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Mystical Texts or Mystical Bodies? Peculiar Modes of Performance in Late Medieval England

Denis Renevey

Alongside dramatic performance, to which the vast corpus of medieval plays attests, late medieval culture in England abounds with other demonstrations of performance. Chaucer's Pardoner is, of course, one outstanding case, including as it does a brilliant performance characterised by the use of a subversive discourse, and which is addressed simultaneously to two audiences, i.e. the fictitious audience made up of the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, and the real audience, medieval or modern, which hears or reads but is similarly beguiled by the Pardoner.¹ Other and earlier manifestations of performance occur in the thirteenth century. Anchoritic writings offer prescriptions for performance as ritual gesture, following liturgical prescriptions or accompanying ascetic or meditative practices.² Through self-inflicted hardship and ritualised physical exercise, bodies become sites where the first manifestations of sainthood find expression.³ Visual representations of some of those ritual episodes, with God, Jesus or the Virgin Mary as witnesses and audience, provide further evidence for performance in late medieval culture.⁴

Medieval liturgy, and para-liturgical anchoritic practices in particular, therefore offer convincing evidence for a ritualised, controlled form of performance within the boundaries of the church and its vicinity, or the anchori-

¹ See Geoffrey Chaucer 193-202.

² *Ancrene Wisse*, the thirteenth-century anchoritic rule written in Middle English, is a good case in point. See especially the first distinction, or book, "Devotions," in *Ancrene Wisse* 12-29.

³ For a thorough study of the body as discourse, see Karma Lochrie, esp. 56-96.

⁴ Kneeling before God or the Virgin, as found for instance in the illumination for St. Anselm's *Prayers and Meditations* in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Auct. D.2.6, fol. 156r, a twelfth-century manuscript, is represented recurrently in Books of Hours. See for instance *Catherine of Cleves kneeling before the Virgin and Child*, from the Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves, in Henk van Os 81; for further examples, see Roger S. Wieck.

tic or monastic cell. However, rather than looking at textual, iconic or ritual supports which make the performative act possible, I would like to enter into the heart of one performative activity. Since individuals make and experience performance, as actors or audience, I wish to consider evidence from medieval culture indicative of performance taking place within individuals.

Accounts of a particular mode of performance occur in mystical texts. I propose that, very much like Grotowsky's saintly actors, mystics reading texts should be considered as performers, entirely oblivious of their own self, striving to be completely immersed in a peculiar performance, and living it as reality made immanent through the use of texts specifically designed to this effect.⁵

For instance, in the long version of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*, written after a spell of more than twenty years devoted to meditations on the account of her revelation as found in the short text, she ends her text with a thought-provoking confession: "This booke is begunne be Gods gift and his grace, but it is not yet performid, as to my syte" (*Revelation* 134).

An exegesis of this cryptic passage yields several answers. Performance may be applied to some of the facts which concern the salvation of all Christians, on behalf of whom, Julian asserts, the revelation was given to her. In this framework, performance would refer to events described in Julian's *Revelation* and ordered by God for all Christians, but which are yet to be performed by the deity. The second exegesis, self-referential, places Julian now at the core of her writing, but clearly differentiates her role of writer from her role as mystic. Despite the momentous events during which the revelation took place, and the long process of writing the two versions, Julian suggests that the time has come now for her to attempt its performance. Before the mystical text which needs now to be performed, Julian finds herself in the situation of any reader addressing the mystical issues of this divinely inspired text.

Mystics – and Julian is a good case in point – naturally receive a great deal of attention as writers. The study of their texts contributes to our understanding both of medieval culture and literature. However, excessive attention to writing privileges this first performative act against a performance of a different order, which generates, and is at the heart of, religious experience. In view of the importance of writing for bringing out mystical thoughts and feelings, it is surprising to note that, among the Middle English mystics, for instance, none of them encourages their disciples to fashion their own self via

⁵ See Jerzy Grotowski, *Vers Un Théâtre Pauvre*.

the writing process.⁶ On the other hand, instances of invitations to perform texts abound. I shall now devote my attention to two authors, one, Richard Rolle (c. 1300-1349), who was generous with advice on performance, and the other, Margery Kempe (c.1373-c.1440), who offers fascinating models of performance based on the kind of advice found in the affective tradition of which Rolle was a follower.

Richard Rolle is one the most prolific writers of medieval England. His popularity in the fifteenth century is attested both by the profusion of manuscripts containing his Latin and vernacular works and by the great number of anonymous religious works attributed to him.⁷ Rolle was more widely copied and read than Chaucer. Interest in Rolle, however, faded with the English Reformation. It would take too long to list his Latin and English writings here, but it should suffice to say that the range of Rolle's writings includes pastoral manuals, commentaries on the Bible, religious autobiographies, lyrics and epistles for female recipients.⁸

It is to the latter that I want to turn my attention in order to sieve through material which reveals performative activity. The English epistles are among Rolle's later writings.⁹ Written for female recipients known to Rolle, they yield information not available elsewhere in his writings. Indeed, they are his only pieces we know to have been written for specific female recipients. Moreover, unlike his other pieces, their tone reveals a mystic who, by means of his previous writings or because of personal contact and guidance, has found an audience eager to follow the mystical life that he advocates. Because of his highly idiosyncratic mysticism, Rolle engages in a complex manoeuvre in order to provide signposts for the performance of some parts of his epistles.

The Commandment, *Ego Dormio* and *The Form of Living* take as *fait accompli* the validity of Rolle's teaching. His authority already established, Rolle offers in his epistles material inviting active participation on the part of the audience. While his earlier writings were characterised by excessive

⁶ My close study of the career of Richard Rolle as writer and mystic shows how his own participation in the making of biblical hermeneutics, especially the tradition of the commentaries on the Song of Songs, coincides with the development of his mysticism; see Denis Renevey. For a divergent but insightful approach, with emphasis on his literary rather than mystical career, see Nicholas Watson.

⁷ For a thorough study of the textual transmission of Richard Rolle's works and other religious works attributed to him, see Hope Emily Allen.

⁸ For a list and chronology of Rolle's writings, see Watson 273-94.

⁹ References (by page and line numbering) to Rolle's writings in Middle English are from *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*. For a Modern English translation, see *Richard Rolle. The English Writings*.

contamination in the forms of virtuosic accounts relating his mystical exploits, here Rolle resorts in parts to more orthodox – and perhaps safer – material combined with a systematic account of three degrees of love, each defining a degree of close inner contact with God, with a growth in intensity from the first to the third degree. Despite the long-established tradition of categorisation of the degrees of love in medieval culture, Rolle's attempt is markedly new in several respects.¹⁰ Writing in the vernacular, and for a known audience, Rolle, with an iron hand in a velvet glove, gauges the level of consciousness of his recipients in order to locate them within one of the three degrees. For instance, in *The Form of Living* Rolle offers a definition of each degree of love, and indirectly assumes his recipient, the anchoress Margaret Kirkeby, to be somewhere between the first and the second degree, but in any case not yet in the third:

In þis þrid degre, if þou may wyn therto, þou shalt wit of more ioy þan I haue told þe yet, and amonge oþer affeccions and songes þou may in þi longynge synge in þin herte to thy [lord] Ihesu, wh[en] þou coueiteste his comynge and [thy] goinge. . . .(18\594-7)

[In this third degree – if you can attain it – you will know more joy than I have yet described to you, and among other aspirations and songs you may in your longing sing this in your heart to your Lord Jesus when you desire his coming and your leaving. . . .(Allen, *English Writings* 172-3)]¹¹

My aim is not to fuel discussion on what could be regarded as an intrusive and amoral gesture, but I want rather to consider its impact for our understanding of performance in mystical literature.¹² Rolle attaches, as part of the epistle, a short lyrical piece which, as the comments above demonstrate, should be performed (“synge in þin herte”) rather than simply read. The conditions for the performance to take place are intrinsic to the degree of consciousness of the performer. We are far from a common act of reading here. Rolle posits his lyric not as a literary piece but as support to a performance in which the recipient may want to engage in order to acquire experience. Whatever the literary qualities of Rolle's lyrical passages, their primary function consists in supporting enactment of the state of consciousness which the degrees of love describe.

¹⁰ See for instance Richard of St. Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux.

¹¹ I have emended Allen's translations when she follows versions of Rolle's writings different from those found in MS Longleat 29.

¹² For a discussion of the somewhat intrusive role of male confessors and spiritual guides in the life of religious women, see Rosalynn Voaden, “Women's Words, Men's Language,” as well as Anne Clark Bartlett.

In the *Ego Dormio*, written for a nun of Yedingham, Rolle provides additional material as support for performance. For each degree of love suggestions for their performance accompany their definition. The first degree of love receives appropriate treatment, but specific supporting material is not provided. Rolle indeed invites his audience to use the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria and other prayers, psalms, and existing meditations on the Passion for establishing and stabilising oneself in the first degree of love.¹³ Such a task is attainable by all Christians who obey the ten commandments and avoid the seven deadly sins.

Following Grotowski, I maintain that the essence of mystical performance consists of a meeting: those who accomplish an act of self-revelation establish contact with themselves, and this confrontation involves their whole being, in a disciplined and demanding process (Grotowski 53-8). This moment of self-discovery is at the core of the mystical experience. As mentioned earlier, the partitioning of this moment into three specific levels, with specific material for their re-enactment, is characteristic of Rolle. When dealing with the second and third degrees of love, Rolle provides adequate supporting material for their performance. At the second level, Rolle provides material essentially derived from the Passion incidents, with the following general recommendation:

I wil þat þou neuer be ydel; for be euer other spekyng of God, or wirchyng some notable werke, or thynkyng in hym, and principaly þat þi thought be euer hauyng hym in mynde. And thynke of[t] þis of his passione:...(30\170-4).

[I don't want you ever to be idle, so be constantly either talking of God, or doing something significant, or thinking especially about him, and so that your mind may be constantly remembering him, meditate frequently in this way on his passion: . . . (*English Writings* 138)]

The first part of this lyric subsequently presents the most important incidents of the Passion. An affective gloss, a substitute for the director's comments, guides the thoughts of the performer of this text. For instance, the placing of the crown of thorns distils the following thought: "Alas, my ioy and my swetyng is d[em]ed for to henge (30\181)", and later, the vision of blood is followed by "To þynke is gret pitte, how demed he is to deth" (30\188).

¹³ Outside of the epistolary context Rolle provides two meditations on the Passion; see *Rolle: Prose and Verse* 64-83; for a study of those meditations, see Morgan. See also Glasscoe and Schmidt.

The second part of the lyric moves away from Jesus in his humanity and its accompanying gory details. A new meeting is set up, a performance which the text enables:

Ihesu, receyue my hert, and to þi [loue] me brynge;
 Al my desire þou art, I couait þi comynge. . . .
 How longe shal I be here? When may I cum þe nere
 Thi melody for to hire? (31\196-209)
 [Jesus, receive my heart, and to your love me bring;
 You are my whole desire, I long for your coming. . .
 How long must I be here? When may I come you near? (*English Writings* 139)]

The performance which the text supports is absent from the gaze of the academic voyeur. All that is left are the crumbs and the leftovers, manifest as exterior signs demonstrating change and self-discovery:

If þou wil þynke þis euery day, þou shalt fynd gret swetnesse, þat shal draw þi hert vp, and mak þe fal in wepyng and grete langynge to Ihesu; and þi þoght shal be reft abouen al erthly þynges, abouen þe sky and þe sterres, so þat þe egh of þi hert may loke in to heuyn. (31\212-5)
 [If you meditate on this every day, you will be bound to find great sweetness, which will draw your heart upward and make you sink down weeping and in deep yearning for Jesus; and your heart will be snatched away above all earthly things, above the sky and the stars, so that the eye of your heart may gaze into heaven. (*English Writings* 139)]

The essence of this moment of transformation stands outside the text, within the individual. Here, ineffability not only characterises God's true nature but also the encounter which a determined soul may achieve with Him.

The lyrical passage which glosses the third degree of love in *Ego Dormio* is completely devoid of Passion incidents. The forty-six lines of this well-written lyric end the epistle. They assume a high level of religious and literary sophistication on the part of the recipient, who needs to decode, and then perform, the love messages of the epistle. Other passages reveal expectations about transformation by the recipient of the epistle:

Ihesu, both God and man, thi loue þou lered me þan
 When I to þe fast ran; forþi now loue I can.
 I sit and syng of loue langynge þat in my brest is bred.
 Ihesu, Ihesu, Ihesu, whyn[e] ware I til þe ledde?
 Ful wet I wot þou sest my state; in loue my þoght is stedde;
 When I þe se and dwel with þe, þan am I fild and fedde (33\282-7).
 [Jesus, both God and man, you taught me your love then,

When I ran quickly towards you; therefore I can love now.
 I sit and sing of love-longing which in my breast has bred.
 Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, why aren't I to you led?
 You contemplate my present state; in love my mind is established.
 When I you see, and you're with me, then I am quite full-fed. (*English Writings*
 141)]

When asked to provide a definition of what is theatre, Grotowski adopts the *via negativa* attitude by stating what theatre is not. Dismissing elements such as costumes, sets, music, lighting, and text as requirements for his definition of theatre, he is left with the actor and, to make theatre a show, an audience (Grotowski 13-24). Similarly, the kind of performance which Rolle suggests to the female recipients of his epistles, like Grotowski's ascetic theatre, requires no special artifice, only a complete surrender of one's will and a great desire for a performance offered to only one spectator, who is ineffable and incomprehensible.

Margery Kempe, familiar with some of Rolle's writings, engages instead in a world-tour performance by using the Christian pilgrimage routes and sites to set herself on stage.¹⁴ In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first (religious) autobiography in English, Margery's demonstrations of love for Jesus verge on the sensational. She offers the most peculiar modes of performance, all lacking the characteristics of the ascetic performance described above. She has been labelled as eccentric, annoyingly boastful, unrestricted, paranoid, neurotic, self-centred, selfish, whining, and perversely affected.¹⁵ My approach, more sympathetic towards Margery, is to emphasise performance as an essential element of her discursive practices.

Performance is at the core of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Like the *liber naturae*, its events are part of the great cosmic performance orchestrated by God. My interest lies thus in the way Margery enacts and performs the heritage of the affective tradition in a way which is peculiar and idiosyncratic to her situation. As a married and successful female figure, Margery performs unusual roles. Without the guidance and the protection provided by monastic or anchoritic culture, Margery shapes for herself scenes demonstrative of her

¹⁴ References are to the following edition: *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen; for a modern translation, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt. For a reference to Rolle's writings in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, see Book 1, ch. 17. For a general study of Margery Kempe's spirituality, see Santha Bhattacharji.

¹⁵ See for instance a summary of Father Thurston's objections to Margery's mysticism in Sarah Beckwith, esp. 198. For a psycho-analytical interpretation diagnosing Margery as a hysteric, see Hope Phyllis Weissman.

particular privileged relationship with the deity.¹⁶ Deprived of the authority of the male textual Latinate culture, she appropriates her body as site for the manifestation of her discourse with God.¹⁷ Whereas this intimate discourse is decoded and performed in the intimacy of the cell by anchoresses and nuns, or expressed in a coded and controlled ritual elsewhere, Margery makes her body the scene for a performance enacted according to God's demands.

This peculiar performance of the body, however, feeds on the most significant performing event of all times in Christian culture, i.e. the crucifixion scene. *Imitatio Christi* partakes in the shaping of the bodily enactment of Margery, as it defines also the ascetic practices and meditations of the anchoresses for whom Richard Rolle writes his epistles. A re-enactment of the life of Mary, followed by the Passion, depicts Margery not as witness, as is customary in meditations of the Passion, but as actor in this momentous event.¹⁸ It is interesting to note that Margery does not seem to rely on a written account of those events for her meditations. This allows for manipulation and stronger identification with the actors and the scenes which form her meditations. She is able to rewrite the scenes and insert her own self into her visualisation:

Pan went sche forth wyth owyr Lady & wyth Iosep, beryng wyth hir a potel of pymment & spycys perto. Pan went þei forth to Elysabeth, Seynt Iohn Baptystys moder, &, whan þei mettyn to-gyder, eybyr of hem worshepyd oper, & so þei wonyd to-gedyr wyth gret grace and gladnesse xij wokys. . . .

And þan þe creatur fel down on kneys to Seynt Ely3abeth & preyd hir sche wold prey for hir to owyr Lady þat sche mygth do hir seruyse & plesawns. "Dowtyr, me semyth," seyde Elysabeth, "þu dost ryght wel þi deuer." And þan went þe creatur forth wyth owyr Lady to Bedlem & purchasyd hir herborwe euery nyght wyth gret reuerens, & owyr Lady was receyued wyth glad cher. (*The Book*, ed. Meech and Allen 19)

{[Margery]} went forth with our Lady and with Joseph, bearing with her a flask of wine sweetened with honey and spices. Then they went forth to Elizabeth, St John the Baptist's mother, and when they met together Mary and Eliza-

¹⁶ I contend that Margery's peculiar performance has much to do with her inability to encode and suggest in writing mystical activity, so much so that her performing body becomes her text: the book itself is only an afterproduct, the outcome of a negotiation between Margery and her scribes. I therefore have to disagree with Lynn Staley who reduces the scribes mentioned in *The Book of Margery Kempe* to literary tropes. On Margery Kempe and writing, see Françoise Le Saux.

¹⁷ Apart from Karma Lochrie's influential text placing Margery's body at the centre of her investigation, see also Rosalynn Voaden, "Beholding Men's Members: The Sexualizing of Transgression in *The Book of Margery Kempe*."

¹⁸ For a discussion on Mary as the model (of performance) for Margery, see Lochrie 167-202.

both revered each other, and so they dwelled together with great grace and gladness for twelve weeks. . . .

And then the creature fell down on her knees to St Elizabeth, and begged her that she would pray for her to our Lady so that she might still serve and please her.

“Daughter,” said Elizabeth, “it seems to me that you do your duty well.”

And then the creature went forth with our Lady to Bethlehem and procured lodgings for her every night with great reverence, and our Lady was received with good cheer. (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 53)}

This inordinate involvement with sacred historical events when meditating fashions Margery’s subsequent extravagances.¹⁹ Margery’s extraordinary visual power does not limit itself to such historical re-writing. As she is able to penetrate history and construct a role for herself, she can also capture the essence of sacred history and have her become its performing entity. I contend that this unusual and excessive conflation of personal experience with historical events explicates in part her most peculiar performative moments.

But without the physical presence of a male spiritual guide and in order to find approval and give her body the stamp of credibility, Margery needs first to transform and conform it to the model body, the body of Christ.²⁰ Transformation of her body consists in part in annihilating signs of femininity.²¹ In one of her conversations with God, Margery reassesses the three states of life (maidenhood, widowhood and matrimony) defined by medieval culture to make her corrupt body an appropriate receptacle for performance. God indeed informs her of his love for wives too, stating that “No man may prevent me from loving whom I wish and as much as I wish, for love, daughter, quenches all sin” (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 85). Elsewhere, and out of chronological order in *The Book*, Margery arranges a chastity agreement with her husband (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 60) and receives information, before this agreement, that she shall no longer bear children (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 73). Being outside the boundaries of the cell where female religious bodies usually manifest their love for God, Margery’s body needs to be

¹⁹ For a study of the role played by Nicholas Love’s *Mirror* on Margery’s performance, see Gail McMurray Gibson.

²⁰ For the significant role played by spiritual guides and confessors, with special reference to Margery, see Janette Dillon.

²¹ I believe that the question raised by Sarah Beckwith, i.e. “whether female mysticism is a possible space for the disruption of the patriarchal order, or whether, on the contrary, it exists to act out rigorously its 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/crucifixion,” finds an answer in the way Margery must renounce her femininity in order to deploy her body next to Christ’s. See Beckwith 197.

sealed in a more literal manner so as to offer itself as a credible site of re-enactment. Like St Bridget of Sweden, Margery's most significant continental female model, she has to do with a physical state which constitutes a serious handicap on the road to salvation.

Re-enactments of the Passion reach paroxysmal force in Margery. Her power of visualisation enables to efface time between her present life and the life of Jesus, so as to allow an ever present and endless effusion on her part. When presented with an image of the *pieta*, Margery provides an explanation about her sense of re-enactment. To a lady's consoling comment, "Woman, Jesus is long since dead," she replies:

" . . . hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyde þis same day, & so me thynkyth it awt to be to 3ow & to alle Cristen pepil. We awt euyr to han mende of hys kendnes & euyr thynkyn of þe dolful deth þat he deyde for vs." (*The Book*, ed. Meech and Allen 148)

[" . . . his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so, I think, it ought to be to you and to all Christian people. We ought always to remember his kindness, and always think of the doleful death that he died for us." (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 187)]

Margery's perception of time is entirely based on a cosmic apprehension of the world. Her persistent devotion to the humanity of Jesus accounts for every moment of her own time.²² She accounts for it by offering her body for a never ending performance. Elsewhere, Margery provides evidence for the complete surrender of her body to God. When asked to admit that illness is the cause of her weeping and gesticulation, Margery stands strong against such an accusation. At one point however, as her weeping consistently receives criticism from her fellow pilgrims and countrymen, Margery begs God for a remission, or more private moments for the weeping to appear. But God sets her weeping on the cosmic stage, with the planets, the strong winds, the earthquakes and the whole of creation, ordered by God and obedient to Him in every respect:

"& ryth so, dowtyr, I fare wyth þe myth of my Godheed; it may not be seyn wyth mannys eye, & 3yt it may wel be felt in a sympil sowle wher me likyth to werkyn grace, as I do in þi sowle. &, as sodeynly as þe leuyn comith fro Heuyn,

²² Margery is singularly in tune here with the Pseudo-Dionysian teachings of the Cloud author, who provides a long reflection on keeping account of time and introduces his topic by saying: "& þerefore take good keep into tyme, how þat þou dispendist it. For noþing is more precious þan tyme. In oo litel tyme, as litel as it is, may heuen be wonne & lost." *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson 11.

so sodeynly come I in-to thy sowle, & illumyn it wyth þe lyght of grace & of vndir-standing, & sett it al on fyr wyth lofe, & make þe fyr of lofe to brenn þerin & purgyn it ful clene fro alle erdly filth. & sumtyme, dowtyr, I make erde-denys for to feryn þe pepil þat þei xulde dredyn me

“Also, dowtyr, þu wost wel þat I send sum-tyme many gret reynys & sharp schowerys, & sumtyme but smale & softe dropis. & ryth so I far wyth þe, dowtyr, whan it likyth me to spekyng in þi sowle; I 3yf þe sum-tyme smale wepyngys & soft teerys for a tokyn þat I lofe þe, & sum-tyme I 3eue þe gret cryis and roryngys for to makyn þe pepil a-ferd with þe grace þat I putte in þe in-to a tokyn þat I wil þat my Modrys sorwe be known by þe þat men & women myth haue þe more compassyon of hir sorwe þat sche suffyrd for me.” (*The Book*, ed. Meech and Allen 182-3)

[“And just so, daughter, I proceed with the might of my Godhead; it may not be seen with man’s eye, and yet it may well be felt in a simple soul where it pleases me to work grace, as I do in your soul. And as suddenly I come into your soul, and illumine it with the light of grace and of understanding, and set it all on fire with love, and make the fire of love to burn there inside, and purge it clean from all earthly filth. And sometimes daughter, I cause earthquakes to frighten people so that they should fear me. . . .

“You also well know, daughter, that I sometimes send many great rains and sharp showers, and sometimes only small and gentle drops. And just so I proceed with you, daughter, when it pleases me to speak in your soul. I sometimes give you slight weeping and soft tears, as a token that I love you. And sometimes I give you great cries and roarings, to make people afraid at the grace that I put into you, in token that I wish that my mother’s sorrow be known through you, so that men and women might have the more compassion of her sorrow that she suffered for me.” (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 222-3)]

Margery needs to come to terms with the fact that she is possessed by God. He has taken quarters in her body, which has been made subservient to His will.

Margery’s body becomes the site of a peculiar performance, not so much for its crying, weeping, and its frantic gesticulation, which after all are part and parcel of popular devotions, but rather because it is invested with meaning which claims to be divine. Our sense of uneasiness, and that of her fellows before her wailing and contorted body, contrasts forcefully with her claims, and creates a space where Margery’s marginality solidifies her cosmic claim and her difference.

Both at home and on pilgrimage, Margery seizes the signs which will trigger a particular performance on her part. During her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she enters Jerusalem on an ass. The episode perhaps echoes Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. However, she perceives the sign “Jerusalem” with an elaborate hermeneutics attesting to her knowledge of biblical

interpretation, regarding Jerusalem both as the earthly city and the spiritual one (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt, 103).²³ The sites of the Passion incidents trigger some of her most outstanding performances:

& þe frerys al-wey, as þei went a-bowte, teld hem what owyr Lord sufferyd in euery place. & þe forseyd creatur wept & sobbyd so plentyvowsly as þow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey sufferyng hys Passyon at þat tyme. Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, & þat cawsyd hir to haue compassyon. &, whan þei cam vp on-to þe Mownt of Caluarye, sche fel down þat sche myght not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in þe cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucified. Beforn hir face sche herd and saw in hir gostly syght þe mornyng of owyr Lady, of Sen Iohn & Mary Mawdelyn, and of many oþer þat louyd owyr Lord. (*The Book*, ed. Meech and Allen 69)

[And the friars always, as they went about, told them what our Lord suffered in every place. And this creature wept and sobbed as plenteously as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eyes suffering his Passion at that time. Before her in her soul she saw him in truth by contemplation, and that caused her to have compassion. And when they came up on to the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but writhed and wrestled with her body, spreading her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified. Before her face she heard and saw in her spiritual sight the mourning of our Lady, of St John and Mary Magdalene, and of many others that loved our Lord. (*The Book*, ed. Windeatt 104)]

Performing without a text, Margery expresses doubts about her performance and questions its validity. She receives assurances from God that it is pleasing to Him. But before such an extravagant display, and without literary support, her performing body becomes the seat of fierce attacks from the part of the orthodox church. Grotowski argues that true performance induces change both in the actor and the audience. It is perhaps resistance to this change which leads Margery's audience to blaspheme against her, in what can be regarded as an unconscious re-enactment on their part of the Jews' rejection of Jesus. Her costume, made of white material, receives considerable attention and is understood to be worn by heretics. Yet God manipulates, voids human symbols, and jeers at their way of fixing meaning. He asks Margery to clothe her body later with black garments, thus poking fun at, and destabilising, symbolic meaning. He makes her body an experimental

²³ For a discussion of Margery's ability to generate biblical glosses and deal with allegorical meaning, see Robert Boenig 30-37.

ground where the subservience of man's rational power to the will of God can be measured.

Margery Kempe's translation of mystical experience into bodily performance still puzzles us today. Perhaps the Reformation in England constitutes man's refusal to change before the sensational and extravagant performance which she embodies, but which surely found other forms of expression with those practising the mixed life in the fifteenth century. Or should we rather consider the Reformation as the only possible, viable, and truthful change in view of the enormous devotional paraphernalia which had taken possession of, and obsessed, the ordinary practising Christians?¹

The "waning of the Middle Ages," an expression which still sticks to the late medieval period to which Margery and Rolle belong, misleadingly leads us to believe that such a period was characterised by superstitions, religious decadence and other cultural illnesses. I prefer to regard this period as a period characterised by accessibility. The availability of religious material made possible the emergence of new forms of religious practices, sometimes expressed in an inchoate form but nevertheless revealing innumerable possibilities.

Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe participated in the development of this late medieval culture, in the first case by providing women with access to specific religious forms of experience, and in the second by (re)presenting the female body as site for performance. In both cases, performance, in the form of intimate and direct experience with, and of, the self and God, stands at the core of what was a new and challenging cultural phenomenon, inscribed in the vernacular.

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¹ For a general discussion of late medieval religion in England, see Eamon Duffy.

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