

Margery's Performing Body:
The Translation of Late Medieval Discursive
Religious Practices



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IN her description of the death of an old Sioux woman, Margaret Many Wounds, Susan Power in her short story 'Moonwalk' reports through the eyes of Harley, her grandson, a particularly momentous event. For a little while, neglected by his mother and aunt, Harley sits in front of the television screen watching the astronauts walking on the moon. To his great surprise, he suddenly finds his grandmother taking part in this historic moment. Her performance, a dance modelled on Sioux powwow steps, takes on new meaning as it becomes a part of one of the greatest historical moments of the second half of this century:

Harley was no longer lonely or invisible on the chair. He saw his grandmother's figure emerging on the screen, dancing toward him from the far horizon behind the astronauts. He recognized her weaving dance as Sioux powwow steps, but her beautiful blue-beaded dress was unfamiliar to him.

He said to himself, *Grandma is young*. But then she smiled at him, and the smile was old. Her hair was black and her hair was white. Her progress was steady, and she didn't bounce like the men in space suits. He waited for Armstrong and Aldrin to see her, but they must have seen only the ground. Finally she came upon them, and Harley caught his breath because Margaret danced through Neil Armstrong. The astronaut never ceased digging at the ground, leaving footprints like heavy tank treads, but his oxygen system quivered a little as she passed.

Margaret Many Wounds was dancing on the moon. *Look at the crooked tracks I make like a snake*, she thought. At first it seemed it would take her a long time to make the circuit. *Am I dancing or flying?* she wondered when instead she completed it very quickly. Names came to her, though she had never learned them.¹

This arresting story captures one of the central issues which will be addressed by this chapter, using a work very remote from the writings by Power on the Sioux tribes. *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers a number of scenes in which Margery Kempe, author and main protagonist of this autobiography, inscribes her life into a history, sacred history, and into a particular story based upon the incidents of the Passion.² *The Book of Margery Kempe* is, in part, an account of this literary inscription. In the same way that the television screen provides Harley with a new window into his own inner world, the book invites us to become witness to a rare moment where Margery's body, relieved of spatio-temporal constraints, manages, through visionary experience and meditation, to reconstruct and interact with the characters of sacred history.³ It is my intention to consider this performance as a multi-layered act of translation, conceiving of the latter as a hermeneutic process.⁴ What layers of translation are to be detected in the bodily performance of Margery? First, the figuring of her body within a new dimension necessitates moving it from one dimension through into another (*translatio* as transference). Secondly, this act of encoding is enabled by Margery's own personal translation of the late medieval discursive practices which prevailed among hermits, anchorites and devout lay people throughout Europe.⁵ Thirdly, the several stages which saw the writing of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, without which this account of Margery's performance would have been lost, can also be considered as stages in a translation act. These stages are described by Margery's second scribe in a Prologue in which he traces the process by which Margery's performative act was transformed into an illegible text written in a gibberish of German and English, ultimately to be replaced by a new rendering of the first text into the version which has been preserved for us by the Carthusians of Mount Grace.

The hermeneutic process involved in the making of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is extraordinarily complex and escapes the limitations imposed by this essay.⁶ As a consequence, only the first two modes of translation enumerated above will be attended to here. Without wishing to undervalue the complex encoding of the performative act as textual material, I would nevertheless like to concentrate here upon Margery's role as a performer rather than a writer.⁷ The degree of Margery's authorial involvement during her dictation of her experiences to her amanuenses is difficult to measure. However, considering the material importance of the book within medieval culture, it is necessary to pay attention to the second amanuensis's account of *The Book's* evolution,

even if an initial failure to decipher the text devalues the significance of the first attempt at textual recording. Despite the desire to credit the second attempt with miraculous and hagiographic qualities, it seems nonetheless that it was Margery's authorial involvement, rather than the presence of the initial text, which finally enabled the successful, though painful, translation of events experienced more than twenty years before onto manuscript parchment: 'Be preste, trustyng in hire prayers, be-gan to redyn þis booke, & it was mych mor esy, as hym thowt, þan it was be-forn tym. & so he red it ouyr be-forn þis creatur eury word, sche sum-tym helpyng where ony difficulte was' (5).

For a period of over twenty years Margery offered her body as her reading material. If she initially refused to have her story written down by the Carmelite Alan of Lynn, a Doctor of Divinity of Cambridge, because 'sche was warnyd in hyr spyrit þat sche xuld not wryte so sone' (6), it was also partly because, at that time, her body stood as the parchment on which God actively encoded his signs.

I have shown elsewhere how Margery's own gesticulations, sobbing, weeping and wailing translate sacred history. Her body belongs to the cosmos and obeys the same divine laws as those governing the forces of nature. God says to her '& ryth so I far wyth þe, dowtyr, whan it likyth me to spekyng in þi sowle' (183).⁸ She is part of the *liber naturae*. Whoever reads her astutely will be able to uncover a divine message.⁹ There is, however, another peculiar manifestation of this performance in *The Book*. Margery's vocal and bodily signs often result from her interaction through dreams and visions with the characters and events of sacred history. Her involvement with the Passion narrative is a good case in point. With regard to this particular issue, it is my contention that Margery's devotional practices, especially in their high-powered performative dimensions, were informed by a well-established tradition, rooted in English anchoritic practices, but also manifested in late medieval devotions.¹⁰ In other words, it is possible to gain important new insights into the peculiar performance of Margery Kempe by evaluating it in the light of the Anselmian tradition which influenced thirteenth-century anchoritic culture.

Anselm and the Anchoritic Tradition

The Anselmian spiritual tradition, with its severe outlook on the soul's baseness, fashions to a great extent the spirituality pertaining to the

anchoritic tradition. The penitent soul contemplates its sins and expiates its faults by meditating on its worthlessness in comparison to the beauty and glory of the maker. The deity's grandest act of generosity, the Incarnation, is an important element in this penitential voyage. The soul contemplates the sufferings of this glorious God made man and measures its own debased state and relative comfort against the pain and tortures inflicted on such a Lord. Wearing a hair-shirt, beating oneself, kneeling and kissing the ground, digging one's own grave in one's cell, all those activities partake in a process which serves to mark the inner landscape of the contemplatives with the stamp of sinfulness. Some of those painful physical activities serve as devices for re-enacting the Passion incidents in an attempt to feel something of the pain endured by Jesus on the cross.¹¹

Ancrene Wisse, the Middle English thirteenth-century rule for anchoresses, abounds with evidence of performative activity. The paraliturgical passages of *Ancrene Wisse* require elaborate performances from the three anchoresses for whom this rule was originally written.¹² In the intimacy of their cells, they are asked to participate in penitential performative acts as a part of their daily religious activities.¹³ The enclosure in a cell, and the vocal and bodily utterances, are all conventions used to signify their inner sinful nature and their desire to acknowledge God's generous act. The precise information which regulates their performance in the cell serves to make the majority of their gestures spiritually significant.¹⁴ In other words, it is generally the case that anchoresses participate in a performance demonstrative of their sinful nature, with God as the sole witness.¹⁵

Beyond the physicality of their ascetic practices – which find an echo in Margery's vocal and bodily manifestations – anchoresses express their relationship with God by meditating almost exclusively on the events of the Passion. From the very beginning of the anchoritic life, death is an ongoing theme. The ceremony of enclosure uses part of the *Officium mortuorum* as a way of representing the important tenets and values of the anchoritic life.¹⁶ Life in the cell is a form of death, a personal re-enactment of the Passion of Christ. Again, the relative comfort experienced by the anchoresses in their cells is often contrasted, first, with Christ's uncomfortable birth, and then with other events experienced during his life.¹⁷ In the texts of the Wooing Group, which possibly address the anchoresses mentioned in *Ancrene Wisse*, the Passion incidents play a central part.¹⁸ To take one example, in *Be Wohunge of ure Lauerd*, the narrator's invitation to his audience to

engage affectively with the Passion material opens up many new possibilities for devotional performance.¹⁹ Such a tone encourages specifically creative participation on the part of the audience. Nonetheless, in order to circumscribe a horizon of performance beyond which the creative imagination should not trespass, the narrator remains Anselmian in tone. He moderates the possible achievements of his audience, and is eager to stress the limitations created by their sinful nature. Thus anchoritic writings influenced by the Anselmian tradition prevent too close an identification with the crucified Christ or his mother.²⁰ There is no destination upon the affective journey which the reader is invited to follow. Instead, a transference or translation of this affective input takes place – if the events of the Passion cannot be lived internally, they must be lived externally through ritualized anchoritic practices.²¹ Such visionary elements serve to give meaning to the earthly life of anchoresses who have accepted their own death to the world at the time of the ceremony of enclosure.

Paradoxically, it is by its affective incompleteness that the narration of the Passion incidents in such writings serves best to stimulate and justify the anchoritic life. Absence of closure allows for transference and justification within one's own life. *A Talkyng of the Love of God*, a fourteenth-century compilation of some of the texts of the Wooing Group, provides interesting evidence showing how the compiler/author negotiates with the Passion incidents when deletion of the anchoritic framework has taken place.²² Without going into too many details, it is possible to detect a desire to refashion the Passion incidents so as to allow fuller, more complete affective identification with Jesus and, ultimately, at the moment of his death, with Mary. Lacking the performative guidelines used by anchoresses within the closed space of the anchorhold, which allow for the Passion performance to be transposed, the audience of *A Talkyng of the Love of God* needs to stay longer and more firmly in the realm of the visionary to ensure that its meditation is effective.²³ This fourteenth-century compilation of some of the Wooing Group pieces is forced to signpost its affective strategies, having lost many of the tools provided by the anchoritic culture from which those pieces first emerged.

Equally, Julian of Norwich's account of her own understanding and perception of some of the Passion incidents provides additional evidence for a contextually loose apprehension of those events.²⁴ Julian's three wishes demonstrate an eagerness to empathize with the sufferings of Jesus, and the vision she receives triggers one of the most subtle

visionary accounts in medieval literature. However, Julian deals with the Passion incidents in a very idiosyncratic way. Her creative and imaginative input contribute toward the production of a text which entirely surpasses those considered thus far. Her contribution attests to the ever-increasing hermeneutic scope offered to those outside the monastic and anchoritic milieux who have an interest in the contemplative life. However, it is significant to note that she later embarked upon the anchoritic life – a way modelled as closely as possible on the life of Christ and his mother who, in *Ancrene Wisse*, is regarded as the model for all anchoresses²⁵ – in order to make meaning out of her vision.²⁶

We know that the anchoritic life required the support of the entire community and that most spheres of society were in contact with anchoresses, whether in the capacity of patrons, spiritual guides, confessors, maids, or simply as fellow parishioners.²⁷ The reading by the laity of the Offices to the Virgin and the Office of the Dead in Books of Hours in church or in private chapels is an indicator of religious practices which closely imitated those of solitaries.²⁸ It should therefore be of no surprise to us to see Margery Kempe, a woman of the world, go to the anchoress Julian of Norwich to seek approval with regard to her own peculiar performance.

Love's *Myrrou*

Although it would be possible at this stage of my analysis to explicate Margery's performing body as a peculiar translation of anchoritic contemplative practices, I would like to turn to another religious text in order to broaden the scope of my approach. Nicholas Love's *The Myrrou of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christi*, a translation of the Latin *Meditationes vitae Christi*, invites people of simple understanding to use the book to assist their meditations.²⁹ Love offers an imaginative account of the life of Christ for those who have difficulty in meditating on spiritual invisible things. He insists on the imaginative quality of his piece, defending his move away from Scripture with the following remark: 'Wherfore we mowen to stiryng of deuotion ymagine & þenk diuerse wordes & dedes of him & oþer, þat we fynde not wrien, so þat it be not aʒeyns þe byleue, as seynt Gregory & oþer doctours seyn, þat holi writte may be expownet & vnderstande in diuerse maneres, & to diuerse purposes, so þat it be not aʒeyns þe byleue or

gude maneres' (*Mirror* 10/43–11/4). Love defines his commentary upon the life of Jesus, specifically designed for 'lewed men and wommen', as part of an old hermeneutic practice established by the Doctors of the Church.³⁰ The writing of meditations upon the life of Christ, as suggested by Love, is therefore a part of the commentary tradition. Such meditations participate in the edification of the Christian soul according to the words of St Paul in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 15:4). As Love informs his reader, imagination plays an important role in this hermeneutic process. Neither is that role limited to the writing process. Rather, Love exhorts his readers to engage affectively with his material in order to become active in filling the affective gaps left blank by his text and the gospel accounts. The account of the Nativity is introduced in the following manner: 'And so ymagine we & set we oure mynde & our þouht as we were present in þe place where þis was done at Bethleem! beholdyng how þees þre kynges comen with gret multitude & a wirchipful company of lordes & oþer seruantes, & so by token of þe Sterre firste ledyng & after restyng vp on þat place, þat the child Jesus was inne!' (*Mirror* 43/28–33). The reader has to perform as though, with Love, he were a participant in those momentous events. Love's guiding presence remains strong in the text and prevents any devious use of the imagination on the part of the 'lewed' reader. Elsewhere, when writing on the sufferings of Christ, Love insists on stressing how completely the person of Jesus experienced the suffering inflicted upon his body. Such strategies disallow a passive reading of his text and invite further affective identification with the events described:

At þe bigynnyng þou þat desireste to haue sorouful compassion þorh feruent inwarde affection of þe peynful passion of Jesu; þou most in þi mynde depart in manere for þe tyme þe miht of þe godhede fro þe kyndely infirmite of þe manhede þouh it so be in soþenes þat þe godhede was neuer departed fro þe manhede. For þere beþ many so blynde gostly by vnreasonable ymaginacion of þe miht of þe godhede in Jesu, þat þei trowe not þat any þinge miht be peynful or sorouful to hym as to a noþer comune man þat haþ onely þe kynde of man. (*Mirror* 161/3–12)

In accordance with the declaration of intention made in the prologue, the manhood of Jesus receives careful attention. It is no coincidence that such a comment appears before the meditations describing the Passion incidents. Anchoritic writings also focus consistently upon the

humanity of Jesus, selecting from the abstract, Neoplatonic repertoire of twelfth-century monastic spirituality, only those passages and words which describe Jesus in affective, sensuous and human terms.³¹ Unlike the Wooing Group texts, the wide readership addressed by Love disables him from creating the conditions of reading, encompassing a playful and didactic movement in and out of sacred history, which are so characteristic of anchoritic texts. The game which the anchoress was allowed to perform of affectively correlating her reading material with her living conditions is no longer possible. Instead, Love firmly locates his reader as an attentive but passive witness to the Passion: 'Wherefore if þou þat redist or herest þis boke, haste herebefore bisily taken hede to þoo þinges þat hauen be writen & spoken of þe blessedde life of oure lorde Jesu criste in to þis tyme; miche more now þou shalt gedire alle þi mynde & alle þe strengh of þi soule to þoo þinges þat folowen of his blessedde passion' (*Mirror* 162/33–8). The vivid description offered by Love succeeds in creating a strong affective response on the part of his reader. It is also possible that some of the injunctions scattered within the text may trigger an improvised meditation on the Passion incidents on the part of its most creative readers. Love therefore advocates a kind of performance, but within certain limits, and in accordance with specific intentions:³² 'Oo lord god in what state was þat tyme his modere soule, when she sawh him so peynfully faile, wepe & dye? Sopely I trowe þat for þe multitude of anguishes she was alle out of hir self & vnfelable made as half dede, & þat now mich more; þan what tyme she mette with him, beringe þe crosse as it is seide' (*Mirror* 180/34–9). Love provides a popular hermeneutics in the form of an imaginative re-enactment of the life of Christ, which the audience is invited to perform inwardly.³³ But, as with the example quoted above, Love provides the interpretative solutions to the questions raised by the arresting, emotionally moving scenes within his textual landscape. His creation is a textual one, offering limited access to closely controlled, performative activity.³⁴

Margery's Performance

Margery Kempe was probably familiar with Love's text or its Latin source.³⁵ We are at least certain that she was familiar with the tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life through Rolle's *Meditations on the Passion* and the *Stimulus amoris* which were read to her. The

essay offered by Selman attests further to a flourishing affective tradition where the imitation of biblical characters appears to have been a recurring performative activity. It is against the backdrop of anchoritic material and the pervasive tradition of meditation on the events of Christ's life that I want to offer my own reading of Margery's performance.³⁶ As Bella Millett clearly points out in her chapter in this volume, the *Ancrene Wisse*, and anchoritic culture in general, have had a far greater impact on lay devotional practices than has previously been acknowledged. I argue that it is possible to make sense of Margery's eclectic, original and performative spirituality by viewing it as an offshoot of this tradition.

Kempe's merit consists in the way in which she has been able to accommodate elements from anchoritic and affective traditions into an idiosyncratic translation which incorporates her own body as an important performative element within sacred history.³⁷ To make such a manifestation credible, Margery must first undergo several rites of passage entailing ever closer degrees of identification with Jesus, until a point is reached when he provides her with the following information:³⁸ 'For, whan þow gost to chyrch, I go wyth þe; whan þu syttest at þi mete, I sytte wyth þe; whan þow gost to þi bed, I go wyth þe; &, whan þu gost owt of towne, I go wyth þe' (31).

Margery's conversations with Christ, based on existing models, create an intimacy between her and Christ which is unequalled in other English vernacular writings.³⁹ Christ participates in her daily activities with the same degree of intensity with which we see him perform sacred history. Margery and Christ enter a multifaceted and exclusive relationship: 'Perfor I preue þat þow art a very dowtyr to me & a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse, wytnessyng þe Gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dyscyples, "He þat doth þe wyl of my Fadyr in Heuyn he is bothyn modyr, broþir, & syster un-to me"' (31).

Margery's slow, but unrelenting entry into the framework designated by the Gospel texts initially takes place via powerful assertions in which she depicts herself as an appropriate counterpart to the disciples, and a character capable of appearing and performing in amongst the great dramatic heroes of the New Testament. This process of representation makes use of all the possible affective identifications which Margery can find between her life and that of Christ. Death figures importantly in Margery's life and helps to reinforce her presence in the accounts of Jesus' own death. Her affective engagement corresponds to the solicitations found in anchoritic texts which ponder the events of

the death of Christ. In the anchoritic tradition the audience often attempts to empathize with the feelings of the closest witnesses to the crucifixion. Margery's performance effectively echoes that of an anchoritic audience, although in her case it is triggered by her active participation in the liturgical celebrations of the lay community: 'On þe Holy Thursday, as þe sayd creatur went processyon wyth oþer pepil, sche saw in hir sowle owr Lady, Saynt Mary Mawdelyn, & þe xij apostelys. And þan sche be-held wyth hir gostly eye how owr Lady toke hir leue of hir blysfyl Sone, Crist Ihesu, how he kyssed hir & alle hys apostelys & also hys trewe louer, Mary Mawdelyn' (174). Margery's participation in the Gospel events takes place while she is walking in a procession with her fellow Christians. In other words, the neatly regulated bodily performance which took place within the secrecy of the *recluserium* or the monastic cell is dramatically and loosely translated by Margery before a large public.⁴⁰ Her translation of those events is enacted before a disapproving public unable to read her rendition of discursive religious practices. The description of the parting of Jesus from Mary, the disciples and Mary Magdalene continues in the following manner: 'Whan sche beheld þis sygth in hir sowle, sche fel down in þe feld a-mong þe pepil. Sche cryid, sche roryd, sche wept as þow sche xulde a brostyn þer-with. Sche myth not mesuryn hir-self ne rewlyn hir-selfe, but cryid & roryd þat many man on hir wonderyd. But sche toke non heed what ony man seyde ne dede, for hir mende was occupyd in owr Lord' (174). Selman shows in her essay how, in the *Speculum devotorum*, a Syon nun is invited to identify with Mary. In many respects, the kind of identification suggested by the *Speculum* author bears a resemblance to what Margery offers in her book. However, the difference lies in the double performance which is offered by Margery, one part consisting of her own translation of anchoritic practices and private meditations in public, the other consisting in a performance regulated by the liturgical events of the Christian calendar. Margery proves unable to perform either of these translations wholly satisfactorily, and it is the tensions and frictions which result from this double act which become the hallmark of her peculiar mysticism. During her confrontations with her audience, Margery has constantly to provide a justification for her behaviour. Her performing body needs an accompanying gloss in the form of an oral commentary.

Concern for death allows Margery to inscribe herself even more penetratingly into sacred history. Her empathy with the feelings of the Virgin Mary lead her to behave in her visions in exactly the same

manner as she does when in the presence of her fellow parishioners. Her peculiar behaviour before the apostles makes them respond according to the same paradigms which regulate her real audience's reactions:

Anoþer tyme þe seyde creatur beheld how owr Lady was, hir thowt, in deying & alle þe apostelys knelyng be-forn hir & askyng grace. Þan sche cryid & wept sor. Þe apostelys comawndyd hir to cesyn & be stille. The creatur answeryd to þe apostelys, 'Wolde 3e I xulde see þe Modyr of God deyn & I xulde not wepyn? It may not be, for I am so ful of sorwe þat I may not wythstonde it. I must nedys cryin & wepyn.' And þan sche seyde in hir sowle to owr Lady, 'A, blyssyd Lady, prey for me to 3owr Sone þat I may come to 3ow & no lengar be terijd fro 3ow, for, Lady, þis is al to gret a sorwe for to be boþe at 3owr Sonys dethe & at 3owr deth & not deyn wyth 3ow but leuyn stille a-lone & no comfort han wyth me.' (175)

Her bodily performance is marked as a divine message whose signs require the interpretation which is provided by Margery for the apostles. The support provided by Margery's own commentary reinforces the divine nature of her affective and physical output.⁴¹ Her personal concern with death allows for her intimate involvement in some of the events contingent upon the death of Christ. At the same time, these events take her back to meditations about her own death, which she is able to predict: 'The sayd creatur on a day, heryng hir Messe & reuoluyng in hir mende þe tyme of hir deth, sor syghyng & sorwyng for it was so long delayd, seyde on þis maner, "Alasse, Lord, how long xal I thus wepyn & mornyn for thy lofe & for desyr of thy presens?"' (176).

This constant movement back and forth from Margery's own daily preoccupations into the events of sacred history echoes the iterations of the anonymous authors who invited anchoresses to measure their own life alongside that of Christ. Margery's project recovers many of the anchoritic themes and textual structures which exercised an appeal for a vast lay audience. Nonetheless, the conditions within which they are restored are drastically removed from their original settings.

The re-enactment of the Passion incidents by Margery is provocatively challenging. In Love's *Mirroure*, the audience remains passively observant as they engage affectively with the events which are described. Margery, instead, creates a very important role for herself as a character. The performance which follows is carefully planned and Margery Kempe, in a bold attempt to snatch away the leading female role from the Virgin, enacts the substitution of roles almost imperceptibly:

Whan þe sayd creatur beheld þis gloriows syght in hir sowle & saw how he blissyd hys Modyr & hys Modyr hym, & þan hys blissyd Modyr myth not spekyn o word mor to hym but fel down to þe grownde, & so þei partyd a-sundyr, hys Modyr lying stille as sche had ben ded, þan þe sayd creatur thowt sche toke owr Lord Ihesu Crist be þe clothys & fel down at hys feet, preyng hym to blissyn hir, & therwyth sche cryid ful lowde & wept rith sor, seying in hir mende, 'A, Lord, wher schal I become?' . . . Than answeyrd owr Lord to hir, 'Be stille, dowtyr, & rest wyth my Modyr her & comfort þe in hir, for sche þat is myn owyn Modyr must suffyr þis sorwe.' (188–9)

The visual quality of Margery's affective re-enactments enables the construction of a powerful stage act. As a character, Margery's movement in and out of sacred history creates a sense of fluidity and evanescence which is unmatched in any other mystical account. This double performance blends the two different stages on which she has inscribed her acts, so that the reader loses track of spatio-temporal dimensions. How is the reader to interpret Margery's prostration before the feet of Jesus in the passage above? Is she performing only in her mind here, or is her body responding to her visualizations? It seems that the most powerful visualizations trigger vivid vocal and bodily performances:

And þan hir thowt þe Iewys spokyn a-geyn boystowsly to owr Lady & put hir a-way fro hir Sone. Þan þe forseyd creatur thowt þat sche cryid owt of þe Iewys & seyde, '3e cursyd Iewys, why sle 3e my Lord Ihesu Crist? Sle me rapar & late hym gon.' And þan sche wept & cryid passyngly sor þat myche of þe pepil in þe chirche wondryd on hir body. (192)

Although her first responses carefully blur the barriers between those two dimensions by leaving the location of her vocal performance undetermined ('thowt þat sche cryid'), eventually we can precisely locate her performance, assisted by the responses of her unsympathetic public. Margery's re-enactment of the Passion generates the most vociferous and unusual performances. Although they are a far cry from the measured responses of the anchoresses for whom the Wooing Group was written, they nevertheless stand as an extension of this tradition, affectively inflated by a woman with a creative imagination and an uncontrollable body. Margery's difficulties reside in her inability to provide a coherent bodily translation of these discursive practices. Her public generally fails to read her body properly. The divine message which it attempts to convey is lost on the ordinary Christian who witnesses to her performance:

Þan þe sayd creatur, desiryng to a-bydyn stille be þe graue of owr Lord, mornyd, wept, & sorwyd wyth lowde crying for tendyrnes & compassyon þat sche had of owr Lordys deth & many a lamentabyll desyr þat God put in hir mende for þe tyme. Wherfor þe pepil wondryd vp-on hir, hauyng gret merueyl what hir eylyd, for þei knewe ful lital þe cawse. Hir thowt sche wolde neuyr a partyd þens but desiryd to a deyde þer & ben berijd wyth owr Lord. (194)

Margery's body is her initial book. However, its reading proves problematic to the general public who fail to perceive the divine message encoded within.⁴² Despite Margery's initial beliefs, the conditions for reading her body prove largely unsuccessful, since she remains unable to provide a commentary with which to accompany this particular text. Her performance of the Passion would make sense if her audience were to receive information relating to her own involvement in those events. Appropriate reading conditions would imply the audience's presence alongside her upon both stages, following her backwards and forwards in a way which helps them to make sense of her external physical manifestations.

Two examples should suffice to demonstrate how Margery's prolific imagination pushes hermeneutic practices to their very limits. Devotional objects trigger her visions in the most powerful way. Margery invents a new grammar for the translation of devotional practices. We have seen how she attempts to steal the main feminine role from the Virgin Mary. At one point she declares 'Lady, I wil sorwe for 3ow, for 3owr sorwe is my sorwe' (193). It therefore comes as no surprise to realize that this new syntax achieves articulation through appropriating many of the feelings which were attributed to the Virgin Mary in late medieval culture. Our Lady chapels, which were very much in vogue towards the end of the fourteenth century, are twice used as the sites for some of Margery's most idiosyncratic visions:⁴³

An-oþer tyme, þe seyde creatur beyng in a chapel of owr Lady sor wepyng in þe mynde of owr Lordys Passyon & swech oþer gracys and goodnes as owr Lord ministryd to hir mynde, & sodeynly, sche wist not how sone, sche was in a maner of slep. & a-non in þe sygh of hir sowle sche sey owr Lord standyng rygth up ouyr hir so ner þat hir thowt sche toke hys toos in hir hand & felt them, & to hir felyng it weryn as it had ben very flesch & bon. (208)

The sheer physicality of such a vision proves puzzling, until we accept

that everything is happening inside the mind of Margery. However, it is more than plausible that this vision, activated inside a location specifically designed to celebrate events connected with the humanity of Jesus, feeds upon the wall paintings, sculptures and other artefacts which serve this purpose. Margery's translations rely upon some of the practices found within the anchoritic tradition; however, they are also often simultaneously triggered by the instruments which support late medieval lay devotions. It is not impossible that the vision of the Lord standing over her is an inner transposition of a sculpture at which Margery would have been gazing before she fell into her slumber.⁴⁴ The significance of Margery's devotions as material for her visions becomes apparent further on, in an episode in which, once again, an Our Lady chapel is named as the chosen location:

An-oþer tyme, as þis creatur was in an hows of þe Frer Prechowrys wythinne a chapel of owr Lady, stondyng in hir preyerys, hir ey-ledys went a lityl to-gedyr wyth a maner of slep, & sodeynly sche sey, hir thowt, owr Lady in þe fayrest sygth þat euyr sche say, holdyng a fayr white kerche in hir hand & seying to hir, 'Dowtyr, wilt þu se my Sone?' & a-non forthwyth sche say owr Lady han hyr blissyd Sone in hir hand & swathyd hym ful lityely in þe white kerche þat sche myth wel be-holdyn how sche dede. (209)

Obviously, this vision does not feed upon some incident found inside the Gospels; rather, it proceeds from the observation of some kind of devotional object which Margery was able to infuse with new creative energy. Margery's mysticism was thus heavily reliant upon devotional practices which were current during her lifetime, and she made particular use of various devotional objects in order to create new layers of meaning for them. This contribution toward the creation of a new grammar rendered her peculiar performance meaningful to those who were able to recognize in it the utmost extension of long-established devotional and meditative practices.

Conclusion

This essay has focused on a sequence of visions which take place in the last chapters of Book 1, shortly after her conversion, and before her long pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They are set within a liturgical context and consist for the most part in re-enactments of the events of the

Passion within a liturgical frame. The scribe's final words ending this sequence sound like a kind of retraction: 'And neuyr-þe-lesse þe fyr of loue encresyd in hir, & hir vnderstandyng was mor illumynyd & hir deuocyon mor feruent þan it was be-for whyl sche had hir medita-cyon & hir contemplacyon only in hys manhod . . .' (209).

Margery's performing body is unable to convey the more ineffable aspects of her mysticism. Her book, which stands as a translation of her performative practices, does not deviate from its primary function, nor does it illuminate its readers about other aspects of Margery's spirituality. Our modern preoccupation with the various degrees of the mystical life, and our demand for rational categorization in a field which remains evasive, load the dice unfavourably against the account offered to us by Margery. If her performance remains puzzling to most of us, nevertheless it stands as an outstanding attempt at translation which combines several distinct traditions into a very idiosyncratic product. It was when interacting with her fellow citizens that Margery's body performed at its best, and the book would fail to do justice to this activity if its gaze remained purely directed toward the more ineffable aspects of her spirituality. For there, at this level, like Margaret Many Wounds, Margery's cosmic performance would come to a halt: 'She set off, no longer dancing, walking briskly toward the council fire, five steps beyond the edge of the universe.'⁴⁵

Notes

- ¹ S. Power, 'Moonwalk', in *The Grass Dancer* (London, 1995), 113–14.
- ² All references to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, with page number in parentheses following quotes, are to the following edition: S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen (eds.), *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS OS 212 (Oxford, 1940; repr. 1961).
- ³ For a study which also addresses some issues presented in this chapter, see S. Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London and New York, 1993), esp. 78–111. Kay and Rubin offer a detailed survey of some of the most significant ideological currents, such as social history, psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, which have contributed to our understanding of bodies as cultural constructs; see S. Kay and M. Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester, 1994), 1–9.
- ⁴ See R. Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 11 (Cambridge, 1991).

- ⁵ For a general but groundbreaking study of female religious practices, with special reference to food, see C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987).
- ⁶ For a general account of medieval hermeneutic practices, see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1988).
- ⁷ The idea for this essay emerged and developed from another paper given at a conference on performance organized by the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English (SAUTE); see my 'Mystical Texts or Mystical Bodies? Peculiar Modes of Performance in Late Medieval England', in P. Halter (ed.), *Performance*, Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 11 (Tübingen, 1999), 89–104.
- ⁸ For further evidence of this form of translation, see my 'Mystical Texts'.
- ⁹ Michael Camille provides visual evidence for the use of the image of the human body to represent the cosmos. Moreover, his final example demonstrates how Opicinus, *scriptor* at the Avignon papal court in the first half of the fourteenth century, inscribes his body as the central part of a cosmic map which must be read allegorically. Although the thought processes of Opicinus do not find their equivalent in Margery, both frame their own bodies as part of a system of signs which abounds with spiritual meaning. See M. Camille, 'The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies', in Kay and Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 62–99.
- ¹⁰ I am also well aware of the importance of the influence of continental women upon Margery. See the pioneering work of H. E. Allen in her commentary to the edition of *The Book*. For further research on continental mysticism and its impact on the English tradition, see R. Voaden (ed.), *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1996), esp. J. Dillon, 'Holy Women and their Confessors or Confessors and their Holy Women? Margery Kempe and Continental Tradition', 115–40. The study of religious performance in the *vitae* of thirteenth-century beguines by Simons provides additional evidence supporting the claim that Margery translates specialized (anchoritic) religious practices as an officially unregulated bodily performance; see W. Simons, 'Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines', in Kay and Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 10–23.
- ¹¹ See for instance *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm: With the Prologion*, ed. B. Ward (Harmondsworth, 1988).
- ¹² For a study of anchoritic practices and culture, see E. Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990), esp. ch. 2: 'An Anchorhold of her Own: The anchoress in Thirteenth-Century England', 13–31.
- ¹³ Part 1 of *Ancrene Wisse*, sometimes called *Devotions*, is filled with information about bodily performance: see J. R. R. Tolkien (ed.), *The English Text of*

- the Ancrene Riwe: Ancrene Wisse: edited from MS Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402*, EETS OS 249 (London, 1962), 5–29; for a modern English version, see A. Savage and N. Watson (eds.), *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1991), 53–66. For brief but useful information on the mass as ritual drama, see R. Beadle, "'Devoute ymaginacioun" and the Dramatic Sense in Love's *Mirror* and the N-Town Plays', in O. Shoichi, R. Beadle and M. S. Sargent (eds.), *Nicholas Love at Waseda: Proceedings of the International Conference 20–22 July 1995* (Cambridge, 1997), 1–17 (13–14).
- ¹⁴ Here is a brief enumeration of the first 'stage directions' offered by the author: 'When you first get up, cross yourself and say . . .'; ' . . . bowing forward on your knees on the bed . . .'; 'When you are fully dressed, sprinkle yourself with holy water . . .'; ' . . . and prostrate yourself toward there with these salutations . . .'; 'After this, fall to your knees before the crucifix . . .'; 'And with these words beat your breast . . .'; see Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 53–4. For further information on Part 1, see Bella Millett's essay within this volume, with its appendix.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, W. M. Thompson (ed.), *Be Wohunge of ure Lauerd*, EETS OS 241 (Oxford, 1958), 36–7.
- ¹⁶ See Revd Dr Henderson (ed.), *Missale ad usum insignis ecclesiae Eboracensis*, vol. 2, SS 60 (1874), 273–86.
- ¹⁷ See the numerous references made to the increasing poverty of Jesus in *Be Wohunge of ure Lauerd*, 28–9.
- ¹⁸ For a close analysis of the spiritual practices found in the texts which make up the Wooing Group, see my piece, 'Enclosed Desires: A Study of the Wooing Group', in W. F. Pollard and R. Boenig (eds.), *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1997), 39–62; for a study of *Be Wohunge* using French feminist theory, see S. M. Chewing, 'Mysticism and the Anchoritic Community: "A Time . . . of Veiled Infinity"', in D. Watt (ed.), *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Cardiff, 1997), 116–37.
- ¹⁹ For instance, the translation of the Crucifixion into a chivalric performance by the author of *Ancrene Wisse* may provide new meaning to the devotions performed by the anchoresses who need to respond to their lover-knight using a charade which takes into account the parameters regulating the (fictional) relationship of the lover-knight with the *domina*. See *Ancrene Wisse*, 199–200; Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 191–2.
- ²⁰ See, for instance, the last sixteen lines of 'Pis is on wel swuþe god ureisun of God almihti', in *Be Wohunge of ure Lauerd*, 9; see also, Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 324.
- ²¹ The enclosure image is perceptively explored by Wogan-Browne in the context of anchoritic culture, where she notes that the anchoress's physical and spiritual existence in *Ancrene Wisse* is mediated as a series of enclosures;

- see J. Wogan-Browne, 'Chaste Bodies: Frames and Experiences', in Kay and Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 24–42.
- ²² For a modern edition of this text, see S. Westra (ed.), *A Talking of the Love of God* (The Hague, 1950).
- ²³ For a study of this text which looks at the hermeneutic practices of the compiler, see my piece, 'The Choices of the Compiler: Vernacular Hermeneutics in *A Talking of the Love of God*', in R. Ellis, R. Tixier and B. Weite-meier (eds.), *The Medieval Translator* 6 (Turnhout, 1998), 232–53.
- ²⁴ The two modern editions of Julian's text, based on different manuscripts, are: M. Glasscoe (ed.), *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love* (Exeter, 1993), and E. College and J. Walsh (eds.), *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (Toronto, 1978). References to Julian's text are to the former-mentioned edition, hereafter cited as *A Revelation*.
- ²⁵ Mary is first invoked as the model for all women in view of the few utterances (four) which she is known to have expressed during her life. Elsewhere in the *Ancrene Wisse*, she is associated with the solitary woman enclosed between four walls and she thus becomes a historic model for female anchoritism; see *Ancrene Wisse*, 41–2, 84; Savage and Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 76–7, 108.
- ²⁶ It is worthwhile comparing the kind of engagement Julian wishes to have with the Passion with some of the thirteenth-century anchoritic texts and with the extravagant performance of Margery Kempe. In the passage below, Julian expresses the same desire to become a participant in sacred history: 'Methought I would have bene that time with Mary Magdalen and with other that were Crists lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our saviour, and of the compassion of our lady and of all his trew lovers that seene that time his peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with him' (*A Revelation*, 3).
- ²⁷ On patronage and anchoritic culture, see A. K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley, 1985).
- ²⁸ For a perceptive view on the Book of Hours and anchoritic devotions, see Bella Millett's chapter in this volume.
- ²⁹ See M. G. Sargent (ed.), *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*, Garland Medieval Texts 18 (New York, 1992). References to this volume are by page and line numbers.
- ³⁰ However, as Meale shows, *Love's Mirror* caters for the needs of all echelons within secular and religious society: see C. M. Meale, "'oft sipes with grete deuotion I þought what I miȝt do pleysyng to god": The Early Ownership and Readership of *Love's Mirror*, with Special Reference to its Female Audience', in Shoichi, Beadle and Sargent (eds.), *Nicholas Love at Waseda*, 19–46; for the early dissemination of this text among noblewomen, gentlewomen and nuns, see esp. 34.

- ³¹ See G. Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, 1998), 143–217.
- ³² Beadle argues that such dramatic life is unusual in medieval English prose; see Beadle, "'Devoute ymaginacioun"', 7.
- ³³ It is not unlikely that Love may have used Rolle as one of his models with regard to text performance; see my 'Mystical Texts or Mystical Bodies', 91–5.
- ³⁴ The reason for limiting participation via the 'deuoute ymaginacioun' in the creation of a narrative may stem from the wish not to shock the Wycliffite sensibilities which claimed the self-sufficiency of Scripture; see Beadle, "'Devoute ymaginacioun"', 8–9.
- ³⁵ See B. Windeatt (ed.), *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London, 1988), 17; 44 out of a total of 113 extant manuscripts of the *Meditationes* survive in English libraries, and most are of English provenance; see Sargent, *Nicholas Love's Mirror*, xix. Meale provides a good summary of the critical discussion on this matter, without, however, offering new evidence for Margery's knowledge of that text; see Meale, "'oft sipes"', 45 (n. 86).
- ³⁶ On Nicholas Love and Mount Grace, see Sargent, *Nicholas Love's Mirror*, xxi–xxix.
- ³⁷ For an argument which corroborates this one, with a focus on Margery's tears, see D. B. Mahoney, 'Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language', in S. J. McEntire (ed.), *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays* (New York and London, 1992), 37–50.
- ³⁸ The privileging of female experience in the *Mirror* could have encouraged Margery Kempe's easy identification and empathy with Jesus and the Virgin; see Meale, "'oft sipes"', 40.
- ³⁹ See S. Bhattacharji, *God is an Earthquake: The Spirituality of Margery Kempe* (London, 1997), 99–114.
- ⁴⁰ For a detailed account of Margery's complex interaction with the community, see J. Wilson, 'Communities and Dissent: The Secular and Ecclesiastical Communities of Margery's Book', in Watt (ed.), *Medieval Women in their Communities*, 155–85.
- ⁴¹ For an early clerical example where the narrator's individual body is inscribed with spiritual meaning, see the account on Opicinus in Camille, 'The Image and the Self', 87–95.
- ⁴² The pardoner's body in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and its reading by his fellow pilgrims help illuminate the medieval cosmic and systemic understanding of the world. If the Pardoner's rhetoric fails ultimately, it is because his body speaks in a language contradicting the rhetorical utterances which he produces; see R. Copeland, 'The Pardoner's Body and the Disciplining of Rhetoric', in Kay and Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 138–59.
- ⁴³ For a study of textual representations of the Virgin which were aimed to contribute to the decoration of Thoresby's Lady Chapel at York Minster, see V. Gillespie, 'Medieval Hypertext: Image and Text from York Minster', in

P. R. Robinson and R. Zim (eds.), *Of the Making of Books* (Aldershot, 1997), 206–29.

⁴⁴ The statement by Camille that ‘the image, not the Word, mediated most powerfully between God and the believer in late medieval spirituality’ finds confirmation in the extravagant visions of Margery Kempe which are mentioned in this paper; see Camille, ‘The Image and the Self’, 74.

⁴⁵ Power, *The Grass Dancer*, 114.

10

Psychological Disorder and the
Autobiographical Impulse in Julian of
Norwich, Margery Kempe and
Thomas Hoccleve



RICHARD LAWES

AERS, in a recent essay, questions the current tendency, in certain influential works by early modernists, to view the Middle Ages as ‘a static homogeneous collective in which there simply could not be any self-conscious concern with individual identity or subjectivity because these simply could not exist in that society. Much less could there be any problematization of individual identity.’ Aers counters this view vigorously, pointing out the ways in which the medieval period has been constructed by early modernists as ‘a homogeneous and mythical field which is defined in terms of scholars’ needs for a figure against which “Renaissance” concerns with inwardness and the fashioning of identities can be defined as new’.¹

Autobiographical writing, perhaps the most direct sort of literary evidence of self-reflective subjectivity, is certainly thinner on the ground in the medieval period, yet it does exist. Autobiography is, of course, a modern word, and very few medieval texts would correspond to the general modern understanding of the genre as a coherent narrative rendering of one’s whole life story. However, despite this, the term ‘autobiographical’ may still be meaningful in medieval studies if, as Abbott suggests, it is used to refer ‘less to the text’s precise genre than to certain of its qualities’.²

Any list of the most ‘autobiographical’ of English medieval texts would be likely to include *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich and several of Thomas Hoccleve’s poems.