Controlling the Body: Regulation Embodied – mysticism, holy violence, and pathways to incorruption

1. Discussion of sources:

Primary source: (Choose one source only)

2. Ancrene Wisse (part 8, on hand out) Reference: Millett, B. & Wogan-Browne, eds. (1992) Medieval English Prose for Women from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse, Oxford. (Please use this book if you do the essay for this seminar.)

Required pre-session secondary reading:

When reading your primary source, try thinking about the following statements:
• These texts represent the way in which Christianity attempts to domesticate the spectacle and orgiastic aspect of humanity and in so doing generate forms of holy violence. (Try: Georges Batailles).

This may be the process that lies behind the development of the association of women with Eucharistic devotion, for example. In such a context the growth of associating women with a form of Eucharistic ecstasy encourages a domestication of female sexuality, placing it in a ‘safe’ frame of reference (at the same time as making ecstasy a possible experience for all women). Consider Bynum’s views on this devotion:

“To some extent, reception of Christ’s body and blood was a substitute for ecstasy – a union that anyone, properly prepared by confession or contrition, could achieve. To receive was to become Christ – by eating, by devouring and being devoured.”

• The texts represent neither men nor women but rather metaphors for male defined and patriarchal control systems operating through the embodiment and genderization of evil. (Feminist interpretations)
• These texts exemplify how bodily surveillance and control is an essential aspect of Christianity. (Use: Michel Foucault)
• These texts represent examples of bodies being organized in terms of gender and sex expectations. Yet both gender and sex in these texts is performative and that performativity is configured in a different way to our contemporary society, suggesting the fluidity of gender/sex assumptions and challenging modern historian’s heteronormative readings that assume more stable, modernist configurations of gender and sex (Use: Judith Butler). The work of Sarah Salih is essential reading here.

2. Reading bodily regulation

a. Virginity as an exemplar, violence against the body as sacred?

How do we ‘read’ virgin’s bodies? How do we read holy violence perpetrated on bodies?
• as a performative expression of the sacred body in society, not easily subject to medical materialism or pathologizing (try Douglas); (ie the ‘no sex and not much food either’ doesn’t represent a medical condition but has a more symbolic meaning (our modern, medically-focused readings might see similarities with anorexia, for example, but be cautious of the limits this places on both the experience and the construction of the virgin’s body.)
• as an example of how the panopticon works to encourage certain behaviours that become incorporated into a cultural and individual identity (try Foucault);

\[\text{References}\]


• as a form of liberation from dominant societal pressures concerning gender and familial roles and responsibilities (in which the apparent rejection of gender roles allows for a less stable, more fluid set of gender expressions); (try Butler);
• as encapsulating the anticipatory erotic in a fashion that can be cyclically replayed (Batailles) and/or controlled through the synergy of cyclical re-enactment of a bounded fantasy (Masoch, McKendrick);

b. **Theorizing the environment of textual production** (what do we need to understand, grapple with when we read about medieval religious bodies?)

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**Foucault’s (1979) notion of the panopticon**

“You must not send letters or receive letters or write anything without permission.”

_Ancrene Wisse_ (part 8)

“If you find you are practising what you read, thank God sincerely. If you are not, pray for God’s mercy, and try to observe it better in the future as far as you can.”

_Ancrene Wisse_ (Part 8)

**Bourdieu (1983) Habitus**

**Power of textual communities**

Our texts are normally produced within what have become known as textual or discourse communities, they must reflect some of the understandings of that community.⁴

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How do textual communities work?

Arguably, the medieval theological map of the human body is a public one. The body is to be read as a site of contemplation, the senses as avenues to God. And such a reading is for redemptive purposes.

What are the implications of textual communities for how we understand the depiction of the medieval body?

“English women of the thirteenth century could rarely read more than a smattering of Latin. In 1277, for example, Bishop Cantilupe wrote to the nuns at Limebrook in Herefordshire in Latin, but expected the nuns to find a translator: "you are to cause this our letter to be expounded to you several times in the year by your penancers in the French or the English tongue, which ever you know best."\10 Among the limited number of vernacular texts available to women were the popular French romances, the medieval Harlequin romances. That anchoresses were at least familiar with these earlier-day popular romance is suggested by the Wisse author's reference to them.\11 However, the anchoress needed to read vernacular texts other than romances. Because of her lack of Latin literacy, the anchoress had created a demand for vernacular religious literature. Because it was written by men in the image of what they thought women should be it was a literature that focuses on domesticity, on the petty daily pressures of the anchorhold, and on the deadly sins writ small.”

Metaphor, allegory, and eros

Douglas, M. (1985). “the more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message....The body, a complex structure, is an ideal source of symbols for other complex structures..... (pp. 114-115).

“Here is a more joyful wonder still: no matter how many mortal sins his [Jesus’] love has been dishonoured by, as soon as she comes back to him, he makes her a virgin again.” Ancrene Wisse, part 7.

“Likewise it [virginity] keeps her body and five senses – sight and hearing, taste and smell, and sensation in every limb – so that those to whom God has granted so much through his grace do not perish or grow corrupt in carnal filthiness through lusts of the flesh.....” Hali Meiðhad, A Letter on Virginity (13th C.)

c. What are the weaknesses of the notion of discourse community?

• Consistency and extent of actual impact

• Intersecting / competing dominant discourses

Where might we look to discover whether or not erotic readings and writings of the body were occurring in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries?

• Increasingly complex portrayal of desire?

• Clerical fear

• Medical perceptions – though medical ideology as appropriated from Galen and Aristotle tends to inform rather than challenge clerics in their explanations of the inferiority of women’s bodies.6

• 'Bawdy' / anti-clerical sub-culture?

• Implications of Romance literature?

• Goliardic poetry (12th Century)

• Vernacular vida (Southern France)

3. Subverting textual regulations – alternative discourses and concepts of agency

4. Any current usefulness? The art of reclaiming and reframing the normative past

Is it appropriate for Christian theologians and ecclesiastical historians to re-appropriate medieval texts and re-read them through modern theoretical eyes?

Queering female anchorites?7

• Is the anchorhold both a physical and a metaphorical closet?

• Should we use the practice of historical imaginary to reclaim female anchoritism as a possible space for relationships between women?

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(and at: http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/viewArticle/sauer/178)