

THE BODY IN LATE
MEDIEVAL AND EARLY
MODERN CULTURE

DARRYLL GRANTLEY
AND NINA TAUNTON

The Body
in Late Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Dedicated to the memory of Gareth Roberts
(1949–1999)

The Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Darryll Grantley and Nina Taunton

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Introduction

Nina Taunton and Darryll Grantley

The late medieval and early modern body has been attracting critical attention for well over a decade now. Poststructuralism, evolving beyond semiotics (though never abandoning it altogether) has sent critics down paths which merge the semiotic with the somatic. Incorporating the principles of semiology as a means of interpreting varieties of discourses around the body, critics have increasingly resisted assumptions about the grounding of culture in language with its universal system of codes and structures (and therefore ultimately unifying objectives) towards the altogether more bumpy terrain of bodily signifying practices. On its journey from linguistic to somatic signification, the body has wound round itself a spiral of proliferating and competing discourses. To quote Keir Elam quoting Julia Kristeva:

[t]he reaction against the linguistic turn and its prophylactic sterilizing of the body has been what we might term the *corporeal* turn, which has shifted attention from the word to the flesh, from the semantic to the somatic' – a turn 'pre-announced in Julia Kristeva's notion of the pre-verbal and pre-semantic semiotic *chora*, the battleground of the subject's competing bodily drives which 'makes the semiotized body a place of permanent scission.'
(1996, 143)¹

Cultural historians, literary scholars and feminist theorists, having rescued the body from the margins of critical attention and having intensively investigated it and its parts from the point of view (for example) of the material, the ludic, the carnivalesque and the grotesque, are now turning their attention to areas still unincorporated into the mainstream of poststructuralist studies of pre-modern corporeal materiality.² Indeed, the fertile field of studies on the body more traditionally associated with the human sciences – biology, anthropology, sociology, medicine – is now being thoroughly picked over for multiple and multilayered semiotic–somatic meaning, while the totalizing impulse of semiology has now more or less been superseded by theories which stress instability, plurality, scission and discontinuity – and which reinscribe the body into narratives of difference and otherness. In what he calls the 'body boom' in Shakespeare studies, Keir Elam lists a 'ghost army of early modern organisms

to anatomize. The Shakespearean critical industry has become the Shakespearean Corps' (1996, 142, 144). The boom has extended way beyond the bodies in Shakespeare. Embracing interdisciplinarity and postmodernism, writers on the early modern body continue to make their own significant contribution to a corpus of works travelling full circle from rejection of totalizing philosophies which assume the universal in the particular to a deeper appreciation of the unstable, the discontinuous, the fragmented and the marginal in pre-modern culture. For example, as Jonathan Sawday has discovered, the early modern vogue for anatomies, both textual and corporeal, could betoken both an interest in the workings of the insides and outsides of human (and animal) bodies, and fears that textual/corporeal parts, once atomized and anatomized, never reassemble into the whole that they once were. In *The Body Emblazoned*, he explores the paradoxical function of dissection, which provided a means both of expanding knowledge of the body, and of breaking up the philosophical and religious body of knowledge whose goal was universality and completeness (1995, 1–15).

The present volume intervenes in debates such as these, with a collection of essays which demonstrate that work on the body continues to break new ground. In moving away from Shakespeare somewhat, the essays carry forward debates about grotesque, spiritualized, mortified, unaccommodated, sexualized, institutionalized, textualized, regimented, destabilized, demonized, dissolved bodies into areas reaching beyond existing Shakespeare criticism. Taking as its chronological starting point the female body of late medieval devotional literature, the volume proceeds to a consideration of the representation of gendered bodies in literature. It then examines sixteenth-century occupational orderings of the (male) body in education, the civil service and the army, and involves explorations into a variety of rituals for the purification, ordering and disciplining of the flesh. It includes enquiries into the miraculous royal body, demon bodies and the 'virtual' body of satire, and ends in the late seventeenth century with dramatic representations of the diseased body, and the grotesque bodies of travellers' tales as signifiers of racial difference.

The volume as a whole pushes forward postmodern notions of the body as a site for competing discourses. It provides new dimensions to fantasies, rituals and regulations in narratives ('fictions') of the body as identifications of forms of knowledge unique to the early modern period. Each of the essays sheds new light on how these late medieval and early modern narratives function to produce specialized and discrete languages of the body that cannot be understood simply in terms, say, of religion, philosophy or physiology, but produce their own particular forms of knowledge. Thus the essays materially contribute to an understanding of the relationship between the body and spatial knowledge by giving new bearings on epistemologies built upon pre-modern

perceptions about bodily spaces and boundaries. They address these issues by analysing forms of knowledge constructed through regulations of the body, fantasies about extensions to the body and creations of bodily, psychic, intellectual and spiritual space. The essays pose important questions about how these epistemologies offer different investments of knowledge into structures of power. What constitutes this knowledge? What are the politics of corporeal spaces? In what forms of knowledge about spatial and bodily perceptions and practices are these early modern narratives embedded? What ideologies shape and contain them?

The collection deliberately incorporates a period range which encompasses considerable cultural and ideological shifts that impact upon perceptions of the body. The choice of essays in the volume recognizes both continuities and discontinuities between perceptions of the body in the medieval and early modern periods. By way of illustrating these, it is useful to compare examples of the representation of the body in one genre – the drama – separated by a century and a half. The mid- to late fifteenth-century play *Wisdom, Who is Christ*, is in many ways a traditional medieval morality in which the action consists principally of the corruption of the soul through sin, and its subsequent redemption.³ What makes the play a slightly unusual example of the genre is that the central protagonist, rather than being an embodied everyman figure, is represented in an abstracted way as a disembodied soul. The disembodiment of the soul has a particular point in the moral scheme of the play, since the piece incorporates (though it does not actually stage) reference to the medieval devotional trope of the debate between the soul and the body. This trope articulates a long medieval tradition of religious discomfort with corporeality which was to endure through the Renaissance and beyond, despite the advent of humanism. In *Wisdom, Who is Christ*, the corruption of the soul comes about precisely through the satisfaction of physical appetites. The body becomes entirely moralized and only exists in the play as a concept within a process of constant cosmic struggle, in a way that can be argued to be entirely consistent with the theocratic world-view of pre-humanist medieval culture.

Leaping forward some hundred and forty years to the early seventeenth century, an apparently rather different conception of the body is to be found at the centre of *King Lear* in the heath scene, where Lear says to and of the wretched beggar that Edgar has become: 'Is man no more but this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Here's three on 's are sophisticated, thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art' (3.4.92–7). The sensibility here appears to be at considerable variance with that found in the earlier play. Though this scene presents man as bereft of those dignities which distinguish him from the beasts, and might be

considered to present an antithetic view to that of humanist aspiration, its humanism is evident in the way in which bodily reality is recognized, if not embraced. Whereas the fifteenth-century play advocates a disavowal of the body, a theological perspective that might be considered particularly medieval, here the body is brought into play as the only sure reality of human existence. 'Unaccommodated man' is somehow the real man or 'the thing itself', albeit that he is a 'poor, bare, forked animal', whereas in the medieval play there is a clearer separation between the soul and the body, the former being by implication what is real about human life (particularly in the context of cosmic moral struggle for the soul of man).

However, if this is the point of difference between the two visions, a similarity is also present in that both incorporate a tension between the attempt to validate the quality of humanity through distancing it from the physical or animal (either in circumstances of life, or in more spiritual and moral ways) on the one hand, and a recognition of the hard reality of human existence as being grounded in the corporeal on the other. In both visions can be discerned a conflict between the striving towards an ideal of humanity, whether in theocratic or in humanist terms, and an implicit acknowledgement of the fact that corporeal existence reduces man to far less than his aspiration would have him. It is the same opposition between the striving to god-like dignity and the reality of material existence that is the source of the anguish in Hamlet's impassioned speech: 'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?' (2.2.293–8).

Aside from the issue of corporeality as an aspect of human identity, both texts also use the physical body as a powerful signifier. In *Wisdom, Who is Christ*, though it is the soul rather than the body that is the topic of the play, it is by means of the actor's body on stage that the corruption of the soul is demonstrated. At the outset of this highly ceremonial play, the Soul (Anima) enters in a cloth of white and gold and there is a detailed direction for her magnificent dress. When, however, the Soul has been compromised by the corruption of its component parts, Mind, Will and Understanding, she re-enters in a state of physical defilement, and there is the direction: 'Here rennyt owt from wnder þe horrybyll mantyll of þe Soull seven small boys in þe lyknes of dewylls and so retorne ageyn' (912 s.d.). Although it is done by different means and for somewhat different purposes, the way in which the decline into nakedness of Edgar in *King Lear* is used to parallel the stripping away of Lear's kingly pomp is a not wholly dissimilar use of a corporeal image.

Of course these texts are both works of drama, and the physical aspect of representation, particularly bodily reality, is ever present in a way that is not always true of other forms of writing. However, an interest in the human body

might be considered a natural product of humanist interest in the material and philosophical realities of terrestrial existence. Renaissance humanism quite understandably propelled the contemplation of the human body to the centre stage of early modern culture, whether in respect of the human form in art, or the body as material for self-fashioning, as a source of metaphor, as a commodity of exchange, as a powerful dimension of gender conflict, as a site of contention over sexuality, as a source of political or magical power, or as a signifier of otherness, to name but a few facets of this potent focus of cultural discourse. The essays in this volume engage all these topics and more, but the historical remit of the volume has deliberately not been restricted to the early modern period. This has been in order to give recognition to the fact that, paradoxically within the theocratic and persistently anti-carnal discourses of the medieval period, the body had a powerful role to play. The humanist engagement with the body reposited on a long tradition of intense, if sometimes uncomfortable interest in corporeality. In the veneration of Saints and relics, the body had a major part to play as a signifier, commodity, object of worship and source of magical power. This was reinforced in the written culture in the Saint's legend, the most ubiquitous form of popular writing from the Conquest to the Renaissance. The body as a source of metaphor was also a recurrent feature in medieval writing. The body of the Virgin Mary – particularly as the human vehicle of the incarnation of Christ – was one of the more evident examples of this, as in some of the Marian devotional lyrics in which every part of the Virgin's body became loaded with some doctrinal significance.

It is thus with the acknowledgement that there are as many continuities as distinctions between medieval and Renaissance or early modern culture, that this collection attempts to straddle both, though beyond opening in the late Middle Ages and closing in the late seventeenth century, there has been no attempt to arrange essays chronologically. They are arranged, rather, in four broad topic areas defined by a focus on gender, on work, on the mystical and on otherness. The four essays grouped under 'Gendered Bodies' investigate aspects of the blurring of the semiotic-somatic dichotomy. It is Claire Marshall's contention that the disciplinary technologies of fasting and flagellation, originally designed to suppress and control the female body, evolved into strategies of empowerment, becoming a way of accessing the sacred whilst bypassing clerical authority. Thus the theme of bodily inscription is carried forward into the realm of gender politics. The religious life of women in the later Middle Ages was conceived as one of chastity and enclosure. Holy women were ideally sealed away from the world and silenced. These practices were intended to correct the female body's natural grotesqueness and its identification with the corruptions of the flesh. However, late medieval female piety, often expressed through extreme displays of emotion and violence which inscribed the female body by wounding and mutilation, blood, disease and self-

starvation could be used to challenge the very structures that had first positioned these women. This bodily route to the sacred was enacted in the work of two late medieval mystics: Margery Kempe and St Bridget of Sweden, and Marshall's essay explores the manner in which their exemplary practices of affective spirituality, with its focus on the bodily, fed debates about the growth of lay piety at the end of the Middle Ages.

The second essay in this section, which deals with Marlowe's plays in terms of gender categories, responds to the semiotic-somatic tension by arguing that Marlowe's plays dismantle the seemingly stable, uniform and extralinguistic notions of masculinity and femininity, as represented by male and female bodies, in order to expose these conceptions as ideological and semiotic constructs – that is, as gendered bodies which signify and negotiate relationships of power. Feldmann looks at representations of 'manliness' and its bodily signifiers in these plays through the heroes' desire (as in *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta*, *The Massacre at Paris*) to fix bodies in order to fix meaning and power. Yet textually, the body, and above all the female body, appears in excess of all classifying categories, as the vanishing point of legibility and authority.

Barry Taylor's contribution takes the disappearance of gender-defining boundaries a stage further. He considers Book II, Canto xii of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* as symptomatic of the dissolution of binary classifications set up within the structure of the poem as a whole. He singles out the tableau of the naked, 'effeminated' body of the boy knight Verdant as a means of accessing the relationship between critical readings which express anxieties about the self-cancelling impulses of the poem as a whole, and the trope of fluid femininity. The essay negotiates the submerging of semiotic-somatic distinctions by an interrogation of the collapse of the seductive power of the bodily pleasures experienced by the reader in the Bower of Bliss episode into anxieties about dissolution of bodily boundaries. Taylor treats this collapse as an analogue of the poem's structural divergence from traditional (masculine) shape-defining epic forms.

Felicity Dunworth's work rounds off the first section's preoccupation with the embroilment of the semantic with the somatic. All four essays associate violence with the feminine – through self-mutilation, passivity, dangerous fluidity – and Dunworth contributes to this association by showing how complex concepts of maternity used and compounded the function of maternal corporeality as a material and emblematic signifier of violence. This violence, Dunworth argues, has the power to evoke multiple responses to the plight and suffering of the mother, and the essay considers the means by which these responses are harnessed together in representations of private outcomes to public friction. Represented both rhetorically and by means of dramatic spectacle, the mother's body, simultaneously inscribed as predator and victim,

functions both as carrier of diegetic capability and multiple meaning as emblem of suffering.

In the next section, 'Occupational Bodies', knowledge of the body is arrived at in various ways, through sectioning (dissecting) social or cultural difference explored in new contexts: educational ones, gentle and non-gentle status, inscriptions of the body into institutional spaces that have the aim of securing regimes of power but have instead an undermining effect, obliterations of the body in scriptorial practices which in their anxiety to preserve the secrets of unspeakable and unthinkable crimes on the body have the effect of obliterating it altogether. The first essay in this section notably extends recent critical focus (begun by Francis Barker in *The Tremulous Body*) on the propensity of the corporeal in early modern writing to collapse into the textual. In his reworking of the papers relating to the infamous Overbury murder, Alan Stewart argues that the abused body of Thomas Overbury ('the body personal'), the focal point of the trials of Frances Howard and the servants involved in the murder, materially disappeared into a body of paperwork ('the body archival') which significantly proliferated in James I's reign. But while the material body of Overbury was jostled, in the indictment of Robert Carr, the Earl of Somerset, husband of Frances Howard and intimate friend of the murdered man, from centre stage by the body archival, the two bodies – the personal and the archival – continued to be bound together. Stewart argues that the intimate transactions of the secretaries in the secrecy of their closets away from the public sphere of political action were, along with the transactions which generated them, inseparable in the minds of contemporaries, because of their figuration as physically intimate, sexual relations. Stewart finds embedded in the Attorney-General Francis Bacon's plans for the prosecution a strategy which displaces the crime perpetrated upon Overbury's body onto a far greater crime against the body – that of sodomy. Thus one kind of bodily danger is averted through reports and letters, only to re-emerge, literally inscribed as a menace alarmingly multiplied in the proliferation and circulation of correspondence to do with the case.

Nina Taunton next looks at the relationship between the textual and the corporeal from another angle – the preoccupation with training and containing the bodies of soldiers textually in the military conduct books which proliferated in the war-torn years of the 1590s. Taking the regimentation of the fighting body as both an index of power and as an articulation of the anxieties of powerlessness, the essay examines in the manuals and an exemplary dramatic text the obsession with military spaces as a hallmark of a decade when the need to create a standing army was being most urgently pressed. In a discussion about military orderings of space, this essay examines the connection between the military camp's status as a 'territorial assemblage' (that is, as practised space, defined by the bodies of soldiers which inhabit it and the regulated

activities performed within it) and its status as a written narrative capable of producing meaning in more than one medium.

Darryll Grantley's work explores the corporeal-textual contradiction from the standpoint of the relationship between the semiotics of elite status and the somatic practices involved in its construction. Mulcaster's 'bodie of presence' both draws attention to the actuality of the material body and underscores the elitist nature of the social conditions in which humanist education played such a crucial role in training the body. Inscriptions of the body onto the broader canvas of social identity emerged in debates between those theorists who sought to defend the position of the established landed elite and those who championed the cause of the 'new men' as educational challenges to notions of the innateness of the quality of nobility already being put into question by economic changes and social mobility. Grantley concludes that though the debates of the sixteenth century appeared at first sight to interrogate essentialist notions of gentility, Mulcaster's theories, in their articulation of the social foundations of the ethos of physical rigour in the education of boys illustrate the fact that what they did was simply change the terms of reference.

The essays in section 3, 'Mystical Bodies', continue the work of moving forward from existing publications on the body and of providing hitherto unfamiliar theoretical perspectives. Stephen Clucas's essay contributes to the interrogation of the tension between semiotic and somatic meaning by examining ritualistic practices and spatial organization of the 'bodily fictions' of Christian magic. Along with Claire Marshall's work on subjection of the female body to rituals of purification and mortification as a route to the divine, this essay continues the work of additional insight into early modern insistence on the corporeal in mystical writings despite the continuing sway of medieval thinking on the rupture of body from soul. Taking as his starting point Merleau-Ponty's assumption that space is created by lived experience, and is thus inseparable from the subject who inhabits it, Clucas sets up a line of enquiry into the nature of the body produced by the consecrated spaces of early modern magic. The essay draws upon a diverse array of cultural practices involved in medieval and Renaissance theurgy to examine the rigorous codification of the body through pietistic regiment and forms of asceticism stipulated by bodily hygiene, abstinence, symbolic vestments and bodily practices such as prostration, genuflection and so on. These practices, Clucas argues, constitute an attempt at creating, through semiotic strategies, a somatic 'vessel' for an idealized corporeality of the practising subject.

In 'The Bodies of Demons', Gareth Roberts takes matters spiritual-corporeal into the realm of black magic, and poses the question of whether demons have bodies which function like the bodies of human beings, particularly in terms of sexuality and sexual fantasy. He looks at how these

matters are negotiated in familiar dramatic texts ranging from Middleton, Ben Jonson, Donne and Spenser, to not-so-familiar ones such as Aquinas, Caesareius of Heisterback, Walter Map and William of Auvergne. In these texts, revelations on the composition of the bodies of demons, and medieval stories of Saints' lives that incorporate anecdotes of couplings between humans and demons, function partly as vehicles for sexual fantasy and partly as devices for the regulation of women and married sex. However, Roberts concludes with an exposition of demonology in Middleton's *The Witch* that reveals, beneath the veneer of misogyny inscribed into Continental demonology which are its sources, an impulse, embedded in the comic burlesque of the witches, towards a communality of women which has 'agency, freedom and fun'.

The political dimensions of the mystical body are examined by Lawrence Normand in his discussion of the supposed miraculous powers of the royal body. He argues that James VI and I, despite both his promotion of the idea of divine ordination of kingship, and his interest in the phenomenon of witchcraft, rather sought to distance himself from ideas of the healing powers of the king's touch. Though James was willing to promote the idea of the king as a power against demonic forces, one factor animating his scepticism of the healing potency of the royal body was his Protestant suspicion of the superstition of much popular belief and practice. Another was the fact that, despite James's strong adherence to the philosophy of divinely appointed kingship, his political practice was essentially pragmatic. Normand goes on to examine reflections of the idea of mystical royalty in the work of various writers, most notably Jonson and Shakespeare, contending that, though these writers were happy to indulge and flatter James's beliefs in certain respects, their treatment of the issue of divine or miraculous kingship reveal a pronounced tendency to demystify monarchy.

The first paper of the final section, 'Bodily Otherness', moves the reader from the grotesque practices of Middleton's witches to the appearance on stage of a grotesque female body deformed by syphilis. Using this startling image to initiate her discussion of sixteenth-century perceptions of 'pocky bodies', Margaret Healy examines the cultural sigification of contagious bodies in city spaces. Her contention is that discourses about the spread of disease had enormous ramifications for the 'dirty' poor who lived in the hastily built tenements at London's boundaries, and revealed tensions beneath the surface of London's rapidly changing shape and social structure. Throughout the period 1480–1620, literature helped construct perceptions about, and responses to, disease. Vivid personifications of syphilis and bubonic plague formed popular stereotypes and prompt her inquiry into how these stereotypes gave rise to blame cultures, and the relation between the materiality of illness, the myths which emerged around them, and medical and social ordering practices. Focusing on the adjacent surfaces between popular medical, religious and

literary writings, the essay explores some of the ways of 'seeing' the two most densely symbolic bodily afflictions of the early modern period.

Literary grotesques are next examined as Cliff Forshaw considers the way in which bodily physicality is constructed in early modern satire, and particularly the satirical writing of John Marston. He argues that the corporeal reality of the satirist as a figure in Marston's writing is apparitional since it is reduced to the functions of the observing eye and describing tongue. This is evident in Marston's adopting the persona of a crude and psychopathic malcontent, W. Kinsayder, who as both voyeur and 'Barking Satyrst' has his own metamorphic identity determined by his function as satirist. Equally, the 'rough poetry' of this fictional persona denies bodily reality to his targets, though they are constructed as obsessed with corporeality themselves, as their physicality is distorted into the grotesque forms required by his satire.

The notion of the 'seeing' reader is also elaborated in the final essay of the volume. Susan Wiseman argues that certain seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel narratives of racial difference powerfully generate images of the body which produce the textual effect of 'seeing double' for the reader – that is, of enabling the reader to experience contradictory pleasures and positions. Thus the reader of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is positioned in the way that the reader of travel narratives is. Tails seen on the native body work as a means of registering criminality and difference; yet in creating the effect of 'reading in mythic categories', they simultaneously enable readings that acknowledge similarity by permitting disbelief at the same time as encouraging belief in such monstrous embodiments of difference as persons with tails. Wiseman, by recourse to Freud's theories of disavowal and the uncanny, in an intricately woven argument, repeatedly returns to her original question of textual-corporeal complications – that is, of how we are able to understand the way that colonial discourse 'superimposes iconic and mythic categories on the body and even gives them tails'. She concludes that early modern stories of distant places set up circuits of disavowal in terms of both the fiscal and the exotic that allow for the mingling of the real with the fantastic, and that these narratives both manufacture difference and reveal anxieties about the cultural nature of this difference.

The Politics of Self-Mutilation: Forms of Female Devotion in the Late Middle Ages

Claire Marshall

Female devotion in the Middle Ages is often discussed in terms of the misogyny and dualism of the period. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. The construction of the female body in medieval science and theology alike focused on gaps, orifices and symbolic filth. 'Woman' was positioned in the principle of disruption in the human psyche: the flesh. Her body was seen as pervious and excessive and her character both corruptible and corrupting. Consequently, the need to repair the natural accessibility of the female body became a moral and spiritual imperative in the medieval church's approach to women. Woman's natural susceptibility to sin and defilement was to be corrected through moral and physical enclosure (Thomasset, 1992, 43–69; Lochrie, 1991, 13–55).

The move towards enclosure for religious women can be seen at work at a number of levels. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's work on the female Saints' lives and devotional treatises that make up the early thirteenth-century Katherine Group – a collection originally intended for a group of well-born anchoresses – has demonstrated how the themes of virginity, bodily enclosure and both symbolic and literal death are worked out in such a fashion as to indicate the way in which physical, spiritual and institutional levels overlap and inform each other (Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne 1992, xv–xx; Wogan-Browne, 1994, 164–94; Wogan-Browne, 1994b, 24–9). Along with a *Letter on Virginity for the Encouragement of Virgins* the collection contains three virgin martyr legends. In essence, the lives of Juliana, Margaret and Katherine tell the same grisly story of a woman who chooses torture, dismemberment and execution rather than marriage and seduction. The material was presumably intended to demonstrate that female holiness is primarily about intactness, enclosure and the maintaining of an unbroken body, and the imagery surrounding the sign of chastity demonstrates the overlap between physical and moral categories: 'God died for us, the beloved Lord, and I am not afraid to suffer any kind of death for his sake. He has set his mark on me, sealed me

with his seal; and neither life nor death can divide us again' (Millett and Wogan-Browne, 1992, 53).

The seal has a plural significance. It refers both to the spiritual seal that binds the virgin to Christ and to the woman's physical virginity which preserves her flesh from defilement. Yet it is clear that the potentiality for corruption is always there in the female body, a fact which no doubt accounts for the prevalence and importance of the dead virgin as the dominant representation of female sanctity. Only death can assure perpetual virginity: the place where women's weak bodies can no longer be tempted or violated and instead achieve a final union with the perfect bridegroom, Christ. In these texts the best virgin, as Wogan-Browne remarks, 'is always a dead virgin' (1994b, 24).

The Katherine Group is generally understood to have a history of textual association with the famous middle English guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse* (Millett and Wogan-Browne, 1992, xi–xl). The practice of anchoritism demonstrates the links between bodily containment and spiritual purity: the holy woman's enclosure ensures her perpetual virginity through the enactment of a symbolic burial. The insistence on enclosure as the defining mark of sanctity finds expression in the *Ancrene Wisse* when the author recommends an imitation of Christ's suffering on Calvary that will effect a total shut-down of the body. In an ingenious, if somewhat perverse *imitatio Christi*, Christ's broken body is interpreted in such a way as to remind women to shore up their own vulnerable bodies against corruption.¹

Evidence from the Katherine Group and the *Ancrene Wisse* suggests a model of sanctity based on sealing the body within strict physical and spiritual boundaries. Yet even here it is possible to construct counter-readings of the material which operate against the overtly manipulative, misogynistic and often prurient nature of the writing. This is most readily seen in the virgin martyr legends where the humiliations and extreme physical tortures endured by the female Saint facilitate her empowerment and entry into language. Saint Margaret, for example, is at her most articulate when, through her tortures, she can condemn her enemies and give testimony to God:

'Oh!' she said, 'wretches, you senseless fools, what do you expect? If my body is torn apart, my soul will be at peace among the righteous, through sorrow and bodily pain, souls are saved.'
(Millett and Wogan-Browne, 1992, 53)

The legends follow a pattern whereby the Saint's virgin body is opened through torture to her lover Jesus, and the more her body is broken, the noisier and more impassioned her testimony becomes.

The pattern of empowerment through suffering is repeated in the lives of female Saints and mystics from the later medieval period. The broken body

of Christ, rather than urging these women to closure and silence, inspired them to break, wound and mutilate their own flesh in an *imitatio Christi* which gave them authority to speak from the body. The eroticism of their affective spirituality is pronounced and it is no coincidence that late medieval female piety is notorious for its noise and extreme displays of emotion. In imitation of Christ's bodily suffering and the pursuit of spiritual perfection, women starved and beat themselves to enter into a relationship with Christ in which the erotic and spiritual come together in ecstatic visions in which the women frequently speak of God as lover: of tasting him, of kissing him and becoming soaked in his blood (Walker-Bynum, 1987, 151–86; Walker-Bynum, 1991, 190)

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the lives of the female Saints and mystics make difficult reading and pose uncomfortable problems for many readers. It is certainly true that (male) historians have traditionally been rather squeamish in their approach to this material and to its displays of bodily excess and emotion. In a much-quoted passage on late medieval mysticism and affective spirituality, the historian Dom David Knowles focuses on what he calls the idiosyncratic nature of this form of devotion. He sees it as a second-rate, inferior and, interestingly, contaminating form of spirituality: 'This stream of [pure spirituality] continued to flow till the reign of Henry VIII, but there is some evidence that from the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards it was contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behaviour' (1955, 222–3).

'Unusual behaviour' is presumably a way of drawing a discreet veil over practices that embarrass and offend. However, it is not only male theologians and church historians who find this material difficult. In a paper which starts with a description of the emaciated, battered, bound and bleeding St Rose of Lima (1586–1617), the Christian writer and feminist Sara Maitland has made a valiant and impassioned attempt to come to terms with what she calls the 'penitential excesses and morbid fanaticism' of female Saints and mystics. She is speaking here not only of the Middle Ages:

Women deform their faces with glass, with acid, with their own fingers, they bind their limbs, carve up their bodies, pierce, bruise, cut and torture themselves. The most highly praised mystical writings speak of Christ's love in terms of rape. [These women] abase and abuse themselves. They do it for love of Jesus and the church applauds them.
(1983, 127)

From this it should be clear why in *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir wished to interpret the devotional woman's identification with Christ as one based on a shared identity as passive and victimized: 'the girl is overwhelmed to see that man, man-God has assumed her role' (1976, 686). And indeed why

the medievalist Sarah Beckwith should pose the question of 'whether female mysticism exists to act out [patriarchy's] most sexist fantasies, to reinforce the relegation of "woman" to a transcendent, mystified and mystificatory sphere where female masochism is spectacularly redeployed in the pose of crucifixion' (1986, 36).

Yet it is possible to read these women's lives as something other than case studies on self-hatred and as the masochistic product of the dominant ideologies that constrained their lives. There has been a great deal of interesting work on patterns of late medieval female sanctity and mysticism over the last decade that has gone a long way to rewriting the manner in which late medieval bodily devotion can be accounted for. I am thinking here specifically of the work of historians and literary critics such as Caroline Walker-Bynum, Karma Lochrie, Sarah Beckwith and Laurie Finke, all of whom, from different theoretical stances, have contributed to the subject's reformulation. Here I wish to produce my own response to the way the subject has been reconstituted and to think through some of its implications for my work on late medieval piety, lay spirituality, and heresy at the end of the Middle Ages.

In particular, I am interested in the contention that, although the discourse of the female mystic was originally constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body, it is, paradoxically, through these same disciplines that the mystic achieved her power. Laurie Finke has argued this point in Foucauldian terms, suggesting that the disciplinary technologies of mantric prayer, flagellation, fasting and vigils become, for the mystics, a method of consolidating spiritual power and authority:

In the Middle Ages torture was not regarded simply as a form of punishment. It was, as Foucault has shown, a technique and a ritual, a semiotic system which must 'mark the victim.' Torture inscribed on the victim's body the signs of the ruler's power. It was one of the most visible displays of that power, an art, that competed with other visual displays of theocratic rule. The marking of the victim's body signifies the power that punishes. In the 'excesses' of torture, a whole economy of power is invested. In her excesses, the mystic becomes at once torturer and victim. This, it seems to me is the whole point. The mystic's pain – her inflicting of wounds upon herself – grants her the authority to speak and to be heard. Her body bears the marks, the 'signs' of her own spiritual power.
(1993, 41–2)

It is, therefore, the excesses of the female mystics that mark them apart. Finke stresses that at no time did the church condone severe fasting and self-flagellation. The issue seems instead to be about regulating women's bodies

and their devotional practices, as the following extract from the eighth section of the *Ancrene Wisse* demonstrates:

She should not wear a belt of any kind next to her skin except with her confessor's permission, or wear anything made of iron or hair or hedgehog skins, or beat herself with them, or with a scourge weighted with lead, with holly or with thorns, or draw blood, without her confessor's permission. She should not sting herself anywhere with nettles, or scourge the front of her body, or mutilate herself with cuts, or take excessively severe disciplines at any one time to subdue temptations.

(Millelt and Wogan-Browne, 1992, 137)

The passage does not forbid outright beating or drawing blood, but rather the practice of these disciplines without the confessor's permission. 'Excess', however, is forbidden and again it would seem that the issue is one of control: the enclosed female religious may not authorize the inscription of her own body with the instruments of pain.

Finke argues for a continuity of tradition among the lives and writings of the female mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; younger women very self-consciously modelled their lives and their writing on those of their predecessors and reveal similar strategies for transcending the secondariness of the female body. Yet the reception of these women differs widely across time and space, thus pointing to the need to be very culturally and historically specific in the exploration of the social meaning of their devotional practices. My own interest, then, is in trying to uncover a social politics of female bodily devotion as it can be explored in the early fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*.²

Margery Kempe's *Book* is sometimes called the first autobiography in the English language. It describes the life of a wife and mayor's daughter from Lynn and offers a unique account of one woman's entry into language, albeit via the good offices of members of the male clergy, as Margery herself was illiterate. Margery's account of her life is littered with direct and indirect intertextual references to other Continental saints and mystics from whom she borrows narrative tropes. She was particularly influenced by the married Saint and mother, Bridget of Sweden (1303–73) as well as Mary of Oignies (d. 1213). The first steps Margery takes towards her self-fashioned spiritual life can be found in the accounts of these women's lives: she practises marital chastity, secretly wears a hair shirt, fasts, performs vigils and spends hours on end in mantric prayer and the 'byddyng of many bedys'. Later, like Mary of Oignies, she develops a bodily language of devotion which involves excessive crying and weeping at the thought of Christ's Passion. In fact, Margery's sobs and roars become her trademark and are a source of much contention – she is often required to restrain herself as her outbursts disrupt public worship.

However, Christ's own voice offers an authoritative interpretation of Margery's shift from private fleshly mortification to a display of the bodily language of excess, which accompanies Margery's spiritual union with him: 'Fastyng, dowtyr, is good for hong be-gynnars & discrete penawns ... & yet it is not parfyte ... And I haue oftyn-tymes, dowtyr, told the that thynkynd, wepynd & hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe' (Kempe, 89). Yet this is not enough for Margery and at various points in the text she imagines for herself the ultimate martyrdom. She would like to be slain for the love of God and to 'be bowndyn hyr hed and hir fet to a stokke & hir hed to be smet of wyth a sharp ex for Goddys lofe' (ibid. 29–30). Elsewhere, not unlike Angela of Foligno's wish to 'go through squares and towns naked, with fish and meat hanging around her neck', she wants to make a public spectacle of her penitance: to be 'leyd nakyd on a hyrdil, alle men to wonderyn on me for þi loue ... & þei to castyn slory & slugge on me, & be drawyn fro town to town euery day my lyf-tyme, hyf thu wer plesyd þerby & no mannys sowle hyndryd' (ibid. 184). That these fantasies are charged with a unmistakeable eroticism is perhaps acknowledged by Margery's insight that her display may be injurious to men's souls. Significantly, they testify to the way that Margery understood the legends of the martyrs and the self-inflicted humiliations of the mystics: supreme bodily suffering is the ultimate testimony of her love for Christ and her *imitatio Christi*, a route to empowerment. Nevertheless, if Margery's exposure to hagiography and mystical writings taught her that bodily devotion could be a bid for power, by her own testimony it is equally clear that her practices often gained a social meaning which was quite other than that which she anticipated. In her *Book* Margery's body and what it means becomes hotly contested as her devotional practices are constantly being read and re-read in different ways by her husband, her community and the secular and spiritual authorities. Willy-nilly, Margery becomes embroiled in a number of key issues concerning late medieval lay piety and heresy, especially where her lifestyle and her ambitions seem to encroach onto the territory which was strongly defended by the clergy. The ecclesiastical monopoly on preaching and the clerical control of access to the Eucharist are important issues here, as Margery's strategies for transcending the cultural limitations of her gender intersect interestingly with the concerns of an institution under threat from contemporary Lollard heresies.

Margery's practice of fasting is a case in point, and here I would like to take into account Caroline Walker-Bynum's ground-breaking study, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Walker-Bynum's book elaborates an anthropology of symbol and ritual in order to explore the food practices of the medieval mystics. Rather than reading the self-starvation of these women as a product of self-hatred or symptomatic of a kind of 'holy anorexia', Walker-Bynum sees such practices as keying into a cultural understanding of food which