praying with weeping that she might be shielded from any stain or familiarity with a man. She cried to the saints and to the high angels, praying for their help with the Heavenly God, that she could serve Christ in chastity.

---

<sup>51</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham, *Aelfric’s Lives of Saints* vol. 2, ed. W.W. Skeat (London: EETS, 1883).

Cecilia adds bodily mortification – a hair-cloth and fasting – to her virginity as ascetic practices that bring her closer to Christ. These practices come to fruition when Cecilia is brought to Valerian’s bed on their marriage night, singing (in Latin), “Beo min heorte und min lichama þurh God ungewemmed, þæt ic ne beo gescyld” (May my heart and my body through God [remain] unstained, that I may not be overcome) (*LOSII.34.26 – 27*). Then, Cecilia tells Valerian that she has “Godes engel þe gehylt me on lufe” (God’s angel, who holds me in love) (*LOSII.34.32*), and who will kill him if he tries to touch her. Valerian’s desire to see this angel prompts him to give Cecilia a fair hearing and in the end, “Seo faemne þa laerde swa lange þone cniht oð þæt he gelyfde on þone lifigendan god” (the woman then taught the young man for so long that he believed in the living god) (*LOSII.34.49-50*). It is a moment for which Cecilia has been well-prepared: before her marriage to Valerian,

þeos halige faemne haefde on hire breoste swa micle lufe to þam ecan life þæt heo daeges and nihtes embe drihtnes godspel and embe godes lare mid geleafan smeade, and on singalum gebedum hi sylfe gebysgode. (*LOSII.34.6-10*)

This holy woman had in her breast so great love of the eternal life that, day and night, she inquired about the Lord’s gospel and about God’s lore, with true faith, and busied herself in continual prayers.

In an Aelfrician context it makes perfect sense that one who loves eternal life would devote herself to the lord’s gospel and god’s teaching, for as he writes in his homilies, “Truly, if knowledge of God prepares us for the eternal life, so much the more are we hastening to live as much as we are growing in this knowledge” (*LOSII.34.78-79*). Yet Cecilia’s knowledge of God, and her ability to convert Valerian, depends both upon the Christian learning she imparts through her teaching, and upon the unstained body that enables her to see God’s angel, the promise of whose sight is just the motivation Valerian needs to be receptive to this

teaching. In Cecilia, Aelfric gives his readers of a model of Christian teaching dependent upon both the body and the book.

The importance of the body in Cecilia's *Life* is also enhanced by the extent to which the conversions that occur in it are catalyzed by sensory experience. Just as Valerian's desire to see Cecilia's angel brought him to the true faith, the scent of the roses and lilies with which their angel has crowned prompts Tiburtius, Valerian's brother, to question them:

Ic wundrige þearle hu nu on witres daege her lilian blostm oþþe rosan braeð. Swa winsumlice and swa werodlice stincað. þeah þe ic haefde me on handa þa blostman ne mihton hi swa wynsumme wurt-braeð macian, and ic secge to soþan þæt ic swa eom afylled mid þam swetan braeða swylce ic sy geedniwod. (*LOSII.34.104-109*)

"I wonder greatly how now, on a winter's day, here lily-blossom or rose's breath smells so pleasantly or so sweetly. Though I had the blossoms in my hand they could not make such a pleasant odor [lit: 'herb-breath']; and I say in truth that I am so filled with the sweet breath as if I were made anew."

Valerian reveals the divine origin of the pleasant smell, and that Tiburtius, too, can see the crowns of lilies and roses if he comes to believe in God. As the crowns of lilies and roses provoke Tiburtius inquiries into their origin, they become the *gesceaft* through which Aelfric teaches the unlearned man might come to know God, or the beautiful letters of a book that elicit praise even from one who cannot read them. Yet as Aelfric argues in his homilies, the believer cannot remain at this surface understanding of God – more is necessary. Cecilia provides a deeper understanding of Christian *lār* for Tiburtius in her explication of the existence of eternal life, Christ's revelation and, most importantly, the Trinity:

þa andwyrde Tiburtius, Aenne god gebodiað and hu-meta namast þu nam-cuðlice þry godas. Cecilia him andwyrde. An god is aelmihtig on his maegen-þrymnysse wunigende. þone arwurðiað we cristenan aefre on þrynnysse and on soðre annysse. forþan þe faeder and sunu and se frofer gast an gecynd habbað, and aenne cyne-dom. swa swa on anum men synd soðlice þreo þing, andgit, and willa, and gewittig gemynd, þe anum men gehyrsumiaþ aefre togaedere. (*LOSII.34.161-170*)

Then answered Tiburtius, "One God they worship, and now you mention three gods, by name?" Cecilia answered him, "There is one God almighty, dwelling in his majesty; him, we Christians worship for ever in Trinity, and in true Unity, because father, and son, and

comforting spirit have one nature and one kingdom, just as in one man are truly three things: understanding, and will, and conscious memory, which always together, obey a single man.”

This climactic moment in Cecilia’s instruction causes Tiburtius to fall to his knees and declare, “Ne þincð me þæt þu spraece mid menniscra spraece, ac swilce godes engel sylfe spraece þurh þe” (“I don’t think that you speak with the speech of men, but that god’s angel himself speaks through you) (*LOSII.34.174-175*). The reader knows that Tiburtius’s declaration is partially true, for thanks to her chastity and ascetic practices, Cecilia *does* possess Christ’s angel, who no doubt guides her speech as Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy’s intimacy with Christ guides theirs. Yet Cecilia has also prepared for this moment, as she did for her conversion of Valerian, with devout study. Now, she directs her will toward converting Valerian, marshaling her understanding and mind to help her in this goal. At this moment, then, if Aelfric’s explication of the trinity of mind-understanding-will is to be believed, Cecilia more closely resembles God in Trinity than at any other. No wonder, then, that to Tiburtius her words seem to be not her own.

As ‘bookish’ as the *Life of Cecilia* is in its concern with explicating complicated doctrine in a theologically-sound manner, its fulfillment comes when its saints put their book-learning to use and direct their will toward holy actions. Tiburtius and Valerian take a martyr’s death, converting Almachius’s lieutenant and many other pagans in the process, when the sight of God’s angels rushing to their sides becomes as eloquent a testimony as any to the superiority of the Christian faith. Cecilia meets a similar fate, but like her fellow saints, Agnes, Agatha, and Lucy, evacuates Maximus’s speech of power before she departs:

Almachius hir cwaeð to þa þa hi campodon mid wordum, Hwaet þu ungesaelige nast þu þæt me is geseald anweald to ofsleanne and to edcucigenne, and þu spraecst swa swa modelice mine mihta taelende? [ . . . ] eft heo cwaeð him to, þu cwaede þæt þu haefdest to acwellene anweald and to edcucigenne, ac ic cwaeðe þæt þu miht þa cucan adydan, and þam deadan þu ne miht eft lif forgifan, ac þu lyhst openlice. (*LOSII.34.321 -323, 327-331*)

Almachius said to her as they fought with words: “O you, unhappy one! Don’t you know that power is given to me to kill and to bring back to life? And you speak so proudly, scorning my might.” [ . . . ] And again she said to him: “you said that you had power to kill and to bring back to life; but I say that you can destroy the living, but you cannot give life again to the dead; but you lie openly.”

In her death, or rather, failure to die, Cecilia makes Almachius a liar on both counts: despite issuing the command for her execution twice, once in a boiling tub of water and once by the sword, he is unable to bring it to fruition. Cecilia survives the boiling bath, and remains alive for three days after her head is severed from her body, instructing the faithful. Her survival reveals Almachius’s words to be powerless next to those of the living God, just as the immobility of Lucy’s body did in her *vita*.

As Cecilia’s unstained body at the beginning of her life brought her the vision of an angel, through which she converted Valerian, so her un-killable body teaches a lesson at the end of it. Cecilia’s conversions and lessons are shown in her life to be the product of both *bóclíc lár* and an incorruptible body working together in the fulfillment of God’s will on earth. The process of Christian learning proves to be one that begins with the bodily senses before deepening into a fuller understanding with the help of a good teacher, one who dedicates both body and mind to Christ. Moreover, the good Christian teacher must move beyond this fuller understanding of book-learning to a conversion of what she has learned through understanding and mind into actions *in the world*, be they as simple as instructing others or as extreme as undergoing a martyr’s death. For only by directing the will toward God’s work on earth does the Christian teacher complete the trinity of mind-understanding-will through which she most closely resembles God.



## Conclusion

Discussing Bede's *Libellus Responsorium*, Clare Lees remarks that this collection of questions-and-answers about ritual practices "reminds us that Christianity brings not only a religion of the book, but of the body to Anglo-Saxon England."<sup>52</sup> Yet, fixating on the female body as a symbol of rampant sexuality and bodily excess, scholars have focused their attention only on the way it teaches through transcending itself: "The transformed body, not the sexed one, is the exemplar."<sup>53</sup> This critical tendency derives, I believe, from what Karmen Mackendrick calls the "ascetic paradox": Asceticism, she writes, constitutes a paradox inasmuch as it is "a sacrifice constituting the sacred, humility out of arrogance, life out of death, affirmation out of denial. It is profoundly perverse, self-denying, and yet self-overcoming. The desire that drives it at once turns against the body and demands (and glorifies) the presence of the body as a space of suffering"<sup>54</sup> If we as critics fixate on representations of the female body as the site of carnality and sin, we risk occluding the side of this paradox that demands the presence of the body, even celebrates it.

If, on the other hand, we remain aware of the female body as the site of complex and multiple, even contradictory, cultural associations, we can simultaneously acknowledge the pervasiveness of misogyny while recognizing the possibilities for female power and agency that inhere in certain traditions of representing this body. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, this critical orientation results in a reading of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* that pays particular attention to how female virginity opens the body to the word of God. This focus, in turn,

---

<sup>52</sup> Lees and Overing, "Engendering Religious Desire," 20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Karmen Mackendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: Suny Press, 1999), 86.

draws our attention to Aelfric's theology of the body more generally. Far from being a hindrance to Christian knowledge, something to be transcended on the approach to God, the body plays a crucial role in access to the divine. Both in the sensory engagement with the world the body offers, and in the way that the workings of the mind provide an image of God-in-Trinity, the body provides access to God on earth. When associated with traditions of female virginity as intimacy with God, Aelfric's female saints, in particular, literalize Aelfric's conception of the relation between the body and Christian knowledge.

If late classical people believed, as Peter Brown claims, "that moral paradigms that had bitten to any depth in the soul would and should show themselves by reassuringly consistent body-signals," that, in other words, the soul would write itself upon the body, then the body is without question a *text* that communicates certain truths to its readers.<sup>55</sup> Discussing late medieval mysticism, Gabriele Sorigo writes that, "to take in a word meant to embody it, to let it become truth by the help of one's own body, to get it from the abstract into the concrete."<sup>56</sup> The same might be said of Aelfric's female martyrs' relationship with the words of God. Through their dedicated virginity, they open their bodies to an intimate relationship with Christ-as-spouse, activated through the bodily denial in which "God, the ultimately desirable other (the ultimate object of an utterly implacable love), is drawn through a violent defiance of all other possibilities of desire and pleasure."<sup>57</sup> In drawing God into their bodies, they repeat the Incarnation of Christ, the ultimate dissolution of the "boundary between body and voice" inasmuch as "Jesus' embodiment as the Word of God

---

<sup>55</sup> Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983), 5.

<sup>56</sup> Gabriele Sorigo, "Living Relics: On Constructing Mystic Inwardness through Bodily Suffering," *Magistra* 12.1 (2006), 132.

<sup>57</sup> Mackendrick, *Counterpleasures*, 85.

makes that body into a form of authoritative speech.”<sup>58</sup> In Aelfric’s female virgin martyrs, we see the combination of a late Patristic association of the virginal female body with the word of God, with Aelfric’s views of the role of the body in teaching and learning. This conceptualization of the body is one in which “corporeal sentience is not despised in itself; on the contrary, the martyr constitutes it as the most productive route to the divine.”<sup>59</sup> It is one that affirms all bodies, even, or perhaps especially, female ones.

---

<sup>58</sup> Gail Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 157.

## Chapter 2

### THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BODY IN THE KATHERINE GROUP

*Dah þe flesch beo ure fa, hit is us ihaten þet we halden hit up. Wa we moten don hit, as hit is wel ofte wurðe; ah nawt fordon mid alle, for hu wac se hit eauer beo, þenne is hit swa icuplet ant se feste ifeiet to ure deorewurðe gast, Godes ahne furme, þet we mahten sone slean þet an wið þet oþer (3.12.284-288).<sup>1</sup>*

*Though the flesh is our foe, it is commanded us that we hold it up. We must do it woe as it very often merits, but not destroy it completely, since howsoever weak it is, it is so coupled and so fastly fastened to our precious soul, God's own image, that we could easily slay the one with the other.<sup>2</sup>*

The twelfth-century guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, is well-known among early Middle English instructional writings for its marked focus on the connection between the situation of the anchoress's physical body—its enclosure in a cell—and her spiritual life. As Lara Farina characterizes it, “the anchor's celibate enclosure traces out (for her and for others) the purity of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> In an analogy of cell and body, the anchoress is the heart of her cell, which guards her body just as her body guards her soul. The openings of the cell must be guarded and regulated just as their counterparts in the anchoress's own body—the senses—must be. Conceiving of a seamless communication between body and soul, the *Ancrene Wisse* expands upon the idea that her chastity makes the virgin an ideal vessel for Christ by detailing the care and keeping of that vessel. The homology of the body with the

---

<sup>1</sup>Citations of the *Ancrene Wisse* are taken from *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, ed. Bella Millett. Vol. 325 (London: EETS, 2005). Citations are Part.Paragraph.Line(s).

<sup>2</sup>Translations of Middle English texts are my own unless otherwise indicated, with grateful acknowledgment to *Anchortic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, ed. and trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), and *Medieval English Prose for Women*, ed. and trans. Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), to whose translations I looked for guidance.

<sup>3</sup>Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 41.

anchoress's cell makes of the body a boundary, all of whose exits and entryways must be protected. Guarding these exits and entryways is how the virgin creates an optimal space in which to communicate with her lover, Christ. In a transformation in which the virgin uses her bodily senses to apprehend the spiritual, and orients earthly communications toward God, what goes out is just as important as what comes in.

For this reason, the occasion of the anchoress's speech is an event fraught with anxiety, for her open mouth leaves her vulnerable to penetration in the same way the open eyes or legs do, and raises the possibility that she may be substituting a worldly form of communication for her more important ones with God. Exhorting the anchoress to silence, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* cites an Old Testament proverb to emphasize the danger to which the flapping-tongued anchoress makes herself vulnerable:

“Hwa se ne wiðhalt his wordes,” seið Salomon þe wise, “he is as þe burh wið ute wal þet ferde mei in ouer al.” þe feond of helle mid his ferd wend þurh ut te tutel þe is eauer open in to þe heorte. (2.19.395-404)

“He who does not withhold his words,” says Solomon the wise, “is like a city without a wall which an army can enter everywhere.” The devil from hell with his army worms his way through the mouth that is always open, into the heart.

Here, the anchoress's open mouth becomes an open door in her “wall”—in this case, her body—through which sin, metonymically represented as the “devil from hell” can penetrate deep into her, finally lodging in her heart. Far better for her mouth to remain closed, not only because the closed mouth seals off one of sin's entry-points into the body, but also because “hoarded” words—those that the anchoress does *not* share through speech—rise up to heaven as dammed water before a well (*AW* 2.19.388-395). The silent anchoress protects her heart from the approach of sin and imbues her words with special power to reach heaven by hoarding them.

In addition to illustrating the anxiety that surrounds the occasion of anchoritic speech, this passage demonstrates a pattern that recurs often in the *Ancrene Wisse*, in which a teaching that is initially gendered masculine (*he* who does not withhold his words) becomes the means of regulating a female anchoress. This pattern reflects the gendered nature of anchoritism, in which “the female anchorite was considered far more problematic than the male by public authorities.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the male anchorite, whose installment in his cell usually came after a lifetime in a monastery, the anchoress was likely to come to the anchorhold from a formerly lay lifestyle. For this reason, she “was perceived to require much closer monitoring and support than her male counterpart.”<sup>5</sup> Because of her untested lay background, the anchoress represented far more of a risk for her benefactors and teachers; the fear that she might shame them and herself by succumbing to sin was great. Anchoritic guidance writing therefore seeks to regulate the anchoress to a much greater extent than her male counterpart. The re-gendering of a specifically masculine tradition to instruct the anchoress reflects the author’s perception of her greater vulnerability to sin. Faced with this vulnerability, anchoritic guidance writing attempts to protect the anchoress from the onslaught of sin by advising her to seal up her body and hide from the world in order to avoid being tempted away from her calling.

What are we to make, then, of the three female martyrdoms that often accompanied these works in their manuscript contexts, doubtless also intended for the anchoress’s use and edification?<sup>6</sup> In these legends—of Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana—the female virgin

---

<sup>4</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, “Gender, Rhetoric and Space in the *Speculum Inclusorum*, *Letter to a Bury Recluse*, and the strange case of Christina Carpenter,” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> These three lives—of Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret—are contained together with *Sawles Warde* and *Hali Meidhad* in MS Bodley 34, and each appears in at least one other manuscript: Margaret and Juliana in Royal 17

spends most of the account with her mouth wide open, and communicating, moreover, with men. In *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives*, Catherine Sanok acknowledges the marked inappropriateness of virgin martyr legends such as those in the Katherine Group for medieval women's imitation: "Unlike the early Christian community in Rome, late medieval English communities did not require—indeed did not condone—women's heroic virtue, but rather their everyday conformity to a very different set of ethical and religious practices." In fact, says Sanok, "the anchorhold is designed to prevent precisely the kind of spectacle of feminine sanctity that provides the narrative center of virgin martyr legends."<sup>7</sup> Women were enclosed, in other words, to prevent precisely the kind of contact and commerce with the outside world that Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana undergo.

Yet despite their enclosure, anchorites occupied a highly visible and public role at the center of their communities. Referencing St Paul's description of himself as a having become a dead vessel for a living God, Nicholas Watson writes of anchoritism that "one of the most important things to be said about the anchoritic life is that it was meant to embody these spiritual transformations in a highly physical and public way."<sup>8</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne goes so far as to characterize the solitude of enclosure as "rhetorical," writing, "Like the early stylitic saints, at once remote on pillars and yet highly visible in the centre of their communities, the ascribed liminality of the recluse's position gives her power and a public role: she is an important part of the *imaginaire* of her community and also of its socio-

---

A xxvii, and Katherine in Royal 17 Axxvii as well as the Titus manuscript, Cotton Tiberius B.i. See Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds. *Medieval English Prose for Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 285, 259. Although *Seinte Katerine* is the only life to appear in the same manuscript with the *Ancrene Wisse* (Cotton Tiberius B.i), the shared dialect, style, physical appearance, and overriding concerns of the works contained in these manuscripts leads scholars to group them together as part of the Katherine Group.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 16.

economic life.”<sup>9</sup> The Katherine Group accordingly characterizes its reader as occupying a highly visible, and therefore treacherous, position. *Holy Maidenhood* imagines the virgin in a tower from which she “bihalt al þe worlt under hire” (beholds all the world below her) (and, presumably, is beheld by it), but where she is also besieged by an enemy who “weorrið ant warpeð eauer towart tis tur for te keasten hit adun, ant drahen hire into þeowdom þet stont se hehe þerin” (2.11, 16-18; makes war and rushes against this tower to bring it down, and drag into thralldom she who stands so high inside it).<sup>10</sup> Anticipating the potential spectacle the anchoress represents, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* interprets an Old Testament rule against uncovering a pit, Exodus 21:33-34, as a warning to women not to let men see her: “þis is a swiðe dredful word to wummon þet schaweð hire to wepmones echne. Heo is bitacned bi þeo þet unwrið þe put. þe put is hire feire neb, hire hwite swire, hire lichte echnen, [hire] hond, 3if ha halt forð in his echze-[sihðe]” (2.8.126-129; this is a very dreadful word for a woman who shows herself to men’s eyes. She is symbolized by one who uncovers the pit. The pit is her fair face, her white throat, her light eyes, her hand, if she holds it forth in his eye-sight).<sup>11</sup> These anxious fantasies of anchoritic visibility demonstrate that as much as they exhort the anchoress to trade the gaze of the world for God’s, the works of the Katherine Group acknowledge the inherent vulnerability of the anchoress to public display.<sup>12</sup> Her position as the embodiment of a community’s beliefs about the relation between God and

---

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture, c. 1150 – 1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Citations of *Hali Meidhad* are taken from *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett (London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1982). Citations are page.line(s).

<sup>11</sup> Because folios 15-16 of the Corpus Christi manuscript have been damaged, Millett has here substituted the text from BL Cotton Cleopatra C.vi.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this point, see Robert Mills, who argues that the anchoress occupies a position as the spectator in a Foucaultian panopticon while at the same time being herself subject to this panopticizing gaze: “Troubled Looks in the Katherine Group” in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Robert Mills and Emma Campbell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).



the self necessitates a careful negotiation of her public role. She must guard the entryways and exits to her cell and soul not only to make of herself an ideal dwelling-place for Christ, but also to be *seen* to do so by the audience of onlookers in the parish community she inhabits.<sup>13</sup>

The inherent visibility of the holy woman's body derives, says Amy Hollywood, from the hagiographer's need to translate an internally produced and lived experience of sanctity into something legible to the world—"more graphic, objectively apprehensible." The writer "focuses attention on the *visible* body and its markings."<sup>14</sup> Hollywood's remarks are applicable in this context because although the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* writes a rule and not a *vita*, he shares with the writer of a holy life the need to create a body that visibly demonstrates its inner purity. We can read his "outer rule"—the regulations governing the anchoress's day-to-day, bodily practices—as deriving from essentially the same impulse that Hollywood attributes to the writer of a *vita*. The bodies of both anchoress and saint must visibly testify to an inner wholeness, for both anchoress and saint occupy highly public roles—the saint both within the narrative itself as her circumstances necessitate a preaching vocation, and when her life becomes a hagiographical text; the anchoress as a shared, public symbol of her community's beliefs about the relation of God and the self. Both anchoress and militant saints Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana might be said to occupy a visible, public role in spite of themselves. The saints are appropriate exemplars for the anchoress in their modeling of the successful occupation of a highly visible position.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ann K. Warren's foundational study was the first to articulate the anchoress's role as a central and public figure in the parish community, a "phenomenon that lay at the heart of the religious belief of the period" rather than a marginal or "fringe" expression of spirituality, as had been previously argued. See *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Hollywood, "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographers," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 89.

The exposure of the female body that occurs in these saints' lives is not without its attendant anxiety, however. These bodies are not only on display, but are also *speaking*, breaching the hermetically sealed containment the *Wisse*, *Hali Meiðhad* and *Sawles Warde* portray as ideal for the virgin vessel of Christ. The anxiety that accompanies the occasion of the virgin's speech manifests in these *Lives* as a heightened focus upon the proper method of and occasion for it, and upon the inviolate bodies of the virgins. These narratives take special care to show the virgin body as impervious to sin in spite of its open mouth. For if the saint's body is a legible text on which to read her sanctity, it must testify to her virgin intactness all the more so when her public speech threatens that very wholeness. Once that wholeness has been achieved, the speech of the virgin has special power.

In what follows, I establish the *Ancrene Wisse*'s establishment of an explicit relationship between bodily practices and spiritual wholeness by showing how the text represents sin as a penetrative force that makes its way into the soul through insufficient guarding of the bodily entry-points, the senses. While the *Ancrene Wisse* characterizes excessive speaking as endangering the soul, it does so in contrast to the *exempla* of the saints' lives of the corresponding manuscript tradition. What exemplary role are Juliana, Margaret, and Katherine—who all speak at great length in public encounters with their pagan persecutors—playing for anchoresses? I answer this question by showing how the *Ancrene Wisse* provides a model of the proper use of speech through its attention to Mary's sparse but powerful words. The *Ancrene Wisse*'s exhortation to the anchoress to follow the Marian model invites a reading of the Marian commentary on the *Song of Songs*, a tradition contemporaneous with the compilation of the Katherine Group. This tradition represents Mary as the bearer of privileged knowledge of Christ because of her bodily intimacy with

him, and as a teacher with the obligation to confront heresy by testifying to this bodily relationship with Christ. The possibility that this model offers to anchoresses, of speech without inevitable bodily and spiritual rupture, opens the door for a reading of the Katherine Group's virgin martyr legends as deploying this Marian model of speech.

While critical readings of the exemplarity of these lives argue that their female readers were meant to focus upon the virgins' private spiritual virtues rather than their public speaking, I argue that, in fact, these lives provide for such women examples of the maintenance of bodily and spiritual wholeness in a highly public role. I therefore read the saints' lives of the Katherine Group as responding to the threat to spiritual wholeness produced by a dangerous but practically-necessary anchoritic and saintly public visibility. By deploying the Marian model of virginal speech, the lives of *Katherine*, *Juliana* and *Margaret* offer to anchoresses and the holy women that come after them the possibility of playing a role in their own self-representation, and particularly the representation of their bodies.

### **I. The Boundaries of the Body in *Ancrene Wisse*, *Hali Meidhad*, and *Sawles Warde***

*The Ancrene Wisse* describes the heart of the anchoress as her most precious possession, because, as the author explains immediately at the beginning of the rule, God rewards those with a righteous heart or, as he terms it, a heart that is “efne ant smeðe wið ute cnost ant dolc of woh inwit ant of wreizende” (Preface.3.13-14; even and smooth, without the lumps and scars of a misguided and accusing conscience). The role of the anchoress's body is to protect what it encloses—this heart—from penetration by sin. The author of the

*Wisse* actually divides his rule into two parts, what he calls the “Outer Rule,” which deals with the bodily practices that serve the “Inner Rule,” which deals with the maintenance of a pure and sinless heart. In fact, the anchoress is to think of the “Outer Rule” as a “puften” (handmaid) to the Inner (Preface.4.32). In a textual mirroring of the idea of the body as enclosing the heart, the author encloses the five books of the “Inner Rule” between the three books of the “Outer Rule,” which deal with daily devotions, the bodily senses, food and drink, and the physical objects that ought to surround the anchoress. This organization makes explicit and material the portrayal of the anchoress’s body as a containing structure for her heart and receives further elaboration in the text’s presentation of a homology between the anchoress and her cell. In this homology, the cell is to anchoress as the anchoress’s body is to her spirit, a relationship that clarifies the body’s function with respect to the soul: just as the cell protects its anchoress from the sinful world, so, the logic goes, the body of the anchoress protects her soul from sin.<sup>15</sup>

The figurative move in the *Ancrene Wisse*, whereby the anchoress’s cell symbolizes her body, might lead us into the trap of viewing the body of the anchoress as merely symbolic as well, a pure representation of the anchoress’s soul. Catherine Innes-Parker, for example, calls the body “the dominant image and symbol for the spirituality of the female anchoress.”<sup>16</sup> But the body’s role in the *Ancrene Wisse* goes far beyond a metaphoric function. In fact, the body is the soul’s boundary, the liminal space in which it communicates with the world. The anchoress’s spirituality is in fact “profoundly rooted in her body, as the

---

<sup>15</sup> Another excessively physical homology in the *Ancrene Wisse* is between the anchoress’s body and the text itself. See Elizabeth Robertson, “Savoring ‘Scientia’: The Medieval Anchoress Reads *Ancrene Wisse*” in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, Yoko Wada, ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Innes-Parker, “Fragmentation and Reconstruction: Images of the Female Body in *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group,” *Comitatus* 26 (1995): 27-52.

sinful impulses of the flesh are recognized in the most vehement of terms.”<sup>17</sup> This relationship between soul and body in the *Ancrene Wisse* leads critics to characterize it as produced by a theology of Incarnation that complicates the Christian doctrine of body and spirit as linked but ultimately separate. As Anne Savage notes, “the English anchoritic texts, even while participating in this discourse of antithesis, show the anchoritic life striving towards a unified understanding of the embodied spirit, the ways in which every impulse which flickers in the body flickers in the spirit as well, and vice-versa” and describes anchorites as “people pursuing body and spirit into every detail of their mutual dependence.”<sup>18</sup> This understanding of the body and soul plays out in the Katherine Group texts in their depiction of the body as a tower or fortress guarding a besieged inner sanctum, the soul. But as these metaphors imply, the body is also the point at which the anchoress is vulnerable to rupture, the site at which the corrupting influence of sin can make its way into her soul. So literally does the Katherine Group portray this relationship that a breach in the body’s protective barrier does not just *verge* upon a breach of sin into the soul: it *is* one. In this way, “images of the female body [. . .] become the meeting place of the literal and the metaphorical.”<sup>19</sup>

If the body in the Katherine Group is the soul’s boundary, then the senses are its sentries, regulating what passes in and out of the body and what is allowed to engage with the soul. As such, they are the body’s most vulnerable points. Accordingly, the *Ancrene Wisse*

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy remarks that “the anchoritic body appears, discursively at least, to have transcended its ontological battle with a soul perpetually protesting against its own imprisonment within a penitentiary of flesh and blood.” “From Anchorhold to Cell of Self-Knowledge: Points Along a History of the Human Body” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place, and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 157.

<sup>19</sup> Innes-Parker, “Fragmentation and Reconstruction,” 29.

takes special care to detail the proper use of the senses, and to warn the anchoress of the sins to which each sense makes her vulnerable. The disciplining of the senses is part of the author's attempt to regulate the anchoress's daily bodily and spiritual practices, a goal all the more important for this literature because of the absence of a physical teacher in the anchoress's cell.<sup>20</sup> Again relying upon the homology between cell and body, the senses are "windows" through which sins communicate with the soul. This role leads Mark Amsler to call the senses a "conflicted site," and the anchoress's "connections with the world . . . persistently in tension with her desire for heightened spirituality."<sup>21</sup> The author's overall strategy in his regulation of the anchoress's senses is to counsel her to keep these openings as firmly shut as possible, just as she keeps her windows veiled. As it touches sins of the tongue, moreover, with which he groups the anchoress's speech, the *Ancrene Wisse*-author accordingly counsels silence in most cases. Unfortunately for his regulatory ambitions, however, the extent to which the anchoress can wall off her senses (and her speech) is just as limited as the extent to which she can completely wall herself off from the world. And in fact, the anchoress *needs* her senses, for though they can lead to sin, they can also lead to "spiritual salvation, depending on the anchoress's *intentio*."<sup>22</sup> Inasmuch as the anchoress inhabits a body, she can never escape the role her senses play in her salvation.

---

<sup>20</sup> Lara Farina remarks that "the existence of manuals of instruction must have helped to convince skeptics that anchors were indeed supervised or led in their spiritual devotions, even if by proxy of the letter." Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39. This regulation was thought to be even more important for *female* anchorites because unlike their male brethren, drawn from the ranks of the monastic discipline, anchoresses were "far less containable: initially an unknown entity, a gamble on the part of the bishop and the local community" (McAvoy, "Gender, Rhetoric, and Space," 123).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Amsler, "Affective Literacy: Gestures of Reading in the Later Middle Ages," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 18 (2001): 83-110, 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

The *Ancrene Wisse* deals with the problem of the anchoress's embodiment using a rhetoric of re-direction, counseling the anchoress to develop earthly sensing into spiritual just as she has accepted an earthly bridegroom for a heavenly one. And if she cannot forego speech entirely, the anchoress should transform an Eve-based model of sinful soul-destroying speech, into a Marian one that forecloses the possibility of sin's encroachment into her soul because her soul is already filled up—with Christ. These re-direction and transformations are the *Ancrene Wisse*'s acknowledgment of the impossibility of a spirituality divorced from the body, and its creation of one that can rely upon the senses, and the bodily entry-points through which they operate, for its functioning. Yet they cannot altogether override the anxieties surrounding the possibility of sin's encroachment through the senses and bodily entry-points, as evidenced by the great amount of time and space it devotes to the vulnerability of these sentries on the body's boundary.

In Book II of the Rule, "The Outer Senses," the *Ancrene Wisse*-author develops his argument about the inherent vulnerability to sin and self-fragmentation the senses can produce in the incautious anchoress. Treating the sense of sight first, he begins by focusing on the eyes, explaining that one's heart can "leap out" through them and recounting how David's escaped through "the window of his eye" (2.1.48; his ehpurl). But in a literalizing move, he follows this figurative description of the eyes as "windows" with a discussion of the *actual* windows of the anchoress's cell, advising her to make them small and narrow and love them as little as she possibly can. The natural extension of this homology is that just as the anchoress should keep her cell windows tightly shut, so she should keep the entrances to her body—both orifices and senses—closed.

The Rule reinforces the reason for this injunction by portraying sin with martial metaphors in an enlargement of the metaphor of body-as-cell to include body as besieged fortress. Explaining how lechery gains a foothold in the heart, it personifies the sin as “this stinking whore” who

scheot þe arewen of þe licht echnen, þe fleoð lichtliche forð ase flaa þet is iuiðered ant stikeð i ðere heorte. þer-efter schakeð hire spere ant neolachet vpon hire, ant mid schakinde word zeueð speres ðwunde. Sweordes dunt dunricht, þet is þe hondlunge; sweord smit of nech ant zeueð deaðes dunt. (2.9.166-170)<sup>23</sup>

shoots arrows from lascivious eyes that fly lightly forth like a fletched arrow and stick in the heart. Thereafter she shakes her spear and approaches her, and with agitating words gives the spear’s wound. The sword’s dint—that is, handling—is the ultimate; the sword smites from nearby and gives the death-dint.

This passage presents the advent of sin as a progressive invasion by an enemy army.

Although the enemy forces begin their siege from a distance, shooting their light arrows from afar, by the end of the siege they are close enough to give the “death-blow” with a sword.

The Rule encourages the anchoress to imagine herself as a fortress under siege, with each successful penetration—first the arrows of sight, then the spears of speech and finally, the death-blow, sex—enabling the next. The gendering of this metaphor is indeterminate, for although the weapons are depicted as penetrating the heart “just as men war with three kinds of weapons,” their carrier, the whore of lechery, is a woman.

*Hali Meidhad*, which accompanies *Ancrene Wisse* in both the Titus manuscript and MS Bodley 34, contains a similarly martial depiction of the encroachment of sin in the heart, adding a warning about the vulnerability of the maiden, in particular, to the siege because of her heightened visibility to the devil. Seeing her in the “honor of maidenhood,” the devil “toswelleð of grome; ant scheoteð niht ant dei his earewen, idrencte of an attri healewi,

---

<sup>23</sup> This passage also comes from the missing folios and has been substituted with the text from BL Cotton Cleopatra C.vi.



toward tin heorte to wundi þe wið wac wil, ant makien to fallen, as Crist toe forbeode!” (7.17-20; swells with rage, and shoots his arrows night and day, drenched in a poisonous potion, toward your heart to wound you with weak will, and make you fall, Christ forbid!). Yet in *Hali Meiðhad*’s version of the process, mere penetration is not enough:

Euch fleschli wil ant lust of leccherie þe ariseð i þe heorte is þes feondes fla; ah hit ne wundeð þe nawt bute hit festni in þe, ant leaue se longe þet tu waldest þet ti wil were ibroht to werke. Hwil þi wit edstont, ant chastieð þi wil, þah þi lust beore to þet te leof were, ne hearmed hit te nawiht, ne suleð þi sawle; for wit is hire scheld under Godes grace. Hwil þe scheld is ihal—þet is, þe wisdom of þi wit—þet hit ne broeke ne beie, þah þi fleschliche wil fals beo þerunder ant walde as hire luste, þes feondes flan fleoð azein alle on himseoluen. (7.25-33)

Every fleshly wish and lust for lechery that arises in your heart is the devil’s arrow; but it does not wound you unless it fastens in you, and remains so long that you wish for your will to be brought to fruition. While your reason stands firm and chastises your will, even if your wish inclines toward that which is agreeable to you, it harms you nothing, nor pollutes your soul; for reason is her shield under God’s grace. While the shield is whole—that is, the wisdom of your reason—so that it does not break nor bend, though your fleshly desire may be false underneath and would do as she wishes, the devil’s arrows all fly back on him.

This passage envisions an additional layer of protection for the maiden beyond her body: the wisdom of her reason, which acts as a shield and even offers the possibility that the devil’s arrows might rebound on him. The maiden might become the penetrator, rather than the penetrated, turning the gendering of this metaphor upon its head and providing an antidote to the penetrations of Lady-Whore lechery in the *Wisse*.

Just as *Hali Meiðhad* does, *Sawles Warde* suggests that the body has defenses beyond its boundary, but that these defenses are constantly susceptible to failure. This text is the most detailed and explicit in its allegory of the body as a building guarding a besieged inner sanctum. It imagines the human self as a house ruled by a wife, Will, and her husband, Wit, the representation of reason. This couple guards the house from thieves who wish to rob it of

“a treasure for which God gave himself, that is, the human soul” (248.29-30).<sup>24</sup> To help them, they rely upon their servants, of which the “outdoor” ones represent the five senses, and four daughters—Caution, Spiritual Strength, Measure, and Justice. The five senses serve as entryways and

nimeð þis hird, euc efter þet his, his warde to witene: þe ehnen hare, þe muð his, þe earen hare, þe honden hare, ant euc alswa of þe oþre wit, þet onont him ne schal nan unþeaw cumen in. (249.56-59)

this herd take care to guard their domain, each according to what they are: the eyes on their guard, the mouth on his, the ears on theirs, the hands on theirs—and each also of the other senses, so that no vice shall come in by them.

The body possesses defenses beyond its mere border in the form of Wit (or reason), who guides and rules all within his walls and appoints Caution as his “gatekeeper” to determine who is allowed to enter the house. But should Wit ever sleep, this house is in danger of penetration by thieves, for all of the servants—especially the bodily senses—are unruly and pledge their allegiance to Will. They are vulnerable entryways who must be constantly guarded, kept under strict watch lest Will permit them to let in a thief in the night.

Taken in sum, these metaphors—body as cell, besieged fortress, and house—encourage the anchoress to think of her body as a border between her soul and the outside world, and her bodily senses as entry points through which sin can enter. By imagining sin as a besieging army with spears and arrows, or a thief that enters via the unguarded door, moreover, these works portray the workings of sin as a penetrative force. Although lechery is the most oft-cited example, *all* sin is sexualized by this collection of images, for all sin is a penetrating force that makes its way into the body. Like the homology between body and

---

<sup>24</sup> Citations of *Sawles Warde* are taken from the critical edition in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers (London: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1968), which produces an edition of the text as found in Bodley MS 34 with variants from Royal 17 A.XXVI and Cotton Titus D.XVIII. Citations are page number.line.

anchor-cell, the imagined act of heterosexual sex affords a pleasingly literal image of the penetrative action the text attributes to *all* sin, becoming yet another means by which it can enact its preferred method of pedagogy. Faced with the onslaught of penetrative sin, the remedy for the devout anchoress is a closing-off of the body that strictly limits the traffic in and out of it both literally, in strict chastity and asceticism, and figuratively in the regulation of the bodily senses.

Limiting the traffic in to the anchoritic body is a matter of “shutting the doors and windows,” so to speak, by avoiding the ingestion of evil. In its discussion of evil talk, for example, the *Ancrene Wisse* begins by calling it “poison” and advising the anchoress to close her ears and, if she must, her windows, against it. Evil speech is divided into three types—“attri, ful, ant idel” (2.23.507; poisonous, foul, and idle), with two of the three—poisonous and foul—reflecting the text’s characterization of sins as bodily contaminants whose breach of its barriers will be detrimental to well-being of body and soul. The text becomes more explicit still about the nature of foul speech by calling flatterers and back-biters the “devil’s privy men,” who either cover up the stinking privy of a person’s sin or spread about the excrement (2.27.556&ff). The flatterer’s sin takes on a further contaminating dimension because his actions prevent the sinner from smelling his own “filth,” which would surely cause him to run to confession and “spew it out” (2.28.588-589). The flatterer thus encourages the contaminating excrement of sin to fester within the sinner’s body. This section of Book II ends with the author’s prayer that “the Lord through his grace keep your ears far from their poisonous tongues” (2.29.609-610). Avoiding proximity to backbiters and flatterers is the means to stopper up the ears against poisonous speech, to prevent sin from breaching the body’s barrier and worming its way into the heart.

Yet the anchoress's avoidance of penetration is not just a matter of limiting what comes *in* to her body. She must also limit what goes *out* of it, a limitation with particularly important implications for the text's characterization of anchoritic speech. The proper occasions and procedures for it occupy most of the *Wisse*'s discussion of sins belonging to the mouth, despite the fact that these occasions are, according to the text, few and far between. Borrowing much of the imagery that is common in the "sins of the tongue" tradition, as well as an antifeminist strain that portrays women as senseless chatterers, this section of the rule compares any speech that occurs beyond certain carefully-proscribed occasions, including confession and prayer, to the cackling of a hen, the grinding of the waste-product of wheat, with the woman's jaw and tongue as grinding-stones and clapper, and to the torrent of water that pours from a just-opened dam. These metaphors portray such speech as senseless and animalistic, wasteful and destructive.

While tempting to view the *Ancrene Wisse*'s imprecations against anchoritic speech as simply a manifestation of an antifeminist tradition that deprives female speech more generally of sense and reason, the ethic of female silence here also derives from the same impulse that counsels the closing of windows and doors and the careful regulation of sight and hearing. For the open mouth is yet one more entry-point into the anchoritic body, whether ingesting or expelling. It is a vulnerability in the fortress-body's defenses. This attitude toward speech becomes clear when the text refers to a string of Proverbs to support its exhortations to speak as little as possible:

Hwen ze nede moten, a lute wiht lowsið up ower muðes flod-zeten, as me deð ed mulne, ant leoteð adun sone. Ma sleað word þen sweord. *Mors et uita in manibus lingue.* "Lif ant deað," seið Salomon, "is i tunge honden." *Qui custo dit os suum custodit animam suam.* "Hwa se witeð wel his muð, he witeð," he seið, "his sawle." *Sicut urbs patens et absque murorum ambitu, sic, et cetera. Qui murum silencii non habet, patet in imici iaculus ciuitas mentis.* "Hwa se ne wiðhalt his wordes," seið

Salomon þe wise, “he is as þe burh wið ute wal þet ferde mei in ouer al.” þe feond of helle mid his ferd wend þurh ut te tutel þe is eauer open in to þe heorte. (2.19.395-404)

When you must, loosen up your mouth’s flood a little way as one does at a mill, and let it down again soon. The word slays more than the sword. *Mors et uita in manibus lingue*. “Life and death,” says Solomon, “are in the hands of the tongue.” *Qui custodit os suum custodit animam suam*. “Whoever guards well his mouth guards well his soul,” he says. *Qui murum silenciū non habet, patet in imici iaculus ciuitas mentis*. “He who does not withhold his words,” says Solomon the wise, “is like a city without a wall which an army can enter everywhere.” The devil from hell with his army worms his way through the mouth that is always open, into the heart.

Here, proverbs which in the Old Testament applied equally to both women and men are deployed in a specifically female context, illustrating both the way that excessive speech has become more associated with women at this point, and the perceived heightened vulnerability of the anchoritic *female* body to penetration. Although the text acknowledges the inevitability of anchoritic speech, it encourages the anchoress to envision her mouth as the dam of a mill, which must be opened carefully and as little as possible so that a flood is not loosed. Such an image encourages caution with regard to speech, which here becomes a dangerous, uncontrollable force that threatens to overtake its proper boundaries. “The word” is also compared to a “sword,” an analogy that emphasizes its penetrative nature. But above all here, the mouth becomes the entryway to the soul, with its careful patrolling and guarding the only means to ensure a properly protected interior. In the proverb that compares the person who fails to withhold his words to a town without a wall, besieged by the enemy on all sides, we are squarely within the *Wisse*’s metaphorical world of the body as besieged fortress, a location the text makes clear by expanding upon this final proverb to explain that the “enemy” represents the devil from hell, who makes his way through an open mouth into the heart.

We can therefore read the *Ancrene Wisse*'s injunctions towards anchoritic silence whenever possible as an extension of its exhortations to seal off the body to avoid vulnerability to sin or contamination. Speech, whether entering or exiting, is a penetrative force that compromises the body's wholeness and threatens the purity of the anchoress's heart. Even speech that begins with good intentions threatens anchoritic wholeness:

As Salomon seið, *In multiloquio non deerit peccatum*. Ne mei nawt mulche speche, ne ginne hit neauer se wel, beo wið ute sunne; for from soð hit slit to fals, ut of god in to sum euel, fro meosure in to unimete, ant of a drope waxeð in to a much flod þe adrencheð þe sawle; for wið þe fleotinde word tofleoteð þe heorte, swa þet longe þrefter ne me ha beon riht igederet to gederes. (2.20.422-427)

As Solomon says, *In multiloquio non deerit peccatum*. No long speech, begin it ever so well, can be without sin, for from truth it slides to falsehood, from good into some evil, from moderation to immoderation, and from a drop grows into a great flood that drowns the soul. For with the floating word floats the heart, so that long thereafter she cannot be rightly gathered together.

Here we can see both the text's fears of speech as uncontrollable, straining at its boundaries as it spirals from a drop of water into a great flood which "drowns the soul," and its linkage of speech as disruptive of the integrity of the soul. Rather than penetrating, however, the heart is imagined as attached to "floating words" that carry it away from the self. The person becomes scattered, fragmented like so many grains of sand that must be collected and reincorporated if the anchoress is to achieve the spiritual wholeness her vocation demands. A subsequent passage imagines the heart as a container for spiritual feelings finite in quantity:

Hope is a swete spice inwið þe heorte, þet sweteð al þet bitter þet te bodi drinkeð. Ah hwa-se cheoweð spice, ha schal tunen hire muð þet te swote breað ant te strengðe [þ]rof leaue wiðinnen; ah heo þe opened hire muð wið meaðelunge, ant brekeð silence, ha spit hope al ut ant te swotnesse þrof mid wortliche wordes, ant leoseð azein þe feond gastelich strengðe [ . . . ] Hope halt te heorte hal, hwet-se þe flesch drehe; as me seið, "3ef hope nere, heorte tobreke." (2.21.481-487, 490-491)

Hope is a sweet spice in the heart, that sweetens all the bitterness that the body drinks. But whoever chews spice, must close her mouth so that the sweet bread and its strength remain within; but she who opens her mouth with babbling and breaks

silence, she spits hope and its sweetness out with worthless words, and loses spiritual strength to the Fiend [. . .] Hope keeps the heart whole, whatever the flesh suffers, as men say, ‘Without hope, the heart breaks.’

In this interpretation of how speech fragments the self, spiritual feelings like hope can exit through the open mouth, willfully ejected in unguarded words to dissipate as though it were lost with the devaluation of speech. And since a feeling like hope “keeps the heart whole,” its loss leads to the heart’s fragmentation. The example is particularly pertinent to those whose lifestyles demand practices that compromise bodily wholeness, such as self-mortification, since the wholeness of heart through hope persists “whatever the flesh suffers.” With these examples—of the flood of speech that carries the heart away, or the hope whose inadvertent loss through speech threatens the heart’s wholeness—the text expands upon its characterization of speech as a threat to bodily wholeness. It is not just a phenomenon whose entry or exit penetrates the body; here, it also becomes a practice whose careless use can fragment the heart.

Whatever penetrates the body can be dangerous to the soul. That is the lesson at the center of the Katherine Group’s conceptualization of the workings of sin. Confronted with such a lesson, which identifies the body and its senses as the locus of vulnerability to sin, it would be easy to read these works as “seeking to inspire the anchorite’s disgust in or distrust of her body,” as Farina puts it.<sup>25</sup> Yet as Farina also acknowledges, these works’ approach to the body is much more complicated than this reading suggests. For at the same time as they warn about the dangers to be found in unregulated sight, touch, hearing, or speech, they also rely upon what Farina calls a “sensuality of the spirit” to teach spiritual truths. This process is clearly at work in *Sawles Warde*, which Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne claim

---

<sup>25</sup> Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*, 48.

“clarifies and heightens [its Latin source] *De Custodia*’s allegory by increased sensuous (especially visual) detail.”<sup>26</sup> For example, when Caution decides to allow Fear, Death’s Messenger, to pass through the entrance of the body-house. Fear paints a vivid picture of the hell that awaits sinners:

Ant ful wel ha iseoð, ham to grisle ant to grure ant to echen hare pine, þe laðe helle-wurmes, tadden ant froggen, þe freoteð ham ut te ehnen ant te nease-gristles [. . .] þer is remunge i þe brune ant toðes hechelunge i þe snawi weattres. Ferliche ha flutteð from þe heate into þe chele, ne neuer nuten ha of þeos twa hweðer ham þuncheð wurse, for eiðer is unþolelich. Ant i þis ferliche mong, þe leatere þurh e earre derueð þe marre. þet fur ham forbearneð al to colen calde, þet pich ham forwalleð aðet ha beon formealte, ant eft acwikeð anan to drehen al þet ilke, ant mucche deale wurse, a wiðuten ende. (251.107-110, 113-120)

And full well they see, to them terrifying and horrible and the increase of their pain, the loathsome hell-worms, toads and frogs, which devour the eyes and the nostrils [. . .] There is shrieking in the flame, and teeth chattering in the icy waters. They flit suddenly from the hot into the chill, and never know which of these two they think worse, for either is unendurable. And in this sudden intermixture, the latter torments all the more because of the former. The fire burns them all up to cold ashes, the pitch boils them until they are melted, and afterward they come alive right away to suffer all the same, and a great deal worse, without end.

Using highly detailed imagery, Fear describes the sights, sounds, and feelings that Hell’s occupants endure: ugly worms, shrieking, unbearable temperature extremes. The text relies upon the reader’s sensory capabilities to induce horror; this strategy actually moves beyond a “sensuality of the spirit,” for although the description of hell works in the reader’s imagination, it nevertheless depends upon a reader’s lived bodily experience of sensations similar to the ones described in it. *Sawles Warde* employs the same strategy for Love of Life’s description of heaven, using imagery of light, sweet smells, and beautiful music to induce a desire for eternal life in the occupants of the body-house and the reader.

---

<sup>26</sup> Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, ed and trans. *Medieval English Prose for Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), xxvii.



*Sawles Warde's* evocation of the lived sensory experience of its readers as a rhetorical strategy to evoke revulsion toward hell and a desire for heaven suggests that its author is well aware of the importance of the body and its senses to the anchoritic vocation. To speak figuratively, *Sawles Warde* demonstrates that it is not a matter of locking the doors forever, but of making carefully-considered decisions about whom to let in and out. After all, Prudence allows Fear to enter her house because he is someone she "knows well," while the decision to permit entry to Love of Life is a joint one between Prudence and Wit, based upon careful consideration of the effect he will have upon the household (249.62, 255.233-244). Sensory penetration, this allegory teaches, is a process to be undertaken with caution, and only when its effects upon the soul are commensurate with its overarching goal of union with God. Worldly sights, sounds and smells are to be replaced with ones which, while perhaps not spiritual in origin, might be called spiritually-*oriented*.

The Katherine Group's substitution of one category of bodily senses for another is in keeping with what Farina identifies as a "conceptual reliance on systems of exchange," although inasmuch as the anchoress is not encouraged to completely forego earthly sensing, but to orient the senses toward only what is spiritually-enriching, better concepts than "exchange" might be re-direction or transformation.<sup>27</sup> Just as the anchoress's choice of the heavenly bridegroom-Christ transforms the worldly concept of marriage into a spiritual one, so the anchoress's focus only on spiritual matters transforms the bodily senses from entry-points for sin into vehicles of God's revelation. In the *Ancrene Wisse* we see this logic in action when the writer says of St John the Evangelist's "secret balsam that no one knows

---

<sup>27</sup> Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, 66. Elizabeth Robertson makes a similar point when she writes that "rather than seeking to deny or escape her sexuality, a woman must redirect her sensual and sexual self to an appropriate object, Christ." *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 9.

who has not tasted it,” that “this tasting and this knowing come from spiritual sight, from spiritual hearing, from spiritual speech, which those will have who forgo for God’s love worldly hearing, earthly speech, fleshly sights” (2.678-682). But the most specific transformation in the *Ancrene Wisse* surrounds anchoritic speech.

I have already detailed how the *Ancrene Wisse* approaches speech as a potentially-dangerous penetrative force, at some points urging the anchoress to forego it entirely. Later, the *Ancrene Wisse* describes the advantage to be gained by limiting one’s speech:

As [Sein Gregoire] seið, *Iuge silentium cogit celestia the meditari*, “Long silence ant wel iwist nedeð þe þohtes up towart heouene.” Alswa as 3e mahe seon weater, hwen me punt hit ant stoppeð hit biuore wel, þet hit ne mahe duneward, þenne is hit inedd azein forte climben uppart, ant 3e al þisses weis pundeð ower wordes, forstoppið ower þohtes, as 3e wulleð þet ha climben ant hehin toward heouene, ant nawt ne fallen duneward ant tofleoten zont te worlt, as deð muchel chaffle. (2.19.388-295)

As St Greory says, *Ige silentium cogit celestia meditari*, “A long and well-hoarded silence compels the thoughts up toward heaven.” Just as you can see water, when men dam it and stop it up before a well so that it can’t go downward and therefore has to keep climbing upward; in just this way hoard your words, stop up your thoughts, since you want them to climb and rise up toward heaven, and not fall downward and float away throughout the world, as does so much chatter.

Here the anchoress’s store of thoughts is imagined to be finite: their stockpiling enables their elevation to heaven whereas their expenditure in speech scatters them throughout the world in much the same way as the anchoress’s heart fragments with excessive garrulousness. The anchoress must forego her speech in favor of thoughts that rise toward heaven.

Later, however, the *Ancrene Wisse* moderates its rather extreme injunction against all anchoritic speech. Instead of remaining completely silent, it says, the anchoress should take Mary as her role model for the proper use of speech:

Vre deorewurðe Leafdi, seinte Marie, þe ah to alle wummen to beo forbisne, wes of se lutel speche þet nohwer in Hali writ ne finde we þet ha spec bute fowr siðen; ah for se selt speche hire wordes weren heuie ant hefden much mihte. *Bernardus ad Mariam: In sempiterno De uerbo facti sumus omnes et ecce, morimur; in tuo breui*

*responso refitiendi sumus ut ad uitam reuocemur. Responde uerbum et suscipe uerbum, profer tuum et concipe diuinum. (2.21.442-448)*

Our precious Lady, St Mary, who ought to be to all women an example, was of so little speech that nowhere in Holy Writ do we find that she spoke but four times; but for the seldomness of her speech, her words were heavy and had great power. [Bernard to Mary: *In the eternal word of God were we all made and behold, we die; in your short response we are made again and recalled to life. Respond with a word and receive the word; offer up yours and conceive the divine*].<sup>28</sup>

The text imagines Mary as trading words for The Word, Christ. The *Ancrene Wisse*-author joins Bernard in imagining Mary as participating in Christ's Incarnation, and in depicting that moment as a transformation of speech into spiritual reward. In fact, in the same logic by which it counsels a transformation of worldly-oriented sensing into spiritual, the *Ancrene Wisse* imagines the possibility of transforming dangerous, frivolous speech that has the ability to fracture the soul and body into Marian speech, which preserves spiritual wholeness. Even in a text that portrays speech as a dangerous liability, the author suggests that on some occasions the anchoress may be called upon to "respond with a word." For these occasions, he offers the Virgin Mary as a model, and in doing so, recommends a particular relationship between speech, the body, and Christ.

## II. Eve Becomes Mary: Speech in the Marian Model

The *Ancrene Wisse* divides speakers into two types, corresponding to Eve and Mary:

Eue heold i parais long tale wið þe neddre, talde him al þe lesceun þet godd hefde ired hire ant Adam of þe eappel, ant swa þe feond þurh hire word understod ana riht hire wacnesse, ant ifond wei toward hire of hire forlorenesse. Marie dude al on oþer wise. Ne talde ha þen engel na tale, ah easkede him scheort liche þing þet ha ne cuðe. 3e mine leoue sustren, folhið ure leafdi, ant nawt te cakele eue. (2.12.284-290)

---

<sup>28</sup> Latin is left untranslated in original.

In paradise Eve held a long discussion with the serpent, told him the whole lesson that God had taught her and Adam about the apple, and so through her words the devil right away understood her weakness and found a way to get close to her<sup>29</sup> through her waywardness. Mary did completely otherwise. She told the angel no tale, but asked him quickly about what she did not understand. You, my beloved sisters, follow our lady, and not the cackling Eve.

What is most striking about this passage is that it reads Eve's conversation with the serpent as the occasion of her vulnerability to sin. Through Eve's speech, it claims, the serpent "found a way to get closer to her," no doubt on his way to corrupting her soul entirely. The Middle English word "tale" recurs twice in this passage, first in a fairly neutral sense as "discussion," or "conversation," but later with the more negative connotation of "falsehood" or "frivolity," reflecting the way that Eve's conversation with the serpent has transformed her story into one about lies and betrayal. The rhetorical posture encouraged by this example, moreover, is one of a student before a teacher, asking briefly about what she does not understand rather than engaging in the more equal exchange implied by a "discussion," which, in the final analysis, is so much insensible "cackling."

In juxtaposition with the example of the "cackling Eve," Mary offers to anchoresses a model for the proper use of speech.<sup>30</sup> The four occasions of Mary's speech therefore provide the anchoress with an idea of what types of speech are acceptable for her. Many of them are, indeed, demure questions about what Mary does not understand. Another is Mary's response

---

<sup>29</sup> The middle English words "toward" literally means "to" or "toward," but can also denote an "approach" or "proximity," which is why I have translated it as "close." *MED*, prep. "toward."

<sup>30</sup> Anna McHugh, too, reads the example of Mary as responding to Eve's specifically in its modeling of proper feminine speech, arguing that with its reference to Mary, "the author suggests that the real danger for Eve was not her roaming eye, but her too ready answers, her willingness to answer back in contrast with the Blessed Virgin and her weighty but sparing speech." "Inner Space as Speaking Space in *Ancrene Wisse*" in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008). Another way in which Mary models a licit female relationship to language is as a model of literacy. See David Linton, "Reading the Virgin Reader," and Winifred Frey, "St Mary as Ideal Reader and St Mary as Textbook," both in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 1999).

to the angel Gabriel's announcement that she will become the mother of Christ, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the lord. Let it be done to me according to your word," an announcement of identity and assent to God's command (Lk 1:38). Another is an instruction to the wedding-celebrants at Cana, to do whatever Jesus tells them to (John 2:5). But Mary speaks at greatest length when she visits her cousin Elizabeth. Then, in response to Elizabeth's praise of her faith, Mary responds with a prayer that begins

My soul doth magnify the Lord.  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.  
Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid;  
for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
Because he that is mighty,  
hath done great things to me;  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is from generation unto generations,  
to them that fear him.  
He hath shewed might in his arm:  
he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seat,  
and hath exalted the humble.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things;  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.  
He hath received Israel his servant,  
being mindful of his mercy:  
As he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his seed for ever.  
(Luke 1:46 – 55)<sup>31</sup>

Mary's song, which came to be known in Christian liturgy as the Magnificat, begins with Mary's description of her relationship with and response to God. Her soul "magnifies" the greatness of the lord, she says, declaring her soul to be in some sense a mouthpiece for him. After she declares that God has done great things for her, Mary launches into a declaration of how God has been merciful to those who follow him, but struck down the proud who have

---

<sup>31</sup> All biblical citations are from the *King James Bible* translation.

not. Mary's experience of God leads her to reflect upon God's relationship with the Jews, to read her role as the mother of God as part of a larger salvation history and a fulfillment of God's plan for his people. What begins as a personal response to God becomes a lesson in biblical history. The Magnificat suggests that the response of the soul to God, in prayer, can become a public teaching moment, that the individual's experience of God has relevance not only to that individual, but to all those who are connected to that experience through a shared history and faith. As Mary's experience of God is the substance of what she teaches in the Magnificat, so might be the anchoress's private relationship with Christ. The example of the biblical Mary that the *Ancrene Wisse* offers to anchoresses is therefore not as restrictive of speech as it might first seem, suggesting that instructions to others to obey Christ, expressions of identity with and obedience to God, and especially, personal experiences of God, might all be occasions upon which the anchoress can properly speak.

But the biblical Mary is not the only Mary the anchoress might have known, for roughly contemporaneously with the compilation of the *Ancrene Wisse* and its associated works, Marian devotion was enjoying an efflorescence of sorts. This burgeoning devotion to Mary took the form of her increased presence in sermons and scriptural commentaries, as theologians attempted not only to praise her, for "it was impossible to praise Mary enough," but to find in her suffering at the foot of the cross a model of compassion with which to identify.<sup>32</sup> These theologians had a problem, however, when it came to exploring the relationship between Mary and her son, for Scriptures had very little to say about it. They

---

<sup>32</sup>Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 196. Fulton continues "[Mary's] pain . . . more closely approximated the pain of the devout Christian in prayer than did Christ's, whose pain was (arguably) unique in its intensity, no person having ever suffered bodily as the God-man did as he died for the sins of the entire world. Accordingly, it was her pain that provided the model for compassionate response to Christ's pain, her pain that taught Christians what it was like to have seen Christ die on the Cross. Hers was the appropriately human response to Christ's sacrifice" (198-199).

overcame this difficulty by turning to one of the readings for the Marian feast of the Assumption, the Song of Songs, interpreting it as a conversation between Mary and Christ.

These commentators, writes Rachel Fulton,

discovered how to make the exterior image, of Christ on the Cross and his Mother standing in anguish nearby, not only visible (*'Vide'*) but audible (*'Audi'*)—more particularly, both how to make Christ say more to his Mother than “*Mulier ecce fillius tuus*” (the only words, according to the evangelists, he is known to have said to Mary from the Cross) and how to make Mary say anything at all. (293)

In addition to giving Mary a voice, moreover, the Marian commentaries on the *Song of Songs* gave writers a vocabulary to describe her that resonates strongly with the language of the *Ancrene Wisse* and its associated works—Mary as a “garden enclosed, a fountain sealed.” An examination of Mary and her speech in this commentary tradition reveals how the Marian model transforms the body from a besieged, vulnerable entry-point for sin into a vessel of Christ and, accordingly, speech from a destructive force into a vehicle of God’s revelation.

As she is in the *Ancrene Wisse* tradition, the Virgin in the Marian commentaries is compared to a dwelling-place of some sort, be it a single chamber, a house, a tower, or an entire walled town. But this dwelling-place is no longer vulnerable to attack. In Sermon 19, “For the Assumption,” Aelred of Rievaulx calls her “a unique castle” (268, par. 15).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, explicating another reading for the Feast of the Assumption, which begins “Jesus entered into a certain town” (Lk 10:38), Honorius Augustodunensis writes that Mary is that town (col. 497).<sup>34</sup> But unlike the besieged fortress of the Katherine Group, fending off the arrows of sin, Mary possesses more than adequate defenses. Aelred’s “unique castle” has “this wall [of chastity] . . . within herself more perfectly than anyone else . . . Her

---

<sup>33</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Liturgical Sermons*, trans. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications), 2001, 268 par 15.

<sup>34</sup> Honorius Augustodunensis, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, trans Amelia Carr in *Vox Benedictina* 8.2 (Winter 1991), 200 & ff, col 497. (Column numbers correspond to Latin text as found in *Patrologia Latina*.)

virginity, like the stoutest of walls, could never be penetrated by any projectile or by any other instrument—that is, by any temptation of the devil” (266, par. 11). Honorius describes Mary-as-town as

fortified on all sides with the unfailing protection of the angels. In her there is a high tower, that is to say, humility, reaching to the highest heaven, whence it is said: He has regarded the humility of his handmaid (Lk. 1:48). The wall outside was her chastity which furnished a defense for the rest of the virtues within. (col. 497)

Neither the devil’s arrows of lechery in the *Ancrene Wisse*, nor the invading enemy army of lust that finishes the unsuspecting virgin off with the sword’s dint in *Hali Meidhad*, pose any threat to Mary’s defenses, for she possesses an impermeable wall of chastity. Even the possibility of virgin visibility, an anxiously-imagined threat in the *Ancrene Wisse*, becomes re-written. The “high tower” is no longer a site of potentially lascivious spectacle; instead, it is Mary’s humility, and the onlooker, God. With Mary, the besieged fortress or town of the Katherine Group has become the well-protected citadel of God, surrounded by an impermeable wall of chastity.

The Marian commentators take their reversal of the Katherine Group’s portrayal of the virgin body even further, however, by substituting an in-dwelling of Christ for the entry of sin. Taking his metaphor of Mary-as-castle to its conclusion, Aelred writes that “this is the castle which Jesus entered.” But the entry of Christ does not produce the disruption or permanent vulnerability of the virgin body:

He entered with the gate shut and with the gate shut he exited . . . The enemy could find no entrance, absolutely no opening. It was closed and sealed with the seal of chastity which was not broken but rather made more solid and firmer by the entrance of the Lord. For he who gives the gift of virginity did not take virginity away by his presence, but rather confirmed it. (266, par. 11)

This entry by Christ *does* produce an opening-up of the virgin body, but not to sin. Instead, Mary responds readily to Christ’s command to “open to me” not just by opening her doors or



windows, but by becoming herself nothing but a hole. Accordingly, Honorius calls Mary “the window of heaven, through whom the sun of justice shone into the house of the world” and a “door through which Christ entered the world.” He imagines Mary speaking in the words of the *Song of Songs*:

Therefore, my beloved, namely God, whom I chose above all others, put his hand, that is, his son into the world, through the keyhole, namely through me, who became a hole through which he came unto men. (266, par. 11)

Mary imagines herself to be a “hole,” a pure opening. No characterization of the virgin body could be more anathema to the Katherine Group tradition, with its insistence on a sealing of doors and windows both literal and metaphoric. But Mary’s status as a dwelling-place for Christ re-writes the virgin body, upending a model that renders it vulnerable to sin. Maud Burnett McInerney comments that “in Mary, the body itself is transformed. Eve’s womb brought forth the first children of original sin, conceived in lust, but Mary’s brings forth the child without sin, conceived without lust or fleshly agency.”<sup>35</sup> Anna McHugh, too, reads Mary’s example as responding to Eve’s, writing that in contrast to the “unenclosed and broken open” bodies of her “Others,” Eve and Dinah, Mary’s body demonstrates perfect intactness and wholeness.<sup>36</sup> I would add that Mary transforms not only the body, but the vocabulary with which writers imagine that body. The impenetrable fortress gives way to the wide-open window.

Mary as window, door, keyhole through which Christ enters the world—all these figures of speech emphasize not only Mary’s paradoxical openness even as a sealed and closed-off body; they also foreground her status as a privileged bearer of knowledge

---

<sup>35</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, “‘In the Meydens Womb’: Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure,” in *Medieval Mothering*, John Carsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 162.

<sup>36</sup> McHugh, “Inner Space as Speaking Space in *Ancrene Wisse*,” 92.

inaccessible to anyone else but God. “The soul of Mary loved Christ,” writes Honorius in the *Sigillum*, “so he revealed to her all the secrets of the Father” (col. 501). He elaborates further,

For none of the angels understands God as God knows himself. For no one knows the Father but the Son, neither doth anyone know the Son but the Father, and he to whom it shall please the Son to reveal him, which is believed to have been done for his mother. (Col. 504)

This passage comes after Mary searches among the angels in an attempt to understand the divinity of Christ and fails to find it among them, for they do not possess this knowledge fully. The knowledge of the divinity of Christ, Honorius suggests, is to be found only in Mary herself, in her intimacy with the Son who chooses to reveal himself to her.

What Mary does with this privileged knowledge differs according to the agenda of the writer who lays it at her door. In his sermons, Aelred of Rievaulx seems determined to find in Mary a model of the retiring, contemplative life. He returns often to the gospel image of the silent virgin pondering God’s words in her heart and urges his listeners to follow Mary’s retreat away from the affairs of the world beyond a closed door, to “hide ourselves within ourselves” (169, par. 3). Only in that space of silence and enclosure, claims Aelred, will Christ enter the soul. But writers like Honorius Augustodunensis and his fellow Benedictine, Rupert of Deutz, write in the context of defending the Benedictines’ prerogative for pastoral care—preaching and teaching—from the new orders that threatened to strip them of this role. Accordingly, they saw in Mary’s example not a model of retiring, contemplative silence, but the slow blossoming of the world’s most perfect teacher. After affirming Mary’s unique knowledge of Christ’s divinity, Honorius’s *Sigillum* has her declare, “those things I know of Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit, I announce to the Jews and the Gentiles” (col. 504). As though directly engaging with Aelred’s retiring virgin, Rupert of Deutz asks Mary, “Why did you not rather stay in hiding? Why have you not confirmed for yourself the secret

of contemplation?...Why have you not rather hidden the precious beauty of your pearl from men?” Mary responds, in her own words, that she heard Christ calling her to “open,” to him,

Therefore, ‘I rose up to open to my beloved,’ I gave my work, that with the apostles I should profess the words and deeds of Christ, my beloved, through the gospel.....’I opened the bolt of the door to my love,’...that is, I opened my mouth in teaching, so as to make known the beloved to those listening.....[V (5.2-8), 111-12].<sup>37</sup>

Rupert repeats the opening of the virgin body to Christ by which he enters her, this time writing it as the opening of Mary’s mouth to make Christ known to the world. This conception of Mary’s role makes her into “a conduit, a pure vessel in which God can be revealed or through which humankind can be saved” which Karin Lagapoulou claims is “the purpose of the virginal body, the hole into heaven, the Chamber of the Trinity.”<sup>38</sup> Mary becomes a gateway between heaven and earth through which Revelation passes freely, without breaching her body’s barriers.

The Belgian Cistercian Helinand of Froidmont shares Rupert and Honorius’s vision of the teaching Virgin, but elaborates upon it in a way that privileges Mary’s bodily maternity of Christ as the most important part of her ministry. As Helinand interprets the *Song of Songs*, Christ promises to reunite Mary with him, but not until she performs a vital task as a teacher of holy religion “the like of which eye has not seen.” A time will come, Christ tells her, when various heretics deny Christ’s humanity or divinity. “Mary’s responsibility [is] to testify to the truth of Christ’s Incarnation—that she conceived him not by a man but by the Holy Spirit, that he took real flesh from the substance of her flesh, that

---

<sup>37</sup> Rupert of Deutz, *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum de Incarnatione Domini*. ed. Rhabanus Haacke, CCCM26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974). Translated in Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 335.

<sup>38</sup> Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, “Yate of Heaven: Conceptions of the Female Body in the Religious Lyrics,” in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 150.

he did not take his beginning from her but existed before all time as the Word.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the witness of Mary’s body—its enfolding of the divine within it—becomes the soul and substance of her teaching. Accordingly, Helinand interprets Mary’s assent to Purification in the temple after Christ’s birth, despite the fact of her perpetual purity, as her acknowledgment of the importance of the body in the Christian faith, its status as “a tool for penance through purgation and purification” and her “sanctioning of the body as a vehicle for virtue.”<sup>40</sup> He also draws attention to her purification as a time of preparation and cleansing that models the bodily and spiritual purification the preacher must undergo before he offers the Word to others. In Helinand’s commentary, Mary’s bodily experience is a powerful response to heresy, as well as the means by which Mary prepares herself to speak.

The *Ancrene Wisse*, too, counsels the anchoress toward proper preparation of the soul, characterizing it as essential to anchoritic communion with the Divine, as the text makes clear when it instructs the anchoress to pray:

*Set quis est locus in me quo ueniat in me Deus meus, quo Deus ueniat aut maneat in me, Deus qui fecit celum et terram? [ . . . ] Angusta est tibi domus anime mee, quo uenias ad eam; dilatetur abs te. Ruinosa est; refice eam. Habet que offendant oculos tuos, fateor et scio; set quis mundabit eam, aut cui alteri preter te clamabo? Ab occultis meis munda me, Domine, et ab alienis parce famule tue. (1.15.223-224, 227-231)*

But what place is in me where my God may come into me, where God may come and dwell in me, God who made heaven and earth? [ . . . ] The house of my soul is narrow for you; so that you may enter it, let it be made large by you. It is ruined; repair it. It has what offends your eyes, I know and confess—but who shall cleanse it, or to whom else but you shall I cry? Purge me of my hidden sins, and from unworthiness spare your handmaid.

Proper preparation of this bower, as we have seen, involves a careful regulation of the bodily senses to be sure that nothing penetrates the body that might sully or fragment the bower of

---

<sup>39</sup> Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, 332.

<sup>40</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London; New York: Allen Lane, 2009), 156.

the heart. Once this sealing and wholeness has been achieved, however, the anchoress can entertain the possibility of heavy, Marian speech.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond inviting Christ's penetration, or perhaps, *because* of the penetration by Christ that it invites, Marian speech is excessively powerful in other instances, as well. When Mary speaks to Elizabeth, John leaps in his mother's womb; at her entreaty at Cana, Jesus turns water into wine; finally, at Mary's words upon finding Jesus after he is lost in the temple, the text marvels about Jesus's subsequent obedience "That God Almighty bowed to man" (2.21.459-460)—all as a result of Mary's speech. What characterizes Mary's speech in all of these instances is that it is directed toward God. Even in the context of the *Ancrene Wisse's* anxieties surrounding any force that breaches the body's barrier, not all speech is bad, illustrating Barbara Newman's observation that "even among clerics, what was called loquacity '*in malo*' might be praised as 'eloquence' *in bono*."<sup>42</sup>

With the example of Mary, the *Ancrene Wisse* gives the anchoress a model of a speaking virgin. By focusing upon the virgin body's role as dwelling-place for Christ rather than a vulnerable entry-point for sin, the Marian commentaries on the *Song of Songs* also uphold the possibility of speech that does not fracture the self and body, but rather preserves its wholeness. This type of speech is Marian speech. It is produced by a bodily intimacy with

---

<sup>41</sup> Susanna Greer Fein reads the model of Marian penetration as explicitly reversing the breach that the author earlier worries might occur in the anchoress's cell. Instead, writes Fein, by contemplating the Virgin in her room reading at the moment of Christ's Incarnation, "one enters 'the room' and reads the books, acts that enable one to affect the Virgin's experience; one becomes vicariously 'inflamed' as the Virgin's womb is filled with the godhead; and finally the sister lives this experience as her own, because she, too, is both virgin and eager bride." This experience corresponds to the anchoress's most privileged role, that of a "container" for Christ. "Maternity in Aelred of Rievaulx's Letter to His Sister," in *Medieval Mothering*, Bonnie Wheeler, ed. (New York: Garland, 1996). In "Inner Space as Speaking Space in *Ancrene Wisse*" Anna McHugh identifies the Rule as participating in a classical and medieval tradition of writing about the memory, in which "the human mind and its innate desire to know God are figured as an enclosed space, miming the containment of God's nature and providing an image of a place where the human seeks and finds the divine." This reading of the *Wisse* focuses attention on how the enclosed anchoritic heart is imagined as a love-nest for Christ. It is a "generative place where something new and living is produced as a result of the love experienced, and the speech made, within." The anchoress's inner bower of the heart is her meeting-place with Christ.

<sup>42</sup> *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 24.

Christ—the virgin body’s envelopment of the divine Word within itself—that is also its meaning. No distance exists between Mary’s body and her speech, for both bear and reveal only Christ. The way that this model informs the speaking virgins of the Katherine Group is the subject of Part III of this chapter.

### III. Marian Speech in *Katherine, Juliana and Margaret*

In its discussion of the sins of the tongue, the *Ancrene Wisse* often and unequivocally forbids anchoresses from styling themselves teachers. Taking the ever-popular Pauline maxim from 1 Timothy 2:12—*mulieres non permitto docere* (I do not permit a woman to teach)—as part of its justification, the text warns the anchoress, “do not preach to anyone” (2.18.368). In particular, the *Ancrene Wisse* advises anchoresses not to preach to men, telling them “Let no man ask you counsel or talk to you; advise only women” (2.18.368-369). In a brief passage that imagines the consequences of the anchoress attempting to “teach” rather than “advise,” the text explains

Sum is se wel ilearet, oðer se wis iwordet, þet ha walde he wiste hit þe sit ant spekeð toward hire, ant zelt him word azein word, ant forwurðeð meistre þe schulde beon ancre, ant leareð him þet is icumen hire forte learen; walde bi hire tale beon sone wið wise icuððet ant icnawen. Icnawen ha is—for þurh þet ilke þet ha weneð to beo wis ihalden, he understont þet ha is sot. For ha hunteð efter pris ant kecheð lastunge; for ed te alre leaste, hwen he is awei iwent, “þeos ancre,” he wule seggen, “is of mucche speche.”

Someone is so well learned, or so wisely worded, that she wants he who sits and speaks with her to know it, and repays him word for word, and becomes a teacher who should be an anchoress, and teaches him who has come to teach her; she wants to be soon known and recognized for her talk among the wise. She is known—for through the same things through which she thought to be held wise, he understands that she is foolish. For she hankers after praise and catches blame, for at the very least, when he has gone away, “This anchoress,” he will say, “is very talkative.”

As with its fantasies of exaggerated anchoritic visibility, the main concern of the text here seems to be with the community's *perception* of the anchoress—that she might come *to be known* as a consummate talker rather than an anchoress first and foremost. But the *Ancrene Wisse* also explores the talkative anchoress's motivation for teaching, fearing that she wants the person she teaches to know that she is learned, to be “recognized and known,” so that her motivation for teaching exactly coincides with the *Ancrene Wisse*'s fears about her potential notoriety. The text's naming of the only proper anchoritic rhetorical mode for conveying information as “advice” subtly navigates around these fears: advice is a private activity undertaken between two individuals with its primary motivation a concern for the advisee's welfare. If the anchoress advises “only women,” she avoids the charge of seeking notoriety as well as the pitfall of intimate commerce with men, which inevitably makes her vulnerable to charges of improper sexual behavior.

The *Ancrene Wisse*'s exhortations to silence or, at the most, private advice giving, do not accord with the examples offered by the three virgin martyr legends that are associated with the *Ancrene Wisse* in its manuscript context. These three lives, of Katherine, Juliana, and Margaret, are contained together with *Sawles Warde* and *Hali Meiðhad* in MS Bodley 34, and each appears in at least one other manuscript.<sup>43</sup> Although *Seinte Katerine* is the only life to appear in the same manuscript with the *Ancrene Wisse* (Cotton Tiberius B.i), the shared dialect, style, physical appearance, and overriding concerns of the works contained in these manuscripts leads scholars to group them together as part of the Katherine Group, which represents “a sustained attempt by a small group of early thirteenth-century religious

---

<sup>43</sup> Margaret and Juliana in Royal 17 A xxvii, and Katherine in Royal 17 Axxvii as well as the Titus manuscript, Cotton Tiberius B.i. See Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds. *Medieval English Prose for Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 285, 259.

to provide, over twenty or thirty years, a coherent program of spiritual reading for a number of anchoresses in their charge.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, although *Margaret* and *Juliana*, especially, were likely intended for a wider audience (perhaps initially composed for public performance in a hall in commemoration of the feast-day of their subjects) the inclusion of these three passions in the Katherine Group signals that the manuscripts’ compilers viewed them as appropriate instructional reading for anchoresses.<sup>45</sup>

The instructional role of these virgin martyr legends raises the question of their exemplarity in the anchoritic context, a particularly vexed one given anchoritic literature’s seeming condemnation of the public role the virgin martyrs willingly undertake. Some scholars deal with the apparent contradiction by shifting the locus of the martyrs’ exemplary role to other aspects of their sanctity. Catherine Sanok writes that rather than focus upon the virgin martyrs’ militant public performance, “the anchoresses are rather encouraged to find in their ‘englische boc of seinte Margarete’ an example of devout prayer, which is, in turn, identified as a remedy for desire,” continuing that *Ancrene Wisse* takes care to counteract the model of “independence from masculine authority” and “public vocation” authorized by these lives.<sup>46</sup> Gail Ashton writes that the virgin martyr finds authorization as a model of prayer, which “posits woman as a vessel containing the power of the divine. Woman acts as intercessor.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Karen Winstead writes that the exemplarity of these tales is to be

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, “General Introduction: The Anchoritic Works and their Background,” 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 11. For more on the intended audience of the saints’ lives of the Katherine Group, see Bella Millett, “The Audience of the Saints’ Lives of the Katherine Group,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990): 127-156 and *Ancrene Wisse, The Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group*, ed. Bella Millett, George Jack, and Yoko Wada (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 15-17.

<sup>46</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 106.



found in “the long prayers that would have been appropriate for religious women, especially anchoresses,” theorizing that “their thirteenth-century hagiographers may have chosen to translate the lives of Margaret, Katherine, and Juliana precisely because their legends pay special attention to the saints’ activities in prison—praying, being comforted by angels, and combating demons.”<sup>48</sup> These interpretations of the exemplarity of virgin martyr legends group the saint’s public speaking with her physical martyrdom as part of a pagan past that could not possibly be relevant to the hagiographer’s intended audience. The exemplarity of the virgin martyr, they insist, is in her steadfast response to adversity and as a private author of prayer, rather than as the public speaker she is in the great majority of her life.

All of these saintly attributes are, no doubt, partially constitutive of the production of sanctity in these lives. Saints’ lives are, as Anne Clark Bartlett terms them, “heteroglossic”—“sites of competing genres, registers, and traditions,” a status that makes for the possibility of multiple, even self-contradictory versions of sanctity within them.<sup>49</sup> But virgin martyr lives, in particular, have at their heart “a contest not of strength, but of meanings” as the virgin martyr struggles to control the interpretation of her body and its suffering.<sup>50</sup> To gloss over the public debate in the life of the virgin martyr is therefore to elide its most important, indeed, generically constitutive, center of meaning. Moreover, other, less militant representations of virginity are available to hagiographers. Maud Burnett McInerney notes that throughout her history, the virgin martyr has continually oscillated “between appearances as an icon of

---

<sup>48</sup> Karen Winstead, “Saintly Exemplarity,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 337.

<sup>49</sup> Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 145.

<sup>50</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.

silence and death and as one of active speech and liberation.”<sup>51</sup> The hagiographers of the Katherine group had at their disposal a model of silent, passive, “bridal” virginity as pioneered by late-classical writers such as Prudentius and Tertullian. But they chose to make their virgins militant public speakers, and the compilers of the Katherine Group to include *these* models of virginity for the anchoresses their manuscripts address.

For these reasons, I ask what is to be learned by reading the exemplarity for anchoresses in the saints’ lives of the Katherine Group as inhering in the public speech and spectacle of the virgin martyr’s *passio*, rather than in spite of it. This reading foregrounds the public role that both virgin martyrs and anchoresses play for their respective “audiences.” Although the anchoress spends her entire life in a cell she, like the virgin martyr, embodies a complex set of meanings for her community. She “becomes herself a living text, a spiritual icon veiled for literate and illiterate alike to unveil” and “a physical symbol of the spiritual enclosure that lay people can enact in their own lives.”<sup>52</sup> The anchoress, and in particular, the anchoritic body, is therefore *on display* in much the same way that the virgin martyr is, both within her life as she debates publicly and undergoes public torture, and in an extra-textual capacity as her *passio* and body are displayed before the readers of her life.

This public visibility, whether real or imagined, is at the heart of the paradox of the virgin martyr *passio*, by which the mere act of making the virgin available for display in some sense compromises her purity. According to Brigitte Cazelles,

---

<sup>51</sup>Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins From Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Marie Kauth, “Book Metaphors in the Textual Community of the *Ancrene Wisse*,” in *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 108, 113. Similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy argues that the female anchorite, in particular, “took on a much more public and representative role than did her monastic, male equivalent whose residency deep within an already enclosed institutional setting would render his role more local and specific to that religious community” (*Gender, Rhetoric, and Space*, 123).

a number of Church Fathers posited that in order to be, purity should neither be seen nor described. In their view, a virgin ceases to be a virgin when she becomes the object of sensual love (Cyprian; third century); when she endures unchaste gazing (John Chrysostom; fourth century); and when she is submitted to the adultery of the eyes (Novatian; third century). Tertullian goes even further when he declares that ‘every public exposure of a virgin is [to her] a suffering of rape.’<sup>53</sup>

We see this ethic in play in the *Ancrene Wisse*, as well, in its characterization of Dinah as a “pit” of sensuality and sin—and a whore—merely for walking about in public, thus exposing herself to the eyes of men. In both the *Ancrene Wisse* and in the lives of virgin martyrs, any public exposure of the female body, textual or otherwise, is an occasion for anxiety. The *Ancrene Wisse* deals with this anxiety by counseling the anchoress to remain hidden from the world whenever possible. But it also counsels the anchoress to imitate Mary’s example—and the Marian commentaries suggest that the virgin has a duty to play a public teaching role. More is required of her than simply carrying Christ within her body. Although enclosure and silence may be necessary to prepare the bower of the heart to receive Christ, that Revelation, once received, demands a testimony to others that only the virgin can produce. Specifically, God calls the virgin to bear witness to a personal experience of the divine both bodily and spiritual, and, like Mary, to interpret the meaning of her body in terms of Christian theology. In the virgin martyr legends, the “heresy” which the virgins confront is not just idol worship, but her persecutors’ and spectators’ misreading of the meaning of her body and its role. The virgin must respond to this misreading by giving her own, transforming an Eve or Dinah-like tale into a Marian one.

My reading of these lives therefore locates their exemplarity for anchoresses precisely in the public speaking of the virgin martyr. These lives, I argue, model Marian speech for the anchoress by placing a virgin in a public setting in which her body’s meaning is read in a

---

<sup>53</sup> Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 48-49.

worldly or pagan way, rather than a Christian one. The virgin responds to this misreading by publicly speaking her own understanding of her body and its meaning, transforming the public exposure of her body into an opportunity for Christian teaching. This response finds its authorization in the Marian model of speech, in which careful protection of the body's boundaries—in other words, the maintenance of bodily and spiritual purity—ensure that the only force that breaches the body's barriers is Christ. This penetration affords the virgin privileged knowledge of Christ that must be shared with others and, in fact, makes the speech of the virgin especially powerful and effective.

In this context, the most important task of the lives of *Margaret*, *Katherine*, and *Juliana* is to demonstrate the connection between virginity and proper Christian knowledge and speech. Before launching into a description of Margaret's martyrdom, *Seinte Margaret* addresses itself to all women, but especially to maidens:

Te meidnes nomeliche lusten swiðe zeornliche hu ha schulen luuien þe liuiende  
Lauerd ant libben i meiðhad, þet him his mihte leouest, swa þet ha moten, þurh þet  
eadie meiden þe we munneð todei wið meiðhades menske, þet seli meidnes song  
singen wið þis meiden ant wið þe heouenliche hird echeliche in heouene. (4.8-14)<sup>54</sup>

Maidens especially, should listen very earnestly to how they should love the living Lord and live in maidenhood, which to him is the power most beloved, so that they might, through the blessed maiden we remember today, with maidenhood's honor, that happy maidens' song sing with this maiden and with the heavenly host eternally in heaven.

This re-writing of a scene from Revelations that speaks of 144,000 happily singing virgins who “were not defiled with *women*” follows the pattern established in the *Ancrene Wisse* of re-gendering texts that originally applied to men, revealing the female gendering of virginity at work here ((KJV *Revelations* 14:4, my emphasis). This time, the re-gendering connects

---

<sup>54</sup> Citations of *Seinte Margarete* are taken from *Seinte Marherete, þe Meiden ant Martyr*, ed. Frances Mack (London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1934). This edition presents facing-page texts of MSS Bodley Bodley 34 and Royal 17 A XXVII. Here I refer to the Bodley Manuscript. Citations are page number.line.

maidenhood to speech in its identification of the results of a virginal life as the ability to sing the “happy maidens’ song.” At the same time, it calls maidenhood the “power most beloved” to the Lord. Yet this power is not a force that emanates from the virgin herself, but one that she channels from her bridegroom, whom she frames as her “protector” against attempted rape by another. Margaret, for example, asks Jesus to “protect my body, which is entirely given to you, from fleshly filths [ . . . ] Lord, defend me, and keep [my maidenhood] always for yourself; never let the evil one trouble my reason or influence my wisdom” (6.25-26, 8.3-5). This easy slippage from protected maidenhood to the preservation of wit and wisdom attests to the text’s connection of virginity with Christian knowledge.

Margaret clarifies the nature of the relationship between virginity and knowledge in a speech in response to Olibrius’s offer to take her into his household if she will worship his idols. Margaret recognizes the veiled sexual nature of the proposition, and the majority of the content of her response is praise of Christ, whom she calls “a lover who I’ll not leave nor lose for anything” (12.Note 4). In this exchange Margaret’s speech quite literally emanates from Christ, since he is its subject and object. Later, as Margaret does battle with the demon, he tells her

Crist wuneð in þe, forþi þu wurchest wið us al þet ti wil is. Ne nawt nart tu, wummon, oþre wummen ilich. Me þuncheð þet tu schinest schenre þen þe sunne; ah ouer alle þine limen þe leitið of leome, þe fingres se freoliche me þuncheð, ant se feire, ant se briht blikinde, þet tu þe wit blescedest ant makedest te merke of þe mihti rode þe reauede me mi broðer, ant me wið bale bondes bitterliche bindest, þet Ich lokin ne mei, swa þet liht leomeð ant leiteð, me þuncheð. (30.22-31)

Christ dwells in you, so you do with us what you will. Nor are you, woman, like other women. I think that you shine brighter than the sun; but especially your body, which gleams with light. They seem so fair, and so brightly shining—the fingers that you so freely blessed yourself with and made the sign of the mighty cross that bereaved me of my brother, and bound me bitterly with baleful bonds, that I can’t look at them, so the light gleams and glimmers, it seems to me.

Margaret terms the demon’s speech here “flattery,” but it is nevertheless true that Margaret does whatever she wants with the demon. The conversation she has with him elicits a wealth of information about the nature of the devil and the workings of sin, all enabled by her status as a dwelling-place for Christ. The devil’s attention here to Margaret’s body—her brightly shining appearance, the fingers with which she crosses herself—emphasizes the role that this body plays in Margaret’s ability to overcome the devil, a role he later clarifies when he calls “eating simply and drinking even simpler still; making the flesh feel some need” some of the most powerful weapons against him (34.1-3). Here Margaret’s success provides the confirmation of his words, as her bodily practices have become the means by which she cowers the devil and becomes a powerful agent of revelation.

Like Margaret, Juliana portrays the source of her knowledge and discernment between good and evil as originating in her relationship with Christ. A demon appears to her as an angel of God, giving her permission to worship her tormentor’s idols so that she can escape torture. Juliana immediately prays:

Ihesu quoð ha godes sune þet art þi feader wisdom wisse me þi wummon hwet me beo to donne. ant zef þi deore wil is do me to understonden. þet þe þet þis seið me zef he beo þi sonde. (327-330)<sup>55</sup>

“Jesus,” she said, “God’s Son who is the wisdom of your father, instruct me, your woman, about what you want me to do. And if it is your precious will, make me understand whether the one who says this to me is your messenger.”

Calling herself “your woman,” Juliana frames the information from God that she asks for as the instruction of a wife by her husband. It is not precisely her own wisdom upon which she relies, but the *source* of wisdom—Christ. Yet because she is Christ’s bride, married to wisdom, so to speak, she receives the guidance she needs:

---

<sup>55</sup> Citations of *Seinte Iulienne* are from the edition of Bodley MS 34 in *þe Lijflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*, ed. S.R.T.O. d’Ardenne (London: EETS, 1961). Citations are by line number.

nule nawt þi leofmon þoli na leas þing ta lihe þe longe. Hit is þe stronge unwiht þe stont þer of helle. [. . .] tu schalt leaden him al effter þet te likeð. ant he schal al telle þe unþonc tu wilnest to witen. (332-334, 337-339)

Your lover will not allow any mendacious thing lie to you for long. It is the fierce fiend from hell that stands there [. . .] you will lead him however you like, and he will tell you anything you want to know.

Once again, the saint's status as a bride of Christ—enabled by her virginity, through which she preserves her body for him alone—is the source of her wisdom and role as an agent of revelation. Like Juliana, Margaret becomes an elicitor of speech that reveals the devil to be “just what he [is], a fiend from hell” (344).

Both Margaret and Juliana have their most powerful “teaching moments” when they are eliciting speech from others, a revelatory ability enabled by their relationship with the bridegroom Christ. Katherine, on the other hand, undergoes a battle of wits with the most renowned philosophers that her pagan tormentor can find, in which she holds forth on the doctrines of the Incarnation and the dual nature of Christ as God and man. As she prepares to meet the fifty wisest philosophers in the world, Katherine quotes from Luke 21:12-15, praying

Ant seidest þe seluen [. . .] “Hwene ze stondeð biuore kinges ant eorles, ne þenche ze neauer hwet ne hu ze schulen seggen, for ich chulle zeouen ow ba tunge ant tale, þet an ne schal of all ower wiðerwines witen hwet he warpe a word azein zow”: lauert, wune wið me ant halt þet tu bihete us ant sete, Iesu, [swucche] sahen i mi muð to marhen, ant [ʒ]ef swuch mahte ant strengðe i mine wordes, þet þeo þe beoð icumene azeines þi deore nome me to underneomene moten missen þrof. (232-242)<sup>56</sup>

And you said yourself [. . .] “When you stand before kings and earls, don't think about what or how you shall speak, for I will give you both words and form, that not one of all your adversaries will know how to cast a word against you.”: Lord, dwell with me and fulfill what you promised us and place, Jesus, such words in my mouth tomorrow, and put such might and strength in my words, that those who come against your precious name to undermine me might miss their mark.

---

<sup>56</sup> Citations of *Seinte Katerine* taken from the edition of MS Bodley 34 in *Seinte Katerine*, ed. S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne (London: EETS, 1981). Citations are by line number.

In response to this prayer, an angel appears to Katherine promising that her “lover” will not abandon her, and that he “will pour into your mouth flowing waters of wise words, which will quickly put your enemies to flight” (255-256). The description of the words that the angel promises Katherine as “flowing waters” echoes the language of Honorius’s *Sigillum*, in which he praises Mary as the one from whom comes “the well of living waters, that is, Christ, who is the wisdom of holy Scriptures” (Col. 508). Katherine explicitly identifies the source of her speech as Godly, and the echo here of the Marian commentary tradition authorizes and confirms this origin.

Like Margaret’s and Juliana’s speech, the power of Katherine’s emanates from her relationship with Christ. Yet what is unique to Katherine’s speech is that it de-emphasizes the Bride of Christ motif in favor of a focus upon Katherine’s turn from pagan wisdom and philosophy to Christian. This focus renders explicit these texts’ insistence that all knowledge (and the speech through which it is transmitted) not only comes from Christ—it *is* Christ.

Ich . . . habbe ihauet hiderto swiðe hehe meistres. Ah forþi þet te lare þet heo me learden limpeð to idel zelp ant falled to bizete [ant] to wu[rð]schipe of þe worlde, ne ne helped nawiht eche lif to hab[b]en [. . .] Ah sone se ich seh þe leome of þe soðe lare þet leadeð to eche lif, ich leafde al þet oðer, ant toc me him to laurd ant madeðe him me leofmon (171-172, 174-176)

Until now I have had very great teachers. But because the learning they taught me belongs to idle boasting and descends to getting worldly worship, nor does it help in any way to attain eternal life [. . .] As soon as I saw the light of the true teaching that leads to eternal life, I completely left behind the other, and took him to me as lord, and made him my lover.

In a slippage common in saints’ lives, Katherine describes her turn from pagan to Christian philosophy as the rejection of worldly learning in favor of a relationship with Christ. Her conversion was not just a turn from one subject matter to another, but a turn in methodology from “traditional” book learning to a love-relationship. Katherine makes the same claim



when she describes Christ—“from his Father, truly God, from his mother truly human, both together in unity—true human and true God” as “all the learning I now learn” (344-345, 347). Katherine’s special devotion to the *Incarnated* Christ is appropriate given her understanding of herself as channeling God’s speech. As *the* Word, Christ lives in her just as he lives in humanity through the Incarnation. Her teaching is simply an opening up of herself to let the living Word speak through her. Like the Virgin Mary, she has “opened” herself only to Christ.

The Marian model promises that speech originating with and directed toward God will be powerful, and in fact, at many points in the *Lives*, the virgin’s speech is pitted against the pagan persecutor’s to emphasize its power in comparison to his. The virgin’s speech even has the power to rob her persecutors of sense and reason. In the course of Katherine’s passion, she speaks with such wit and wisdom that she defeats fifty of the world’s greatest philosophers, who convert to Christianity when faced with “a heavenly spirit in [Katherine] so much against us that we do not know how to throw a word against her in war” (486). Meanwhile, Maxentius descends further into madness, rolling “his head around in rage like a madman, burning as he was with fury and wrath” at Katherine’s conversion of his philosophers (496-497). Katherine has always contended that the words of the king are worthless and has invited him to promise, flatter, and threaten her, always promising that her response will be more exaltation and praise of God. She concludes her speech about her lover Christ by commanding the king to “be silent and still your words, for they are worthless to me” (561-562). In response, “the king had no power over his senses, but began to tremble and did not know what to say” (563-564). He has unwillingly obeyed Katherine’s command

to be silent, proving that his words have no power over her whereas hers drive him out of his mind until he loses his senses and speech entirely.

Whereas madness is the effect of Katherine's speech upon her pagan interlocutor, Juliana and Margaret describe their persecutors' journey as one into bestiality. Like Maxentius, Olibrius goes "nearly out of his mind with rage" at Margaret's speech, but Margaret also refers to him as a "heathen hound" and a "raging lion" (18.5, 14.28, 14.33). After Juliana's prayer produces an angel that quenches the fire that surrounds her,

heo stod unhurt þer amidheppes heriende ure healent wið heheste steuene. þe reue seh hit acwenct ant bigon to cwakien. se grundliche him gromede. ant set te balefule beast. as eauer ei iburst bar. þet grunde his tuskes. ant fen on to feamin. ant gristbeatien grisliche up o þis meoke meiden. (666-672)

She stood unhurt there amidst it, praising our Lord with the loudest of voices. The reeve saw it quenched and began to shake, violently angered, and the baleful beast sat like any enraged boar that ground his tusks, and began to fiercely grind his teeth at the meek maiden.

Olibrius's attempt to harm Juliana's body not only fails, but also produces her fulfilled prayer and praise of God "in the loudest of voices." In the meantime, Eleusius can muster only animal noises—a grinding of tusks, gnashing of teeth, and foaming at the mouth. Juliana has kept her head and words about her while robbing her persecutor of speech and reason, making him descend to the level of an animal. Attempting to silence the virgins first through persuasion and ultimately through torture, their persecutors instead meet this fate themselves. The words of the virgin prove powerful enough to turn them into madmen or enraged beasts without speech or reason.

Katherine's most dramatic and powerful speech occurs, like Margaret's and Juliana's, at a moment when her bodily integrity is threatened. Maxentius designs a special torture, just for her. The narrative lavishes attention on it, forcing the reader to contemplate the effect it

will have on Katherine's body. Maxentius's advisors instruct him to make ready four wheels, and "let the spokes and rims be pierced through with iron spikes, so that the points and the iron nails pierce through very sharply, and stick out far on the other side, so that all the wheels are spitted through with spikes keener than any knife, row on row" (701-704). The sheer number of words for the hardware that gives this wheel its torturous power—spikes, points, nails, spikes, knife—all weaponry which works through insertion in the body—attests to this machine's penetrative power. In response, Katherine prays "full loud with her heart, but with a quiet voice" that the wheel might shatter to splinters (721-722).

þis wes unneaðe iseit þet an engel ne com, wið ferlich afluht fleoninde adunewart, ant draf þerto dunriht as a þunres dune ant duste hit a swuch dunt þet hit bigon to cleaterin al ant tocleouen, tobursten ant tobreken, as þah hit were bruchel gles, ba þe treo ant tet irn; ant ruten forð wið swuch rune þe stucchen of [baðe], bimong ham as ha stoden ant seten þerabuten, þet ter weren isleine of þet awariede uolc fowr þusent fulle. (726-733)

This was scarcely said when an angel came, with a sudden flight flying downward, and drove right into it like a thunder clap and gave it such a dint that it began all to clatter and split apart, to burst and to break, as though it were brittle glass, both the wood and the iron; and the pieces of both [the wood and iron] flew off with such force among the people that stood and sat around there, that of those wicked folk were slain fully four thousand.

Katherine is unharmed, while the weaponry designed to tear her body apart pierces the surrounding people. She remains un-penetrated while her prayer effects four thousand deaths. Her intact body demonstrates the total ineffectiveness of her persecutor's speech in the face of hers. Maxentius gives an order, and Margaret responds with a prayer. The prayer is successful; the order is not. The intact virgin body teaches a lesson about which kinds of speech have power, and how.

Like Margaret, Katherine is able to overturn the power of her persecutor's speech because she prays for this power. Her prayer is shown to be marvelously effective, just as the

author of the *Ancrene Wisse* promises his readers theirs will be if they follow a Marian model for effective speech by protecting their bodies from defilement. Margaret asks for just this kind of speech, praying, “give me hope of salvation, so that my prayer will through-pierce heaven” (54.21-22). This speech, which pierces the vault of heaven, proves to be powerful in other ways as well, worming its way into her persecutor’s body to drive him out of his mind. Although in these moments, we are witnessing a prayer, a private address of the soul to god rather than an explicitly public speech act, Mary’s example in voicing the Magnificat suggests that the personal communication between the soul and god can be an occasion of teaching. These lives allow us to overhear the virgins’ prayers, transforming them into a public act that partially collapses the distinctions between explicitly public teaching and private exemplarity.

The lives of *Katherine*, *Margaret*, and *Juliana* show virgin martyrs fully in command of eloquent speech, and represent the virgins’ deaths as unambiguously triumphant martyrdoms, victories for Christ against the devil. But the hagiographers’ attempts to proscribe and delimit the possible meanings of the saints’ lives and deaths cannot entirely elide the possibility that in exposing the naked virgin body for public apprehension, “Christian clerical narrators and authors are posed between voyeurism and witness and are not themselves free of the ambivalences informing the actions of the pagan torturers.”<sup>57</sup> They are caught in the paradox of virgin martyr hagiography, whereby the exposure of the virgin body calls its very existence *as* virginal into question. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly characterizes it, “chastity is best maintained by a deliberate non-play of signifiers, by absence and silence. However, hagiography, in which the virgin is made subject to narration, which is inherently

---

<sup>57</sup>Wogan-Browne, “The Virgin’s Tale,” in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and L. Johnson (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

unstable and mutable, forces the virgin into play, and it is motion, not stasis, that puts her at risk.”<sup>58</sup> As is the case with the body of the anchoress, imagined as inherently vulnerable to penetration by sin with any opening of windows or orifices, the purity of the virgin martyr would best be served were she never put “into play” at all, if she remained, as the *Ancrene Wisse* imagines the ideal anchoress, walled off from the world. But like the anchoress’s, the virgin martyr’s meaning inheres in her role at the center of a Christian community, a status that necessitates her public display.

The exposure of the naked female body that occurs in the saints’ lives of the Katherine group is especially explicit, and, at times, seems deliberately sexualized. At one point in the *Life of Juliana*, the text subtly connects torture to rape. Eleusius has commanded boiling molten brass to be poured over Juliana

þæt hit urne endelong hire leofliche lich adun to hire helen. Me dude al as he het. Ah þe worldes wealdent þæt wiste sein iuhan his ewangeliste unhurt iþe ueat of wallinde eoli þer he wes i don in. þæt ase hal com up þrof. as he wes hal meiden. þe ilke liues lauerd. wiste him unwemmet. his brud of þe bres þæt wes wallinde. (257-264)

so that it ran headlong down her lovely body to her heels. Men did exactly as he ordered. But the world’s ruler, that kept Saint John his Evangelist unhurt in the vat of boiling oil he was put in, so that he came up as whole thereof as he was a whole maiden; this same lord kept his bride for himself, unsullied by the boiling brass.

The mention of Juliana’s “lovely body” immediately draws the reader’s attention to the erotic nature of this scene, with the detail of the molten brass’s path “headlong down her lovely body” encouraging the visualization of this nude body in its entirety. These details make the torture a stand-in for rape, and accordingly the “rescue” of Juliana is her “husband’s” preservation of his bride’s virgin body “for himself, unsullied.” This passage from *Juliana* is simply but one example of the sexualization of torture in these lives. No torture scene passes

---

<sup>58</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 61.

without mention of the maiden's "soft lovely body" or "beautiful flesh," which is often on display as the virgin has been stripped stark naked. A virgin martyr passion requires torture and martyrdom to be performed on the virgin's body, but with this exposure of her body comes the possibility that both the characters in the story and its readers will misinterpret this body's meaning, transforming a martyrdom into a peep show.

But this misreading is not inevitable, and again, the Marian commentary tradition on the *Song of Songs* offers a model for the redirection of the erotic gaze. As Honorius interprets one of the *Song's* most explicitly erotic passages in his *Sigillum*, he transforms it into a *blazon* for the Virgin Mary:

The joints of your thighs are like jewels, that is to say, your thighs are fortunate from which comes forth the precious pearl, namely, Christ the jewel beyond price, who is the garden of all creation. They are made by the hand of a skillful workman. The workman is God the Father, his hand is the Son, through whom he made all things, through whom also the incarnation was brought about. Your navel, meaning blessed be your navel, on which hung the Son of God. As a shield hangs from a nail, so the little baby hangs from her breasts. . . [Your belly is like a heap of wheat.] Blessed is your womb, in which lay the only begotten Son of God incarnate. . . Your neck is blessed, because often the arms of the Son of God embraced it. (Col. 513)

This passage encourages the reader to imagine the Virgin Mary's body in great detail, to focus first on "the joints of her thighs," then her belly, breasts, womb and neck. Yet each of these body parts is catalogued according to its relationship to Christ: the thighs are the place from which he entered the world, the breasts that from which he received nourishment, the womb his resting place, and the neck the pillar to which he clung. Honorius re-writes the inherently sexual gaze of the *Song of Songs* into a gaze that reads the Virgin body only in relation to Christ. In doing so, he also transforms the romance convention of the *blazon* into a vehicle of revelation, proving that the erotic gaze can be re-shaped to become a Christian one.

The generic conventions of virgin martyr hagiography enact a similar transformation of the romance genre, detailing the fate of a marriage-eligible virgin and her heroic bridegroom. In this case, of course, the heroine's virginity and beauty signify her status as a bride of Christ, rather than as a marriage prospect for an earthly man. The saints' lives of the Katherine group make clear that this sort of genre-borrowing and transformation is operative. When Eleusius first visits Juliana in her father's home, he feels himself "wounded deep in his heart with the darts shot by love" (35-36). A later passage is even more specific about the effect Juliana has on him:

As he biseh ant biheold hire lufsume leor lilies ilicnesse ant rudi ase rose. ant under hire nebscheft al se freoliche ischapet. weorp a sic as a with þet sare were i wundet. His heorte feng to heaten ant his meari mealten þe rawen rahten of luue þurh each lið. of his limmes. ant inwi bearnde of brune swa ant cwakede as of calde. þet him þuhte in his þonc. þet ne bede he iþe worlt nanes cunnes blisse. bute hire bodi ane. to wealden hire wið wil efter þet he wolde. (195-204)

When he saw and beheld her lovely face, in a lily's likeness and ruddy as a rose, and all below her face so beautifully shaped, he heaved a sigh like a man that has been sorely wounded. His heart began to grow hot and his marrow to melt. The rays of love shot through each bone of his limbs, and inside he burned as from a fire and shivered as from cold. It seemed to him that he desired no kind of happiness but her body alone, to overpower her with his will however he wanted.

This passage inserts the romance convention of the "arrow of love"—traditionally shot through the eyes of the lover at the sight of the beloved, until it reaches his heart—to describe Eleusius's response to the sight of Juliana's body.<sup>59</sup> Were this tale an ordinary romance, Eleusius's response to the sight of Juliana's would be entirely appropriate. But although Eleusius does not know it yet, this story is of an altogether different type, in which the eligible maidens take no delight in "frivolous games or foolish songs," nor do they "long for any love songs or love stories" (SK263). Unaware of the type of story in which they are

---

<sup>59</sup> Wogan-Browne has written extensively on the generic intersection of romance with hagiography. See, for example, "The Virgin's Tale."

participating, the pagan persecutor continues to attempt to act the role of the hero of romance by possessing the virgin's body for himself and, when thwarted, attempts to demonstrate his power over this body by exposing it to public shame and torture.

It is at the moment when her body is on display that the virgin martyr must engage in Marian speech, must step forward to explain the meaning of her body, and what has happened to it, to the "heretics" who defile or debase it by attempting to explain it in the world's terms, rather than God's. When Olibrius orders Margaret's body hung up high and burned with candles "in reward for her mockery," Margaret prays, "God, set my heart on fire with the sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit, the comfort of humanity, and let the flame of your love blaze in my loins," transforming what Olibrius intends as a punishment into further envelopment by God's love (*SM302*). Similarly, she responds to Olibrius's attempt to drown her by praying that the water become "a bath of joy and baptism at the font-stone, the blessing and light of eternal salvation" (*SM303*). Olibrius continues to insist that he is giving Margaret a shameful death, but before the watching and listening crowd, Margaret proclaims it divine rapture, baptism, and finally, martyrdom.

The crowds that surround the virgin martyrs misread what is happening to the virgin bodies as well, willing as they are at first to believe their leader's interpretation of the spectacle. Their response to the torture becomes the occasion for the virgin to explain the true meaning of her bodily suffering. The crowds who surround Margaret pity her and mourn at the sight of her "soft lovely body so terribly torn" and lament the beauty she will lose because of her "misbelief," begging her to give in to Olibrius. Margaret rebukes them as "wretches" and "fools," asking "what are you hoping for? If my body is torn apart, my soul will rest with the just: sorrow and the body's pain are healers of the soul" (*SM292*). The



onlookers to Margaret's torture are concerned primarily with the loss of her beauty, signaling their focus only upon her body. In response, Margaret asserts the presence of a soul that receives a reward because of what happens to that body, testifying to the relationship between soul and body even, or perhaps especially, as she prepares to leave her body behind.

Margaret, Juliana, and Katherine all speak the meaning of their bodily tortures to their persecutors, declaring them to be the means by which they become triumphant, rather than shamed or punished. To the pagans' attempts to possess them, they continue to declare that their bodies belong to another lover, Christ, who will dispose of it as he sees fit, echoing Mary's response to the angel Gabriel in scripture: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the lord. Be it done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

The saints' insistence on control over the meaning of their own bodies and their suffering demonstrates how, in these lives, "the locus of exemplarity becomes the way the virgin martyr controls and shifts the meaning of her tortures to render herself transcendent."<sup>60</sup> Sarah Salih reads these lives as modeling a "Christian interpretative process," and remarks that they teach anchoresses "to analyse the spectacles of their own bodies as well as those of the saints, and to read them as virginal."<sup>61</sup> But these tales do more than teach the anchoress how to be a good *reader* of her body—they also teach her how to speak its meaning, how to fracture and upset the prurient gaze of a sometimes hostile audience of onlookers by constantly asserting and re-asserting her body's relationship to Christ.

## Conclusion

---

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Innes-Parker, "Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic 'Rape' in the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group," *Women's Studies* 24 (1995): 205-217, 214.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 82.

Female virginity is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Recent critical literature on medieval virginity focuses upon how the female body must testify to this often slippery, unquantifiable state. “Even at the point at which virginity seems to be most visible, most susceptible to verification,” writes Kathleen Coyne Kelly, “it successfully evades any conclusive confirmation.”<sup>62</sup> Salih characterizes virginity as sited in the interaction between body and spirit, rather than exclusively located in *either* the physically intact hymen or perfect purity of soul.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the virgin body in discourse bears the weight of attesting to a state that represents the interaction of the body and the spirit, but is only available for public apprehension and confirmation upon the surface of the body itself. But it cannot bear this weight alone, for physical virginity, by itself, is not exemplary. “Women were praised for giving up their generative potential only when their energies were thereby redirected toward something deemed to be productive in spiritual terms . . . Only when virginity was consecrated as a sacrifice to God and was seen to represent total dedication of the self to God, body and soul, was it considered to be a spiritual advantage.”<sup>64</sup> The consequence of this ambiguity for the representation of the virgin martyr is that a public declaration on the part of the virgin is necessary to explain and inscribe the meaning of her body. A moment always arrives during which she must publicly claim her identity, a moment “in which for all women the display and disposal of ‘maydenhede’ is pivotal: the ‘authenticated’ virgin (or honorary virgin) passes briefly through ‘public’ space as bride.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity*, ix.

<sup>63</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Bos, “The Literature of Spiritual Formation,” in *Listen Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Constant J Mews (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 208.

<sup>65</sup> Wogan-Browne, “The Virgin’s Tale,” 169.

Virgin martyr legends complicate this passage through public space by surrounding the virgin with an audience that does not necessarily agree with her chosen disposal of ‘maydenhede,’ heightening the importance of the expression by which, like the first dedicated virgin, the martyr declares herself to be “the handmaid of the lord.”

Like the virgin martyr, the medieval anchoress, too, occupied a highly visible position at the center of her community even as she remained enclosed by the walls of her cell.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne describes anchoresses as “public figures of enclosure at the centre of patronage, client, and community networks: their solitude is the very reverse of private and takes its meaning from its public but veiled existence in the middle of a community.”<sup>66</sup>

Hyper-aware of this community gaze and vigilant to protect the anchoress from exposure to censure, the *Ancrene Wisse* attempts to regulate both the visible and invisible aspects of the anchoress’s life—both body and soul—so that the anchoress will not only *be* spiritually whole, but will also *appear* spiritually whole to her community, with her carefully-regulated, un-penetrated body serving as testimony to the purity within even as it produces it. As a force that breaks through the body’s boundary, speech is suspect and problematic for the *Ancrene Wisse*.

But the *Ancrene Wisse*’s imprecations against speech are not absolute. To the anchoress who must speak, the text offers two possibilities: Eve, or Mary. Eve, we are told, held a long discussion with the serpent, Satan, whereas Mary “told the angel no tale” (2.12.288). Eve’s speech is the type that breaches the body’s barriers, creating holes in the spirit that threaten to irretrievably scatter the self. Mary’s speech is produced entirely by

---

<sup>66</sup> Wogan-Browne, “Virginité Always Comes Twice: Virginité and Profession, Virginité and Romance,” in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, ed. Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 368.

Christ, the only force that has the paradoxical ability to penetrate the body and soul's barriers without causing a breach. In the *Song of Songs* commentary tradition, Maryian speech is also speech which is rendered necessary by misinterpretation of the meaning of Mary's body. In the face of heresy that denies Mary's explicitly bodily relationship to Christ, Mary has no choice but to leave her seclusion—to control the meaning of her body by speaking its meaning before the entire world.

To anchoresses, the Marian model offers the possibility of speech without inevitable defilement. Just as *Ancrene Wisse*, *Hali Meithhad*, and *Sawles Warde* uphold the possibility that the body's senses may be re-directed toward God and become the means to greater knowledge of him, rather than breaches in the body and soul through which sin can enter, the model of Marian speech suggests that speech can be a vehicle of Christ's revelation rather than a vulnerability for the virgin. The lives of *Katherine*, *Juliana*, and *Margaret* display this model in action, telling the stories of virgins whose bodies invite an in-dwelling by Christ that enables eloquent, theologically-correct, and powerful speech and whose violent martyrdoms require, even *demand* an explanation of their meaning before an audience who misreads them. By speaking the meaning of their bodies as they understand it—insisting that they are not characters in a typical medieval romance in need of rescue from a tyrant's torture, that, instead, their bodies belong to Christ and their bodily suffering is their victory—they transform Eve's "tale" into the virgin martyr *passio*. The opportunity that this model offers for anchoresses and the holy women who come after them is that they may play a role in their own representation, and especially in the representation of their bodies, before an audience that demands an explanation.

## Chapter 3

### SCRIBE OF MARY:

#### PRIVACY AND PREACHING IN THE *SECOND NUN'S PROLOGUE AND TALE*

*It may be suggested that (on some occasions at least) she is reminiscent of those creatures of the schoolmen's nightmares, the auditrix, doctrix, and praedicatrix.*<sup>1</sup>

At the end of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, the virgin martyr Cecilia sits in a bathtub full of boiling water surrounded by her Christian converts, her head literally dangling by a thread. "Thre dayes lyved she in this torment," the narrator tells us, "and never cessed hem the faith to teche; / that she hadde fostred, hem she gan to preche" (537 – 539).<sup>2</sup> These three lines succinctly capture a narrative progression undergirding all 433 lines of the tale: beginning by teaching, Cecilia "fosters," or "nourishes" her children, developing them into a congregation of Christian converts ready to receive God's word. The progression from teaching to preaching, from fostering children to preaching a sermon before a congregation, is one I argue Chaucer dramatizes in *The Second Nun's Tale* as Cecilia transforms from privately devout virgin to proselytizing wife to—finally—preacher before a congregation of Christians. By detailing this transformation, Chaucer forces his readers to contend with the contemporary controversy over the proper definition of preaching: Who can preach? What separates preaching from teaching? As it is portrayed by Chaucer, Cecilia's life and

---

<sup>1</sup> Alastair Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 249.

<sup>2</sup> Citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

martyrdom suggest that the line between the two is not as well-defined as ecclesiastical authorities would like it to be.

Critical consensus surrounding the *Second Nun's Tale* is that Chaucer's Cecilia is a particularly fearless and outspoken speaker and teacher—but also a preacher, as Chaucer's use of the term twice where the Franciscan abridgement refers to her only as “teacher” makes clear. In light of its historical late fourteenth century context, in which support of women's preaching made one vulnerable to charges of heresy, Alcuin Blamires asks whether this is “a doctrinally provocative dimension to Cecilia's story, which Chaucer knowingly keeps provocative simply by retaining the verb ‘preach’ and its full pedagogical context.”<sup>3</sup> For both Lynn Staley and Sherry Reames, the answer is an emphatic yes. Both critics allege that Chaucer intended his readers to see contemporary relevance in the tale, particularly in Cecilia's decision to speak truth to power.<sup>4</sup> In fact, writes Staley, Cecilia “not only presents a challenge to authority (something she shares with many saints), she offers a new ordering of hierarchies far more threatening than any of the Wife of Bath's solutions to contemporary relationships.”<sup>5</sup> For these critics, it is not such a stretch to see Chaucer's Cecilia as what Alastair Minnis, referring to the Wife of Bath, calls “those creatures of the schoolmen's nightmares.”

Thus Chaucer's use of the word ‘preche’ to describe Cecilia's “bisy” activity has been a subject of much critical inquiry, as have the lengths to which Chaucer went to emphasize the subversive aspects of her legend, particularly her confrontation with secular

---

<sup>3</sup> Alcuin Blamires, “Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints' Lives.” *Viator* 26 (1995), 151.

<sup>4</sup> See Sherry Reames, “The Sources of Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*.” *Modern Philology* 76.2 (1978): 111 – 135.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Staley Johnson, “Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent.” *Studies in Philology* 89.3 (Summer 1992), 322.

authority. But those who focus upon Cecilia's subversive status sometimes fail to remark upon just how much of Cecilia's proselytizing activity occurs in the space to which women were *supposed* to confine themselves—the domestic, private, and familial. In contrast to the Wife of Bath, whose discourse takes place on pilgrimage (which Susan Signe Morrison has argued is itself a public performance) before a large mixed audience of pilgrims, the great bulk of Cecilia's instruction occurs in her home among family members.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it is to describe Cecilia's private instruction of her brother-in-law that Chaucer first uses the term "preche." Noting this context, Blamires asks, "would the prospect of female preaching here have been felt to be legitimated by its essentially 'private' context?"<sup>7</sup> Also focused upon the extent to which Cecilia's spirituality manifests itself privately, Peter Fields reads Cecilia as a sort of proto-humanist, and the *Second Nun's Tale* as "the life of one who has successfully reconstituted religion upon the private and individual plane."<sup>8</sup>

This chapter unites the insights of both groups of critics—that is, those who read Cecilia as a subversive public figure, and those who focus upon her private devotions and domestic ministrations. I argue that the very point of Chaucer's Cecilia legend is to collapse distinctions between these two spheres. For though Cecilia's activities may begin privately, they very quickly take on *public* implications, as Almachius, in particular, seems to understand. The subversiveness of the *Second Nun's Tale* comes not only from Cecilia's public preaching, but from the way in which her *private* instruction of her husband, brother-in-law, and spiritual "fostres" has dramatic effects upon the public, institutionalized church.

---

<sup>6</sup> Susan Signe-Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Blamires, "Women and Preaching," 151.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Fields, "Chaucer's *Cecile* as Christian-Humanist Disputer of the Sacred." *In Geardagum: Essays on Old and Middle English Literature* 15 (1994), 38.

The tale therefore inserts itself into contemporary controversies over the exact meaning of preaching. In an attempt to exclude women from the public preaching office, church theologians of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries had attempted to exclude women from the public preaching office by drawing a clear distinction between public and private teaching, sanctioning the former as the domain of church officials. With the *Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer collapses this distinction, showing how easily a house can become a church, and a female teacher, a preacher.

This reading of the *Second Nun's Tale* makes a persuasive argument in favor of including it as part of the marriage debate. By including a married saint in his collection, rather than a more “straightforward” virgin martyr legend like that of Margaret, Juliana, Katherine, Agnes, Agatha, or Lucy, Chaucer shows how what happens within a marriage and a family can have a marked effect on the institutions to which that family pledges allegiance. Though this insight might have seemed fairly banal to a pre-Benedictine reform audience, in which “queens were recognized for their successful work as ‘domestic proselytizers’[as] . . . part of a concerted ‘public’ strategy of conversion,”<sup>9</sup> Chaucer writes long after a ninth-century shift has changed the landscape of female sanctity. As Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg remarks,

these shifts began in the ninth century and brought with them a new style of female sanctity. Many of the saints' lives now singled out for praise exceptional domestic skills. They lauded and sacralized the expertise of pious women in household management, domestic arts, and motherhood [. . .] The intersection of the public with the private spheres had encouraged the female exercise of power: this convergence was now replaced by an increasingly rigid separation of public and domestic spheres of influence. (117, 119)<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, “Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100,” in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



*The Second Nun's Tale* shows how the conversations that begin in a married couple's bedchamber reverberate throughout the realm and invigorate the Church; what is ostensibly private or domestic is in fact political and public. It collapses the post-Benedictine reform separation of public and domestic "spheres of influence." Moreover, it does so largely by exploiting the contemporary controversy over the meaning of preaching.

Once the *Second Nun's Tale* establishes Cecilia as a successful preacher, it is able to further delineate the relationship of the female body to authoritative speech. Much remarked upon in the critical literature on the *Second Nun's Tale* has been the elision of much of the voyeuristic, quasi-pornographic focus upon the saint's body as compared with other versions of the legend and other virgin martyr lives. But it is not just the elision of the scurrilous details of Cecilia's public torture that contribute to this effect: also totally absent from this tale is any sense of the audience we see so often in saints' legends, particularly during the climactic encounter with the pagan persecutor. In legends that include such an audience, the onlookers to the saints' torture function both as a source of potential violation in that the saint must appear naked before the public, and as a built-in "wrong response" for the saint to correct, thereby rewriting the audience's response to her body and martyrdom on *her* terms. *Not* having this audience means that the saint is less "on display" both inter- and intra-textually, since without an audience within the tale, there is also less voyeurism for the readers to enjoy.

But the body is not wholly absent from the *Second Nun's Tale*: it inheres in particular in the way in which the *Tale* portrays the conversion from idolatry to Christianity as both motivated by and rewarded in the senses, particularly the sense of sight. Potential converts are led to faith by a desire to see and rewarded for this faith by heightened vision. What the

*Prologue* calls the “contagion” of the body becomes the pleasures of faith, still experienced through the body. Cecilia’s faith also manifests in her virginity, which various figures of speech throughout the tale link to her fruitful speech, thus demonstrating the link between virginity and speech that I have traced in my first two chapters whereby the saint’s practice of virginity makes her an ideal conduit for God’s word on earth. In the context of fourteenth-century preaching manuals, however, the saint’s ability to directly channel God’s word takes on new significance. In these preaching manuals, the ideal preacher is one who channels God’s word with no interference from his embodiment, which makes him vulnerable to sin. In other words, the ideal preacher displaces himself to become a vessel for his message. *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, I argue, shows the Second Nun achieving this displacement by portraying herself as the scribe of words that come from another source.

The *Prologue* heightens this displacement, moreover, with the Second Nun’s lack of a represented body: She is the one of only a few pilgrims to receive no portrait in the General Prologue. I argue that the elision of the bodies of Cecilia and the Second Nun reinforces the message that these women are ideal preachers. As the reader is left without much of a sense of their particular embodiment, the characters can subsume themselves in their abstract offices of virgins and preachers, becoming conduits for God’s word. But unlike a male preacher, women like the Second Nun, who are excluded from the preaching office because of their biological sex, *must* displace themselves from their speech if they wish it to be heard. In the *Second Nun’s Prologue* and *Tale*, Chaucer demonstrates how the strategy by which women subvert prohibitions on their preaching may also be the means by which they become

*ideal* preachers—those for whom no distance exists between persona and office, for whom body and message are perfectly congruent.<sup>11</sup>

## I. Private Lessons

Early in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the Pardoner, thrilled by the utility of the Wife's explication of the "wo that is in mariage," leaps to his feet to declare her "a noble prechour in this cas" (165). In fact, as Lee Patterson has demonstrated, the Wife's speech is not a "straight" sermon, but a *sermon joyeux*: a form that uses sermon conventions to expound on a burlesque or "low" subject.<sup>12</sup> The Pardoner recognizes her use of the genre by calling the Wife a preacher. But at the same time, the Pardoner's use of the term—coupled with the Wife's skilled parody of argumentative techniques and rhetoric—subtly reminds the audience of the inherent elasticity of the concept of preaching more generally. As Spencer Leith argues in *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, "alongside the more exact sense, in Middle, as in modern, English the words 'sermon', 'preachment', and the verb 'to preach' could be used, and were used, in a general way to describe any serious admonition private as well as public, especially one to which the audience felt disinclined to listen."<sup>13</sup> The slipperiness of the concept was increasingly becoming a problem for ecclesiastical authorities at the time Chaucer wrote:

---

<sup>11</sup> Mention of the *lyf of Seynt Cecile* in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* suggests that Chaucer composed the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* sometime in the mid-1370s and assigned it to the Second Nun with only minor revisions much later. (See *The Riverside Chaucer* headnote p. 942). The argument of this chapter, however, concerns itself primarily with the interplay between *Prologue* and *Tale* rather than between this tale and others.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 304–307.

<sup>13</sup> Spencer Leith, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 118.

Radical questions were being widely ventilated—and in English, not just in Latin and within the safe, rarefied confines of the universities—that could not be ignored, questions about who in the Church was empowered to do what and on what authority [ . . . ] Soon preaching would become a contested site in the general struggle for supremacy to be waged between orthodox churchmen and their heterodox opponents.<sup>14</sup>

Aware of its status as a “contested site,” ecclesiastical authorities attempted to delimit preaching as strictly “a religious and hortatory address, customarily based upon a passage of scripture, provided one were an authorized person in an authorized place at an authorized time.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, they attempted to strictly define the content, place, time, and proper deliverer of a sermon. Yet even among Church theologians, conflict over the meaning of the term persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Particularly contentious for many theologians was the question of whether a woman was authorized to preach.

By the mid thirteenth century in Paris, increasing suspicion of autonomous sisterhoods of well-educated female religious called Beguines, combined with fears over unauthorized preaching and teaching on the part of Cathars and Waldensians, had caused a flurry of university debate on the subject of women’s preaching. These debates continued for well over a century, extending their influence the way to England and the heresy trial of Lollard Walter Brut before the Bishop of Hereford in 1391-93. Brut contended that although St Paul had indeed written that women were to learn in silence with all subjection, and were not permitted to teach, the Apostle never said they were not fully *capable* of doing so. In support of his contention, he marshaled the example of “devout virgins,” who “steadfastly preached the word of God and have converted many people while priests dared not speak a

---

<sup>14</sup> Alan Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late-Medieval England* (Dublin; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1998), 12, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Leith, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, 118.

word.”<sup>16</sup> In response to Brut’s arguments, the Harley manuscript collected treatises refuting them. The discussion of women preachers drew heavily upon arguments first advanced in Parisian universities during the thirteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

In a compilation of lectures on theological knowledge dating from 1276 – 1292, Henry of Ghent includes a *quaestio* on “whether a woman has the power to teach religious knowledge.” In keeping with the style of the *quaestio*, he first raises three arguments in support of the proposition, which he will go on to refute in the course of the argument. Referring to 1 Peter 4.8-10, “But before all things have a constant mutual charity among yourselves . . . as every man hath received grace, ministering the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of god,” Henry writes

“As one has received a gift, so employing it for one another . . .” But women sometimes receive the gift of this knowledge, therefore they ought to employ it for others—which they cannot do except by teaching. Hence Mary and Martha received different kinds of tongues with the Apostles, and one reads that they taught and preached in public, just like the Apostles. (*Utrum mulier*, Paragraph. 3)<sup>18</sup>

“Unusquisque sicut accepit gratiam in alterutrum administrantes,” sed mulieres quandoque gratiam scientie huius accipiunt, ergo aliis debent administrare, quod non possunt facere nisi docendo, ergo etc, unde Maria, et Martha cum Apostolis genera linguarum acceperunt et publice sicut Apostoli docuisse et praedicasse leguntur.

Here is a concise statement of a strong and prevalent argument in favor of women preachers: following 1 Peter 4:10, those with talents that might benefit the Christian community have an obligation to use them for this purpose. It follows that if a woman has a talent for teaching or preaching, she ought to use it. Anticipating Walter Brut by a century, Henry mentions holy

---

<sup>16</sup> *Registrum*, ed. W.W. Capes. Canterbury and York Society 20 (1916) , 345, cited in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (New York: Clarendon Press, 1992), 257-260.

<sup>17</sup> See Blamires, “Women and Preaching,” from which this discussion is largely drawn.

<sup>18</sup> *Summa* 1.11.2 from *Utrum mulier possit esse doctor seu doctrix huius scientiae*. Translated in Blamires and Marx, “Woman Not to Preach: A Disputation in British Library MS Harley 31,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993) 34 – 63.

women who have preached and are now revered by the church, combining the so-called “argument from precedent” with the “argument from moral obligation” to buttress the straw man of an argument he will proceed to knock down.

In his response to this argument, Henry of Ghent draws heavily upon Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, the strongest argument against women preachers was their condition subsequent to the fall—subjection to Adam, or men in general. Consequently, said Aquinas, women by their very natures did not possess one of the necessary prerequisites to preach: a position of authority over their audience, something he calls ‘prelacy.’ If women possessed a divine gift of knowledge, therefore, it could properly be exercised only in a private, domestic space in which the woman did not risk usurping a position of authority:

Speech may be employed in two ways: in one way privately, to one or a few, in familiar conversation, and in this respect the grace of the word may be becoming to women; in another way, publicly, addressing oneself to the whole church, and this is not permitted to women. First and chiefly, on account of the condition attaching to the female sex, whereby woman should be subject to man, as appears from Genesis 3:16. Now teaching and persuading publicly in the church belong not to subjects but to the prelates. (although men who are subjects may do these things if they be so commissioned, because their subjection is not a result of their natural sex, as it is with women, but of some thing supervening by accident). (Question 177, Article II)<sup>19</sup>

Sermone potest aliquis uti dupliciter. Uno modo, private ad unum vel paucos, familiariter colloquendo. Et quantum ad hoc, gratia sermonis potest competere mulieribus. Alio modo, publice alloquendo totam Ecclesiam. Et hoc mulieri non conceditur. Primo quidem, et principaliter, propter conditionem feminei sexus, qui debet esse subditus viro, ut patet Gen. III. Docere autem et persuadere publice in Ecclesia non pertinet ad subditos, sed ad praelatos. Magis tamen viri subditi ex commissione possunt exequi, quia non habent huiusmodi subiectionem ex naturali sexu, sicut mulieres, sed ex aliquo accidentaliter supervenienti.

---

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Christian Classics, [1920], 1981.

Aquinas withholds the privilege of public teaching from all but prelates, or those who hold a position of authority in the church. But only women are prohibited from public teaching absolutely: their subjection to authority is incontrovertible because of their sex.

Accordingly, Henry of Ghent insists that women can teach by special privilege and not *ex officio*—in other words, not in any institutionally endorsed sense—and privately, only. The Harley Manuscript goes even further than Aquinas and Henry of Ghent in setting up its argument, conceding that teaching is one of the Seven Works of Spiritual Mercy which no Christian, no matter his sex, can withhold. Yet the author of this disputation maintains that women are not to preach, only to teach privately, interpreting Matthew 6.2, “when thou dost an almsdeed, sound not a trumpet before thee,” as describing the proper manner and attitude of women teachers. Similarly, although the provincial of the White Friars, Thomas Netter (who, not incidentally, was the friar who was responsible for forbidding Margery Kempe from receiving tutelage from her mentor, Alan of Lynn) raged against the “foolish and clamorous woman” of Proverbs 9.13, whose position upon a seat he interpreted as her usurpation of a public teaching role in the “forum,” he had no problem at all with the wise teaching of Eudochia, Jerome’s friend and correspondent, because she did not presume to teach *in church*.<sup>20</sup> The insistence on the proper location of women’s teaching as extra-ecclesial might belie a concern with ordination, too: that is, a woman who teaches in a church might be usurping the place of only those who are ordained ministers. With such scholastic subtleties do the masters surmount the “argument from moral obligation” of 1 Peter 4:10 without going so far as to endorse women preachers: the assumption that when women teach

---

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Netter, *Thomae Waldensis Doctrinale Fidei Catholicae* (Farnborough, Hants, England: Gregg Press, 1967), I:628A. See also Hope Emily Allen, *Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Oxford UP for EETS, 1961) note to 6.9.

in domestic space, they do so without institutional authority and therefore, are not preaching, requires splitting hairs to construct a strict divide between private and public, home and church and especially, a strict definition of what it means to preach.

A narrow definition of preaching is precisely what the author of the *Speculum Christiani*, a mid fourteenth-century manual for the education of priests, attempts to give his readers. Defining it over and against against “techyng,” he explains

Prechyng es in a place where es clepyng to-gedyr or foluyng of pepyl in holy dayes in chyrches or other certeyn places and tymes ordeyned terto. And it longeth to hem that been ordenede ther-to, the whych haue iurediccion and auctorite, and to noon othyr. Techyng es that eche body may enforme and teche hys brothyr in euery place and in conable tyme os he seeth that it be speedful. (p. 3).<sup>21</sup>

For this author, only speech that occurs in a specific location (chyrches and other certeyn places) at a specific time (holy dayes) and under specific circumstances (when there is “clepyng to-gedyr or foluyng of pepyl”) counts as “prechyng.” Most importantly, only the speech of “hem that been ordenede ther-to,” who have the endorsement of the institutionalized church, can truly preach. Teaching is something that “eche body” (anyone) may do in any place and time that it is useful. It is also something that, in this manual, is described in terms of the family: in contrast to the more general “pepyl” that the preacher addresses, the teacher addresses “hys brothyr.” Although this word might refer to a brother in Christ rather than an immediate household member, the language employed to describe teaching removes it to the sphere of the domestic and familial.

Anxiously working to defend the preaching prerogative of only “him who is sent” by the institutionalized church, official discourse narrowly defines preaching almost out of existence. But other uses of the term, suggest a much broader definition of it, revealing that

---

<sup>21</sup> *Speculum Christiani*, Vol. 182 (London: Oxford UP for EETS, 1933), 3.



the conflict over the true meaning of the term persists throughout the middle ages. In the second decade of the thirteenth century, for example, Thomas of Chobham's *Summa Confessorum* instructed priests to encourage their female penitents to "preach" to their husbands:

Chobham envisages a woman lying in bed, in her husband's arms, talking to him softly, doing everything in her power to improve his conduct. If he is hard, merciless, and an oppressor of the poor, she should encourage him to be compassionate. If he is avaricious, she should arouse in him generosity, and secretly dispense alms from their common possessions.<sup>22</sup>

Chobham calls such women *praedicatrices*—preacheresses—a construction from the verb that is defined much more narrowly in other texts. As Minnis remarks, Chobham is obviously using the term "in a loose or metaphorical sense [. . .] there being no question whatever of the *magisterium* of preaching or teaching being usurped."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, just as the Pardoner's description of the Wife of Bath as a "noble prechour" does, Chobham's use of the term to describe the private speech between a husband and wife that might more properly be termed "counsel" reveals the many shades of meaning inherent in the word itself.

An equally expansive claim of preaching occurs in the early thirteenth-century epilogue in some manuscripts of the *Visions* of Angela of Foligno:

Know, dear ones that [Angela] is the teacher [*doctrix*] of the discipline of God and the one chosen for this work [. . .] Learn along with me that this rule, preached by the observance of our holy mother, is immortal!

The "preaching" to which the author refers here is not speech at all, but Angela's "observances"—her daily practices, presumably ones that occurred largely in private during her lifetime. The idea that a woman's private exemplary conduct might constitute a sort of preaching in its own right would doubtless fail to gain much traction among the fourteenth-

---

<sup>22</sup> Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 332.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

century writers who sought to limit the activity to a very specific set of circumstances. What these later writers are attempting to avoid is the effect that is operative in Chobham's *Summa* and the Epilogue to Angela's visions: the acknowledgement of the importance of *all* teaching about God—whether it occurs in a bedroom or through the body of a saint—to the larger church. In other words, calling these activities “preaching” acknowledges their relevance to a wider audience, creating room for even those who are not “sent” by the institutionalized church to influence its observances and doctrines. Moreover, just as it makes a preacher out of a wifely counselor or one who lives an exemplary life, it creates a wider sermon audience—a community of the faithful that is not contiguous with the walls of the church building, but might congregate anywhere—even in a private home. But this definition of preaching is too broad for many ecclesiastical authorities. Unable to completely police what occurs outside of its official institutions and beset by fears of heresy and heterodox practice, the church attempts to prevent what occurs in extra-ecclesial space from having public effect by withholding from it the official stamp of preaching.

Into this fray steps Chaucer, describing Cecilia's teaching in *The Second Nun's Tale* as “preaching.” Soon after she converts her brother-in-law, the narrator tells us, “Tho gan she hym ful bisily to preche / Of Cristes come, and of his peynes teche (342-343). Throughout her tale, Cecilia preaches “continueely” and “bisily,” ever-zealous in her pursuit of converts for the Christian faith. In her lesson to Tiburce and Valerian, she delves into theology, touching upon the Augustinian concept of the trinity and the doctrine of Christian redemptive justice that many a scholastic or cleric in Chaucer's time would have thought out of place on the lips of a woman. Yet Chaucer does not shy away from portraying his Cecilia as a learned preacher. In fact, writes Staley, Chaucer's reliance upon what Reames has termed the

“Franciscan abridgement” of the tale from lines 302 onwards, an account that drastically reduces the role of Valerian and Tiburce and gives prominence to Cecilia’s speeches, “places Cecilia center stage as the spokesperson for the Christian faith, since she emerges as the tale’s true preacher.”<sup>24</sup> In Chaucer’s hands, argues Laurel Broughton, Cecilia’s voice becomes the driving force behind the tale, one that is emphasized by the ending, in which, even after her throat is cut three times, “the indefatigable saint cannot be silenced.”<sup>25</sup> And Reames reads Chaucer’s choice of sources as suggesting that he “was particularly interested in Cecilia’s trial and the example she sets there of fearlessly proclaiming the truth to authority”—in other words, in Cecilia’s speech.<sup>26</sup> For these critics, Chaucer’s Cecilia is obviously and unequivocally a fearless public speaker—and a preacher.

I would add that she is a preacher even when her speech occurs in a bedroom or a bathtub. The significance—and potential heterodoxy—of the circumstances of Cecilia’s preaching is heightened by the tale’s marked emphasis on Cecilia’s proselytizing as private, domestic, even secret, bearing little resemblance to the public and institutionally-endorsed speech to which the author of the *Speculum Christiani* and other representatives of official church wished to limit it. The tale’s emphasis on the personal and domestic nature of Cecilia’s activities begins almost immediately with its description of Cecilia as “from hir cradel up fostred in the feith” (122). The homely term “cradel” marks Cecilia’s faith as a product of the household in which she was raised in contradistinction to any sort of public institution. At the beginning of her life, Cecilia bears Christ’s Gospel “in hir mynde” (123)

---

<sup>24</sup> David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 205.

<sup>25</sup> Laurel Broughton, “Chaucer and the Saints: Miracles and Voices of Faith,” in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. Helen Phillips (Woodbridge, England: Brewer, 2010), 115.

<sup>26</sup> Sherry Reames, “Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints: Chaucer and Later-Medieval Piety,” in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. Helen Phillips (Woodbridge, England: Brewer), 94-95.

and engages in ceaseless prayers to God, “bisekyng hym to kepe hir maydenhede” (126). At this point in her life, therefore, Cecilia’s faith is a personal activity in the sense that it is contained within and affects only her. Her identity as a Christian is literally buried under that of a proper Roman maiden. Accordingly, upon her arranged marriage to Valerian,

She, ful devout and humble in hir corage  
Under hir robe of gold, that sat ful faire,  
Hadde next hire flessch yclad hire in an haire.  
And whil the organs maden melodie,  
To God allone in herte thus sang she:  
‘O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye  
Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be.’  
And for his love that dyde upon a tree  
Every seconde and thridde day she faste  
Ay biddyng in hire orisons ful faste.  
(131 – 140)

This description of Cecilia’s piety contrasts it with the trappings of a proper Roman maiden and marriage day. The “robe of gold” she wears hides the hair shirt that testifies to her faith, while the melody of the organs drowns out the song Cecilia sings “allone in herte.” At this point, Cecilia’s public identity as a proper Roman maiden seems to bear little relation to her Christian faith, which is a primarily personal devotion that consists in the personal ascetic practices of chastity, fasting, and “orisons,” or prayer.

All that changes after the ceremony has ended and Cecilia meets her husband in the bridal chamber for the first time. Her marriage, argues Marc Glasser, “dramatically and abruptly changes Cecilia’s solitary condition and prods her from her essentially contemplative state into a life of active ‘bisynesse.’ The marriage provides a situation in which her good works or ‘bisynesse’ can touch, teach and benefit others in addition to herself.”<sup>27</sup> Reames argues that Cecilia’s status as married woman is in keeping with

---

<sup>27</sup> Marc Glasser, “Marriage and the *Second Nun’s Tale*.” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 23 (1978), 5.

Chaucer's general tendency to "give us saints without much institutional power, saints who were officially subordinates to their husbands as well as to their fathers, higher secular authorities, and all clergy" a demonstration of the paradoxical spiritual influence of apparent "lowliness."<sup>28</sup> But, following Glasser, I argue that Cecilia's marriage also provides Chaucer with the opportunity emphasize the way in which an individual's private devotions have consequences far beyond the bedchamber.

Cecilia's chastity, of course, directly affects Valerian, who no doubt expects to share a bed with his new wife. And share a bed they do, but the activity that occurs there is far from what Valerian is expecting. When Cecilia goes to bed "with hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere,"

... Pryvely to hym she seyde anon  
'O sweete and wel biloved spouse deere,  
Ther is a conseil and ye wolde it heere,  
Which that right fayn I wolde unto yow seye,  
So that ye swere ye shul it nat biwreye.  
(142 – 147)

Cecilia's first proselytizing activity occurs "pryvely," in the confines of the bedchamber. She describes what she is about to tell her husband as "a conseil," a term that refers to "counsel, advice, instruction," but also "a secret, private matter."<sup>29</sup> This use of the term to describe Cecilia's teaching continues throughout the tale: Pope Urban praises Christ as the "sower of chaast conseil" in Cecilia, while the angel that rewards the young couple with crowns praises Valerian for yielding to Cecilia's "good conseil" (192, 233). Instruction in the Christian faith is thereby equated with secrecy and privacy in the *Second Nun's Tale*, a connection further reinforced by its location at this particular moment in that most private of spaces, the marriage bed. Cecilia's manner of address to her husband at this moment,

---

<sup>28</sup> Reames, "Mary, Sanctity, and Prayers to Saints," 95-96.

<sup>29</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, "conseil," 5a and 8a.

moreover, is not that of a teacher to a student, but a wife to her “sweete and wel biloved spouse deere.” We are not far here from Thomas of Chobham’s bedroom scene, in which the wife clasps her husband in her arms in the marriage bed as she prods him to good Christian behavior with sweet blandishments.

And in fact, Chaucer’s use of the term “conseil” to describe Cecilia’s teaching aligns it with both Thomas of Chobham’s version of wifely instruction and the role proper to wives at this time period—of wise domestic counselors to their husbands—that Chobham’s example draws on. Discussing the context for another example of Chaucerian feminine counsel—Prudence’s advice in *Melibee*—Carolyn Collette describes how Chaucer’s French source for the tale, the *Ménagier de Paris*, characterizes Melibeus and Prudence as “an illustration of ‘how that you shall be wise when your husband beareth him foolishly, as young and simple folks often do, and that you should gently and wisely draw him away from his follies [. . .] [because] it behoveth good ladies, subtly, cautiously and gently, to counsel and restrain their husbands from the follies and silly dealing whereunto they seem them drawn and tempted.’”<sup>30</sup> In some ways, Cecilia’s “conseil” resembles the descriptions in Chobham and the *Ménagier de Paris*: Cecilia provides triple “blandishments” in calling her husband “sweete and wel biloved spouse deere;” she proceeds gently and unaggressively, asking her husband’s permission to speak. Once she speaks, however, the similarities end. Cecilia is not just, or not only, attempting to affect her converts’ *behavior*, but to make them understand and accept a particular set of beliefs and doctrines. To do so she must go far beyond the gentle correction Thomas of Chobham envisioned as the proper subject for a wife addressing her husband, into the realm of basic theology.

---

<sup>30</sup> Carolyn Collette, “Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*.” *The Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995): 422, citing *Le Ménagier de Paris* (trans. Power), 188.

Cecilia's foray into this realm occurs as she attempts to convert her brother-in-law, Tiburce, who is a somewhat more skeptical and demanding potential convert than Valerian. Struck by the contradiction between Cecilia's insistence on a single God and her mention of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Tiburce demands an explanation. Cecilia replies:

'Right as a man hath sapiences three –  
Memorie, engyn, and intellect also –  
So in o beynge of divinitee,  
Thre persones may ther right wel be.'  
Tho gan she hym ful bisily to preche  
Of Cristes come, and of his peynes teche,  
And manye pointes of his passioun;  
How Goddes Sone in this world was withholde  
To doon mankynde pleyn remissioun,  
That was ybounde in synne and cares colde.  
(338 – 347)

Here Cecilia engages with two important theological arguments: one, the concept of the Trinity, the other, the doctrine of remission of mankind's sins through Christ's sacrifice. To explain the Trinity, she relies upon complicated Augustinian theology upon which I touched in my first chapter: the idea that the interaction of three mental faculties—memory, understanding, and will—is one of the models apprehensible to humans that closely approximates the relationship and workings of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in Trinity. The doctrine of “pleyn remissioun” was also a complicated one. This doctrine, which grappled with how to reconcile mankind's redemption from sin with God's absolute justice, taught that Jesus's assumption of a human form made him an acceptable proxy for humankind in the drama of divine retribution. Referring to it as one of the many “poyntes of [Christes] passioun” Cecilia discusses further marks this instruction as somewhat scholarly: one definition of “poynt” is as a subject of inquiry or argument; scholars, for example, might answer one another's “poyntes” and prove their own. Yet at this moment we are not in a

university, a pulpit, or even the town square. Rather, Tiburce, driven by divine powers to intrude upon his brother's honeymoon, takes his instruction in the tenets of Christianity in the privacy of Cecilia and Valerian's bedchamber.

Concerning another, rather similar bedroom scene, that occurring between the "loathly lady" and her reluctant husband in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Alastair Minnis reflects upon how that lady transcends her traditional role of *magistra amoris* to reveal herself a master of teachings with an altogether different origin and reach, remarking that the loathly lady's learned words on true *nobilitas* "transcend the private, domestic, and 'familial' arrangements which William of Aragon had seen as defining the sphere within which women could achieve their gendered *nobilitas*. For they have relevance in the wider world, not merely in the 'economic' arena (in Aristotelian terms, i.e., the world of familial and household management)."<sup>31</sup> In much the same way, Cecilia's instruction of her brother-in-law concerns itself not with matters of household management, nor does her bedroom ministrations to her husband seek only to correct foolish *behavior*. Rather, it pushes the two men to accept an entirely new set of doctrines. Accepting them, moreover, constitutes an entire reshaping of their public identities from pagan to Christian just as the loathly lady's instruction of *her* husband asks him to acknowledge the roots of his nobility "nat for oure eldres for hir old richesse" but from Christ (1118). In both cases, Chaucer stages a bedroom scene bait-and-switch: a woman begins by seeming to offer "conseil" in the *Ménagier de Paris's* sense of the term but in fact offers instruction in doctrines "with such moral challenge and universal potency that [. . .] [the standard distinction between private and

---

<sup>31</sup> Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 331.



public is] put under considerable pressure.”<sup>32</sup> And Chaucer shows his hand even more plainly in *The Second Nun’s Tale* by using three terms—conseil, teche, and preche—to describe what happens in Cecilia and Valerian’s bedchamber, drawing our attention to the porousness of the boundaries between those terms, to how easily what might look on the surface like private “conseil” among family members transforms into religious instruction with universal application. In other words, argues the tale, it is not as easy as ecclesiastical authorities would have us believe to draw clear distinctions between preaching and teaching, church and home, or bedroom and pulpit.

Yet what this *Tale* dramatizes in addition to the tenuous boundary between private and public is the evolution of an interior faith, contained in the “mynde” of a single individual, into a larger movement that eventually has important consequences for the institutionalized church. The private, in other words, can never *really* be private, or at least not for long: no sooner has Cecilia taken a husband than she is converting him. Her personal chastity demands it, revealing how this inwardly-oriented ascetic practice, in particular, is in fact a wholly social choice. Emphasizing how Cecilia’s private faith has an effect on the church as a whole, the *Tale* lavishes a significant number of lines—about eighty in what is only a 553-line tale—on Urban and Valerian’s reception of baptism at the hands of Pope Urban, the representative of the institutionalized church. Critics have commented upon how the figure of Urban seems frail, feeble, even “feminized” by *The Second Nun’s Tale*. John C Hirsh, for example, comments that “the appearance of Pope Urban and the old man, one of the few direct appearances of the sacred order in Chaucer, takes place away from the trappings of power, and is deliberately stripped of the usual associations of rank and

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 339.

gender.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Tiburce seems almost surprised that Cecilia expects him to take his baptism from the man

‘That is so ofte dampned to be deed  
And woneth in halkes alwey to and fro,  
And dar nat ones putte forth his heed.’  
(309-311)

The picture of Urban here is of a feeble, furtive fugitive whose dwelling in “halkes” “to and fro” seems almost aimless. Urban does not dare to show himself for fear of being “ybrend” (318). This posture contrasts with Cecilia’s, who a few lines later “boldely” scorns the overvaluation of this earthly existence and counsels her converts to forego dread of death (319-322). The marked contrast leads Janemarie Luecke to characterize the male authority figures in the tale as stripped of their physical vigor, which “on the whole is attached rather to Cecilia.”<sup>34</sup> The institutionalized church in the tale does indeed seem stripped of its power, reliant upon Cecilia’s success at proselytizing for its growth, its role confined to making this growth official by conferring the sacrament of baptism upon her Christian “fostres.” By the end of Cecilia’s life, the Church has grown immeasurably not through the ministrations of an emasculated pope, but because of something that began in a woman’s bedchamber. The boundary between the private and the public has dissolved, and the power of a woman’s faith to shape the larger church is revealed.

A faith attested and taught “pryvely,” in the privacy of an ordinary home, could be threatening to the institutional church, as events that transpired in the decades after Chaucer was writing make clear. In the 1420s and 30s, several Lollards were brought to trial in

---

<sup>33</sup> John C Hirsh, “The *Second Nun’s Tale*” in *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge, England; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 163.

<sup>34</sup> Janemarie Luecke. “Three Faces of *Cecilia*: Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*,” *American Benedictine Review* 33.4 (1984), 341.

Norwich. At issue in these trials was not only the content of the Lollards' beliefs, but their holding of "conventicles," or schools, in the privacy of their own homes. In her abjuration, Hawisia Moon, who regularly held conventicles in her "cheeshous chambr" confessed that in "our houshold," referring to the home she shared with her husband, she "receyved and herbwed" "divers heretics," and that in these places she "herd, conceyved, lerned and reported" her Lollard beliefs.<sup>35</sup> As part of their abjurations, the Norwich Lollards had not only to renounce their heresy, but to renounce the secrecy associated with it and agree to practice their faith openly, like other Christians.

My point in drawing this comparison is not to collapse the obvious historical distance between the Norwich Lollards and the embattled Christians of *The Second Nun's Tale*, but to provide yet another context by which Cecilia's use of private space to disseminate religious doctrine is somewhat heterodox. The very word "prive" often appears in Lollard heresy trials to describe the meeting-places of the Lollard congregation: the Mones admit to meeting in "prive chambres and prive places of oures;"<sup>36</sup> in *Premature Reformation*, Anne Hudson details the evolution of language to describe Lollard meeting places in Parliament Rolls from "market-places, fairs, and other public places where a large number of people congregates" to also include "*secrete in aulis, cameris, ortis, et gardinis*."<sup>37</sup> Field suggests that Chaucer's audience would have been cognizant of this context, writing that it "has heard of 'privee chambers' and 'scoles of heresie' thriving in 'privee places,' but now they were granted

---

<sup>35</sup> *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428 – 1431*, ed. Norman P Tanner (London, Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1977), 140. Cited in Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 177.

entrance.”<sup>38</sup> Both the *Second Nun’s Tale’s* Christians and the Lollards re-inscribe domestic space for religious purposes, and the extreme “priviness” of their practices eventually meets with a demand by those in power that they submit to public scrutiny. Almachius, for example, bids his ministers to fetch Cecilia “openly” to do sacrifice to his gods before him, bringing to an end the discretion and secrecy with which she has so far conducted her faith life. In other words, like the Norwich heresy trials, the *Second Nun’s Tale* demonstrates the inherent threat posed to official institutional culture by groups operating outside its surveillance.

Unlike the Cecilia in the *Second Nun’s Tale*, however, Hawisia Moon hears, conceives, learns, and reports her Lollard beliefs in her cheesehouse chamber, but she does not preach them. To have used such a term to describe her activities would likely have been risky for an already-embattled Hawisia. Chaucer, on the other hand, chooses to use the term to describe Cecilia’s activities in the *Second Nun’s Tale* where his source text refers only to “teaching.” The locution occurs three times: once to describe Cecilia’s lesson on Trinitarian theology and the doctrine of plain remission of sins, then again when Tiburce and Valerian convert the prefect Maximus in his home, and finally, as Cecilia lies in a bathtub full of boiling water with her head half-severed from her body, instructing the Christian community that has gathered around her. Only in the last instance is there any suggestion of a large audience; the first two are private lessons between Christian and potential convert. In all three cases, the speech in question occurs in a private home. As I have already argued, by calling this speech “preching,” *The Second Nun’s Tale* exposes the tenuousness of the boundaries between private and public, domestic and universal, the speech with which “eche body may enforme and teche hys brothyr” and that which occurs “where es clepyng to-gedry

---

<sup>38</sup> Fields, “Chaucer’s Cecile as Christian-Humanist Disputer of the Sacred,” 38.

or foluyng of pepyl in holy dayes in chyrcches.”<sup>39</sup> It places a confirmatory stamp on what the plotting of the Tale has already revealed: that what happens in the private, domestic space of the family home often has significant effects upon the public institutions and social structures of which that family is a part.

With *The Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer is expanding the boundaries of “preaching” to be inclusive and democratic, in a move similar to the Pardoner’s when he calls the Wife of Bath a “noble prechour” in matters of love, lust, and marriage. In both of these cases, Chaucer’s preacher is a woman. And in fact, there is a third woman in this mix: the Second Nun, who implicitly links her “leveful bisynesse” in telling her tale to Cecilia’s “lastynge bisynesse” within it (Prologue ll. 5 and 98). As Catherine Sanok remarks, “we may read the Second Nun’s claim that her translation is ‘after the legende’ not only as an explanation of her relationship to her source, but also as an acknowledgment of its grounding in the idea of exemplarity.”<sup>40</sup> The Second Nun is imitating Cecilia by telling her tale and Cecilia, as the narrator insists, is preaching. Yet again expanding the boundaries of what constitutes preaching, the implicit link between Cecilia’s and the Second Nun’s activities suggests that the oral delivery of a virgin martyr legend to a group of pilgrims on the road to Canterbury might also be preaching. And very early on in its critical history, the *Second Nun's Tale* was recognized as such: the illustrator of the Ellesmere manuscript portrays her with a distinctive hand position that indicates preaching, speaking, or teaching, in a gesture very like that used by St Cecilia in a fourteenth-century altarpiece now held in the Galleria degli Uffizi, one which “is interesting for its selective emphasis, in the narrative registers, on this female

---

<sup>39</sup>*Speculum Christiani*, ed. Gustaf Holmstedt for EETS (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 168.

saint's preaching and teaching activities during her lifetime."<sup>41</sup> Medieval readers of the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* saw the Second Nun as preaching a sermon and so, in a sense, did modern critic Claude Jones, who read the *Prologue* and *Tale* as a *de sanctis* sermon to be preached on St Cecilia's day, examining it in terms of Theme (l. 28), Invocation (ll. 29 – 84), Definition (ll. 85 – 119), and Body (ll. 120 – 553).<sup>42</sup> Both Second Nun and Cecilia are preaching outside of the contexts in which the official church would recognize their activities as such, because they are not in a pulpit and *especially* because both are women. In Sanok's words, "the tale [the Second Nun] tells is orthodox, of course, but the privilege of telling it as a moral exemplum to a public audience is reserved for others," a fact which the Prologue to the *Tale*, which dresses it in all the trappings of a sermon, very studiously ignores.<sup>43</sup> With his "preacheresses" Chaucer uses his speakers' shared female gender to explore "the gendering of late medieval religious practice" and "the unstable boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy."<sup>44</sup>

Yet there is another reason Chaucer might have chosen to use women—and virgin women in particular—for his exploration of the boundaries and ethics of preaching. As *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Pardoner's Prologue* make clear, Chaucer was interested in exploring the relationship between the body and speech, and particularly preaching. While his Pardoner and Wife of Bath are flawed, fallen bodies that are nevertheless capable of producing effective sermons, the Second Nun and St Cecilia offer Chaucer something else entirely: pure, virgin bodies that are ideal receptacles for and transmitters of God's word.

---

<sup>41</sup> Maidie Hilmo, "Iconic Representations of Chaucer's Two Nuns and their Tales from Manuscript to Print," in *Women and the Divine in Literature Before 1700: Essays in Memory of Margot Louis*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2009), 124.

<sup>42</sup> Claude Jones, "'The Second Nun's Tale,'" A Mediaeval Sermon," *Modern Language Review* 32 (1937).

<sup>43</sup> Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 169.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

## II. Scribe of Mary, Scribe of God

In Robert of Basevorn's early fourteenth-century preaching manual *The Form of Preaching*, the author affirms a divine precedent for aspiring preachers: God, who, writes Robert

preached frequently through angels who assumed bodies or, as some would have it, some other corporeal likeness which He Himself assumed not in union of substance, but only as its mover, as perhaps He spoke to Adam and many others . . . And at last He Himself, taking on a human soul and body in the unity of substance came preaching.<sup>45</sup>

As Claire Waters notes in *Angels and Earthly Creatures*, Robert's insistence that even God took on a body to preach affirms the necessity of fleshly clothing to the preacher's office, the truism that, in order to bring the divine word to earth, the preacher must inhabit the earth in a body.<sup>46</sup> This requirement held out both possibilities and pitfalls for the preacher. Ideally, an ethically scrupulous preacher's example would align so well with his message that there would be no distance between what the preaching manuals refer to as his *persona*, or his worldly performance of sanctity, and his office of transmitting God's word on earth. But the preaching manuals' insistent focus upon all the ways that sin could impair the preacher's delivery of his message suggests that the reality was far otherwise. Unlike Christ, who *was*

---

<sup>45</sup>*The Form of Preaching*, trans. Leopold Krul, in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 126-127.

<sup>46</sup> Claire Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 40. For a similar argument as it relates to authorship, see Alastair Minnis, "The Author's Two Bodies? Authority and Fallibility in Late-Medieval Textual Theory" in *Of the Making of Books. Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays Presented to M.B. Parkes*, ed. P. Robinson and R. Zim (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), 259-79.

the Word made flesh, whose sinlessness did away with any possibility that his body might taint his message, preachers were “charismatic bodies whose very *raison d’être* was to be representatives, with the divisions that representation inevitably implies.”<sup>47</sup> Divided between a heavenly message and an earthly existence, preachers often fell short of exact and faithful representation of their exemplar. The preacher was meant to give the Word human form just as Christ had, but his very individuality, expressed as his embodiment, could interfere with the universal, abstract message he was meant to convey. In the struggle to become Word made Flesh, the flesh often won out over the words.

Chaucer dramatized the two extremes of preachers—the one, excessively embodied so as to detract from his abstract, universal message; the other, demonstrating perfect congruence between persona and office—in the figures of the Pardoner and Parson. The Pardoner’s “physicality is so foregrounded, simultaneously excessive and elusive, that it may well dominate our sense of him and certainly interferes with his preaching in ways that preaching theorists would have strongly disapproved.”<sup>48</sup> No wonder that the Pardoner calls the Wife of Bath, whose bodily experiences form the crux of her “sermon,” a “noble prechour” (165). Both of these preachers are excessively embodied and proud of it, the Pardoner exulting in the way his bodily gesticulations enable him to seduce his audience, the Wife claiming that her experience “of five husbondes scoleiynge” makes her an expert in love, lust, and the “nether purs” (44f, 44b). Both of these pilgrims receive detailed physical descriptions in the General Prologue, enhancing our sense of their embodiment. In contrast, writes Waters, the lack of a physical description for the Parson in favor of his dedication to

---

<sup>47</sup> Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures*, 49.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



his office “suggests a body whose sole meaning derives from its service to a larger task.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, the character of the Parson successfully blends the preacher’s office with his persona. In fact, the only mention of the Parson’s physical presence is his diligent visitation of the entire length of his parish “upon his feet, and in his hand a staf,” the shepherd’s crook a symbol of both Christ and his office (Prologue l. 495). Rather than distracting from his message, the Parson’s body blends with and reinforces it perfectly.

Chaucer’s portrait of an ideal preacher in the Parson relies upon a strategy available only in representations of preachers, and not to the preachers themselves: he elects to avoid much focus on the Parson’s body at all, and in so doing shifts our attention to what the Parson represents—his message—rather than his particular earthly embodiment. In the free space of representation, the preacher’s specific persona can be distanced from his message, ultimately resulting in a figure who seems to achieve a seamless communication between heaven and earth, to be totally subsumed in his message as little more than an empty vessel for God. For any preacher whose earthly embodiment might be a liability—all preachers, or in any case, all human ones—such a representation is attractive. But for women, the particulars of whose earthly persona—namely, their biological sex—are used to exclude them from the preaching office, it is an absolute necessity. Women who wish to authoritatively preach and teach and those, like Chaucer, who wish to represent them doing so, *must* represent the female body as a vessel for the divine word so that this body may not be said to taint the message it transmits. Forced into this strategy by necessity, women who successfully deploy it achieve the status of *ideal* preachers—those for whom no distance exists between persona and office, for whom body and message are perfectly congruent.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 33.

Comparing Cecilia to the unsuccessful alchemist of Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Blamires remarks that "it is a woman who epitomizes verbally and spiritually efficacious dynamism and it is a man who epitomizes empty verbiage conducting obsessional materialistic activity leading to no proper or useful 'conclusion.'"<sup>50</sup> I argue that Cecilia's ability to embody such perfect verbal and spiritual fruitfulness arises from the particular exigencies of representing female preachers at this time period. While Claire Waters argues that Chaucer uses the excessive embodiment of female preachers to expose the inevitability of the interference between a preacher's persona and his office, I argue that the opposite is also true: that in representing a female preacher, he explores the way in which women, driven by their biological sex to disavow personal agency in the message they transmit, become ideal preachers. In *The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*, this disavowal of agency takes the form of the Second Nun's triple distancing of herself from her tale. But the proof of an ideal preacher also takes the form of a body that facilitates, rather than impedes, the transmission of a Christian message. *The Second Nun's Tale* suggests several roles the body can play in Christian learning. In its portrayal of the bodily senses as generative of Christian conversion, it affirms the body's role in the Christian faith. Moreover, in its exploration of virginity as a source of fruitful speech and teaching, it upholds bodily practices as a potential source of a type of Incarnation. The *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale* portrays both the Second Nun and Cecilia as imitating Mary in their bearing of the Word through their fruitful virginity.

Like the Parson, the Second Nun avoids the conflict of persona and office that characterizes the Pardoner. In fact, she is one of only a few pilgrims in the General Prologue to receive no portrait at all. Concerning the Second Nun, we learn only that the Prioress "another NONNE with hir hadde she / That was her chapelyne" (163-164). This non-portrait

---

<sup>50</sup> Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 208.

gives us nothing to go on *except* for an office: that of a chaplain, or secretary. The Second Nun is thus defined by her literacy, a wholly appropriate detail for a pilgrim who offers as her tale a translation of a saints' life from Latin into English. Again, the office and persona reinforce one another.

The Second Nun's relative lack of particular embodiment in comparison with the other pilgrims is paralleled by the way the tale she tells is remarkably free of description of Cecilia's body. This lack derives in part from the legend itself, which as Reames notes, "is markedly less sexualized and sensational than most medieval virgin martyr legends."<sup>51</sup> Gone are the stripping and whipping, the prurient gaze of a predatory male authority figure; the primary threat to Cecilia's chastity—her marriage to Valerian—is dispatched early on in the tale when she converts him to Christianity. In the virgin martyr lives I discuss in my first two chapters, particularly those of the Katherine Group, a built-in audience within the tale contributes to our sense that the virgin, and namely her body, are in some sense on display. The gaze of this built-in audience provides a voyeuristic mirror for the reader, as well as a "wrong" reading of the virgin body that the saint can correct in order to establish its meaning. But in the *Second Nun's Tale*, which, as I have already shown, occurs almost entirely in "privee" space, this built-in audience is largely absent. And even in presumably public spaces, such as the site of Cecilia's confrontation with Almachius, we are given little sense of an audience. Without a potentially prurient gaze upon Cecilia's virgin body, the contradiction at the heart of some other virgin martyr legends, between the virgin's desire for purity and the dangerous exposure of the body her public visibility enacts, is muted. Like the Parson or the Second Nun, Cecilia can escape the threat posed to her office by a sense of her particular

---

<sup>51</sup> Reames, "Mary, Sanctity, and Prayers to Saints," 94.

embodiment. For all three characters, this escape is effected by the elision of their bodies from public view.

But the body is not entirely absent from the *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*. It is simply present in a different sense than the Pardoner's or Wife of Bath's. Without the same association with earthly engendering that is present in these wholly corporal characters' personas, and without the prurient audience gaze that afflicts so many other virgins, the bodies of Cecilia and the Second Nun are free to teach other, spiritual lessons. In *The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*, the focus on the body inheres in the portrayal of bodily senses as a gateway to faith which, once embraced, rewards the faithful with a heightening of those same senses. When, on her wedding night, Cecilia evades her husband's embraces by claiming an angel "redy ay my body for to kepe," Valerian demands, "Let me that aungel se and hym biholde," a sight Cecilia promises him he shall have "so ye trowe on Christ and ye baptize." (154, 164, 171). The redundancy in Valerian's request—to not only "se" but also "biholde" the angel, emphasizes that a desire for perfect sight is what motivates his conversion. Likewise, Cecilia's brother-in-law Tiburce is motivated by the "soote savour" of the roses and lilies to enter her bedchamber and inquire after them. Redundancy characterizes the style of this episode as well, with the wonderful aroma described as a "savour," "soote savour," "sweete smel" and, again, "savour." (243, 247, 250, 251). This aroma of the flowers is a hybrid of the physical and spiritual: it is obviously experienced through the bodily senses, as Tiburce's apprehension of it makes clear, but it penetrates his very heart and changes him "al in another kynde," with "kynde" a loaded term that can indicate both bodily kinship and spiritual or categorical affinity (252). As she did with Valerian, Cecilia promises that upon his conversion Tiburce will have sight of these flowers which, without Christian faith, his

eyes now “han no myght to see” (255). Similarly, when Almachius demands that Cecilia worship his idols, she responds

‘Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen  
That thou n’art blynd;\* for thyng that we seen alle  
That it is stoon – that men may wel espyen –  
That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.  
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle  
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,  
Syn thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.

(498-503)

\*(Your bodily eyes lack nothing to make you blind)

Presumably, what Almachius’s “outter,” or bodily eyes need to give them true vision is “inner,” or spiritual sight, available only through belief in the Christian god. This passage is characterized by the same redundancy that marks the earlier passages I discussed: “thyng that we seen alle” is repeated as what “men may wel espyen,” and at the end Cecilia repeats her point that Almachius’s blind eyes fail to see. Cecilia’s suggestion that Almachius employ his other senses – taste and touch – to apprehend the true nature of his idols parallels the process through which Tiburce came to faith: led by another sense (in his case, smell) to the realization that his vision was lacking, the promise of true sight inspired him to embrace God. Although the process fails with Almachius, Cecilia’s reliance upon it in all cases reveals the importance of the bodily senses in this tale: they are both the instigator toward and reward for true faith.

Just as Aelfric does in his appropriation of Augustinian theology, the *Second Nun’s Tale* upholds the role of the body in coming to knowledge of God. But the body plays another important role in Cecilia’s *vita*, this one expressed in a series of symbols and metaphors that link her chastity to the Incarnation of the Word. Beginning her explanation of the meaning of Cecilia’s name, the Second Nun tells us

It is to seye in Englissh ‘hevenes lilie’  
For pure chaastnesse of virginitee,  
Or, for she whitnesse hadde of honestee,  
And grene of conscience, and of good fame  
The soote savour, ‘lilie’ was hir name.  
(85 – 91)

The lily was a well-known symbol of purity and virginity by this point, an association upon which the narrator draws in her explanation. But it had another symbolism as well: as Laurel Broughton explains, in his four sermons on the Annunciation, Bernard of Clairvaux “connects flower symbolism with the word,” with the blossom symbolizing the virgin birth. “Bernard and others associate the blossom with the lily of the Song of Songs; thus the lily represents Christ, not just the purity of the Virgin.”<sup>52</sup> Chaucer uses the lily to symbolize the Virgin Mary in the *Prioress’s Prologue* when the Prioress endeavors to speak in praise of both Christ and “the whyte lyle flour / Which that the bar” (9 – 10). Like the Second Nun, the Prioress invokes Mary’s aid in speaking her tale. Both speakers are drawing on a constellation of metaphors associating the lily, the Incarnated Word, and fruitful speech. Broughton explains that in medieval “lily miracles,” in which an “Ave Maria” results in the blossoming of a lily from the mouth of the (sometimes deceased) utterer, the lily represents the Incarnated Christ, planted in the faithful Christian’s body with the utterance of a word just as Christ was in Mary’s. With the lily, therefore, the Second Nun links Cecilia’s name to a complex association of beliefs surrounding speech, participation in the Incarnation, and the Word.

She also links Cecilia’s “pure chaastnesse of virginitee” to greenness and growing things, a natural fecundity that Pope Urban, too, remarks on in Cecilia. Addressing Christ in thanks for Valerian’s conversion, he exclaims

---

<sup>52</sup> Broughton, “Chaucer and the Saints,” 119.

“Sower of chaast conseil, hierde of us alle,  
The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitee  
That thou has sown in Cecile taak to thee!”  
(193 – 195)

Here Christ is a “sower of chaast conseil,” which proves to be a seed that yields fruit—the converts Cecilia wins to Christ. Cecilia’s bodily chastity is therefore paradoxically associated with growth and bounty. As is true of the lily symbolism, however, language of seeds and sowing also has an association with the Incarnation of the Word, largely thanks to the parable of the seed and sower, in which Christ is the sower, flinging the seeds of his word on Christian believers, who, if they live a chaste life, fertilize it to yield bountiful fruit. In this passage, the description of Christ as “sower of chaast *conseil*,” a term which means “teaching,” forges the connection of the seeds with God’s word. An alternative but related interpretation of the parable in the Brigittine convent at Syon’s *Myroure of Oure Lady* explicitly links it to the Incarnation:

Blessed be thow most worthy sower that haste sowen a grayne of the beste whete in the beste lande, wette wyth the dew of the holy goste, whyche grayne deed ys meruelously multyplyed [ . . . ] Thys sower ys the father of heuen. the grayne ys the sonne. the erthe ys oure Lady. The grayne was sowen in the erthe by hys incarnacyon. yt was deed by hys passyon.<sup>53</sup>

In actual fact there is little distance between these two interpretations: in the first, Christians bear Christ’s word by fertilizing it in their chaste bodies; in the second, Mary bears Christ in her body when she assents to the angel with a word. The parable links words, the Word, and the Incarnation of the Word, and in using this same language to describe Cecilia, the *Tale* upholds the saint as a participant in this dynamic. Cecilia’s chaste body fertilizes fruit for Christ when his “conseil” falls upon it, and in another sense, in giving voice to his teachings, she incarnates his word.

---

<sup>53</sup> *Myroure of Oure Lady*, ed. Henry Blunt for EETS 19 (London 1873) 201.

Giving voice to God's word is a task in which the Second Nun, too, in translating Cecilia's *vita* into English, participates, a participation she makes explicit by linking her task to Mary's Incarnation of Christ. In the *Prologue* to her tale, the Second Nun invokes Mary as a sort of muse for her endeavour: addressing her as "flour of virgines," she asks Mary to "me endite / Thy maydens deeth," (32 – 33), portraying Mary as the source of her tale and herself as a scribe taking dictation from the blessed mother, in a divine mirror of the role she already plays in her job as secretary to the Prioress. Her ensuing praise of Mary dedicates two stanzas to Mary's role in the Incarnation as the one in whom "God for bountee chees to wone," (48) and whose noble nature gave God a means "his Sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde" (42). With her invocation to Mary, the Second Nun upholds the Virgin as both source of a saint's life and source of Christ or perhaps, source of a saint's life *because* source of Christ, whom Cecilia and all saints themselves incarnate. The *Prologue* makes this last point by referring to Mary as giving shape to Christ "withinne the cloistre blisful of thy sydis" and as she who "baar of thy body" Christ (43, 48). Mary's role as encloser and bearer of Christ foreshadows the Second Nun's description of Cecilia as one who "baar [Christ's] gospel in hir mynde" (123). The Second Nun's *Prologue* is a beautiful Marian invocation, but also a sophisticated theological argument linking virginity to Incarnation, Incarnation to words: as God clothes and "wyndes" Christ in flesh and blood in Mary's body, so the Second Nun clothes and "wyndes" Cecilia's life in her mother tongue.

Just as Mary's Incarnation of Christ led to mankind's redemption from his fallen human "kynde," by transforming the human body from a vessel of sin to a bearer of Christ, so does the Second Nun's translation of Cecilia's *vita* effect a kind of transformation. The



Second Nun begins her *Prologue* with a condemnation of “ydelnesse,” of which, unlike virginity, “ther nevere comth no good n’encrees” (l. 18):

. . . That slouthe hire holdeth in a lees  
Oonly to slepe, and for to ete and drynke,  
And to devouren that othere swynke,  
And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,  
That cause is of so greet confusioun,  
I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse  
After the legende in translacioun  
Right of thy glorious lif and passioun.  
(19 – 24)

The Second Nun portrays idleness as a sin that devolves and reduces the sinner to his basest bodily functions: sleeping, eating, drinking, devouring the good and increase that others have produced. The cure for this sin, in her case, at least, is translating a saint’s life. When the Second Nun refers to herself as troubled “by the contagioun / of my body”—the first time that this expression occurs in English—directly before invoking Mary’s help with her work, she further reiterates this argument: her act of translation and telling a saint’s life transforms her body from the site of sin to bearer of God’s word akin to the Virgin Mary’s.

In order to portray her act of translation and storytelling as participating in the Incarnation of Christ, the Second Nun must emphasize that story’s origin from another source. Just as Mary was not the source of Christ, but merely the vessel that bore him, so is the Second Nun merely Mary’s scribe, the body that gives voice to words that originate elsewhere. But the necessity of portraying herself as a vessel for words that originate with an incontestable source of authority is a strategy that also derives from the fact of the Second Nun’s female sex. In deploying it, she aligns herself with Julian of Norwich, who, in the short text of her *Showings*, justifies her authorship despite being

a womann, leued, febille and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye, I hafe it of the schewynge of hym tha(t) es souerayne techare . . . Botte for I am a womann, schulde

I therefore leve that I schulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of god, syne that I sawe inthat same tyme that is his wille, that it be knawenn?<sup>54</sup>

For her speech, Julian claims the status of a “schewynge” of the sovereign teacher, God.

Reinforcing her message that she is just a scribe, and not an author, of her writing, she invests the humility topos—a trope that is also common in writings by men—with a feminine aspect, implying that a “mere” woman, “leued, febille, and freylle,” could not possibly be the true source of these writings. The Second Nun, too, makes use of the humility topos, calling herself a “flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle” and comparing herself to a dog that eats crumbs from its lord’s table (58-61). And just as Julian adapts a trope used by male authors to buttress the myth of her lack of authorship of her own work, so the Second Nun speaks words that may originally have been intended for a male speaker: Chaucer composed the *Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale* during his Italian period in the mid-1370s, before he began to write the *Canterbury Tales*. But in the voice of a woman, the humility topos plays a new role, its authenticity simultaneously reduced and amplified by its new context—amplified because women truly *were* considered to be more feeble-minded than men in some circles, reduced by its status as a strategy with which a woman could displace herself from her own writing or speech.

In fact, the Second Nun distances herself from her speech on multiple levels: It comes from Mary, but also from “the legende in translacioun” and “the wordes and sentence / Of hym that at the seintes reverence / The storie wroot.” With this last attribution again refers to herself as the recipient of dictation, or “enditing” (25, 80-83). Lynn Staley describes the narrator’s distancing of herself from her speech as part of Chaucer’s “strategies of dissent,” as a screen which allows him to throw the more controversial aspects of Cecilia’s tale into

---

<sup>54</sup> Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. James Walsh. 2 vols (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 222.

prominence without falling afoul of institutional authorities. But this distancing is also what Claire Waters calls the *alibi*, or “elsewhere,” of female authority. Necessary because the female voice is thought to be hopelessly contaminated by the “contagion of the body,” the *alibi* of female authority locates the source of the woman’s speech outside of her—in God, Mary, the saints, divine inspiration. Yet somewhat paradoxically, when she can effectively produce it, this *alibi* gives the woman who wields it even more authority than those who can claim ownership of their own speech. For with no distance between her body and her speech, her body a vessel of words that originate in another source, the scribe of God is also the ideal preacher.

Medieval representations of ideal preachers need not necessarily always be feminine, as Chaucer’s Parson reveals. But the medieval clerical depiction of women as frail, feeble-minded, hopelessly contaminated by the “contagion” of their bodies simultaneously necessitated a displacement of women from the source of their speech and made them appear particularly well-suited to the form this displacement most often took—a portrayal of women as passive vessels of God’s word. Christine Cooper-Rompato describes a similar phenomenon occurring around an activity not unrelated to preaching in the concerns it raises about the equivalence between source material and text: translation. As anxiety surrounding lay access to Latin texts and fears over improper or unauthorized translations increased, argues Rompato, accounts of miracles of Latin xenoglossia increased proportionally. These miracles transmitted the idea of “miraculous translation,” which promised “complete equivalence between languages and a desire for ‘pure translation’ that does not mutate, manipulate, or alter the text in any way. This longing for purity in translation increased in tandem with the realization and acknowledgment that, in practice, translation necessarily

shapes and rewrites.”<sup>55</sup> I theorize that a similar effect can be seen on medieval representations of preaching: as the Church’s power over the preaching office becomes more tenuous, so does the realization that transmission of God’s word without interference from the all-too-human bodies that must deliver it is impossible. Like miraculously-inspired xenoglossia, the ideal preacher may exist only in the sphere of representation. And this sphere is also one in which women are often feeble-minded, passive vessels for the ideas of men, which paradoxically, also makes them ideal receptacles for the word of God. Cooper-Rompato argues that “Chaucer envisions the translator who translates ‘perfectly’ or miraculously to be a woman, in large part because he imagines it is her particularly passive or *gentil* nature that makes her especially receptive to another’s words.”<sup>56</sup> In the *Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale*, Chaucer also imagines the perfect *preacher* to be a woman, not just because of a particularly passive nature, but also because a woman *must* displace herself from her speech by stressing the origins of her message in an elsewhere that is the *alibi* of female authority. She must do so in order to avoid the subsuming of office by persona to which every preacher is vulnerable but which, in her case defines her relationship to her public role. Because her biological sex excludes her from the preaching office, the female preacher must be represented as seamlessly bridging the gap between persona and office, body and message, earth and heaven, if she is to claim an authoritative preaching voice. Once this representation is successful, however, the female paradoxically wields an authority more complete and legitimate than that of the male preachers who in some respect fall short of incarnating the Word made Flesh. In the *Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale*, Chaucer wields

---

<sup>55</sup> Christine Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women’s Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

this paradox to great effect, revealing how the strategies of authorization necessitated by a speaker's female status can also be the means by which she claims the ultimate authority—her status as Scribe of God.

### Conclusion

More than any other in the tale, the scene with which I began this chapter, in which Cecilia preaches in the bathtub after her neck has been “ycorven,” makes Cecilia's status as vessel of God's word clear:

But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,  
He lefte hir lye, and on his wey is went.  
The Christen folk, which that aboute hir were,  
With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent.  
Thre dayes lyved she in this torment,  
And nevere cessed hem the faith to teche;  
That she hadde fostred, hem she gan to preche.  
(533 – 539)

This passage trains our focus on the damaged saintly body “half deed, with hir nekke ycorven,” so deeply wounded that her audience must tote away sheets full of blood. Cecilia's vocal cords have presumably been rent, yet her teaching and preaching continue. Clearly it is not—or not only—Cecilia's voice that speaks here, but God's voice that speaks *through* her. Cecilia's martyrdom is the culmination of the process that began when she decided to keep her body for God; now he possesses it as his mouthpiece.

Discussing Raymond of Capua's *Legenda* of Catherine of Siena, Karen Scott argues that the hagiographer portrays Catherine as experiencing a kind of “living death,” a definitive, once in a lifetime turning point in her early spiritual development in order to defend the holiness of her subsequent activism as that of a mystic already entirely possessed by God

and dead to herself.”<sup>57</sup> In Scott’s view, the tactic functions as a sort of apologetic for Catherine’s active spirituality as “an itinerant preacher and public kind of mystic instead of the usual kind of holy woman who prayed in her cell.”<sup>58</sup> Only by portraying her body as an empty vessel to be filled by God can Catherine’s hagiographer authorize his subject’s public ministry. The same strategy is operative in the *Second Nun’s Tale*: after Cecilia undergoes a movement from private to public space, transforming from a virginal bride to the Christ that is “hidden” in her heart to a public preacher before a congregation of Christians she has created, her body undergoes a living death. This argument—that the female must elide her body in order to avoid distracting her audience with the taint of her femininity—is now a commonplace in medieval studies. But by insisting upon the word “preche” at just the moment when Cecilia is at her most corpse-like, Chaucer draws our attention to the seamless transmission of God’s word that this necessary elision of the female body produces.

After this moment, most versions of the Cecilia legend end with the date of her martyrdom and a prayer to the saint to intercede for the audience. But *The Second Nun’s Tale* flouts convention by describing how Cecilia requests that Pope Urban “werche / Heere of myn hous perpetuelly a chirche” (ll. 545 – 546). This bequest, and the description a few lines earlier of how Cecilia’s “fosters” have now become the audience for her preaching, returns us to the divide between private and public, sacred and secular space I argue this tale troubles. Cecilia’s “fosters”—a term with domestic connotations referring to offspring or progeny, and particularly those one has nourished—now receive nourishment not of a physical mother’s milk, but of a sermon. “By contrasting the two activities,” argues Sanok,

---

<sup>57</sup> Karen Scott, “Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic’s Encounter with God” in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

“the Second Nun insists that Cecilia’s work be identified with the full authority of preaching: her activity is defined against a more generalized and gender-appropriate role as spiritual teacher.”<sup>59</sup> The transformation of Cecilia’s home into a church by Urban, moreover, is simply a literalizing of what Cecilia has already done when she uses her bedroom as a forum for the conversion of her husband and brother-in-law—and of what Chaucer has already done when he insists upon referring to at least some of this activity as preaching. The *Second Nun’s Tale* suggests that the boundaries between a Church and a home, wifely counsel and preaching, are permeable. A Christian congregation may form around a bed or a bathtub, and there, a woman may preach. When it comes to preaching, moreover, the *Second Nun’s Tale* suggest that in fact, a woman might preach with more authority than a man inasmuch as her body—necessarily elided because of her female gender—becomes a vessel for God’s word.

---

<sup>59</sup> Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 169.

## Chapter 4

### LIKE A VIRGIN MARTYR:

#### READING THE *BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE* AS VIRGIN MARTYR LEGEND

Early fifteenth-century Lynn was a noisy place. Along with the ordinary hustle and bustle of a thriving late medieval town, its citizens might sometimes hear above it all the roars and cries of a local townswoman—some said holy, others, possessed—Margery Kempe. Such was the case one Corpus Christi Day as “prestys born the Sacrament abowte the town wyth solepne procession,” when a good woman shared with Margery<sup>1</sup> her wish that God give them grace to follow in Jesus’s steps (1.45.2528).<sup>2</sup> These words “wrowt so sor in her herte and in hir mende that sche myth not beryn it” (1.45.2529-30). She began to cry. We can assume that her weeping in this instance took the usual form:

than sche fel down and cryed wyth lowed voys, wondyrfully turnyng and wrestyng hir body on every syde, spredyng hir armys abrode as yyf sche shulde a deyde, and not cowde kepyn hir fro crying, and these bodily mevyngys for the fyer of lofe that brent so fervently in hir sowle with pur pyté and compassyon. (1.28.1621-1625)

Even after her crying had ended, Margery filled the town with noise, this time in the “jangelyng” of the townspeople about what could possibly be the matter with her and what to do about it. Was she possessed by a wicked spirit? Drunk? Was her weeping the appropriate response of a sincere devotee of Christ’s passion, or completely immoderate? And how

---

<sup>1</sup> I follow Staley’s convention in *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* of distinguishing between Kempe, the author, and Margery, the character Kempe creates. In doing so I signal my agreement with Staley that *The Book of Margery Kempe* is the work of someone “fully enfranchised” by her art, “whose narrative demonstrates her ability to use the conventions of sacred biography and devotional prose that she inherited as the means of scrutinizing the very foundations of community.” See Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 3 – 4.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from the *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996). Citations are (Book.Chapter.Line).



should the townspeople respond? Curse her? Thank God for her? Wish her a dwelling place in heaven, or out on the sea in a bottomless boat? In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, early 15<sup>th</sup> century Lynn was a noisy place not only because Margery Kempe was crying, but because everyone was talking about it.

*The Book of Margery Kempe* is an account of this noise. It is also, of course, the memoir of a medieval contemplative and mystic.<sup>3</sup> Kempe composes it with the help of a scribe, justifying its creation because “alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccion,” and she is one such work. More specifically, she is an example of “how mercyfully, how benyngly, and how charytefully [Jesus] meved and stered a sinful caytyf unto hys love” (1.1.5-11). *The Book of Margery Kempe* is an account of a sinner’s “stirring,” or movement, toward God. As such it has much in common with the devotional texts of Margery’s contemporaries Julian of Norwich, Marie d’Oignies, or Elizabeth of Hungary—texts and people Kempe mentions at various points throughout her narrative in her attempt to authorize aspects of sanctity that might be controversial or confusing for her readers. Like those works, the *Book of Margery Kempe* gives detailed accounts of Margery’s contemplative work and visions—the speech of God in her soul and her first-person experience of Christ’s birth, life, and passion. In part following Kempe’s lead, critics sought first and foremost to read her as a mystic—usually a failed one.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> I have debated whether to refer to Margery as “mystic” or “contemplative.” Scholars in general are divided on the issue. Margery’s piety sometimes follows a more contemplative model, with sustained focus on single scenes of Christ’s life and passion and imaginative insertions of the viewer into the scene. At other moments, however, Margery experiences a “burning” or “stirring” more akin to the experience described by the mystical *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle of Hampole, and her weeping certainly seems to qualify as mystical rapture. In general, this debate over terms is symptomatic of the multivalent, hybrid nature of Kempe’s text. It is yet one more interpretative puzzle the *Book* presents. Since the *Book* itself rejects an either/or mentality, referring to Kempe as *both* mystic and contemplative seems like a fair compromise. And indeed, Kempe herself may be intentionally blurring distinctions between the two categories.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of critics who read Kempe as a failed mystic, see M.C. Bodden, *Language as the Site of Revolt in Medieval and Early Modern England: Speaking as a Woman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 126 –

That reading was always bound to paint an incomplete picture of Kempe's enterprise. For the focus in *The Book of Margery Kempe* on Margery's inner experience of God is only part of her story, at most a few chapters. The rest—indeed, the majority—of the *Book* is an account of Margery's lived, public response to this experience, and of others' response to her in turn. Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a mystical text, Laurie Finke remarks that what she believes “sets it apart from others of its kind by mystics like Julian, St. Bridget, and St. Katherine—is its presentation of the politics of sanctity [. . .] the conflict, opposition, persecution, ridicule, and danger that followed in the wake of audacious claims to sanctity like Kempe's.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike a Julian, a Bridget, or a Katherine, Kempe's purpose is not just to convey her revelations to her readers, but also to give an account of their reception. As Jessica Barr concurs, “while many of her revelations are indeed private, their implications and their performance are adamantly public.”<sup>6</sup> And so we read not only of Margery's recognition of the Christ child in all the male babies she meets, but of her loud weeping in response to them, and her audience's response in turn; of God's confirmation in a vision that oath swearers sin against him *and* the repercussions of Margery's public reprimand to the Archbishop of Canterbury's men who commit that sin. This focus leads Catherine Sanok to characterize Margery's religious practice as “insistently, conspicuously public,” a

---

127. Bodden characterizes this reading as the effect “of our gauging [Kempe's] spiritual culture and her authentic spirituality by criteria considered significant in our own spiritual culture and our own expectations of hagiography,” suggesting that Albrecht Classen's reading of Kempe as both mystical and quasi-mystical “begins to move us toward a solution.” I argue that even this reading does not go far enough for reasons I will explain here.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie A. Finke, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1999), 180.

<sup>6</sup>Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 231.

characterization we could *not* use to describe the cloistered contemporaries against which so many critics have read the *Book*.<sup>7</sup>

Margery's account of her spirituality does, however, bear great resemblance to the lives of the virgin martyrs who Margery also uses to authorize herself. As my previous chapters have shown, those *vitae* feature virgin martyrs who undergo a highly public martyrdom that serves both as the occasion of their public speech, but also an occasion of multiple, sometimes divergent readings of their lives and bodies both within and without the narrative. What better exemplars for a woman whose preaching, pilgrimage, and public weeping made her always a "merveyl," a spectacle—something to be wondered at? Kempe herself seems aware of this consonance. As often as she does with the more obvious exemplars—penitential prostitutes, or contemporaries like Birgitta of Sweden or Marie d'Oignies—Kempe affiliates herself with the virgin martyrs. The following passage, in which Margery laments her lack of "maydenhode," is representative. Christ reassures Margery

Thu art to me a synguler lofe, dowtyr, and therfor I behote the thu schalt have a synguler grace in hevyn, dowtyr, and I behest the I schal come to thin ende at thi deyng wyth my blyssed modyr and myn holy awngelys and twelve apostelys, Seynt Kateryne, Seynt Margarete, Seynt Mary Mawdelyn, and many other seyntys that ben in hevyn, which gevyn gret worshep to me for the grace that I geve to the, God, thi Lord Jhesu. (1.22.1158-1163)

Christ's response to Margery promises her a visitation of a range of different saintly types at her death: virginal wives (Christ's "blyssed modyr"), apostles, a penitential prostitute (Mary Mawdelyn), and two virgin martyrs in particular: Katherine and Margaret. Later in this speech, Christ promises Margery "the same grace that I behyte Seynt Kateryne, Seynt Margarete, Seynt Barbara, and Seynt Powle" (1.22.1187-88). This pattern of invoking a

---

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 124.

range of saintly types in close proximity in order to imagine herself among them is recurrent throughout the *Book*. The point is that Kempe does not wish to affiliate herself with *only* chaste wives, her saintly contemporaries, penitential prostitutes, apostles or virgin martyrs, but with all of them at once. As authorizing models, the virgin martyrs—both married and otherwise—are just as important to Kempe as other types of saints.

In what follows, I discuss Kempe's affiliation of Margery with two types of virgin martyrs: unmarried virgins and married (but still virgin) female saints. Of the unmarried virgins, Margaret and Katherine are the two Kempe invokes most frequently. I focus my study partly on Katherine, arguing that Kempe's affiliation with her reveals Margery's possession of a hybrid form of learning that is neither wholly mystical nor wholly literate, but a unique combination of the two. Of the married virgin saints, I focus on Margery's identification of herself with Saint Cecilia. Though Kempe never explicitly mentions Cecilia in her *Book*, she subtly rewrites the Cecilian boudoir scene by including Christ's promise to "sodeynly sle" her husband just as Cecilia invokes a sword-bearing angel to prevent her deflowering. Later, her husband makes the connection more explicit by countering with his own version of a stranger in the bridal chamber with a sword—this one protecting the couple's sex life instead of their chastity. Noting this detail's allusiveness to the Cecilia legend, Sarah Salih writes "John's use of hagiographical convention here is perhaps prompted by the fact that hagiography has already entered his marriage bed. The ensuing conversation reveals that Margery has enlisted St Cecilia to her cause."<sup>8</sup> Agreeing with Salih, I choose to focus my attention on Cecilia, but view this saint as representative of the category of married virgin martyrs more generally. Overall, my reading of Kempe as imitating virgin

---

<sup>8</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginitly*, 200.

martyr legends reveals her *Book* to be just as deeply informed by this model of sanctity as it is by the other forms she invokes.

Despite the *Book's* multivalent identification of Margery with diverse models of sanctity—its “series of temporary affiliations with several traditional saints, which together signal the *Book's* deep engagement with vernacular legends [. . .] the lives of mystics and holy women such as Mary d’Oignies and Bridget of Sweden have received more critical attention from Kempe scholars than have traditional legends.”<sup>9</sup> Still, the traditional legends have not been entirely ignored by critics. In seriously probing the “affiliations” Kempe draws between herself and the virgin martyrs, this chapter builds on the work of Sanok and Salih, both of whom have engaged in extended readings of the *Book's* use of virgin martyr legends. Sanok shows how “Margery demonstrates the considerable distance between the ethical paradigm of traditional legends and late medieval expectations for laywomen’s religious and social practice. The *Book*, that is, uses the exemplarity of female saints’ lives to develop a striking analysis of the historical specificity of feminine devotion.”<sup>10</sup> Salih argues that Kempe draws on the definition of virginity inherent in both classical treatises and virgin martyr legends as sited in the soul rather than body to claim true virginal status for herself, and to reveal virginity as a process rather than a fixed state. In Sanok’s reading of the *Book*, the failures of the interpretive community surrounding Margery are signs of the historical distance between Margery and the virgin martyrs, with the difficulty of performing a

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. In addition to Sanok, scholars who have engaged in serious readings of Kempe’s affiliation with virgin martyr legends include Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 166 – 240; Katherine J. Lewis, “Margery Kempe and Saint Making” in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004); and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, “Veneration of Virgin Martyrs in Margery Kempe’s Meditation: Influence of the Sarum Liturgy and Hagiography,” in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Christiana Whitehead and Denis Renevey (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 123.

classical virgin martyr role in a medieval town exposing the rupture between that historical moment and Margery's. In Salih's reading, they are signs of an incomplete, inappropriately literal understanding of virginity. What unites Sanok and Salih's interpretations is that they focus our attention on failed readings of Margery's performance of sanctity. Extending their insights, my chapter reveals how Kempe uses these failures to read her correctly to contrast literal and spiritual readings of the saintly body, just as a virgin martyr legend does. These legends dramatize the virgin's struggle to demarcate and control the meaning of her own body in opposition to a worldly script that defines it as a sexual object of exchange or even—more simply—merely physical. Kempe's affiliation of Margery's life with this hagiography emphasizes her struggle to be her own translator, her own interpreter, above a cacophony of voices attempting to wrest the privilege from her. In this reading, the “jangelyng” of the onlookers to Margery's spectacle and the struggles of various scribes to understand her treatise parallel the audience responses and interpretive requirements in virgin martyr legends, with Margery's body—and specifically, her tears and white clothing—a “test” of the reader's ability to read spiritually rather than literally.

### **I. Hagiographical Precedents**

In “Margery Kempe and Saint Making,” Katherine J. Lewis wonders why the virgin martyrs are “referred to in the *Book* so much more frequently than the female visionaries who

seem to share more in common with Margery's experiences," speculating that "the *Book* and its presentation of Margery was . . . intended to plug a perceived gap in female English sanctity by providing a saint who was Katherine, Bridget, Mary Magdalene and others all rolled into one."<sup>11</sup> In this reading, Margery is a sort of "every saint," her narrative strategically echoing that of multiple others in order to give it the broadest possible appeal to the English public. But the parallels in Margery's life to multiple virgin martyrs also serve to highlight and authorize aspects of Margery's religious practice that church authorities might view as subversive, or even heretical; for example, chaste marriage. In authorizing this aspect of her sanctity, Margery foregoes an explicit *imitatio* of *chaste* marriage in favor of one that aligns her with married *virgin* martyrs, for reasons I discuss at length below. Using the married virgin martyrs, Kempe authorizes the removal of her body from worldly patriarchal exchange. Moreover, from the virgin martyr Katherine, Kempe takes a model of spiritual knowledge that is not wholly mystical *or* holy literate, but a unique hybrid of the two. Kempe's use of multiple *types* of virgin martyr—both married saint, and more "traditional" single virgin martyr—signal her understanding of her identity as complex and multivalent.

Also from the virgin martyrologies more generally, Kempe takes the model of a woman who speaks publicly without claiming agency for her speech, enabling her to portray Kempe as an effective public speaker.<sup>12</sup> As I have argued in earlier chapters, the virgin martyr represents herself as channeling the word of God, her mystical marriage to Christ giving her privileged access to the speech of her bridegroom. Kempe's addition to this

---

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, "Margery Kempe and Saint Making," 215.

<sup>12</sup> On the question of where Kempe would have encountered her virgin martyr models, Sarah Salih writes that "it would probably be impossible to determine which version of the virgin martyr legends were available to Margery, as her citations of the virgin martyr legends are to the general tradition rather than to specific versions." Salih thinks *The South English Legendary* and Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* are the texts Kempe was most likely to have encountered; when I cite from virgin martyrology I use Jacobus de Voragine. See Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 196.

tradition is her focus not only on the moment when Margery speaks God's word in public, but on the moment when she receives it. The reader of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is privy to the "secret" conversations of Christ in Margery's soul. What Kempe calls Margery's "homlynes" with Christ—the couple's intimacy and familiarity—is on display for the reader in page upon page of conversation between the two. These moments are an expansion of the intimate relationship between virgin and bridegroom that is left to the imagination of readers of traditional virgin martyr legends. They serve as authorization for Margery's public speech, proof that it emanates from her privileged intimacy with Christ just as the virgin martyr's does.

Margery's public dissemination of the fruits of her intimacy with Christ begins at the age of about forty, as her childbearing years are coming to an end. Margery receives a call:

And than owyr Lord Cryst Jhesu seyde to hir, "My servawntys desyryn gretly to se the [ . . . ] For thei that worship the thei worship me; thei that despysen the thei despysen me, and I schal chastysen hem therfor. I am in the, and thou in me. And thei that heryn the thei heryn the voys of God. Dowtyr, ther is no sinful man in erth levying, yf he wol forsake hys synne and don aftyr thi counsel, swech grace as thu behetyst hym I wyl confermyn for thi lofe." Than hir husband and sche went forth to Yorke and to other dyvers placys. (1.10.512-515)

The call requires Margery to travel to "dyvers placys," to make herself a public object of both worship and scorn, so that those who see and hear her can access God's voice, and—through Margery's counsel—his grace. In effect, Margery has received a call to public speaking and to private pastoral counseling, with the power to dispense God's grace in quasi-priestly fashion. Such extraordinary powers granted to a woman require extraordinary authorization. This authorization comes from the force of Christ's direct speech to Margery and in the two episodes that bookend this call: Margery's negotiation of chaste marriage with her husband.



For reasons I have discussed at length in previous chapters—speech’s potential as a dangerous opening of the female body to sin, female chastity’s mitigation of these dangers, *sponsa Christi* as privileged bearer of God’s word—Kempe *must* establish the removal of Margery’s body from worldly traffic in sex if she is to authorize her public preaching vocation. Yet this move can be a double-edged sword. As Adrienne Rich comments, “the deliberate withdrawal of women from men has almost always been seen as a potentially dangerous or hostile act, a conspiracy, a subversion, a needless and grotesque thing.”<sup>13</sup> Kempe must proceed carefully.

Her strategy is to shape her narrative of chaste marriage negotiations after one of the most orthodox of sources: the life of a married saint. The legends of classical married saints—among them Julian and Basilissa, Chrysanthus and Daria, and the model I focus on here, Cecilia and Valerian—recount the forced marriage of a Christian who wishes to live chastely and converts his or her spouse to the faith, and a chaste marriage, on the wedding night. Subsequently, the couple undergoes martyrdom, converting many pagans in the process. Though Kempe could probably have chosen any married female saint as an authorizing model for Margery, Cecilia’s legend contains a plot point that Kempe explicitly echoes (and wields to great effect): the presence of a militant angel in the bridal chamber, ready to slay Valerian should he attempt to defile Cecilia:

and then she said to him: I have an angel that loveth me, which ever keepeth my body whether I sleep or wake, and if he may find that ye touch my body by villainy, or foul and polluted love, certainly he shall anon slay you, and so should ye lose the flower of your youth. (Jacobus de Voragine, *Life of St Cecilia*, Paragraph 2)<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bodden, *Language as the Site of Revolt in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 35. Bodden cites the 1977 edition of Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1977), 105.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)*, trans. William Caxton and modernized by F.S. Ellis (Temple Classics, 1900), accessed online at the Fordham Medieval Sourcebook at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/>.

The *Book* echoes this scene when, in response to Margery's entreaty that they live chastely, Jesus promises to 'sodeynly sle' John before the Feast of Pentecost if Margery fasts on Friday. Here 'sle' is a euphemism for 'make impotent,' which is indeed the fate that befalls John. Afterward he 'had no power to towche hir at that tyme in that wyse, ne nevyr aftyr wyth no fleschly knowyng' (1.9.476, 479-80). The entire incident recalls Cecilia's marriage to Valerian: desperate to avoid a sexual relationship, Cecilia begs for God's help and fasts every second and third day; her avenging angel is a reward for these pieties. Kempe deftly transposes Cecilia's narrative onto her own. Here, virginal maiden becomes experienced wife, the sexual overtones latent in the Cecilian boudoir scene becoming explicit through the euphemistic meaning of 'sle.' Kempe even concludes this episode with a miraculous survival akin to Cecilia's ordeal in the boiling bath: As Margery prays in her church, nine pounds' worth of the roof fall on her "that hir thowt hir bakke brake asundyr" (1.9.487). Still, Margery feels no pain. The White Friar who weighs the beam declares her survival a great miracle indeed.

Yet this survival episode is far from the wholesale conversion of the faithful and confirmation of sanctity that we see in the Cecilia legend. Immediately preceding it is the description of the sudden impotence of Margery's husband; when Margery's prayers are interrupted by "a gret noyse and a dredful," she herself fears it might be the vindication of the "voys of the pepyl, which seyde God schuld take venjawns upon hir," presumably for the impotence she has just described (1.9.481-483). While some of the townspeople view Margery's survival as God's "preservyng of this creatur agen the malyce of hir enemy" and "magnyfied mech God in this creatur," others "wold not levyn it, but rathyr levyd it was a tokyn of wrath and venjawns." Their voices end the chapter on a note of uncertainty: Is

Margery a proto-Cecilian chaste wife, or a disorderly shrew, unfairly withholding the marriage debt from her husband by unmanning him? Margery's attempt to make herself sexually unavailable ends far more ambivalently than Cecilia's.

And so Kempe's first attempt to portray the withdrawal of Margery's body from patriarchal exchange ends inconclusively, with what Rich might call its dangerous hostility all too apparent to the townspeople and consequently, to Kempe's readers. Accordingly, Kempe tries again. Some three years after the first Cecilian episode, as Margery and her husband travel to York, John

askyd hys wyf this qwestyon, "Margery, if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kendly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens – for ye sy ye wyl not lye – whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth yow agen as I dede sumtyme?" (1.11.521-525)

John reveals himself to be as shrewd a translator of the Cecilia legend as Margery. In his version, God is on the side of the husband who demands his marital debt. Kempe allows this competing version of the legend to stand in echo of the townspeople who objected to her sexual unavailability in the previous episode. But this time, Margery and her husband reach a compromise: In exchange for Margery's promise to pay John's debts before she goes on pilgrimage, to eat with him on Fridays instead of fasting, and to sleep in the marital bed, he agrees to release her body to God.

Just as Kempe's first version of the Cecilia legend made insistently corporeal and sexual the definition of "sle," this episode literalizes the marital debt *as* debt, able to be discharged with money. As Sheila Delany notes, "exchange and release from it are important motifs in [the Cecilia] legend." The motif is apparent in Cecilia's request for release from the sexual obligations of marriage, Valerius's offer to believe Cecilia's story in exchange for the

sight of an angel, and especially, as “Cecilia converts [the officers who escort her to her ordeal [by convincing them that her death is no loss, but, rather, a lucrative exchange with a hundredfold profit.”<sup>15</sup> Delany argues that particularly in comparison to Chaucer, hagiographer Osbern Bokenham enlarges and literalizes this theme. Here, Kempe does the same, rewriting her deliberate withdrawal of her body from her husband not as dangerous insolence, but as a straightforward commercial trade.

Further legitimizing Margery’s arrangement with John is her posture of submissiveness in this episode. Immediately after John refuses Margery’s request for a chaste marriage unless she yields to his demands, “sche prayd hym that he wold geve hir leve to make hyr praerys, and he grawntyd it goodlych.” A particular sticking point is John’s insistence that Margery give up her Friday fasts, which Christ has commanded of her.

Margery refuses to do so until she expressly receives Christ’s permission:

Lord God, thu knowyst al thyng; thu knowyst what sorwe I have had to be chast in my body to the al this three yer, and now mygth I han my wylle and I dar not for lofe of the. For, yyf I wold brekyn that maner of fastyng wych thow comawndyst me to kepyn on the Fryday withowtyn mete or drynk, I schuld now han my desyr. But, blyssyd Lord. thow knowyst I wyl not contraryen thi wyl, and mekyl now is my sorwe les than I fynde comfort in the. Now, blyssed Jhesu, make thi wyl knowyn to me unworthy that I may folwyn therafyr and fulfyllyn it wyth al my myghtys.  
(1.11.552-559)

Margery begins this prayer with *her* “wylle” to be chaste. But in the second half of her prayer, the only “wyl” on the table is God’s, Margery only its follower. The effect of this swapping of wills is that Margery can no longer accept agency—or blame—for the removal of her body from her husband’s control. Margery is not a dangerous free agent; she is simply a wife who now submits to God first and foremost. When God grants her permission to fulfill her husband’s request, she becomes doubly submissive.

---

<sup>15</sup>Sheila Delany, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints and Society in 15<sup>th</sup> Century England: The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99 - 100

As Carolyn Dinshaw notes in *Getting Medieval*, “Margery wants to use her body completely differently from the (reproductive) ways expected by her community,” but “the world’s interpretation of her body constantly keeps its grip tight in this text.”<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, though, Kempe *is* able to loosen that grip. Here it takes two tries, but Kempe finds in the example of a married virgin martyr a way to mitigate the potentially hostile and dangerous implications of Margery’s negotiation of chaste marriage. She does so by using the voices of the townspeople to raise an alternative reading of this move as subversive only to “answer” it two chapters later with her own reading of it as saintly in nature.

Interestingly, with this initial identification of Margery with married virgin martyrs, Kempe has ignored some of the most obvious authorizing models for Margery’s saintly *imitatio*; for example, St. Anne. According to Salih, devotion to Anne was widespread in medieval East Anglia. Moreover, “Anne was an unusual saint in being a woman who was neither a virgin nor a penitent, and so might be thought to provide an imitable model for Margery.”<sup>17</sup> But Anne’s piety takes forms proper to a wife and mother—attending worship, acts of charity. It does not provide the authorization for a public vocation Kempe requires. Similarly, I would argue that even a saintly contemporary Margery obviously admires and refers to on several occasions—St Birgitta of Sweden—falls short as a saintly exemplar for Margery. Unlike Margery, Birgitta was a widow before she entered public life. Her legend conforms to what Dyan Elliott calls the “penitential topos,” in which “out of the debris of a childhood vocation to chastity, a new vocation is formed” with an emphasis on “obedience

---

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 157, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 175.

and, as a kind of corollary, humility.”<sup>18</sup> Though Kempe emphasizes Margery’s obedience in her negotiation of a chaste marriage with her husband, she is far from a paragon of this virtue at other moments in her life, openly flouting the dictates of her confessors on several occasions.

Perhaps most at odds with Kempe’s project in the models offered by saints like Anne or Birgitta, though, is the way their sanctity depends on what Elliott calls “the priority of anatomical virginity.” The humility of the saint depends upon “the abjection arising from [virginity’s] loss.”<sup>19</sup> These saints have fallen short of their ideal and made do with what remained. But Margery has higher aspirations. As Christ tells her,

And, forasmech as thu art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so schalt thu dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes, for I may clepyn the dere abowte and myn owyn derworthy derlyng. (1.22.1198-1201)

Though this passage at first seems to qualify Margery’s as a maidenhood of “sowle” only, it quickly establishes this virginity as no different than any other, promising Margery a place in heaven “wyth *other* holy maydens and virgynes” (emphasis mine). Unlike the lives of Birgitta or Anne, argues Salih, Margery’s *Book* “deals with the process of reformulating the self as virginal. It draws on the implications of virginity literature; that the physical loss of virginity is not insuperable, that individual efforts can remake the body.”<sup>20</sup> Classical treatises on virginity define it as first and foremost sited in the soul, which can then remake the body in its image. It is not a fixed state, but a continual relationship of harmony between body and soul. Kempe capitalizes on this definition in her *Book*, and her rejection of non-virginal

---

<sup>18</sup> Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 241.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>20</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 182.

married saints as models in favor of the married-but-still-virginal Cecilia foregrounds her understanding of herself as truly virgin in soul *and* body.

Margery's sanctity blurs boundaries between virgins and wives and between chaste widows and married virgins. That it is possible to play multiple roles at once is part of the lesson Christ imparts to Margery, calling her sometimes a spouse, sometimes a daughter, sometimes a mother. The lesson seems to be that "true female spirituality . . . consists in an embrace of non-exclusive, co-existing relations and functions."<sup>21</sup> For this reason, too, Kempe's choice to model at least part of her narrative on the life of a married saint is apt: the married saint is both earthly wife and bride of Christ, both married woman and virgin martyr, collapsing categories just as Margery does. That Kempe refuses to limit Margery's saintly *imitatio* to just one category—for example, *just* married saints—signals her recognition of the porousness of the boundaries separating these different virginal "types" from one another. It also enables Kempe to draw upon whichever type is most expedient in the moment: when she wishes to authorize her withholding of the marital debt, she invokes the married saint; later, before the authorities of Leicester who find this itinerant single woman threatening, she can claim to be someone familiar to them: the ordinary wife of an ordinary burgher. She does not lie to the authorities of Leicester when she claims to be the wife of John Brunham of Lynn, nor does she lie to the reader when she claims to be the bride of Christ. And the married saint is also a virgin martyr, making for little cognitive dissonance when Kempe makes the explicit, strategic identification of Margery with another saint—Katherine—during her trial scenes.

---

<sup>21</sup> Janel M. Mueller, "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in the *Book of Margery Kempe*" in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 160.

These trial scenes occur after Kempe has firmly established Margery's chaste marriage early in the narrative and Margery has begun to travel. After a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which she receives the gift of tears for the first time, she pauses in Leicester. Here the trouble begins: The mayor of Leicester, and all the various authority figures who interrogate Margery over the course of the next ten chapters, have not read Margery's *Book*. To them, a married woman wearing the white clothes of a virgin, traveling alone, with a penchant for loud public scenes and what looks suspiciously like preaching is not just a riddle—she is a potential heretic. This is the accusation the mayor of Leicester levels against Margery when he has her before him. He has asked Margery to state her kin and country; she has responded with impeccable credentials as the daughter and husband of high-ranking members of Lynn.

“A,” seyde the meyr, “Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet are ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl, and therfor I schal have the in preson.” (2.46.2627)

The linking of sexual and doctrinal error (“fals strumpet” and “fals loller”) is conventional, but the introduction of St. Katherine is an odd non sequitur unless we read it as Kempe's strategic inclusion of yet another authorizing virgin martyr. And in fact, Margery's *imitatio Katherinae* is the subject of the ten chapters that follow detailing her interrogations before the officials of Leicester and York.

St. Katherine no doubt appealed to Kempe as a precedent because she, like Margery, was a high-ranking woman (in fact, a queen) who was able to defeat fifty of the wisest philosophers in the kingdom in formal, public disputation. Kempe has been at pains to establish Margery's credentials as a public intellectual throughout her narrative; for example in Chapter 15 as she eats with the Bishop of Lincoln and his clerks, answering their “hard



qwestyons” so that “the clerkys had had ful gret mervayl of hir that sche answeyrd so redyly and pregnawntly” (15.793-795). Here all her efforts come to a head in well-attended trials that position Margery in an overtly antagonistic relationship with her learned interlocutors. The transformation of this relationship to one of accord is at the heart of Margery’s *imitatio Katherinae*.

Like any good virgin martyr, St Katherine effects large-scale conversions of pagans through her public interrogation and martyrdom. But “what makes Katherine different from the plethora of other virgins crowding the numerous collections of saints’ lives [. . .] is the scholarly eloquence and educated defiance with which she confronts, confounds, and converts her opponents.”<sup>22</sup> And *who* Katherine converts sets her apart from many virgin martyrs—she converts not just civil servants or onlookers in the crowd, but scholars.

Katherine relies on these scholars’ own tools to effect this conversion:

and when the masters had said that it was impossible that God was made man, ne that he had suffered death, the virgin showed to them that the paynims had said it tofore that he was made. For Plato said God to be all round and to be slain, and Sibyl said thus, that the ilke God should be blessed and happy that should hang on the cross. And when the virgin right wisely disputed with the masters, and that she had confounded their gods by open reasons, they were abashed and wist not what to say, but were all still. (Jacobus de Voragine, *Life of St Katherine*, Paragraph 12)

Katherine uses her knowledge of pagan scholarship—the fruit of her early education in the “arts liberal”—to best the philosophers at their own game. Unable to answer her adequately, the pagan scholars convert to Christianity and undergo martyrdom.

Like the conversions of all virgin martyrs, Katherine’s accomplishment is partly the result her intimate relationship as Christ’s lover. But much more than other virgin martyr

---

<sup>22</sup> Anke Bernau, “A Christian *Corpus*: Virginité, Violence, and Knowledge in the Life of St Katherine of Alexandria” in *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine Lewis (Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 109.

legends, the *Life of St Katherine* highlights the hybrid nature of Katherine's wisdom, lavishing nearly as much attention on her training in classical liberal arts as it does on her mystical marriage to Christ. St Katherine emerges as an example of how to successfully unite two types of wisdom—one, conventional training in *ars rhetorica*, the other, intimacy with Christ—to convert learned men. Stated another way, the *Life of St. Katherine* links what writers of affective theology such as Langland and Rolle referred to as *sapientia* and *scientia*. *Sapientia* was

‘heart knowledge, not head knowledge.’ The power of *sapientia* lay in its accessibility and, because of this, was ‘associated with the body, the emotions, women, and Christ’s human nature.’ *Sapientia* and *scientia* are both drawn on in the legend of St Katherine.<sup>23</sup>

In this legend, “it is the close *connection* between the body and intellectual comprehension that is repeatedly highlighted”<sup>24</sup>: Katherine’s classical learning is incomplete without the close relationship to Christ her virginity—and as a result, her status as his bride—produces. Yet both types of knowledge—*sapientia* and *scientia*—are necessary to best the pagan scholars. Ultimately, the *Life of St Katherine* portrays ideal learning as a hybrid of both types.

This hybrid nature is a large part of what Kempe wishes to emphasize about Margery’s learning. Kempe portrays Margery as someone with a burning desire to learn, but for whom understanding is difficult. In response, God sometimes sends her an overwhelming feeling of being slayed by Christ’s passion – an emotional, wholly mystical rapture. Yet at other moments, Margery receives visits from God, the saints, or Mary in which the instruction more closely resembles a conventional schoolroom lesson. And finally, Margery learns through exemplum and *imitatio*, sometimes in a full-body experience of immersion in

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 118 (citing Nicholas Watson).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the events of Christ's passion, or by living side-by-side with long-departed saints for days at a time.

Two words that recur again and again in the *Book* best represent Margery's hybrid learning: "dalyawnce" and "comown." Margery uses these terms repeatedly to describe both her conversations with Christ and with other people. The verb form of "dalyawnce" has as its second definition "serious, edifying, or spiritual conversation" but can also mean "sexual union."<sup>25</sup> "Comowning"'s verb form also has a specifically scholarly meaning as "disseminate knowledge" or "communicate spiritually" but, like "dalyawns," also has a sexual valence.<sup>26</sup> Margery's use of these terms to describe how God and the saints impart spiritual knowledge to her fully capture its hybrid bodily *and* conventional "schoolroom" nature. When Margery is unable to understand sermons in another language, God promises to "preche the and teche the myself." The lesson is a "dalyawns" so sweet that "as a drunken man sche turned che turnyd hir fyrst on the o syde and sithyn on the other wyth gret wepyng and gret sobbyng, unmythy to kepyn hirselle in stabilnes for the unqwenchabyll fyer of lofe which brent ful sor in hir sowle" (1.41.2312-2314). This lesson wracks her bodily. But at other moments, Kempe refers to her education as a spiritual tutorial of sorts. Even when God or his saints teach Margery themselves, Kempe often portrays these lessons as no more than ordinary conversations between master and pupil. When Margery is left without a confessor in Rome, God sends John the Evangelist to her "to heryn hir confessyon, and sche seyde '*Benedicite.*' And he seyde '*Dominus*' verily in hir sowle that *sche saw hym and herd hym in*

---

<sup>25</sup> "dalien," in *The Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952-). Accessed online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

<sup>26</sup> "communen" in *The Middle English Dictionary*.

hire gostly undirstondyng a sche schuld a do an other preste be hir bodily wittys” (32.1877 - 1881, emphasis mine). In a similar manner,

Sumtyme Seynt Petyr, er Seynt Powle, sumtyme Seynt Mary Mawdelyn, Seynt Kateryne, seynt Margaret, er what seynt in hevyn that sche cowde thynke on thorw the wil and sufferawns of God, thei spokyn to the undirstondyng of hir sowle, and enformyd hir how sche schulde lovyn God and how sche schulde best plesyn hym, and answeyrd to what sche wolde askyn of hem. (1.87.5117 - 5121)

For Margery, the contemplative communions with the saints through which she sometimes learns are little different than the “comowynyng with clerks” in which she also regularly engages. Margery’s education cannot be characterized as wholly “mystical” or wholly “literate.” And in fact, this dichotomy may be a false one. In the introduction to *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200 - 1550*, Anneke Mulder-Bakker describes the way in which, for medieval people, “texts were not in themselves conveyors of knowledge but mnemonic aids for summoning the stored collective knowledge before the inner eye of the reader.”<sup>27</sup> In this model of textual engagement, in which reading is simply an aid to *seeing* something before the mind’s eye, there seems to be little divide between the scholar who reads and therefore sees, and the contemplative who—like Margery—prays and therefore sees.

Mary Carruthers’ work on the medieval understanding of reading further defines the ideal scholarship as a combination of emotion and reason:

A work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself – that process constitutes a necessary stage of its ‘textualization.’ Merely running one’s eyes over the written pages is not reading at all, for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one’s brain by emotion and sense. (9 – 10)<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, “Introduction” in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200 – 1550*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 14.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

This definition of reading is one from which contemplative activity – the internalization of the text through placement of it in one’s carefully constructed memory by an *emotive* and *sensory* process – cannot be severed. Moreover, if true learning, or “study” depends upon meditative reading, then who is better qualified than the pious person who cultivates the contemplative lifestyle to be a learner? Who better than Margery Kempe to be a scholar and a reader?

And in fact, Margery does not rely on *contemplatio* alone to educate herself. Given Margery’s often confrontational relationship with clerics, it is easy to view the *Book* as decidedly anti-clerical. But doing so flattens a decidedly more multi-dimensional relationship. For at the same time as she rails against those clerics who stymie her plans, speak out against her manner of living, or rend the lord’s flesh with their oaths, Margery also relies heavily on them to provide her with material for her contemplation. Margery hungers after God’s word, saying,

Alas, Lord, as many clerkys as thu hast in this world, that thu ne wodyst sendyn on of hem that myth fulfillyn my sowle wyth thi word and wyth redyng of Holy Scriptur, for alle the clerkys that prechyn may not fulfillyn. (1.58.3361 – 3364)

The Lord grants her request, sending a priest who reads to her for seven or eight years from Bible commentary, saints’ lives, and works of contemplative spirituality. It appears, then, that Margery is desirous of the learned spirituality that an educated cleric can provide. Accordingly, when the provincial of the White Friars becomes concerned that one of his members is “to conversawnt wyth the sayd creatur, forasmech as he supportyd hir in hir wepyng and in hir crying and also enformyd hir in qwestyons of Scriptur whan sche wolde any askyn hym” (2.69.3978 – 3981), and informs this man that “he schulde no mor spekyng wyth hir ne enformyn hir in no textys of Scriptur,” (2.69.3981 – 3982) Margery is devastated,

and complains to God. “Alas, Lord, why may I no comfort han of this worschepful clerk, the which hath knowyn me so many yerys and oftyn tymes strengthyd me in thi lofe?”

(2.69.994 – 3995). Scenes of Margery reading with learned clerks thus provide a counterbalance to Margery’s contemplative “dalyawnce” with Christ and the saints.

Margery’s education is both conventional and contemplative, blending *scientia* and *sapientia* and revealing the boundaries between the two to be porous, even artificial.

The result of this hybrid education is a St. Katherine-like ability to best clerics at their own game: When Margery is brought before the mayor of Leicester on charges of heresy, she tells him,

“Sir ye arn not worthy to ben a meyr, and that schal I prevyn be Holy Writte, for owr Lord God seyde hymself er he wolde takyn venjawnce on the cyteys, ‘I schal comyn down and seen.’ And yet he knew al thyng. And that was not ellys, sir, but for to schewe men as ye ben that ye schulde don non execucyon in ponischyng but yyf ye had knowyng befor that it wer worthy for to be don.” (2.48.2720 - 2725)

Proving things “be Holy Writte” is clearly the domain of the university curriculum in theology at Oxford, during the first five years of which a student would be required to attend lectures on the Bible and Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, followed by two years in which the student was allowed to engage in debates, capped by years seven and eight, in which the student would be able to “read” (lecture) on Lombard and finally, in year eight, the Bible. These lectures on the Bible might take the form of simple expositions of Biblical texts of the sort Margery performs here. Oxford students would probably, however, be more concerned with “theological questions occasioned by the text or for which the text may only have been a pretext.”<sup>29</sup> By contrast, in this episode Margery is concerned with how the Bible reflects upon and condemns the mayor’s actions concerning *her*. She uses biblical exegesis to read

---

<sup>29</sup> William J. Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 43.

her own experience. Like Katherine, Margery plays the scholars' game, but uses it for her own ends.

Attention to Margery's *imitatio Katherinae* provides an important corrective to Kempe scholarship that reads Kempe's *Book* as "threatening and subversive of official power since it privileges the chaotic language of tears and cries"<sup>30</sup> or as "an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in defiance of the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system"<sup>31</sup> If the *Book of Margery Kempe* is threatening to official power, it is not because Kempe privileges the bodily or mystical *over* more traditional forms of knowledge. As Audrey Walton argues, Margery's interaction with late medieval orthodoxy always "remains essentially participatory, in some ways constituted by the same set of authorities and sanctions that it challenges."<sup>32</sup> Here, Kempe's participatory spirituality is on display as she shows how two forms of learning, working together, are more powerful than either by itself. This hybrid learning enables Margery—like Katherine—to transform the initially antagonistic relationship between herself and the clerics who interrogate her into one of accord: "The outcome of the trials in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is usually that Kempe and her interrogators have become allies."<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Katherine, however, Margery co-opts clerical techniques at a time when doing so publicly as a woman was likely to put her at odds with the official Church, which forbade

---

<sup>30</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 137.

<sup>31</sup> Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power Over Language" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 40.

<sup>32</sup> Audrey Walton, "The Mendicant Margery: Margery Kempe, Mary Magdalene, and the *Noli Me Tangere*." *Mystics Quarterly* 35 (2009), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Genelle Gertz, *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400 – 1670* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57.

women from preaching. So it goes when Margery defends her prerogative to teach the people in the Archbishop of York's diocese by citing a gospel passage in which a woman publicly praises Jesus. In response, "seyd the clerkys, 'her wot we wel that sche hath a devyl wythinne hir, for sche spekyth of the gospel.' As swythe a gret clerke browt forth a boke and leyd Seynt Powyl for hys party ageyns hir that no woman schulde prechyn" (1.52.2972-2974). Margery defends herself with semantics, claiming she comes "in no pulpitt" and uses only "comownycacyon and good wordys" (1.52.2975-2977). Still, as she did in narrating Margery's chaste marriage, Kempe must tread carefully to avoid showing Margery overstepping male prerogative. She does so using a classic technique of virgin martyrology—by using the trial scene as an occasion of her saint's public speech, while also portraying that speech as originating elsewhere, with God. This technique allows Margery to voice her speech even as she distances herself from it.

First and foremost, the trial scenes in *The Book of Margery Kempe* answer the charges, originally laid at Margery's door by the Mayor of Leicester, that she is a heretic. Following these scenes, even those most antagonistic to Margery grudgingly admit that her beliefs are perfectly orthodox. To the charge of "strumpet," Margery swears that her only sexual partner has been her husband. But once her orthodoxy is well established, Kempe uses trial scenes to establish Margery's preaching facility. As Genelle Gertz argues in *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers*, "forms of inquisition [. . .] become for Margery occasions either for revealing her visionary gifts or practicing public preaching."<sup>34</sup> In this they serve the same function as the interrogation scenes in virgin martyr legends. They are the occasion of the saint's public speech, revealing her words to be divinely inspired and powerful.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 51.



Kempe makes the divine inspiration of Margery's speech abundantly clear. Before her interrogation in Leicester, Margery prays to God to "han grace, wytte, and wysdam so to answeryn that day as myth ben most plesawns and worschep to hym, most profyth to hir sowle, and best exampyl to the pepyl" (1.48.2697-2699). This prayer precedes all the trial scenes; once they have come to an end, Margery vindicated by the Archbishop of York's declaration that she is not a Lollard, Kempe provides a gloss on all that has come after this prayer:

sche cam to Lyncolne, and ther sufferd sche many scornys and many noyful wordys, answeryn agen in Goddys cawse wythowtyn any lettyng, wysly and discretly that many men merveyled of hir cunnyng. Ther wer men of lawe seyde unto hir, "We han gon to scole many yerys, and yet arn we not sufficient to answeryn as thu dost. Of whom hast thu this cunnyng?" And sche seyde, "Of the Holy Gost." Than askyd thei, "Hast thu the Holy Gost?" "Ya, serys," seyde sche, "ther may no man sey a good worde wythowtyn the gyft of the Holy Gost, for owr Lord Jhesu Crist seyde to hys disciplys, 'Stody not what ye schal sey, for it schal not be yowr spiryt that schal spekyn in yow, but it schal be the spiryt of the Holy Gost.'" And thus owr Lord gaf hir grace to answer hem, worschepyd mote he be. (1.55.3195-3204)

Margery uses the learned men's surprise at her "cunnyng" to claim a divine origin for her speech. Their assumptions about what is proper to a bourgeois housewife play directly into her hand: no "mere" wife could possibly answer as readily as Margery does; her answers *must* have a divine origin. Margery even uses this occasion to usurp a prerogative normally reserved for male preachers, of using a scriptural passage as commentary on what has just occurred. By bookending Kempe's trial scenes first, with a prayer for divine inspiration and this scriptural reference, she claims a divine source for her ready answers.

Kempe buttresses her claim of a divine origin for Margery's speech by highlighting its effectiveness, most apparent in her trial at York. As she awaits it, "many good men and women preyde hir to mete and madyn hir ryth good cher and weren ryth glad to heryn hyr dalyawns, havynge gret merveyle of hir speche for it was fruteful" (1.50.2826-2828). Kempe

showcases that fruitfulness, quite literally, with fruit. Confounded by Margery's orthodox Articles of Faith and her canny deflection of a preaching accusation with semantics, a "doctowr" accuses her of telling "the werst talys of prestys that evyr I herde" (1.52.2978). Margery tells the story again—of a priest who witnesses a bear eat pear blossoms, then defecate them; of a pilgrim's interpretation of the scene as a parable about those who waste God's grace by sinning. Sins of the tongue—always a particular bugbear of Margery's—feature heavily here: the pilgrim accuses the priest of taking "ful lytl heede how thu seyst thi mateynes and thi servyse, so it be blaberyd to an ende," and of "sweryng, lying, detraccyon, and bakbytyng" (1.52.2998-99, 3005). The parable's interpretation is somewhat convoluted—the priest is at various points both pear tree and bear—but the point sticks: the Archbishop of York declares it "a good tale," and one of Margery's particular clerkly enemies claims "this tale smytyth me to the herte" (1.52.3011) which, as Margery helpfully explains by parroting the words of her favorite preacher, means he is guilty of the same sins. The fruit of Margery's speech is the Archbishop's approval and this clerk's true contrition.

But the fruit of this parable is also Kempe's appropriation of a preacher's voice for Margery without her having to own it completely. Margery never actually interprets this parable; instead, she simply repeats the interpretation of a pilgrim "massanger of God." Similarly, she does not herself accuse the smitten clerk of sinning, but simply repeats the words she has heard another preacher speak. Since this trial has leveled an accusation of preaching against Margery, Kempe is extraordinarily careful here not to show her engaging in hermeneutics or fraternal correction, which smack of preaching. At the same time, she must prove Margery's speech fruitful. The result is a lesson Margery teaches, but only under duress: the conceit of the trial narrative forces her to tell it; she does not interpret it but

repeats the interpretation of another. And if we are mindful of her claim that the Holy Ghost speaks in her, we know that her words do are born of her communion with God; they are his as much as—or perhaps more than—they are hers.

Like a virgin martyr's, Margery's speech is both hers and not hers. It is a function of her piety—of her prayer and contemplation, and especially, the intimacy with God that gives her special access to God's word. As he tells her,

Hyly I thanke the, dowtyr, that thu hast suffyrd me to werkyn my wil in the and that thu woldist latyn me be so homly wyth the. For in no thyng, dowtyr, that thu myghtyst do in erth thu myghtyst no bettyr plesyn me than suffyn me speke to the in thi sowle, for that tyme thu undirstondyst my wyl and I undirstond thi wyl. (86.4986-4990).

The word for Margery's intimacy with God is "homly," a word whose first definition is "pertaining or belonging to a household, domestic."<sup>35</sup> Kempe plays up the double meaning, taking the virgin martyr's status as a dwelling place for God to its most literal extreme. In the lines that follow this passage, God details how Margery has welcomed him into her soul by employing all of his saints to deck a "chawmbre" in it with spices and flowers and inviting all three persons of the Trinity to seat themselves there on velvet cushions. In the room she creates in her soul, God speaks. And through Margery's speech, God's voice reaches the people: "I am in the, and thow in me. And thei that heryn the thei heryn the voys of God" (1.10.514-515).

But throughout the *Book of Margery Kempe*, other voices threaten to drown out this one. Once Margery has spoken, her utterance "necessarily enters the interpretative anarchy which is elsewhere identified as 'the langage of the world.'"<sup>36</sup> The problem facing Margery is one that Claire Waters argues is common to all preachers: "the preacher's speech, and

---

<sup>35</sup> "homli," *Middle English Dictionary*, Definition 1.

<sup>36</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'Afty Hyr Owyn Tunge': Body, Voice and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Women's Writing* 9.2 (2002), 160.

ownership, are at issue in ways that the prophet's and priest's are not, and those questions of ownership make the speaking body particularly important."<sup>37</sup> Inasmuch as Margery voices God's word, it passes through her body and so, like a virgin martyr's, this body becomes the subject of public interpretation and controversy just as much as the words it speaks. The second part of this chapter interrogates the link the *Book* draws between Margery's body and voice and the problems and possibilities this creates in Kempe's struggle for authority.

## II. The Speaking Body

The virgin martyr never loses control of her speech. Even as Cecilia boils in the bathtub with her head dangling by a thread, she preaches a coherent sermon. The utterances that issue from her wracked body continue to have intelligible meaning. So, too, does that body. Now—having failed to die when the pagan persecutor willed it, and having resisted attempts to defile it—it is firmly marked as God's possession. But the battle for meaning of the saintly body has been hard-won, with other voices in the legend—most notably, the pagan persecutor's, but also the crowds of onlookers to the saint's martyrdom—advancing competing interpretations of the meaning of the saint's body and its suffering. We see these competing interpretations in play when the pagan persecutor—for example, Eleusius in the legend of Juliana—"reads" the saint's body as a potential sexual conquest, or when the crowds of onlookers lament the virgin body's tortures as destruction of earthly beauty only to be rebuked by the virgin martyr, who reads them as means to a heavenly reward.

---

<sup>37</sup> Claire Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 27.

The competing interpretations of the saintly body in a virgin martyr legend are both its Achilles' heel, and the whole point of the genre. On the one hand, training audience focus on the inappropriately sexualized or literal readings advanced by persecutors and onlookers risks "encouraging" the reader to his own misreading: it is easy to imagine that a reader encountering a description of how Eleusius orders molten brass poured over Juliana's body "so that it ran headlong down her lovely body to her heels" might become distracted by that "lovely body" and stop short of reading its beauty as an earthly cipher for a soul united with Christ.<sup>38</sup> But on the other hand, if the reader is able to rise above inappropriately literal or earthly readings, the virgin martyr legend offers a tutorial in spiritual reading, the virgin body a challenging and rewarding "text."

By the time Kempe writes her *Book*, the body-text analogy has become explicit, as Anke Bernau explains:

The growing emphasis on materiality throughout the Middle Ages granted the body a privileged position as a site of religious experience and understanding. It also resulted in the creation of a body-text analogy, in which the body as the 'text' of the illiterate could be 'read' in physical manifestations of holiness (such as stigmata, miraculous lactation, or excessive tears). (Bernau, "A Christian *Corpus*," 118)

But some bodies are easier to read than others. The body of a nun, for example, veiled and sealed off in a convent, is far easier to read as a Bride of Christ than the boisterously weeping body of a woman who wears white clothes but is not a (physical) virgin, who is married but lives apart from her husband, and who is a woman, yet travels abroad alone. Complicating the interpretation of Margery's body still further is her identification with a range of competing, sometimes contradictory saintly models. Is she a widowed matron in the penitential ethos à la Birgitta, a virgin martyr in the Katherinian mode, or a married saint like

---

<sup>38</sup> From the edition of Bodley MS 34 in *pe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iulienne*, S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne, ed. (London: EETS, 1961), 1. 257.

Cecilia? According to Salih, “When virginity literature, in all its complexity, is taken into account, it becomes apparent that it is Margery’s tendency to synthesise various differently gendered traditions of piety which produces an uneasy, difficult text,” and this text is difficult not only for us, but for Margery’s audience within the *Book*.<sup>39</sup>

That Kempe does not shy away from this difficulty—that, in fact, she seems to revel in the slander and scorn it produces—has often been read as Kempe’s attempt to establish figural martyrdom for Margery because physical martyrdom is not available.<sup>40</sup> The *Book* explicitly invites this interpretation; for example, when God tells Margery that “I have behyghth the that thu schuldyst noon other purgatory han than slawndyr” (1.22.1167-68). The interpretation of slander as martyrdom is particularly apt given Kempe’s sustained focus on how sinners “slen [Christ] every day be gret othys sweryng” (1.16.843-44). Sins of the tongue as so many nails tearing the body of Christ was a well-established trope by the time Kempe is writing; she no doubt capitalizes on this trope and the “slawndyr” her unconventional piety occasions to provide yet one more identification of Margery with virgin martyrs. But I argue that Kempe also gives tongue to the voices of her audience in order to dramatize the battle over interpretation of the saintly body just as a virgin martyr legend does. In Kempe’s hands, this drama of slander and gossip becomes a lesson in right reading practices, with the *Book* providing both the gloss on Margery’s difficult-to-read body, examples of how to read it properly, and examples of what not to do.

---

<sup>39</sup> Salih *Versions of Virginity*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Olga Mongan, for example, writes that slanderous talk “compliments and mirrors the *Book*’s discourse of Margery’s mystical visions of Christ and his saints, re-enacting the pains of the Passion with Margery as Christ, and transforming Margery’s ostensibly mundane squabbles with her neighbors and acquaintances into an archetypal struggle between the saintly servant of God and the Devil himself.” “Slanderers and Saints: The Function of Slander in the *Book of Margery Kempe*.” *Philological Quarterly* 84.2, 34.

Like the virgin martyr's message, much of what Margery tries to communicate depends upon her body. As I have shown, Margery is generally successful at making herself understood when she *speaks*. But a great deal of what we hear of Margery is not in the form of speech, but of the "boystows" crying that regularly punctuates her narrative. Kempe portrays this crying as a rapture of Margery's body, one that overpowers it in "labowr" akin to childbirth.<sup>41</sup> As she does when she portrays Margery speaking "pregnawntly," Kempe describes Margery's piety using a maternal metaphor that explicitly links the feminine body to her public utterance. This crying "carries [Margery] out of segregation and into public space"<sup>42</sup> and is the primary means by which the world encounters Margery's body. Her body is also at issue in the white clothing she wears in a public declaration of her contested sexual status. Together, crying and clothing communicate a message as salient as any words Margery speaks. This message is constantly misinterpreted by Margery's audience in the "langage of the world" Kempe dutifully records, giving just as much space to the failures of reading as its successes. What emerges when we read *The Book of Margery Kempe* as an account of not just a holy woman, but the public response to that holy woman, is a lesson in correctly reading the body of a saint.

Critics generally agree that Margery's body is as much the subject of her communication in the *Book* as any words she speaks, that it is, indeed, her primary text. Liz Herbert McAvoy writes that Margery establishes "the text of her own female body as an alternative, authoritative location of what she refers to as 'very trewth schewyd in

---

<sup>41</sup> For more on Kempe's use of metaphors of maternity and childbirth to define her religious identity, see Tara Williams, "Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Modern Philology* 107.4 (May 2010): 528 – 555.

<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 178.

experiens,”<sup>43</sup> while Karma Lochrie compares Margery’s body to Christ’s in its status as a “cryptogram requiring the mystic’s decoding.”<sup>44</sup> Susan Signe Morrison even defines Margery’s bodily movement on pilgrimage as “a speech act of motion or space.”<sup>45</sup> Denis Renevey is most succinct: “Margery’s body is her initial book.”<sup>46</sup> What I and all these critics recognize is that to read Margery’s body as a text is merely to take her at her word that “alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon (1.1.5-6), or to take God’s word that he has ordained her to be a “merowr” among the people (1.78.4409).

We and Margery’s contemporary “readers” encounter her body most insistently through that other aspect of her communication, her tears. One Good Friday, as Margery watches some priests and townspeople “representyng the lamentabyl deth and doolful beryng of owr Lord Jhesu Crist,” she is so overtaken that

sche sobbyd, roryd, and cryed, and, spredyng hir armys abrood, seyde wyth lowed voys, "I dey, I dey," that many man on hir wonderyd and mervyled what hir eyed. And the mor sche besiid hir to kepyn hir fro cryyng, the lowdar sche cryed, for it was not in hir powyr to take it ne levyn it but as God wolde send it [. . .] Than wex sche al blew as it had ben leed and swet ful sor. And this maner of cryyng enduryd the terme of ten yer, as it is wretyn befor. And every Good Friday in alle the forseyd yerys sche was wepyng and sobbyng five er six owrys togedyr and therwyth cryed ful lowde many tymes so that sche myth not restreyn hir therfro, wech madyn hir ful febyl and weyke in hir bodily mytys.  
(1.57.3312 – 3315, 3317 – 3318)

Most apparent here is the insistent—even intrusive—physicality of Margery’s weeping: her arms are flung wide; she turns blue; she sweats. So physical is this labor that it makes her

---

<sup>43</sup> McAvoy “ ‘Afty Hyr Owyn Tunge,’ ” 160.

<sup>44</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 168.

<sup>45</sup> Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> Denis Renevey, “Margery’s Performing Body” in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiana Whitehead (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 209.



weak and feeble. Kempe is also at pains to stress the uncontrollable nature of this crying episode: though Margery attempts to keep from crying, it is not in her power to “take or leave,” but is “as God wolde send it.” Margery’s crying, like her speech, is both hers and not hers; it is a possession of her body by God.

More specifically, it is a possession of her body by Christ’s passion. Kempe has taken the lesson of virgin martyr legends that *imitatio Christi* need not take the form of crucifixion on a cross. As she does by portraying “slawndyr” as a type of martyrdom, she represents her weeping as a form of bodily suffering for and with Christ. Kempe states that in this instance Margery began to weep when, contemplating Mary’s suffering at the cross,

[Jesus’s] precyows body hangyng on the Crosse and sithyn beriid befor hir sight sodeynly ocupiid the hert of this creatur, drawing hir mende al holy into the Passyon of owr Lord Crist Jhesu, whom sche beheld wyth hir ghostly eye in the sight of hir sowle as verily as thei sche had seyn hys precyows body betyn, scorgyd, and crucified wyth hir bodily eye, which sight and gostly beheldyng wrowt be grace so fervently in hir mende, wowndyng hir wyth pyté and compassyon. (1.57.3307-3311)

Jesus’s passion and burial literally “occupy” Margery’s heart, and this occupation draws her mind elsewhere. Suddenly, Margery is no longer at the Good Friday service in Lynn; she is back in the Holy Land where her cryings first began, witnessing Jesus’s crucifixion again. At the same time as she witnesses it, she participates, the sights before her “ghostly eye” so many nails “wowndyng” her in an *imitatio Christi*. We might say that though Margery is at first possessed by Christ’s passion, she also possesses it. She carries the evidence of this possession as the bodily contortions and tears that manifest before her astonished fellow parishioners.

Yet as she did with her translation of the Cecilia legend, Kempe often—almost obsessively—allows divergent interpretations of her crying episodes to compete with her own.

For summe seyde it was a wikkyd spiryt vexid hir; sum seyde it was a sekene; sum seyde sche had dronkyn to mech wyn; sum bannyd hir; sum wissched sche had ben in the havyn; sum wolde sche had ben in the se in a bottumles boyt; and so ich man as hym thowte. Other gostly men lovyd hir and favowrd hir the mor. Sum gret clerkys seyden owyr Lady cryed nevyr so ne no seynt in hevyn, but thei knewyn ful lytyl what sche felt, ne thei wolde not belevyn but that sche myth an absteynd hir fro crying yf sche had wold. (1.48.1599-1605)

The readings of Margery's crying range from the marvelous ("a wikkyd spiryt") to the mundane ("sche had dronkyn to mech wyn") and are not confined to interpretations, but to possible responses: "bannyng," wishing Margery in the sea in a bottomless boat, or, if the readers are "gostly," or spiritual, loving Margery and favoring her more. Kempe tells us that those clerks who accusingly point out that not even the Virgin Mary cried so much "knewyn ful lytyl what sche felt." The referent of "sche" here—whether Margery or the Virgin Mary—aligns Margery's feelings with the Virgin's.

Accordingly, in the end, Kempe portrays the "gret clerkys" failure to read and respond to Margery's weeping correctly as a failure of compassion:

And the compassyfe deth of owyr Savyowr, be the which we arn alle restoryd to lyfe is not had in mende of us unworthy and unkende wretchys, ne not we wylle supportyn owyr Lordys owyn secretariis which he hath indued wyth lofe, but rathyr detractyn hem and hyndryn hem in as mech as we may. (1.28.1641-1645)

Kempe laments not only the failure to have "in mende" Jesus's death, but also the failure to support people like her, whom she calls the "Lordys owyn secretariis." With this turn of phrase, Kempe portrays the compassionate weeping of Margery and those like her as God's very dictation. In other words, this weeping—the proper affective response to Christ's passion—is what God wishes recorded and disseminated. Lynn Staley writes that "[Kempe's] description of herself as one of 'owyr Lordys owyn secretariis' points us to her life as the text she 'writes,' not to an actual book."<sup>47</sup> But it is also Christ's death that Margery writes, her

---

<sup>47</sup>Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 32.

weeping the letters she scrawls across the pews of the parish church, so much holy graffiti. The proper reading of this weeping—in this formulation, a text—is yet more compassion, affective identification with both Margery and through her, with Christ. Fiona Somerset argues that Kempe views language as “excitative”: “These words make things happen, and benefit others as well as herself.”<sup>48</sup> I argue that Kempe views her weeping as another powerful form of language. In fact, those who respond correctly to it become *Margery’s* secretaries, in some cases, quite literally: “Those who recognize [Margery’s] sanctity offer to write down her story ‘wyth her owen handys,’ thereby verifying God’s presence in Margery by helping her to ‘make a book’ out of her feelings and visions.”<sup>49</sup>

Here Kempe gives an even more detailed and involved model of spiritual reading of the saintly body than that offered by the virgin martyr legends. She portrays the proper reading of Margery’s weeping as both correct interpretation *and* compassionate response. It is reading that results not only in compassion, moreover, but in public dissemination of that compassion either through weeping or through its metaphorical equivalent, language. Despite the textual metaphor of “God’s secretary,” Kempe is not insistent that this public dissemination of compassion must take place in writing. In fact, as David Lawton argues, “writing in this book is seen as something provisional, always on the verge of being overthrown by speech.” Voice, he writes “is superior to the edited text, actively outlasting it.”<sup>50</sup> The primacy Kempe grants to speech explains her eagerness to record what people are

---

<sup>48</sup> Fiona Somerset, “Excitative Speech: Theories of Emotive Response from Richard Fitzralph to Margery Kempe” in *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 66.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> David Lawton, “Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 103. McAvoy concurs, writing that “the insistent oral utterance, which is clearly inseparable from the problematic female body, is everywhere

saying about her. This speech is the record of their response to her. If complimentary, it is evidence of God's work in the world. If uncomplimentary, it must still be recorded as evidence of the world's failure to read and respond to her correctly.

Kempe calls this failure of response the "langage of the world," a phrase she first introduces in Margery's visit to Julian of Norwich. As Margery represents Julian in the *Book*, the holy woman reassures Margery that the stirrings of her soul are from God. This character counsels Margery, "Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world, for the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world the mor yowr meryte in the sygth of God" (1.19.983-985). Here Margery represents Julian as characterizing spite, shame and reproof—in other words, all the cruel speech ranged against Margery—as the language of the world. Only a few lines later, Kempe refers to this kind of speech as "evyl langage":

Other which had no knowlach of hir maner of governawns, save only be sygth owtforth er ellys be jangelyng of other personys, pertyng the dom of trewth, seydful evyl of hir and causyd hir to have mech enmyté and mech dysese, mor than schuld have ellys had, had her evyl langage ne ben. (1.19.994-997)

Kempe highlights two recurring characteristics of the "langage of the world;" first, that it occurs not as a response to "knowlach," but to "syghth owtforth" or to "jangelyng of other personys." In other words, it is not based in a depth of understanding of the subject itself, but is the ceaseless iteration of speech *about* that subject. Second, this language causes "enmyté," or hostility. Just as the audience's incorrect interpretation of a virgin martyr's tortures provokes anger and reveals the substantial gap between the virgin's understanding of her body's meaning and the audience's, the "langage of the world" derives a wedge in between Margery and her community.

---

prioritized in the *Book* by its author over the authority of the written word, even when the narrative appears to be at its most literary." "Aftyr Hyr Owyn Tunge," 161.

The tendency of the “langage of the world” to effect separation is one that Kempe goes to great lengths to stress. When Margery has secured lodging in a hostel in Rome, a priest, “spak so evyl of this creatur and slawndryd so hir name in the hospital that thorw hys evyl langage sche was put owte of the hospital that sche myth no lengar be schrevyn ne howselyd therin” (1.31.1861-1863). The priest’s evil language separates Margery from the community of hospitalers and more importantly, from union with God in the body of Christ. Similarly, upon her return to England Margery finds a former spiritual counselor has “turnyd al ageyns hir” through “evyl langage” that he heard about her (1.43.2417). Margery is at pains to “drawyn hym to charité” again (1.43.2418). In this case, evil language has effected a separation from Margery that Kempe portrays in physical terms, as a “turning” away.

In contrast to the “langage of the world,” Kempe refers to the “comownyng” or “dalyawns” she has with God, the saints, and people who are friendly to her. Only a few lines before she recounts the “turning away” of her spiritual counselor, for example, she refers to the salutary conversation she has with Richard Caister as “dalyawns,” and the three halfpennies she wins from a company of pilgrims “inasmeche as sche had in comownyng telde hem good talys” (1.43.2404). As I showed earlier, “dalyawns” and “comownyng” are both terms that carry a sexual valence, that refer to the union of bodies as much as the union of minds. Just as the language of the world effects a spiritual and physical separation, the “dalyawns” and “comownyng” of God draw people together in both physical and spiritual fellowship.

Kempe highlights worldly language’s physically divisive nature most strongly in her description of her relationship with her husband. After Margery and John agree to live chastely,

first thei dwellyd togedir aftyr that thei had mad her vow, and than the pepil slawndryd hem and seyde thei usyd her lust and her liking as thei dedyn befor her vow makyng. And, whan thei wentyn owt on pilgrimage er to se and spekyn wyth other gostly creaturys, many evyl folke whos tongys wer her owyn, faylyng the dreed and lofe of owr Lord Jhesu Crist, demtyn and seydyn that thei went rathyr to woodys, grovys, er valeys to usyn the lust of her bodiis that the pepil schuld not aspyin it ne wetyn it. They, havynge knowlache how prone the pepil was to demyn evyl of hem, desiryng to avoydyn al occasyon, in as mech as thei myth goodly, be her good wil and her bothins consentyng, thei partyd asundyr as towchyng to her boord and to her chambrys, and wentyn to boord in divers placys. (1.76.4255-4264)

Here again, Kempe portrays this speech as provoked only by outward appearance rather than true knowledge. It is a failure of interpretation as well as the product of “evyl folke whos tongys wer her owyn” rather than Christ’s and as such failures always do, it provokes a separation, a parting “asundyr” of Margery and her husband. The worldly reading of Margery and John’s cohabitation is purely sexual. It is a failure to see beyond the surface of their bodies to the true, spiritual intentions within—one that mirrors the reading of the virgin martyr’s body as erotic object of desire for *men*, rather than dwelling place for Christ.

In addition to highlighting the physically divisive effects of the language of the world, this episode brings into focus another much talked-about aspect of Margery’s public persona: her sexual status. Christ demands a public declaration of this status in the white clothing he asks Margery to wear.

And, dowtyr, I sey to the I wyl that thou were clothys of whyte and non other colour, for thou schal ben arayd aftyr my wyl." "A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on other maner than other chast women don, I drede that the pepyl wyl slawndyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me." "Ya, dowtyr, the more wondryng that thou hast for my lofe, the more thou plesyst me." (1.15.732-736)

This demand comes just before Margery is to be at her most public, as she prepares to go out on pilgrimage. As Morrison writes, “the woman on pilgrimage cannot be private, even if she is experiencing personal devotion. A woman in public space makes herself open to

interpretation.”<sup>51</sup> Christ asks Margery—well-known throughout her town as a wife and mother—to don the white clothes of a virgin wife of Christ at just the moment when it will invite the most speculation, even “slawndyr.” He tells Margery he is not just sympathetic but *pleased* if people point, stare, and especially, “wondyr.” In asking her to don white clothing, Christ is asking Margery to make a spectacle of herself, and to do so through the apparent disjunction between appearance and reality.

But like her tears, which only appear inappropriately “boystows” when viewed through a worldly lens, Margery’s white clothing is only inappropriate to a failed reader. This failed reader sees only what Margery *has* been—a worldly wife—and not what she *wishes* to be. This is a mistake, for as God tells Margery on numerous occasions,

I take non hed what thu hast be but what thu woldist be. And oftyntymes have I telde the that I have clene forgove the alle thy synnes. Therefore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt. And, as oftyntymes as thu thynkyst on me er woldyst don any good dede to me, thu schalt have the same mede in hevyn as yyf thu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body which is in hevyn. (1.36.2100-2110)

In this extraordinary passage, Christ defines Margery not only as his wife, but also as his mother, asking to be treated by Margery both “as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr” *and* “as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde.” Immediately before this passage, God has assured Margery that “thu hast fully in thi sowle al the Holy Trinité” (1.35.2069-2070). Just as God is capable of being fully Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Margery’s soul is capable of containing this multitude, and of being both virgin, wife, and mother. Here, in essence, God frees Margery from the limitations of her earthly body. God’s promise to take heed not of

---

<sup>51</sup> Signe-Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, 5.

what Margery has been, but only what she *wouldist*, or *wishes* to be, signals that he (and Kempe) view Margery's will as more important than the physical state of her body. In other words, he and Kempe ascribe to the definition of virginity as "sited in the soul" rather than the body.<sup>52</sup>

The white clothing Margery wears symbolizes the way her virgin will has remade her body. For Margery it is not simply a "metonymy for the sexual state of one's body" or even a signal of "a disjunction between her multiparous body and her virgin desire;"<sup>53</sup> for her and for God there is no disjunction. Margery's soul can be both/and: it can contain a multitude of diverse identities. Georgiana Donavin points out the significance of this multiplicity for Margery's public ministry, writing "the result of Kempe's Marian positions of bride and mother is that she can encompass all things holy and sinful in her own soul and bring forth righteous conversation."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Tara Williams argues that "Margery's use of maternal imagery in combination with concrete sexual imagery complicates what might otherwise be traditional metaphors. She uses her mixed imagery to a specific end: to enhance her authority as a religious figure in the image of the Virgin Mary."<sup>55</sup> Both Donavin and Williams stress how Margery's Marian identification enables her public ministry, particularly her speech. Thus we might also read Margery's white clothing as symbolic of her role as public, speaking virgin. Just as the virgin martyrs use their status as brides of Christ to "give birth" to the Word in a Marian performance, so Margery capitalizes on the possibilities inherent in

---

<sup>52</sup> For more on this definition of virginity and how Kempe uses it to remake her body as virginal, see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 182 – 185.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 129; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 277.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, "Manipulating Mary," 530.



her virginity and the intimacy with Christ that it affords, dramatizing for the reader her “hoomli” conversations with her bridegroom.

Given Kempe’s focus on the identity of Margery’s *soul* as virgin bride and wife, it is tempting to view her as rejecting the life of the body in favor of the spirit. But this would be a mistake, for as Margery’s spiritual motherhood and wifeness are wholly bound up with her experience as a real, physical mother and wife.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong writes that “the way of [Margery’s] spirituality seems not to invest the literal with allegory, but to equip the spiritual with the real.”<sup>57</sup> Kempe *must* equip the spiritual with the real because her project is not simply to communicate with God, but to share these communications with others. It is through the physical world that she encounters these others. Though God may be able to encounter Margery on a wholly spiritual level, her earthly readers are not usually able to grasp it. Like the pagan persecutors and audiences in a virgin martyr legend, they are unable to move beyond earthly, wholly physical readings of the saint. The result is a tension in the *Book* between the spiritual and literal readings of Margery’s body.

This tension manifests in the consternation Margery’s white clothing provokes in onlookers. The mayor of Leicester is not only confused, but fearful:

Than the meyr seyde to hir, "I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han away owr wyvys fro us and ledyn hem wyth the." "Syr," sche seyth, "ye schal not wetyn of my mowth why I go in white clothys; ye arn not worthy to wetyn it. But, ser, I wil tellyn it to thes worthy clerkys wyth good wil be the maner of confessyon. Avyse hem yyf thei wyl telle it yow." (1.28.2726-2731)

---

<sup>56</sup> Again, see Williams: “Motherhood and sexual passion, which were (and still are) popular religious metaphors, have a physical basis in Margery’s earthly life: just as she founded her spiritual motherhood on her physical motherhood, she founds her spiritual sexuality on its earthly equivalent.” “Manipulating Mary,” 547.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, “Understanding by Feeling in Margery Kempe’s *Book*” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 21.

Recognizing the freedom from proscribed social roles that Margery's costume portends, the mayor expresses his fear that some of this license will rub off on the town's wives. He reads Margery's clothing purely for what it might mean for the earthly community of husbands and wives. Accordingly, Margery declares him unfit to hear her secret; she will divulge it only to clerics "be the maner of confessyon," moving the revelation from the earthly to the spiritual realm where it belongs. Later, the Archbishop asks Margery why she wears white clothes; is she a maiden? When Margery admits she is a wife, he orders her to be fettered, for she is a heretic. "By presenting the Archbishop as capable of understanding virginity only in physical terms and completely misunderstanding the spiritual state signified by her clothing," writes Staley, "Kempe stresses the crude literalism of the very man who should be able to understand more than one level of reality."<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the mayor of Leicester can be forgiven for being unable to read spiritually, but an Archbishop should know better. In these instances, Margery's white clothing functions as a test of her audience's interpretative mettle, with most failing.

The great project of both Margery and *The Book of Margery Kempe* is to redeem these failures—or at least, to make them less pervasive—by teaching Margery's audience how to read and interpret her properly. Like a preacher, Margery must expound God's text: herself. Throughout the *Book*, Margery constantly "schews" and interprets her way of living for churchmen. As Barr notes, "the use of the verb 'schew' underscores Margery's role as an intermediary between the divine knowledge that she receives and the rest of the world."<sup>59</sup> But inasmuch as Margery explains *herself*, the divine knowledge that she imparts in her "schewyngs" is her (and God's) understanding of her identity as more than simply wife,

---

<sup>58</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 55.

<sup>59</sup> Barr, *Willing to Know God*, 219.

mother, Christ's virgin spouse and mother, but all of these at once. Staley concurs; pointing to the meaning of "schew" as "to disclose or make oneself known," she calls Kempe's use of it "at once utterly conventional and pointedly reflexive."<sup>60</sup> The lesson of Margery's "schewyngs" is that the earthly body of the saint is unbound by physical laws. It signifies more than—or beyond—its blood and bones. Like the virgin martyr who defies death, the example of Margery's body teaches that spiritual significance inheres in the flesh, because the flesh belongs to God—and God inhabits it.

Parallel to Margery's "schewyngs" and interpretation of herself before various churchmen is (ironically) the *Book's* efforts to make them quite unnecessary. In other words, Kempe teaches her readers how to properly interpret Margery over the course of her *Book*. This goal is apparent from the very start as the *Book* begins with an account of the great difficulty Margery had in getting her life transcribed. First, she has "no wryter that wold fulfyllyn her desyr ne geve credens to hir felingys." She finally meets one who has "good knowlach of this creatur and of hir desyr" who is able to write down some of what Margery tells him, but "the booke was so evel wretyn" that her next scribe

cowd lytyll skyllyl theron, for it was neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne the lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as other letters ben. Therfor the prest leved fully ther schuld nevyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace. Nevyrthelesse, he behyte hir that if he cowd redyn it he wold copyn it owt and wrytyn it betyr wyth good wylle. Than was ther so evyl spekyng of this creatur and of hir wepyng that the prest durst not for cowardyse speke wyth her but seldom, ne not wold wryten as he had behestyd unto the forseyd creatur. (1.1.74-81)

The most successful of Margery's scribes are those who align their will with hers (they "fulfyllyn her desyr") and make an effort to probe beneath the surface, to ascertain her "felingys." The letters that are not "schapyn ne formyd as other letters ben" are a thinly disguised metaphor for Margery herself, her unconventional spirituality making her quite

---

<sup>60</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 195.

singular, neither virgin nor wife just as these letters are neither “good Englysch ne Dewch.” To read Margery correctly will thus require “special grace.” Those who do not have it resemble the pagan persecutors of virgin martyr legends, understanding the body as simply an object to be killed or possessed. As Margery is neither virgin nor wife, but both, the virgin martyr is neither wholly spirit *nor* wholly body, but seamlessly unites the two. Like Margery, she is singular: in the virgin martyr’s case this singularity comes from the perfection with which her virgin body reveals the unblemished state of her soul; in Margery’s case, it comes from the way in which the soul has remade the body as virginal, leading to category confusion. In both cases, only a spiritual reading enables correct interpretation of the saintly body.

The interpretative process Kempe describes resembles that necessary for interpreting visions in dream and visionary literature, in which “the proper alignment of the recipient’s will is necessary for the vision to be understood, as the recipient can only grasp its content if his or her will is wedded to God’s.”<sup>61</sup> Kempe emphasizes the “good wylle” of her second scribe, and how her first scribe only transcribed her book as he “dwellyd” with Margery. Unity is the necessary relationship between Margery and her interpreter; the language of the world divides, rendering Margery’s readers unable to puzzle her out. When the wills are aligned, however, miraculous translation is the result.

Miraculous translation also occurs when Margery on pilgrimage in Rome. Moved to speak with a German priest who does not know English and frustrated by having to go through an interpreter,

sche preyd the preste in the name of Jhesu that he wolde makyn hys preyeris to the blysfyl Trinite, to owir Lady, and to alle the blissed sentys in hevyn, also steryn other that lovedyn owir Lord to preyen for hym, that he myth han grace to undirstondyn hir

---

<sup>61</sup> Barr, *Willing to Know God*, 17.

langage and hir speche in swech thyngys as sche thorw the grace of God wold seyn and schewyn unto hym [. . .] Desyryng to plese God, he folwyd the counsel of this creatur, and mad hys praerys to God devoutly as he cowde every day that he myth han grace to undirstandyn what the forseyd creatur wolde seyn to hym, and also he mad other loverys of owyr Lord to prey for hym. Thus thei preyd therten days. And aftyr therten days the preste cam ageyn to hir to prevyn the effect of her preyerys, and than he undirstod what sche seyde in Englysch to hym and sche undirstod what that he seyde. And yet he undirstod not Englisch that other men spokyn; thow thei spokyn the same wordys that sche spak, yet he undirstod hem not les than sche spak hirselfe. (1.33.1910-1914, 1917 – 1924)

Like her second scribe, the priest is only able to understand Margery after a gift of grace he receives through prayer. Kempe emphasizes the alignment of this priest's will with both God and Margery: he prays because he is "desyryng to plese God," and he "folwyd the counsel of this creatur." This alignment of wills yields a miraculous understanding between the two that Margery is now able to deepen by showing him "the secret thyngys of revelacyonys and of hy contemplacyons" (1.33.1927-1928). In much the same way, the virgin martyr's audience is only able to appreciate the fullness of her message after their conversion to Christianity. Here again, I turn to the Cecilia legend as representative of virgin martyrology more generally: In that legend, Valerian's ability to see the angel who protects Cecilia depends upon his receipt of Christian baptism; similarly, his brother is unable to see the couple's crowns of roses and lilies until he, too, converts. Sight is a symbol of possessing the fullness of revelation, accessible to the seer only through grace and union of the Christians through baptism, just as "the secret thyngys of revelacyonys" come to Margery's interlocutors only through prayer and union of wills.

Immediately following this passage, Kempe emphasizes how this priest understood not just Margery's speech, but her tears, supporting her in her weeping spells even when her own countrymen shun her: "he wolde supportyn hir in hir sobbyng and in hir crying whan alle hir cuntremen had forsakyn hir, for thei weryn evyr hir most enmys and cawsyd hir mych

hevynes in every place ther they comyn” (1.33.1941-1943). Those who we might expect to be most understanding of Margery because of their shared language are in fact most hostile to her. Here Kempe give an object lesson not only in a successful reading of Margery, but in how wills aligned in God create an alternative community—and unity—that takes precedence even over bonds of national affiliation and shared language.

We might productively read such moments as portraying a community akin to the one that springs up between virgin martyrs and their formerly pagan converts. With these episodes in virgin martyr legends, pagans who had formerly read the meaning of the virgin’s tortures as abasement and death suddenly agree with the virgin’s interpretation of martyrdom as the key to eternal life, bodily torture as *imitatio Christi*. Discussing Kempe’s imitation of virgin martyr legends, Sanok argues that the divergent interpretations it provokes reveal “that English community does not form a coherent interpretive community, one that can confidently and consistently recognize a holy woman, united . . . by one orthodox faith, defined against a dangerous religious other.”<sup>62</sup> By portraying a foreigner who understands Margery better than her own countrymen, Kempe reveals the superior alternative to the incoherent English interpretive community: an interpretive community united by wills aligned in Christ. Earthly language, Kempe seems to be saying, is yet one more version of the language of the world. Through it, Margery can never hope to reach the level of unity and understanding necessary for her own correct interpretation, just as the virgin martyr and her audience can never agree on an a spiritual interpretation of torture and martyrdom until they, too, are united in Christ and one spiritual language.

Kempe’s discussion of this episode of miraculous translation points to the larger concern of her book with how Margery is “read.” In *The Gift of Tongues: Women’s*

---

<sup>62</sup> Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 140.

*Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages*, Christine Cooper-Rompato shows how miraculous translation became more common in mystical and hagiographical texts at the time when religious texts' more frequent translation into the vernacular prompts fears that they will be mistranslated or misinterpreted. "Xenoglossia alleviates these fears," writes Cooper-Rompato, "for what lies behind the idea of miraculous translation is the promise of complete equivalence between languages and a desire for 'pure translation' that does not mutate, manipulate, or alter the text in any way."<sup>63</sup> The concern with translation in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is not only with translation between languages, but with translation of Margery herself. As Staley notes, "Margery is both the text and its most astute translator."<sup>64</sup> But she is a thorny text, one whose translation does not come easily. That Kempe portrays the understanding Margery reaches with the German priest as somewhat miraculous points to both her awareness of the difficulty of her "text" and, as Cooper-Rompato's argument implies, her well-founded fears of mistranslation or misinterpretation.

Thus despite Kempe's attention to moments when she and her interpreters are able to overcome the "language of the world," reach a unity of wills, and translate her correctly, *The Book of Margery Kempe* sounds a note of pessimism about the outcome of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls Margery's struggle "to make comprehensible certain aspects of her life that could not be adequately expressed in the discourses available to her."<sup>65</sup> Whether a correct interpretation of Margery is even possible to earthly readers remains an open question. At one point in the *Book*, Margery describes her tears as the fire of love within her, that "wolde aperyn wythowteforth swech as was closyd wythinneforth," suggesting that her

---

<sup>63</sup> Christine Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>64</sup> Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 195.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 162.

weeping is an outward sign of her interiority (1.78.4388-4389). But the fact that so blatant a “schewyng” of Margery’s inner state is consistently misread by her audience suggests that the world is simply not ready to interpret her correctly. Perhaps for this reason, God tells Margery that “thū begilyst bothe the devyl and the worlde wyth thin holy thowtys, and it is ryth gret foly to the pepil of the worlde for to demyn thin hert that no man may knowyn but God alone” (1.84.4897-98). Moreover, unlike a virgin martyr, whose death fixes the meaning of her life and seals her eternal virginity as a *fait accompli*, Margery is a work in progress. Salih concurs, writing that “[Margery’s] self is never securely known because never fixed and always subject to change . . . while she is still alive, she may change,” and that therefore “instead of martyrdom as closure and fixity, [Margery] gets martyrdom as process, subject to contested interpretations, uncooperative persecutors, and all the other difficulties inherent to an imperfect world.”<sup>66</sup> What my reading of the *Book of Margery Kempe* has shown is that Kempe uses these contested interpretations to reveal the difficulties of reading the saintly body spiritually in an imperfect world. In doing so, she expands upon the drama of interpretation inherent in virgin martyr legends to provide a detailed handbook for spiritual reading practices. If the best Margery’s readers can achieve is to understand that she is sent from God and belongs to God, it is not for lack of trying on Kempe’s part. Those who reach even this minimal level of understanding, the *Book* argues, will themselves show signs of their correct reading of the saintly body through compassionate response, speech that unites rather than divides, and an ability to read beyond the “grossly literal” to the spiritual that inheres in the saintly flesh.

---

<sup>66</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 208.



## Conclusion

*The Book of Margery Kempe* portrays Margery's body as "the parchment on which God actively encode[s] his signs."<sup>67</sup> The book is a record of this parchment, but it is also a record of the world's attempts to decode it. At its most basic, it is a record of what Margery says—both through her speech and through her body—and what the world says about her in turn. In *Language as the Site of Revolt in Medieval and Early Modern England*, M.C. Bodden writes of speech that "in its more intimate, casual form of talk, speech is even more dangerous: talk not only communicates; talk transforms." We see talk's transformative function constantly reiterated in the *Book*: in its ability to divide the body of Christ, separating Margery from her community and the sacraments; in the spiritual senses of "dalyawns" and "comownyng," which have the power to undo this division; in the power of "good talys" to turn souls to God and sometimes even make one's purse a little heavier. And most often, the subject of talk in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is Margery herself. More specifically, the subject of talk is usually Margery's bodily manifestation of Christ's passion in her crying, or Margery's sexual status as virgin, wife, *sponsa Christi*, or virgin mother of the Word.

In these ways, Margery's body becomes not only the parchment on which God encodes his signs, but also the spectacle or "merveyl" that provokes conversation about them. Whatever else it does, Margery's body causes people to stand up and take notice. In this, Margery proves herself an apt fifteenth century reader of virgin martyr legends in which the "lovely appearance [of the virgin] attracts her audience's attention and goodwill" with a sweetness that is dangerous "only if the hearer does not realize he must move beyond it [ . . .

---

<sup>67</sup> Renevey, "Margery's Performing Body," 199.

.] The saint's appearance is not 'mere' earthly beauty, an empty signifier, but instead serves as an external marker of inner, spiritual beauty and worth."<sup>68</sup> Kempe's translation of this dynamic sees Margery assuming the outer appearance and preaching vocation of the virgin without possessing the young, lovely body *or* the intact hymen, thus forcing her readers to "move beyond" the merely physical (or in Staley's terms "grossly literal") interpretation of her body. In effect, Margery's performance of virginity points to virginity *as* performance, as an imagined bodily wholeness which "cannot be found on the body's surface, but is instead produced by a range of symbolic practices," and where "bodies and their signs do not always add up neatly into coherent identities."<sup>69</sup> A disjunction between Margery's body and its signs occurs not only with respect to her sexual status, but also when she cries. While crying, Margery participates physically in a drama—Christ's passion—that her audience cannot see. Whether wondering at her weeping or at the apparent non sequitur between Margery's hymen and her white clothing, her readers must look again and, in that second look, move beyond physical to spiritual understanding.

Kempe's use of the saintly body as spectacle to provoke a reading aligns her *Book* with virgin martyrology. The virgin martyr's body, too, is on display, offered up for the divergent interpretations of onlookers both within and without the text. Moreover, it becomes, as Sanok terms it, a "cipher for the status of the communities and institutions around her." Those who read the saint's body properly signal their spiritual insight, while those who do not reveal themselves inappropriately earthly readers. Both Sanok and Staley agree that the cacophony of interpretations of Margery's body signal that the "English

---

<sup>68</sup> Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures*, 104.

<sup>69</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 38.

community does not form a coherent interpretive community, one that can confidently and consistently recognize a holy woman.”<sup>70</sup> In the face of divergent interpretations of her body, Margery, like the virgin martyr, must step forward to give her own reading.

But *The Book of Margery Kempe* differs from a virgin martyr legend in one important respect. This saint does not die. True, as she does with virginity, Margery performs *martyrdom* by submitting to the slurs, bannings, and cursings that she (and God) characterize as just as torturous and just as worthy of eternal reward. But unlike virginity and martyrdom, Margery cannot perform death. And without it, her martyrdom lacks the ultimate inscription of meaning that the virgin martyr’s death produces. This lack leads to a constant cycle in the *Book*, what Timea K. Szell calls “a pattern consisting of cumulative incidents of partial or near loss and defeat or disempowerment (e.g., loss of Kempe’s credibility, safety, dignity, serenity, or threats to her chastity, freedom, etc.) followed by a partial and temporally circumscribed restoration or recovery [. . .] never attaining even illusory narrative closure.”<sup>71</sup> Without death to establish the saintly identity, the voices surrounding and reading Margery’s spectacle never receive the final answer that would silence them.

Kempe’s *Book* is born of this lack. It is an attempt to inscribe a definitive meaning on Margery’s life, to “exchange temporal human voices . . . for the sound of eternal significance.”<sup>72</sup> It performs this exchange by allowing these voices to speak, only to expose

---

<sup>70</sup> Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, 140. See also Staley, who writes that Kempe “persistently describes Margery as offending her contemporaries’ sense of community by acts that apparently threaten its own myths of brotherhood, myths that Kempe suggests are ultimately founded upon falsely imposed hierarchies” (*Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, 59).

<sup>71</sup> Timea K. Szell, “From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 78.

<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Krug, “Jesus’ Voice: Dialogue and Late Medieval Readers” in *Form and Reform: Reading Across the Fifteenth Century* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 125.

them as “the language of the world.” Over the course of the *Book*, Kempe reveals Margery’s voice to be louder and more powerful than these, and amplifies this voice by doubling it in her text: “Awakened again, she renames herself and her experience again by dictating her story. Once translated into text, her voice cannot be silenced.”<sup>73</sup> Though she cannot perform death, Margery, can—through Kempe, through her *Book*—perform virgin martyrdom in multiple ways. She can perform the lives of specific virgin martyrs, like Cecilia and Katherine, whose chaste marriage and hybrid model of learning Kempe claims for Margery. But above all, Margery *can* circumscribe and establish the privileged interpretation of her body among competing definitions advanced by both the overtly hostile and the benignly misguided.

Reading the *Book of Margery Kempe* as a virgin martyr legend makes the central question of our reading not just “What does Margery know about God?” but also, “What does Margery know about *herself*?” In “A Rhetoric of Autobiography,” Cheryl Glenn cites Kempe’s gender as the defining factor in her ability to pioneer a genre, speculating that “perhaps only a woman would have and could have ‘written’ this earliest extant English autobiography.”<sup>74</sup> Reading the *Book* against virgin martyr legends teaches us that only a woman *needed* to write this earliest extant English autobiography, for in this time and place, only a woman needed to fight to define the meaning of her life and body as insistently as any virgin martyr. The first extant autobiography in English is a natural extension of the imperatives of virgin martyrdom to interpret a lived experience.

---

<sup>73</sup> Sandra J. McEntire, “The Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 68.

<sup>74</sup> Cheryl Glenn, “Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe: A Rhetoric of Autobiography*” in *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*, ed. Andrea Lunsford (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 56.

Moreover, the *Book of Margery Kempe* participates in what critics of early modern autobiography recognize as a constitutive aspect of life writing from this time period: “the expression of an ‘I’ as bequeathed by God, and thus experienced, as it were, in the third person. The commitment of ‘self’ to the pages of a journal is always and everywhere a conversation with God, so that one speaks of ‘oneself’ in the passive voice.”<sup>75</sup> So Kempe constantly refers to Margery as “the creatur,” signaling that she views Margery through God’s eyes—as first and foremost his creation—rather than an autonomous individual “self.” The drama at the heart of her *Book* is to reconcile the godly view of Margery with the world’s view, to make the two one. Here again, the concern of virgin martyr legends with the public, social interactions of the virgin body reveals itself in Kempe’s *Book*, which lends itself to readings of the autobiographical self as inherently social. In these readings, “ ‘the question of the self’s identity becomes a question of the self’s location in a world’ . . . The focus here is necessarily on the subject’s exchanges and interactions with others.”<sup>76</sup> As it does in virgin martyr legends and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, this focus on the “exchanges and interactions” with others opens a dangerous gap: the potential for misinterpretation of the virgin body. The virgin attempts to proscribe and fix the meaning of her body and martyrdom by speaking it loudly throughout her legend; with her triumphant death, she accomplishes this fixity.

Since this option is not available to Kempe, she can only provide Margery with the next best thing: identification with the virgin martyrs. This identification itself constitutes an act of interpretation on Kempe’s part. Jerome Bruner argues that “a life is created or

---

<sup>75</sup> “Introduction” in *Early Modern English Lives: Autobiography and Self-Representation, 1500 – 1660*, ed. Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 3.

<sup>76</sup> “Introduction,” in *Early Modern Autobiography* ed. Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 23 (citing Janet Gunn Varner).

constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience . . . Like all forms of interpretation, how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conventions available to us.”<sup>77</sup> One of the most salient and useful interpretive conventions available to Kempe, I argue, was virgin martyrology: through it, she could negotiate a removal of her body from patriarchal exchange in the orthodox mode of the married virgin martyr; she could highlight her hybrid learning and authorize her public speech in an imitation of St Katherine and more broadly, all the outspoken virgin martyrs. But though the choice to model her life on virgin martyrology opens interpretative possibilities for Kempe, it also has the potential to confuse her audience: “Some histories just ‘fit the facts’ better, unfashionable though such a remark may seem to some revisionist historians. So it is with genre choice in autobiography. A ‘wrong’ choice, an inappropriate ‘model’ for a life, ends up lending an aura of unbelievability or ‘forcedness’ to the episodes and the detailed enterprise of that life.”<sup>78</sup> Of course, in Margery and God’s view, in which virginity can be a function of the will and martyrdom undergone by “slawndyr,” virgin martyr legends are not a “wrong” genre choice for Margery’s autobiography. But choosing this genre in an imperfect world, before what Sanok calls an “incoherent interpretive community,” is risky. *The Book of Margery Kempe* dramatizes this risk and the failures of interpretation it provokes. In the process, it reveals itself to be an imitation of virgin martyr legends in both its focus on reading the saintly body, and its aspiration to provide a lesson in spiritual reading practices.

---

<sup>77</sup> Jerome Bruner, “The Autobiographical Process” in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford University Press, 1993), 38.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid, 47.

## CONCLUSION

This study began with a question: When women speak in medieval texts, where does their authority come from? This question, in turn, grew from an observation that despite a medieval antifeminist tradition portraying women's speech as at best, nonsensical, at worst, dangerous, medieval literature is full of women who speak authoritatively on a diverse range of subjects. For every Wife of Bath or *Vieille* holding forth on matters of marriage, love, and lust—in other words, exactly what we might expect from lecherous Woman—there is a sober Prudence or Loathly Lady stepping in to fill the gap in *men's* knowledge of abstract values like *gentillesse* or divine mercy. And even when women talk only about what they are “supposed” to know, they often prove themselves to be skilled rhetoricians. This speech may be “dangerous” inasmuch as it constitutes a provocation to lust, but it is far from nonsensical.

Where does she come from, this sometimes parodical, sometimes straight—but always eloquent—female speaker? In the years since I began this study, a body of critical literature has grown up offering one potential answer to this question. Building on the work of Rachel Fulton and Miri Rubin, whose sweeping studies of the Virgin Mary's portrayal in devotional texts, art, and poetry traced the evolution of one of the most iconic figures in Western Christendom from just a few lines in the Gospels, a new generation of critics has begun to draw connections between Mary, perfect communication, the language arts, and speech. It is a natural connection to draw, for “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God”—and bearing the Word was Mary.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800 – 1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Allen Lane, 2009). Recent work on Mary and the language arts includes Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America

I have drawn on the insights of this critical literature in my own work—for example, in showing how the Katherine Group draws on the Marian model to offer anchoresses the possibility of non-rupturing, effective speech, or how the Second Nun’s Prologue portrays the Second Nun as Mary’s scribe. But in fact, I believe that Mary as we know her in the mid to late medieval period is simply one incarnation in a long tradition of eloquent virgins. The goal of this study has been to uncover this tradition by tracing its evolution from the late patristic writers who linked virginity to intimacy with God and holy speech (“the words of God descend like the dew. The virgin’s produce is the fruit of the lips”<sup>2</sup>) all the way to an early fifteenth century autobiography in which a woman authorizes her preaching vocation not *in spite of* her female gender but *because of* it, for she is a virgin bride of Christ.

The primary vehicle through which Ambrose’s eloquent virgin reaches Margery Kempe is the saint’s life. And what Margery Kempe and other fifteenth century women like her might have seen in the saint’s life was the effect of the virgin’s decision to withhold her body from earthly commerce, playing out before a crowd of thousands. When the virgin spoke, they listened. When she taught, they were converted. When she prayed, they witnessed God’s answers to her prayers. But these fifteenth century women would also have seen in virgin martyr legends a female body. It might be stripped naked and threatened with rape. It would certainly be tortured. In the end, it would die.

These two—the virgin’s speech and her body—are inseparable in the virgin martyr legend. On the most basic level, of course, the virgin’s speech issues from her body (at least

---

Press, 2012) and Chapter 4, on Marian *imitatio* in Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, in Tara Williams, *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* vol. 10 trans. H. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth, ed. Henry Wace and Phillip Shaft (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896), VIII.40-41.



at first). But her body also produces her speech long before it ever crosses her lips. By withholding her body from men, the virgin has opened it to Christ and his Word. Certain virgin martyr traditions—for example, the Aelfrician—emphasize the necessity of embodiment for revelation: The virgin must come to knowledge of God first through the sense and in her, they are not subject to the same temptations and corruptions as the faculties of the non-virginal. And in all the virgin martyr traditions I have studied, the virgin's body produces speech by becoming the subject of her teaching.

When women speak in medieval virgin martyr legends, their authority comes from the body. It is a real, sexed, female body. Although it is put on display, tortured, and threatened with rape, the virgin martyr always re-writes the meaning of what happens to her body, giving it new significance. Because Christ took on a real body, the virgin martyr does not need to transcend hers; she can simply claim and re-claim it for him, in essence speaking hers differently, re-writing the script by which some—pagan persecutors, medieval readers, modern critics—construe it as primarily an erotic object. In other words, although the virgin martyr legend is potentially a genre in which a dangerous body is punished for its femaleness by being tortured and beaten into submission, it does not have to be. How we read it depends largely on who we listen to—the virgin martyr herself (and by extension, God)—or the other, competing interpretations whose dangerous allure is precisely the point.

Perhaps it is going too far to say that virgin martyr legends offered attractive possibilities for *real* medieval women. A real medieval woman could not re-write a beating or a rape simply by speaking it so. But on the other hand, the virgin martyr legends *might* offer attractive possibilities for *envisioning* the female body, particularly in its relationship to speech. Instead of female body as the site of sin and corruption, we see the female body as

the place in which Christ dwells on Earth; instead of an erotic *object* for patriarchal exchange, we see the female body as speaking *subject*. These are the consequences of a virgin martyr's decision to keep her body for Christ. These are also the consequences of our decision to read that body not as a symbol, but as a bod

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

- Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts.* Vol. 325. Ed. Bella Millett. London: EETS, 2005.
- Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett. London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1982.
- Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428 – 1431.* Ed. Norman P Tanner. London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1977.
- Myroure of Oure Lady.* EETS Vol. 19. Ed. Henry Blunt. London: EETS, 173.
- Registrum.* Ed. W.W. Capes. Canterbury and York Society 20 (1916) cited in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts.* Ed. Alcuin Blamires. New York: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Sawles Warde.* Ed. J.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers. London: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Seinte Katerine.* Ed. S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne. London: EETS, 1981.
- Seinte Marherete, þe Meiden ant Martyr.* Ed. Frances Mack. London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1934.
- Speculum Christiani,* EETS Vol. 182. Ed. Gustaf Holmstedt. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- The Form of Preaching.* Trans. Leopold Krul. *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts.* Ed. James J. Murphy. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.
- þe Liflade ant te Passiun of Seinte Iuliene.* Ed. S.R.T.O. d'Ardenne. London: EETS, 1961..
- Aelfric of Eynsham. *Aelfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series; Text.* Ed. Malcolm Godden. London; New York: EETS, 1979.
- . *Aelfric's Lives of Saints.* 2 vols. Ed. and trans. Walter Skeat (EETS and Oxford University Press, 1881.
- . *Aelfrics Grammatik und Glossar.* Ed. Julian Zupitza. Hildeseim: Wiedmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2003.
- . *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben.* Ed. Bruno Assmann. Kassel: GH

- Wiggend, 1889.
- . *Homilies of Aelfric: A Supplementary Collection*. Ed. John C. Pope. London: EETS and Oxford University Press, 1967.
- . *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch: Aelfric's Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*. Ed. S.J. Crawford. London: EETS and Oxford University Press, 1922.
- Aelred of Rievaulx. *Liturgical Sermons*. Trans and ed. M. Basil Pennington. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications.
- Aldhelm. *De Virginitate. Aldhelm, The Prose Works*. Ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979.
- Ambrose. *Concerning Virginity*, trans. H. de Romestin and H.T.F. Duckworth. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*. vol. 10. Ed. Henry Wace and Phillip Shaft. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896.
- Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 11 – 27*. Ed. and trans. John Rettig. Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1989.
- . *On the Trinity*. Ed. and trans. Edmund Hill. *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Vol. 8. Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990.
- Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales. The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Henry of Ghent. *Summa* 1.11.2 from *Utrum mulier possit esse doctor seu doctrix huius scientiae*. Translated in Blamires and Marx, "Woman Not to Preach: A Disputation in British Library MS Harley 31." *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993): 34 – 63.
- Honorius Augustodunensis. *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*. Trans Amelia Carr. *Vox Benedictina* 8.2 (Winter 1991): 200.
- Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)*. Trans. William Caxton and modernized by F.S. Ellis. London: Temple Classics, 1900.
- Jerome, "Letter to Ctesiphon." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 6*. Ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893.
- Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*. Ed. James Walsh. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978.
- Margery Kempe. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Lynn Staley. Kalamazoo, MI:

- Medieval Institute Publications, 1996.
- Rudolph of Fulda, *Life of Leoba*. Ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot. *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodepericon of St. Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface*. London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954.
- Rupert of Deutz. *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum de Incarnatione Domini*. CCCM26. Ed. Rhabanus Haacke. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974
- Tertullian, *On Exhortation to Virginity*, S. Thelwall, trans. Ed. Alexander Roberts. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. vol. 4. Buffalo; New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885.
- Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Christian Classics, [1920], 1981.
- Thomas Netter. *Thomae Waldensis Doctrinale Fidei Catholicae* (Farnborough, Hants, England: Gregg Press, 1967.

### Secondary Sources

- Aers, David, and Lynn Staley. *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Amsler, Mark. "Affective Literacy: Gestures of Reading in the Later Middle Ages." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 18 (2001): 83-110.
- Armstrong, Elizabeth Psakis. "Understanding by Feeling in Margery Kempe's *Book*." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland, 1992.
- Ashton, Gail. *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Barr, Jessica. *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010.
- Bartlett, Anne Clark. *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Bedford, Ronald, Lloyd David, and Philippa Kelly, eds. *Early Modern English Lives: Autobiography and Self-Representation, 1500 – 1660*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.
- , eds. *Early Modern Autobiography*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

- Bernau, Anke. "A Christian Corpus: Virginité, Violence, and Knowledge in the Life of St Katherine of Alexandria." *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*. Ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis. Belgium: Brepols, 2003.
- Blamires, Alcuin. "Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints' Lives." *Viator* 26 (1995): 135 – 153.
- . *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Bodden, M.C. *Language as the Site of Revolt in Medieval and Early Modern England: Speaking as a Woman*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Boklund-Lagopoulou, Karin. "Yate of Heaven: Conceptions of the Female Body in the Religious Lyrics." *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
- Bos, Elizabeth, "The Literature of Spiritual Formation." *Listen Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Constant J Mews. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Broughton, Laurel. "Chaucer and the Saints: Miracles and Voices of Faith." *Chaucer and Religion*. Ed. Helen Phillips. Woodbridge, England: Brewer, 2010.
- Brown, Peter. "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 1 – 25.
- . *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Bruner, Jerome. "The Autobiographical Process." *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*. Ed. Robert Folkenflik. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Bugge, John. *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal*. The Hague: Martinus Neijhoff, 1975.
- Carruthers, Mary. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Cazelles, Brigitte. *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Medieval Identity Machines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Collette, Carolyn. "Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the Melibee." *The Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995): 416 – 433.
- Cooper-Rompato, Christine. *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Courtenay, William J. *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Coyne-Kelly, Kathleen. *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Cubitt, Catherine. "Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth and Eleventh Century England," *Gender and History* 12.1 (April 2000), 1 – 32.
- Delany, Sheila. *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints and Society in 15th Century England: The Work of Osbern Bokenham*. New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Donavin, Georgiana. *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England*. Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2012.
- Elliott, Dyan. *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Emily Allen, Hope, ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1961.
- Farina, Lara. *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Fields, Peter, "Chaucer's Cecile as Christian-Humanist Disputer of the Sacred." *In Geardagum: Essays on Old and Middle English Literature* 15 (1994): 29 – 39.
- Finke, Laurie. *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1999.
- Fletcher, Alan. *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late-Medieval England*. Dublin; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1998.

- Frantzen, Allen. "When Women Aren't Enough." *Speculum* 68.2 (April 1993): 445 – 471.
- Frey, Winifred. "St Mary as Ideal Reader and St Mary as Textbook." *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Albrecht Classen. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Fulton, Rachel. *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Gertz, Genelle. *Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400 – 1670*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Glasser, Mark. "Marriage and the Second Nun's Tale." *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 23 (1978): 1 – 14.
- Glenn, Cheryl. "Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe*: A Rhetoric of Autobiography." *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Andrea Lunsford. Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Godden, Malcolm. "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind." *Learning and Literature in Anglo Saxon England*. Ed. Lapidge and Gneuss. New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Gravdal, Kathryn. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Greer Fein, Susanna. "Maternity in Aelred of Rievaulx's Letter to His Sister," in *Medieval Mothering*. Ed. John Carsons and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Grundy, Lynne. *Books and Grace: Aelfric's Theology*. London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991.
- Hilmo, Maidie. "Iconic Representations of Chaucer's Two Nuns and their Tales from Manuscript to Print." *Women and the Divine in Literature Before 1700: Essays in Memory of Margot Louis*. Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2009.
- Hirsh, John C. "The Second Nun's Tale." *Chaucer's Religious Tales*. Ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson. Cambridge, England; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1990.
- Hollis, Stephanie. *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*. Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1992.



- Hollywood, Amy. "Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographers." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine Mooney. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Horner, Shari. "The Violence of Exegesis: reading the Bodies of Aelfric's Female Saints." *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*. Ed. Anna Roberts. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Innes-Parker, Catherine. "Fragmentation and Reconstruction: Images of the Female Body in *Ancrene Wisse* and the Katherine Group." *Comitatus* 26 (1995): 27-52.
- . "Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic 'Rape' in the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group." *Women's Studies* 24 (1995): 205-217.
- Johnson, Lynn Staley. "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent." *Studies in Philology* 89.3 (Summer 1992), 314 - 333.
- Jones, Claude. "The 'Second Nun's Tale,' A Mediaeval Sermon." *Modern Language Review* 32 (1937): 283.
- Kauth, Jean-Marie. "Book Metaphors in the Textual Community of the *Ancrene Wisse*." *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Albrecht Classen. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Krug, Rebecca. "Jesus' Voice: Dialogue and Late Medieval Readers." *Form and Reform: Reading Across the Fifteenth Century*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011.
- Krug, Rebecca. *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- Lawton, David. "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland, 1992.
- Lees, Clare, and Gillian Overing. "Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.1 (1998): 17 - 46.
- Leith, Spencer. *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

- Lewis, Katherine J. "Margery Kempe and Saint Making." *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004.
- Linton, David. "Reading the Virgin Reader." *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Albrecht Classen. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Luecke, Janemarie. "Three Faces of Cecilia: Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale." *American Benedictine Review* 33.4 (1984): 335 – 348.
- Mackendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany: Suny Press, 1999.
- Mahoney, Dhira B. "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power Over Language." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.
- McAvoy, Liz Herbert. "'Aftyр Hyr Owyn Tunge': Body, Voice and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Women's Writing* 9.2 (2002): 159 – 176.
- . "From Anchorhold to Cell of Self-Knowledge: Points Along a History of the Human Body." *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place, and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*. Ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008, 157.
- . "Gender, Rhetoric and Space in the *Speculum Inclusorum*, Letter to a Bury Recluse, and the strange case of Christina Carpenter." *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*. Ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008.
- McEntire, Sandra J. "The Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland, 1992.
- McHugh, Anna. "Inner Space as Speaking Space in Ancrene Wisse." *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourse of Enclosure*. Ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008.
- McInerney, Maud Burnett. "'In the Meydens Womb': Julian of Norwich and the Poetics of Enclosure." *Medieval Mothering*. Ed. John Carsons and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- . *Eloquent Virgins From Thecla to Joan of Arc*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

- Millett, Bella. "The Audience of the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group." *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990): 127-156
- Millett, Bella, George Jack, and Yoko Wada, eds. *Ancrene Wisse, The Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996.
- Millett, Bella, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, ed. and trans. *Medieval English Prose for Women*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Mills, Robert. "Troubled Looks in the Katherine Group." *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*. Ed. Robert Mills and Emma Campbell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- . *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005.
- Minnis, Alastair. "The Author's Two Bodies? Authority and Fallibility in Late-Medieval Textual Theory." *Of the Making of Books. Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays Presented to M.B. Parkes*. Ed. P. Robinson and R. Zim. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997.
- . *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Mongan, Olga. "Slanderers and Saints: The Function of Slander in the Book of Margery Kempe." *Philological Quarterly* 84.2: 27 – 47.
- Mueller, Janel M. "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in the Book of Margery Kempe." *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Mary Beth Rose. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986.
- Mulder-Bakker, Anneke, ed. *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200 – 1550*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.
- Newman, Barbara. *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Reames, Sherry. "Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints: Chaucer and Later-Medieval Piety." *Chaucer and Religion*. Ed. Helen Phillips. Woodbridge, England: Brewer, 2010.

- Reames, Sherry. "The Sources of Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale." *Modern Philology* 76.2 (1978): 111 – 135.
- Renevey, Denis. "Margery's Performing Body." *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*. Ed. Denis Renevey and Christiana Whitehead. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago Press, 1977.
- Robertson, Elizabeth. "Savoring 'Scientia': The Medieval anchoress reads *Ancrene Wisse*." *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*. Ed. Yoko Wada. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003.
- . *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- Rossi-Reder, Andrea. "Embodying Christ, Embodying Nation: Aelfric's Accounts of Saints Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy." *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England*. Ed. Carol Pasternack and Lisa Weston. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004.
- Rubin, Miri. *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*. London; New York: Allen Lane, 2009.
- Salih, Sarah. *Versions of Virginitiy in Late Medieval England*. Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001.
- Sanok, Catherine. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
- Savage, Anne, and Nicholas Watson, eds. *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1991.
- Scheck, Helene. *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture*. Albany: Suny Press, 2008.
- Scheil, Andrew P. "Bodies and Boundaries in the Life of St Mary of Egypt." *Neophilologus* 84.1 (Jan 2000): 137-156.
- Schulenburg, Jane Tibbetts. "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

- Scott, Karen. "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreter*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Signe-Morrison, Susan. *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Somerset, Fiona. "Excitatory Speech: Theories of Emotive Response from Richard Fitzralph to Margery Kempe." *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*. Ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Sorgo, Gabriele, "Living Relics: On Constructing Mystic Inwardness through Bodily Suffering." *Magistra* 12.1 (2006): 105 – 138.
- Stafford, Pauline. "Queens, Nunneries, and Reforming Churchmen." *Past and Present* 163 (May 1999): 3 – 35.
- Staley, Lynn. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.
- Streete, Gail. *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009.
- Szarmach, Paul. "Aelfric as Exegete." *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*. Ed. Gallagher and Damico. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989.
- Szell, Timea K. "From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland, 1992.
- The Middle English Dictionary*. Ed. Hans Kurath. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952-.
- Upchurch, Robert. "For Pastoral Care and Political Gain: Aelfric of Eynsham's Preaching on Marital Celibacy." *Traditio* 59 (2004): 40-78.
- . "The Legend of Chrysanthus and Daria in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*." *Studies in Philology* 101.3 (2004 Summer): 250-69.
- . "Virgin Spouses as Model Christians: the Life of Julian and Basilissa in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*." *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005), 197 – 217.
- . "Homiletic Contexts for Aelfric's Hagiography: The Legends of Saints Cecilia and Valerian." *The Old English Homily: Precedent, Practice, and Appropriation*. Ed.

- Aaron J. Kleist. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007.
- Walton, Audrey. "The Mendicant Margery: Margery Kempe, Mary Magdalene, and the *Noli Me Tangere*." *Mystics Quarterly* 35 (2009): 1 – 19.
- Warren, Anne K. *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Waters, Claire. *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance and Gender in the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Wilcox, Jonathan. "Famous Last Words: Aelfric's Saints Facing Death." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 10 (1993), 1 – 9.
- Williams, Tara. "Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Modern Philology* 107.4 (May 2010): 528 – 555.
- Winstead, Karen. "Saintly Exemplarity." *Middle English*. Ed. Paul Strohm. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn. "The Virgin's Tale." *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and L. Johnson. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Virginité Always Comes Twice: Virginité and Profession, Virginité and Romance." *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*. Ed. Juanita Feros Ruys. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004.
- . *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150 – 1300: Virginité and its Authorizations*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- . *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150 – 1300: Virginité and its Authorizations*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Yoshikawa, Naoë Kukita. "Veneration of Virgin Martyrs in Margery Kempe's Meditation: Influence of the Sarum Liturgy and Hagiography." *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*. Ed. Christiana Whitehead and Denis Renevey. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.