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FRAGMENTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION:  
IMAGES OF THE FEMALE BODY  
IN *ANCRENE WISSE*  
AND THE KATHERINE GROUP<sup>1</sup>

Catherine Innes-Parker

In recent years there has been an increased interest in the spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* and the texts of the Katherine Group and the Wooing Group, associated with it by dialect and manuscript tradition.<sup>2</sup> In particular, attention has turned to the female, anchoritic audience for whom these texts were written.<sup>3</sup> The question of audi-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Memorial University School of Graduate Studies, whose generous funding made much of the research for this paper possible.

<sup>2</sup> All references to *Ancrene Wisse* are from J.R.R. Tolkien, *The English Text of the "Ancrene Riwe"*: "Ancrene Wisse", edited from MS Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 402, Early English Text Society 249 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962). All references to the *Ancrene Wisse* will be made parenthetically by chapter and page number. The texts of the Katherine Group include *Hali Meidhad* (HM), *Sawles Warde* (SW), *Seinte Margarete* (SM), found in the critical edition prepared by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and "Ancrene Wisse"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); *Seinte Katerine* (SK), edited by S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne and E.J. Dobson, EETS, supp. ser. 7 (1981); and *Seinte Iulienne* (SJ), ed. by S. R. T. O. d'Ardenne, EETS 248 (1936; repr. 1962). The texts of the Wooing Group include *þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* (WLd), *On wele swiðe God Ureissun of God Almihiti* (UrG), *On Lofsong of ure Louerde* (LLo), and *On Lofsong of Ure Lefdi* [or *þe Oreissun of Seinte Marie*] (LLe), and are found in W. Meredith Thompson, *þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, EETS 241 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958) (reference by page and line number). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality: "Ancrene Wisse" and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), hereafter cited as S/W.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Cheryl Frost, "The Attitude to Women and the Adaptation to a Feminine Audience in the *Ancrene Wisse*," *AUMLA* 50 (1978): 235-50; Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1990); and Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers and Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). The interest in the female audience of *Ancrene Wisse* is only part of a larger interest in medieval

ence is a crucial one, for the imagery of *Ancrene Wisse* and its associated texts is powerfully influenced by two dominant and related factors: the anchoress's enclosure and her gender. The anchoress is required to take only three vows: obedience, chastity, and stability of abode. The latter two give rise to a series of images that pervade the anchoritic texts, as the authors treat the anchoritic life in terms of the daily experience of the anchoress herself. Throughout the anchoritic works, the spirituality of the anchoress is inextricably fused with her sexuality, characterized by the paradox of the virgin who is at the same time Christ's lover and bride, and expressed in images that center on the female body and, specifically, the body enclosed.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance it might seem that the anchoress, enclosed in her cell to escape the temptations and distractions of the world and heroically battling temptation from within, has entered into a life that emphatically repudiates her sexuality and denies any positive function to the body. It would seem, perhaps, that apart from the apparently negative function of suffering, the body is to be renounced entirely. In fact, however, the spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* is profoundly rooted in the body, as the sinful impulses of the flesh are recognized in the most vehement of terms and, through suffering in imitation of Christ, are violently wrested from their sinful course and redirected into a path that leads to union with Christ. In this

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women's spirituality and its relationship to the medieval understanding of women's bodies and sexuality: for example, John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987) and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Although the focus of this paper is on *Ancrene Wisse*, I am treating the anchoritic texts associated with it as a group. *Ancrene Wisse* and the texts that together make up the Katherine Group and the Wooing Group survive in collections, and were evidently meant to be read carefully and mulled over, referring from one to the other. It is clear that, with the limited reading material available to the anchoress and the stress on reading (the author of *Ancrene Wisse* actually encourages his readers to pray less that they might read more; AW iv.148; [S/W 153]) these texts would become very familiar to their readers. The images and symbols would thus tend to merge from one text to another: when an image used in one context recurred in another, the former use would come to mind. The works may thus legitimately be studied as a group, each text informing and interpreting the others.

way, suffering acquires a positive role, serving as a trigger for meditation on the Passion which merges into erotic union with Christ. Through such meditation the erotic impulses of the flesh are transferred from human and worldly objects to the human and divine Christ, and are thus transformed into redeeming qualities. The sexual attraction which is condemned as the cause of sin is redirected, as the anchoress cultivates her inner beauty for Christ alone. Christ, the bashful lover of the Song of Songs who will embrace his beloved only in a secret place, must be sought within the heart. However, the anchoress cannot lose sight of the fact that her heart is enclosed within her body, just as the body itself is enclosed within the anchorhold; thus, she herself is God's chamber, the enclosed bower in which she seeks her beloved (AW ii.49 [S/W 82], ii.55 [S/W 86], iii.88 [S/W 110-1]). The images of the female body which are used to describe both purity and enclosure become the meeting place of the literal and the metaphorical, expressed through two dominant sets of images: images of fragmentation, as the female body of the anchoress is broken through sin and suffering, and images of enclosure, as the fragmented body is reconstructed as the enclosed space in which the anchoress communes with her God.

The author of *Ancrene Wisse* thus deals with the very practical problem of living in the body by making the body itself the vehicle of redemption, as the anchoress transforms the body in which she is imprisoned into the bower in which she keeps tryst with Christ. Spirituality which claims to transcend the flesh often simply denies it. *Ancrene Wisse*, on the other hand, begins with the acceptance of the body and a recognition of its sinfulness, and centers the spirituality of the anchoress on the physical. The matrix of anchor-house/body/heart which is established by the imagery of enclosure thus takes on a profound significance; the body is the dwelling place of the heart, even as the heart is the dwelling place of Christ, and therefore both the body and the heart must be prepared for his coming. This preparation involves withdrawal from the world and the "guarding" of the senses, as the body and mind are trained to focus on inner realities by using the outer, physical world as a trigger for meditation on the inner, spiritual world. The sinfulness of the body is recognized in the most vehement of terms, and the body and the heart which it encloses are then purged and purified through suffering and meditation, through which sinful flesh is made fit for the indwelling of Christ. In the anchoritic texts this identification is

presented in appropriately feminine terms: the anchoress becomes both bride and mother in a union with Christ which is rooted in her woman's body, as the body, fragmented through sin, is reconstructed as bower, nest, arbor, and womb.

Accordingly, in spite of the importance of spiritual purity, or the virginity of the soul, the body becomes the dominant image and symbol for the spirituality of the female anchoress. Thus, for example, in the saints' lives of the Katherine Group it is the virgin's body that is desired<sup>5</sup> and her body that is attacked as the symbol of her faith and commitment to Christ. In *Ancrene Wisse*, *Sawles Warde*, and *Hali Meidhad*, the body is the castle that must be defended against the attacks of the devil: it is the body that is enclosed, the body (with its senses) that guards the heart, the body that is purified through suffering, the body that hangs on the cross with Christ. The anchorhold in which the anchoress is enclosed, and the anchorhold of her body which encloses her heart, is the enclosed chamber which she prepares for his coming, the bower in which she greets her beloved, and the nest or womb into which she receives her God.

While the feminine spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* has been recognized, it has most often been viewed in a negative light, as part of the author's misogynist view that women are incapable of the elevated, "intellectual" mysticism of St. Bernard and his followers, and must therefore approach God on a passive, emotional level.<sup>6</sup> In a

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<sup>5</sup> St. Katherine is an exception: Maxentius is first impressed with her wisdom, although her beauty is also remarked upon. However, when he fails to overcome her through argument, it is her body that he attacks.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Cheryl Frost ("The Attitude to Women") proposes that the author's choice of imagery and *exempla* is influenced by his desire to appeal to his readers as women. She argues that the author of *Ancrene Wisse* adopts common patristic and medieval views of women that represent women as a source of sin (particularly sexual sin) and present the alternatives open to women as a choice between the temptress Eve or the passive, submissive Mary. In this view, women are ultimately relegated to the role of either scapegoat or martyr. Elizabeth Robertson (*Early English Devotional Prose*) argues that *Ancrene Wisse* in particular is deeply embedded in the misogynist biases of its author, and indeed of the Middle Ages as a whole. She contends that the anchoritic texts offer a spirituality which is conditioned by the author's assumption that women are inferior to men and are therefore capable only of an inferior, limited spirituality, rooted in the physical world and expressed in imagery of the body and of the everyday world. Elsewhere, Robertson proposes that in *Ancrene Wisse*, among other texts, "the contemplative life, far from offering women an escape from their femininity, actually offered them the opportunity to explore and even celebrate those very traits of femininity that were outlined in [medieval] medical texts" ("Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of

similar vein, Sarah Maitland has argued that the images of redemption through extreme suffering, such as those found in *Ancrene Wisse*, the saints' lives of the Katherine Group, and the writings of many medieval women mystics, simply reinforce a sadomasochistic relationship with a masculine God, which ultimately robs women of any kind of dignity or power, except that of submission.<sup>7</sup> However attractive this idea may be to the modern feminist, concerned as we are about the images of violence in current pornography and the problems of the abuse of women and children in our culture, it is important not to project our twentieth-century "raised consciousness" onto the thirteenth-century women who would have read these texts. My concern in this paper is with those thirteenth-century readers and how they might have responded to the images presented here. The ascetic life would seem to emphasize woman as victim, as the body which is vulnerable to the lusts both of the woman herself and of others is tamed and subdued through suffering. This is especially true of the saints' lives of the Katherine Group, where physical suffering is explicitly associated with sexual threat. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the kind of violence depicted in these texts was a fact of life for many medieval women, and the affirmation of both the value of their suffering and the rightness of their choice of the religious life presented by texts such as those of the Katherine Group may well have given these women a sense of worth and freedom to which we cannot relate.<sup>8</sup> I am not trying to argue that this sense of worth and freedom is unambiguous. As Bynum has shown, medieval women's concern with the physical was a two-edged sword. However, while the experience of religious women was often characterized by pain, isolation, and helplessness, as women internalized the negative associations made by male writers between female flesh and sinfulness, "one of the most striking characteristics of this period in

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Norwich's *Showings*," in Lomperis and Stanbury, 149). Robertson insists, however, that these medical views force women into an essentially inferior status, both physiologically and theologically.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Maitland, "Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience," in *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> "Sexual Violence and the Female Reader: Symbolic 'Rape' in the Saints' Lives of the Katherine Group," forthcoming in *Women's Studies*.

Western religious history is the extent to which female bodily experience was understood to be union with God.<sup>9</sup>

The spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* and its related texts is to be seen in the context of this developing tradition of women's devotion. The erotic spirituality which characterizes women's devotion in the thirteenth century is, in part, a development of the increasing devotion to the humanity of Christ that emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. With the increased emphasis on Christ's Incarnation as the vehicle of redemption, the focus of meditation became not the divine, conquering Christ, but the human, suffering Christ. Beginning with Anselm, and reaching fuller expression with the writings of St. Bernard, the affective mysticism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries came to focus on a love relationship between Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, and the human soul, his earthly spouse. Christ's Incarnation and Passion revealed not so much his divine power and might, but his love. This represented a radical shift with far-reaching implications, especially for women.

Devotion to and meditation on the humanity of Christ was particularly suited to women for several reasons. As Bugge points out:

Once the humanity of Christ was established for doctrinal purposes, a full range of human qualities associated with the husband or lover became available for increased devotion and meditation....As emphasis on Christ's humanity focused attention on his male sexuality, so the latter provoked increased interest in the femaleness of the professed virgin. The result was a new concern to show her drawing upon distinctively female resources to attract and hold the love of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

This type of devotion, expressed in texts written by and for women, differs from the devotion found in the mysticism of Bernard, where the spouse is always the human soul, grammatically feminine but asexual in nature. Whereas for Bernard the spousal metaphor is always focused on in the spiritual and has no place in the realm of the physical, in medieval works associated with female mystics the metaphor is "literalized," as the metaphorical relationship between Christ and the soul becomes rooted and grounded in the female

<sup>9</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 235-6, and passim.

<sup>10</sup> Bugge, *Virginitas*, 98, 107.

mystic's literal physical nature and circumstances. As Savage and Watson point out in their introduction to *De Wobunge of ure Lauerd*:

the work's most important source is the non-literary one of the anchoresses' real situation, as they saw it: married to Christ and crucified with him by their enclosure, and needing only to ratify that marriage and transform that crucifixion by passionately assenting to both in their hearts.<sup>11</sup>

All of the anchoritic texts take the anchoress's "real situation" as their starting point, drawing upon her enclosure and her gender to develop images of mystical union. As the literal and metaphorical become intertwined, the love-relationship with Christ takes on a new, erotic quality, expressed in terms that exploit the sexuality of the female mystic.

Besides the obvious fact that women would more naturally respond to a physical, erotic relationship with a male Christ than would men, however, there is another aspect of devotion to the humanity of Christ that makes it particularly appropriate for women. Women were culturally and psychologically conditioned to accept themselves as weak, and therefore were more open to a form of spirituality that transformed physical weakness rather than denying it. Medieval attitudes towards women taught women to despise their bodies as essentially weak and sinful, and to expiate their sinfulness through suffering.<sup>12</sup> Women were thus better able than men to identify the weakness of their flesh with the essential paradox of the Incarnation; that it is through the physical weakness and suffering of the human Christ that humankind is redeemed. In her

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<sup>11</sup> S/W, eds. note to *Wobunge*, 246.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*, chapter 3 (pp. 32-43). Robertson is too harsh in her assessment and fails to see any positive implications for women in *Ancrene Wisse's* treatment of weakness and suffering. In spite of her recognition elsewhere that the spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* offers women the chance to explore and affirm their "essential" femininity ("Medieval Medical Views of Women," cited above, n. 4), Robertson focuses on the attitudes of the male author, rather than the female readers, and thus misses the paradox of the possibility of transforming suffering to joy, weakness to strength, as the anchoress's physicality is paralleled to Christ's. Her review is nonetheless important in illustrating common attitudes towards the body and, in particular, the female body. Her discussion of Julian of Norwich, in particular, could be most fruitful if applied to the female readers of *Ancrene Wisse* ("Medieval Medical Views of Women"). See also Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, especially the introduction and chapter 1.



study of continental women mystics, Bynum has argued that, while medieval men tended to express metaphors of weakness in terms of the reversal of their natural role, women tended to see such metaphors as an extension of what they already are.<sup>13</sup> As Bynum points out:

Women...often used their ordinary experiences (of powerlessness, of service and nurturing, of disease, etc.) as symbols into which they poured ever deeper and more paradoxical meanings.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, instead of denying their rootedness in the body, women were able to accept it, purge it, and transform it in a mystical identification with Christ.

It is, therefore, important to see the treatment of physical suffering in the anchoritic texts as part of the metaphorical patterns with which these texts are suffused. The literal suffering which subdues the lusts of the flesh, or which (in the saints' lives) is imposed in order to gratify the lusts of another, is also the means of the anchoress's metaphorical transformation, as the victim becomes the beloved, embracing Christ through her suffering, and the body and the heart which it encloses become the means through which the anchoress encloses Christ. The text thus generates a slippage between the literal and the metaphorical: the anchoress's enclosure is the literal circumstance for which the imagery of suffering is the metaphor. In addition, the extent of the physical suffering of the anchoresses to whom *Ancrene Wisse* was addressed must not be overstated: the author continually stresses that his readers are not to indulge in extreme forms of penance or asceticism, and that their physical enclosure itself is suffering enough. The author creates a constant interplay between metaphor and experience, exploiting the continual merging of image and reality in order to create and recreate the anchoress's physical and spiritual worlds. The anchoress's spirituality is described in imagery drawn from her own experience as a female solitary, enclosed within her anchorhold, in terms that create a continual interaction between the literal circumstances of the anchoress's physical enclosure and the metaphorical depiction of her body as the anchorhold which encloses her heart. Erotic imagery merges with images of motherhood and fertility, as the anchoress reenacts the Incarnation within her woman's body, and the flesh which defines all

<sup>13</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, passim.

<sup>14</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 25.

humanity (male as well as female) is liberated and empowered, rather than denied, in an identification with Christ, who took on human flesh in order to redeem it.

The ways in which the body is presented and perceived in the anchoritic texts are thus profoundly affected by the gender of their audience. The spiritual quest of the anchoress is unequivocally the search of a *female* devotee for a *male* God, who approaches her in very human terms. The anchoritic texts are always aware that the body enclosed in the anchorhouse is a female body, sealed by physical chastity, as the anchoress is sealed into her anchorhouse. As J. Wogan-Browne has pointed out, the ideal of the sealed virginal body is heavily gendered in medieval virginity literature, where "technical intactness" (i.e. physical virginity) is given a great deal more emphasis in discussions of female virginity than of male virginity.<sup>15</sup> *Ancrene Wisse* and the texts of the Katherine Group (especially the saints' lives and *Hali Meidhad*) are no exception. The female virgin's body is characterized by such images as a sealed building, or a fragile vessel that must be protected if it is not to be shattered through sin.

The imagery of the enclosed, sealed body is closely related to another dominant set of images depicting the fragmentation of the female body which, along with the image of virginity as the sealed female body, has been viewed as a means of controlling female sexuality.<sup>16</sup> The anchoress's body is fragmented, both literally, in the suffering which is described using images of illness or wounding, and metaphorically, as her tendency to sin is discussed in terms of the individual senses and the body parts associated with each (ear, eye, mouth, hand, etc.).<sup>17</sup> This fragmentation, however, is not intended to

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<sup>15</sup> J. Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale," in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 166-9.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 181 and passim. For a more positive reading of the imagery of fragmentation of the female body in the Middle Ages, see Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*. Bynum suggests that there is a continuity between women's concern with the physical and their experience of God, arguing that the concern with the body in the writings of female mystics should be seen as an opportunity for mystical experience, rather than a hindrance to it.

<sup>17</sup> The literal fragmentation of the female body and its reconstruction (both literal and metaphorical) as the pure, virginal vessel that bears Christ can be seen in a more extreme way in the saints' lives of the Katherine Group, where the lacerated bodies of

destroy the anchoress's sexuality, but rather to redirect (and ultimately transform) it, away from the world and towards Christ. The heart which is wounded through sin is healed by Christ, and the body which is fragmented is reconstructed as the pure body which metaphorically represents (and is represented by) the sealed house that encloses the anchoress's body and heart. The reconstructed body is transformed into the bower or arbor in which the anchoress dallies with Christ, the nest in which she nurtures him, and the womb in which she conceives and bears him. The body which is the focus of the anchoress's spirituality is thus also the *locus* of spiritual fulfilment.

The fragmentation and reconstruction of the anchoress's body is seen specifically in terms of the spousal metaphor in part ii of *Ancrene Wisse*. In the opening section, the author treats the senses of sight, speech, and hearing in terms of the eye, mouth, and ear. These senses are depicted as dangerous windows or gateways which, if not properly guarded, threaten the integrity of the sealed body that protects the anchoress's heart, just as the window of her anchorhold is a dangerous opening that must be kept well-covered to maintain the anchoress's physical enclosure.<sup>18</sup> After treating these senses on an individual basis, the author states:

Of sihðe. of speche. Of hercununge; is iseid sunderlepes of euchan o  
rawe. Cume we nu eft a3ein ⁊ spoken of alle imeane.

Zelatus sum syon zelo magno in propheta zacharia. Vnder-  
stond ancre hwas spuse þu art ⁊ hu he is gelus of alle þine  
lates....Wite þe nu ful wel. his eare is eauer to ward te ⁊ he hereð al.  
His ehe aa bihalt te. 3ef þu makest ei semblant. eani luue lates to-  
ward unþeawes. Zelatus sum syon. Syon þ is schawere. he cleopeð  
þe his schawere. swa his þ nan oþres. for þi he seið in canticis. Os-  
tende michi fatiem tuam. Schaw þi neb to me he seið ⁊ to nan oþer.  
(AW ii.48-49, fols.23a.27-23b.17)

(Sight, speech, hearing: each in turn has been dealt with separately.  
Let us go back to them now and speak of them all together.

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the virgin martyrs are miraculously healed and restored. The imagery in these texts is similar in many ways to the biblical passages discussed by Exum in *Fragmented Women*.

<sup>18</sup> The author's treatment of the anchorhold window might be profitably compared with Exum's discussion of biblical examples of windows which are associated with women and their enclosure (or lack thereof) in the stories of Michal and Bathsheba, the latter being an example used by the author of *Ancrene Wisse* as well (*Fragmented Women*, chaps. 1, 2, and 6).

*Zelatus sum Syon selo magno—in propheta Zacharia* (Zacharias 8:2). Understand, anchoress, whose spouse you are, and how he is jealous of all your doings....Now understand this well: his ear is ever toward you and he hears everything. His eye always sees you, if you make any appearance, any show of love toward sin. *Zelatus sum Syon—Zion*, that is, "mirror." He calls you his mirror—so much his that you are nobody else's. For this reason he says in the Canticles: *Ostende michi faciem tuam* (Canticles 2:14)—"Show your face to me," he says, "and to no one else." [S/W 82]

Together, the anchoress's senses are reconstructed as the face which is shown only to the jealous spouse, whose ears and eyes are always turned towards the anchoress. The anchoress is to be Christ's mirror, turning her senses away from the world, as she seeks after Christ with her inner senses, instead of seeking out the world with her outer senses. The interaction between literal and metaphorical continues, as the literal face which might, through sin, be turned outward towards the world is transformed into the metaphorical mirror which reflects Christ as it is turned inward in contemplation. The anchoress's guarding of her outer, physical, senses is thus directed to the purpose of developing her spiritual senses, especially her inner sight, as she seeks to see and touch Christ in mystical union. The anchoress faces a fundamental choice: to let her eyes stray to the outside world, or to remain in the chamber of her anchorhouse and enjoy the kisses of her beloved in the bower of her heart ("hoerte bur," AW ii.54-5 [S/W 86]; cp. AW i.21 [S/W 59], where Christ descends into the "breostes bur"). Thus Christ implores her, as the passage continues,

Schaw þi neb to me he seið ⁊ to nan oper. bihald me zef þu wult habbe briht sihðe wið þine heorte ehnen. bihald inward þer ich am ⁊ ne sech þu me nawt wið ute þin heorte. Ich am wohere scheomeful. ne nule ich nohwer bicluppe mi leofmon bute i stude dearne. O þulli wise ure lauerd spekeð to his spuse. Ne þunche hire newer wunder zef ha nis muchel ane, þah he hire schunie. ⁊ swa ane þ ha putte euch worldlich þrung. ⁊ euch nurð eorðlich, ut of hire heorte, for heo is godes chambre. (AW ii.49, fol.23b.16-25)

("Show your face to me," he says, "and to no one else; look at me if you would have clear sight with your heart's eyes. Look within where I am and do not seek me outside your heart. I am a bashful lover, I will not embrace my beloved anywhere but in a secret place." In this way our Lord speaks to his spouse. Let it never seem

strange to her that he shuns her if she is not much alone—and so much alone that she puts all the thronging world and every earthly disturbance out of her heart. For she is God's chamber. [S/W 82]

Here, the anchoress who turns her face towards Christ is described as God's chamber, as the body, fragmented through sin into the five senses, is reconstructed through love as the bower that encloses the pure heart, the "secret place" to which Christ descends in order to embrace his beloved.

The five senses are also reconstructed in the sense of touch, which "is in all the others and throughout the body" ("is in alle þe oþre. ⁊ 3ont al þe licome," AW ii.60, fol.30a.11-12 [S/W 89]). The consideration of this sense which encompasses all the others is an extended meditation on the Passion. The anchoress's meditation on Christ's suffering focuses on his hands, which were nailed to the cross, and her own hands, which should, the author tells her, be scraping up the earth from the pit of her grave. The earthen pit of the grave, which is her anchorhold (AW ii.62-3 [S/W 91-2]), can be compared to the pits dug in Christ's hands by the nails that fastened them to the cross. Later, the wounds in Christ's body dug out by the nails are compared to pits dug out of the earth, in which the anchoress may find refuge. Here, it is Christ's body that is fragmented through his wounding in the Passion, and reconstructed as the anchorhold into which the anchoress flees:

flih to his wunden. Muchel he luuede us þe lette makien swucche þurles in him forte huden us in. Creop in ham wið þi þoht. ne beoð ha al opene? ⁊ wið his deorewurðe blod biblodde þin heorte. Ingredere in petram abscondere fossa humo. Ga in to þe stan seið þe prophete. ⁊ hud te i þe deoluen eorðe. Þ is i þe wunden of ure lauerdes flesch þe wes as idoluen wið þe dulle neiles....He him seolf cleoþeð þe toward teose wunden. Columba mea in foraminibus petre. in cauernis macerie. Mi culure he seið cum hud te i míne limen þurles. i þe hole of mi side. Muche luue he cudde to his leoue culure þ he swuch hudles makede. loke nu þ tu þe he cleoþeð culure. habbe culure cunde. Þ is wið ute galle. ⁊ cum to him baldeliche. (AW iv.151, fol.79b.10-14, 24-8)

(Flee into his wounds. He loved us much who allowed such holes to be made in him for us to hide in. Creep into them with your thought—are they not entirely open?—and bloody your heart with his precious blood. *Ingredere in petram abscondere fossa humo* (Isaiah 2:10)—"Go into the stone," says the prophet, "and hide yourself in

the dug-out earth," that is, the wounds of our Lord's flesh, which were as though dug out with the dull nails....He himself calls you toward these wounds: *Columba mea in foraminibus petre, in cavernis macerie* (Canticles 2:14)—'My dove,' he says, 'come hide yourself in the openings in my limbs, in the hole in my side.' Much love he showed to his dear dove in making such hiding-places. See now that you whom he calls a dove have the nature of the dove, which is without gall, and come to him boldly. [S/W 155]

The anchoress's body merges with the crucified body of Christ, both in the fragmented image of the hand and in the reconstruction of the body as the anchorhold or earthen pit that shelters her.<sup>19</sup>

The reconstruction of the fragmented female body thus also occurs through the anchoress's meditation on Christ's sufferings in the Passion. At the end of his discussion of the five senses (represented by the fragmentation of the anchoress's body into eye, ear, mouth, nose, and hand), the author of *Ancrene Wisse* urges the anchoress to guard her senses through meditation on Christ's sufferings in his senses (AW ii.56f. [S/W 87f.]). Just as the fragmented ear, eye, and mouth are reconstructed as the face that turns only to Christ, the five senses together are reconstructed in meditation on the suffering body of Christ, as meditation upon the sins and sufferings of her own senses shifts to meditation upon the sufferings of Christ in his five senses and upon his five wounds, which heal the wounds inflicted by the sins of her five senses. The insistence that Christ's body, although wounded, was not broken, which is characteristic of both biblical and medieval treatments of the Passion, is also maintained by the author of *Ancrene Wisse*. Thus, in its identification with the suffering body of Christ, the fragmented body of the anchoress is restored to the wholeness that Christ's body has always retained. Through meditation upon Christ's Passion, the anchoress is taught to see her own sufferings as an imitation of Christ's suffering on the cross. The anchoress's suffering body is thus redeemed by Christ's suffering body, with which it is identified. As the anchoress in *Wohunge* declares:

þu me derennedes wið like. ⁊ makedes of me wrecche þi leofmon ⁊ spuse. Broht tu haues me fra þe world to bur of þi burðe. steked me i chaumbre. I mai þer þe swa sweteli kissen ⁊ cluppen. ⁊ of þi luue

<sup>19</sup> Compare also the merging of the anchoress's body and her anchorhold as the "earthen castle" in the parable of the Christ-knight in part vii.

haue gastli liking. A swete iesu mi liues luue wið þi blod þu haues me boht. ⁊ fram þe world þu haues me broht. (WLd 35.570-80)

(You vindicated me with your body, and made of me, a wretch, your lover and spouse. You have brought me from the world to the bower of your birth, locked me in a chamber. There I may sweetly kiss and hold you, and in your love take pleasure, spiritually. Ah, sweet Jesus, my life's love, with your blood you have bought me, and from the world you have brought me. [S/W 256])

The anchoress's body is reconstructed through identification with Christ's body, as it is enclosed in the chamber of her anchorhold and becomes the chamber in which her beloved dwells. The only response to such a sacrifice is total and complete identification with the one who made it:

Mi bodi henge wið þi bodi neiled o rode. sperred querfaste wið inne fowr wahes ⁊ henge i wile wið þe ⁊ neauer mare of mi rode cume til þ i deie. For þenne schal i lepen fra rode in to reste. fra wa to wele ⁊ to eche blisse. (WLd 36.590-603)

(My body will hang with your body, nailed on the cross, fastened, transfixed within four walls. And I will hang with you and nevermore come from my cross until I die—for then shall I leap from the cross into rest, from grief into joy and eternal happiness. [S/W 256])

Once again, the anchoress's own body and the body of Christ merge as she joins him in a union which is described in intensely erotic terms. Bugge's comment on this passage is illuminating:

It is worthy of note that the emphasis...is exclusively on the body (despite an occasional sanitary *gastliche*). It is Christ's body which accomplishes the redemption and evokes passionate sympathy; it is the virgin's body which she offers to him...quite literally, to hang on the same cross.<sup>20</sup>

The anchoress's body fuses with Christ's human body as he hangs on the cross, ever present before her eyes in the crucifix upon her wall and above the altar of the church, visible through her window. The anchoress's identification with Christ in her suffering becomes her union with him as his bride, for as she hangs with him on the cross she is enfolded in the embrace of his outstretched arms (e.g., AW

<sup>20</sup> Bugge, 106.

vii.205 [S/W 195]). Her physical suffering reflects his as her body hangs with his on the cross in spiritual and physical union. The anchoress enters into the harsh life of the anchorhouse in a whole-hearted assent to suffering, for it is only by throwing herself into Christ's arms, spread wide on the cross, that the anchoress can be enfolded in his embrace.

The identification of the anchoress's body, fragmented through sin, with Christ's body, wounded in the Passion, is continued in part iii, as the anchoress and Christ are fused in the image of the mother pelican. The author compares the angry anchoress to the pelican who slays its chicks, i.e. her good works (AW iii.63-4 [S/W 93]). The chicks are restored as the mother, with great lamentation, draws blood from its own breast, an image which clearly symbolizes Christ's torn and bleeding side (which later becomes the refuge of the anchoress and the love letter written in his blood). The parallel between the wound in Christ's side and the maternal breast of the pelican also recalls the parallel between Christ's wounded side and the maternal breast of the Virgin Mary in medieval iconography, where Mary is often represented exposing her breast as she intercedes for mankind, just as Christ is pictured displaying his wounded side as he pleads for sinners.<sup>21</sup> Erotic and maternal imagery combine in this passage to deepen the sense of the union of the anchoress and Christ, as both are depicted as the loving mother who bleeds for her beloved child. At the same time, the anchoress is also the child who flees into Christ's embrace and the lover who fuses with him in erotic union.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 270-2, and plates 23-30, especially plate 28, a mid-fifteenth-century miniature from the Turin-Milan Book of Hours depicting the "Double Intercession," with God in the center enthroned as ruler and judge. On his left is Christ exposing his wounded side, and on his right Mary lifts her bared breast. Bynum notes the connection between the blood that flows from the breast of Christ and breast milk. Blood, like breast milk, is the fluid of life, as suggested by the torn breast of the pelican, whose blood restores her chicks. The connection between blood and milk is also found in *Seinte Katerine*, where milk flows from the severed head of the saint. Both breast milk and blood are associated with the healing and life-giving properties of the Eucharist, and both are found as symbols of union with Christ. Christ's Passion and the Eucharist that commemorates it are thus both associated with the nurturing maternal breast.

<sup>22</sup> I do not wish to suggest here that the imagery of motherhood and maternity in *Ancrene Wisse* is unambiguous, any more than is the imagery of the female body. Certainly, the reader is presented with harsh images of parenting in this text, as mothers (and fathers) are presented as either inflicting or enduring terrible suffering.



The merging of erotic and maternal imagery is continued as the anchoress's fragmented body is reconstructed through meditation on Christ's wounded body into the nest that shelters Christ. The nest is harsh on the outside but soft on the inside, representing the body hardened by asceticism and the heart softened by love. The body which is fragmented through the harsh ascetic life represented by the thorns that surround the nest, is reconstructed as the soft, nurturing nest of the heart, just as Christ's pierced body is reconstructed as the refuge of the dove. The anchoress is encouraged to protect her heart by keeping Christ within her nest through meditation on the Passion, using the visual image of the crucifix as a focus for meditation, kissing the wounds of Christ in a literal anticipation of the metaphorical kiss of her beloved:

Hwa se ne mei þes 3imstan habben ne halden i þe nest of hire heorte, lanhure i þe nest of hire ancre hus, habbe his iliche. Þ is þe crucifix bihalde ofte þron. ⁊ cusse þe wunde studen i swote muneunge of þe soðe wunden þe he o þe soðe rode þuldeliche þolede. (AW iii.72, fol.37a.22-6)

(Whoever cannot have or hold this gemstone in the nest of her heart should at least have its likeness, that is the crucifix, in the nest of her anchorhouse; let her look on it often and kiss the places of the wounds in sweet memory of the true wounds which he patiently suffered on the true cross. [S/W 99])

The anchoress thus guards her senses by guarding Christ within her heart. Through her meditation on his bodily suffering and his sweet heart, which provide a model for her own nest, she transforms both heart and body into the nest in which Christ is nurtured.

The anchoress is instructed to build her nest high in the treetops, away from the earth and near to heaven. The anchoress's spiritual flight is described in images of fertile greenness, as the image of the nest merges into the image of the arbor or garden:

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The suffering of the mother, however, whether an image of Christ or of the anchoress, is also redemptive, a participation in the Incarnation through which the world is redeemed. On the one hand, the suffering of the anchoress/child is presented as a deserved suffering, the discipline imposed by an angry parent, necessary to overcome temptation and to atone if she cannot. On the other hand, the suffering of the anchoress/mother is an imitation of Christ's suffering, the labor pains of a devoted and nurturing mother, as she reenacts the Incarnation within her heart. It is this aspect of the metaphor of mothering that concerns me in this paper, as the anchoress's fragmented body is reconstructed as the sheltering nest and nurturing womb.

treowe ances beoð a riht briddes of heouene. þe fleoð on heh 7 sitetð singinde murie o þe grene bohes. Þ is þenched uppart of þe blisse of heouene þe neauer ne faleweð, ah is aa grene. 7 sittetð o þis grene singinde murie. Þ is restetð ham i þulli þoht. and ase þeo þe singeð habbeð murhðe of heorte. (AW iii.70, fol.36a.26-36b.3)

(True anchoresses are rightly birds of heaven, who fly high up and sit singing merrily on the green boughs—that is, think upward to the joy of heaven that never fades but is ever green. And they sit on this greenness singing merrily—that is, they dwell in such thoughts, and, like those who sing, they have mirth in their hearts. [S/W 98])

The nest which is constructed in the green boughs of the trees is the arbor where the anchoress can meditate on the joys of heaven. However, just as the nest is constructed with harsh, prickly thorns on the outside and soft down on the inside, the fertile arbor or cultivated garden of the heart is surrounded by the thorns of bodily suffering. The fragmentation of the body expressed in the image of the thorn is endured in order to avoid a more perilous fragmentation:

3unge ímpen me bigurd wið þornes leste beastes freoten ham hwil ha beoð mearewe. 3e beoð 3unge ímpen iset i godes orchard. þornes beoð þe hearschipes þ ich habbe ispeken of. 7 ow is neoð þ 3e beon biset wið ham abuten. þ te beast of helle hwen he snakereð toward ow forte biten on ow, hurte him o þe scharpschipe 7 schunche a3eínwardes. (AW vi.193, fol.102b.16-22)

(one surrounds young saplings with thorns in case beasts chew them while they are tender. You are young saplings planted in God's orchard; thorns are the hardships I have spoken of, and you need to be surrounded by them so that the beast of hell, when he comes sneaking toward you to bite you, may hurt himself on the sharpness and shrink back again. [S/W 187])

Elsewhere, suffering and hardship, portrayed in images of illness and wounding, are described as tools with which the anchoress may cultivate the garden of her heart, preparing it to receive Christ through her imitation of and identification with his sufferings in the Passion (AW vii.196 [S/W 189]). The anchoress's body, pierced by thorns through sin, temptation, and physical hardship, is thus reconstructed through her ascetic life in imitation of Christ, not only as the nest which shelters Christ, but also as the cultivated garden of the pure heart.

The dangers of the fragmentation of the body and soul are also illustrated in the example of the fig tree whose fruit is good works (AW iii.78-9 [S/W 103-4]). The tree whose fruit is hidden (i.e. the well-enclosed anchoress who conducts her good works in secret) is green and fertile, bearing sweet fruit to nourish God. The tree whose fruit is exposed (i.e. the anchoress who exposes her good works), however, is fragmented and destroyed. Through revealing her good works, the anchoress peels the bark from the tree, causing the green boughs to dry out and the tree to die. The sinful anchoress is thus represented by the image of the fragmented tree, while the well-enclosed anchoress is embodied in the image of the whole, fertile tree.

The anchoress's fragmented body is thus also reconstructed into a garden or arbor as the senses, and the body parts which represent them, are transformed through the practice of virtue. The virtues that the anchoress cultivates in her enclosed life become the flowers that adorn the bower she prepares for her lover, her chaste body, and the heart that it encloses:

mí flesh is ifluret. bicumen al neowe. for ich chulle schriue me ⁊ herie godd willes. wel seið he ifluret to betacnín wil schrift. for þe eorðe al unnet. ⁊ te treon als wa openið ham ⁊ bringeð forð misliche flures....Eadmodnesse. abstinence. Culures unlaðnesse. ⁊ oþre swucche uertuz beoð feire i godes ehnen. ⁊ swote i godes nease smealinde flures. Of ham make his herbearhe inwið þe seoluen. for his delices he seið beoð þer forte wunien. (AW v.173, fol.92a.13-21)

("My flesh has flowered, and has become all new, for I will confess myself and willingly praise God." Well he says "flowered" to signify willing confession; for the earth and the trees too open themselves up quite freely and put out different flowers....Humility, abstinence, the mildness of the dove, and other such virtues, are fair in God's eyes, and are sweet-smelling flowers in God's nose. With them, make his arbour within yourself; "For his delight is to dwell there," he says. [S/W 172])

Here, the flesh which has been fragmented by sin flowers through the practice of virtues, both inner (humility and mildness) and outer (abstinence).<sup>23</sup> In her withdrawal from the world, through confession

<sup>23</sup> As Grayson suggests, the reference to the mildness of the dove as one of the virtues that adorn the arbor within the heart recalls the image of the dove that flees into the wounds of Christ. Grayson argues that the refuge of Christ's wounds is replaced here

and virtue (or guarding the senses), then, the anchoress prepares her body and heart to receive Christ, reconstructing her fragmented flesh into the arbor in which he dwells.

The image of the arbor is also found in the description of the anchoress's participation in the Eucharist, through which she receives "þe meidene bearne iesu godd godes sune þe licomliche lihteð oðerhwiles to ower ín. 7 inwið ow eadmodliche nímeð his herbearhe" ("the virgin's child, Jesus, God's Son, who descends at those times in the flesh to your inn, and humbly takes his shelter within you," AW iv.138, fol.73a.23-5 [S/W 146]). The anchoress's body is the "herbearhe", the arbor in which she receives Christ in erotic union, as well as the inn in which she nurtures him. The combination of the images of the maiden's son, the anchoress's body as an inn, and the fertile image of the arbor emphasizes the use of feminine imagery that combines sensuality, motherhood, fertility, and nurture.<sup>24</sup> The erotic overtones are reinforced by the context; this passage follows directly upon the description of the devil's mounting of the anchoress who succumbs to lust, and the Eucharist becomes the means by which the anchoress overcomes him. The anchoress's sinful flesh is transformed and redeemed as the devil's mounting is replaced by the indwelling of Christ in an erotic union, and the fire of lust is purged by the fire of love for Christ (AW vii.205-6 [S/W 195-6]).<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the anchoress's purified body is paralleled to that of the Virgin Mary, bearing Christ within her, as Christ descends to the "inn" of her body. The explicit parallel with Christ's descent into human flesh in the Incarnation suggests that the anchoress's union with Christ's flesh, as she consumes his body and blood in the Eucharist, is also a reenactment of Mary's reception of Christ into her womb. As Bynum notes, in the writings of continen-

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by the arbor, the nest which is prepared for Christ's indwelling presence, as the trees that flower as a token of spiritual health can be compared to the earth and trees where the bird has its nest in AW iii, which are signs of life and growth. Janet Grayson, *Structure and Imagery in "Ancrene Wisse"*, (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1974), 145-6.

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion of this fusion in the devotion of thirteenth-century women in general, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 179-214.

<sup>25</sup> See Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*, 67, 73-4. Robertson argues that this is simply another example of the transference of the desires of the flesh to Christ. It is clear, however, as the discussion proceeds, that the desires of the flesh are not transferred, but *transformed*.

tal women mystics the consumption of the Eucharist is both a spiritual and physical experience: Eucharist and Incarnation merge in "the insistent *image* and *experience* of flesh taken into flesh" (emphasis mine).<sup>26</sup> In *Ancrene Wisse*, this erotic image of "flesh taken into flesh" becomes an expression of impregnation, as the anchoress makes room in her "inn" for the Christ child, who found no room on earth. The anchoress's labor with Christ on the cross becomes the labor of a woman in childbirth as the matrix of the anchorhouse, body, grave, cross, bower, and arbor is expanded to include the womb (AW vi.192-3 [S/W 186-7]). The anchoress's body, which merges with Christ's in suffering, thus becomes the vehicle of the Incarnation, as Christ descends to the anchoress, and the human flesh that encloses him becomes her own. The anchoress becomes the bearer of the incarnate Christ as, like the Virgin Mary, she makes her body into his anchorhouse: "Ʒ te lauerd þ̅ al þe world ne mahte nawt bifon, bitunde him inwið hire meidnes wombe" ("and the Lord whom all the world might not contain enclosed himself in her maiden's womb," AW ii.41-2, fol.19b.16-8 [S/W 76]).

The image of the anchoress's body as the womb that bears Christ is tied to the image of the body/anchorhold in the elaborate discussion of crucifixion with Christ through enclosure and asceticism in part vi of *Ancrene Wisse*. Here, the anchoress's enclosure in her body and her anchorhold is identified with Christ's enclosure in Mary's womb, in a narrow cradle, on the cross, and in the tomb:

nes he him seolf reclus i maries wombe? þeos twa þing limpeð to ancre. nearowðe. Ʒ bitternesse. for wombe is nearow wununge. þer ure lauerd wes reclus. ant tis word marie as ich ofte habbe iseid, spealeð bitternesse. 3ef 3e þenne i nearow stude þolieð bitternesse, 3e beoð his feolahes reclus as he wes i Marie wombe. Beo 3e ibunden inwið fowr large wahes? Ʒ he in nearow cader. i neilet o rode. i stanene þruh becluset hete feste. Marie wombe Ʒ þis þruh, weren his ancre huses....3e þu ondswerest me. ah he wende ut of ba. 3e went tu alswa of baþine ancre huses. as he dude wið ute bruche. Ʒ leaf ham ba ihale....þ̅ an is þe licome. þet. oþer is þe uttre hus. þ̅ is as þe uttre wah abute þe castel. (AW vi.192-3, fol.102a.24-102b.12)

(was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb? These two things belong to the anchoress: narrowness and bitterness. For the womb is a narrow dwelling, where our Lord was a recluse; and this word

<sup>26</sup> Bynum, "Women Mystics," 188.

"Mary," as I have often said, means "bitterness." If you then suffer bitterness in a narrow place, you are his fellows, recluse as he was in Mary's womb. Are you imprisoned within four wide walls?— And he in a narrow cradle, nailed on the cross, enclosed tight in a stone tomb. Mary's womb and this tomb were his anchorhouses.... "Yes," you answer me, "But he went out of both." Yes, and you too will go out of both your anchorhouses as he did, without a break, and leave them both whole.... One of them is the body, the other is the outer house, which is like the outer wall around a castle. [S/W 186-7]

Christ's two anchorhouses (the tomb and the womb) are specifically identified with the anchoress's two anchorhouses (the anchorhold and the body). In a complex web of imagery, the anchoress is compared both to Christ, who is enclosed, and to Mary, whose body encloses him. The anchoress's enclosure thus becomes the means through which she encloses Christ, as through her identification with Mary her body is reconstructed as the womb in which Christ is nurtured. The emphasis on the integrity of the virginal body of Mary and of the anchoress, paralleled with the sealed tomb and the sealed anchorhold, reinforces the wholeness of the reconstructed female body in which Christ (and the anchoress) dwells.

The transformation of the anchoress's body into the anchorhold that encloses Christ is once again expressed in terms of the anchoress's reception of Christ's body through the Eucharist in part i of *Ancrene Wisse*. Here, the anchoress's body, fragmented through sin, is reconstructed primarily in the image of the bower as she receives Christ's body into her own. The anchoress's participation in the Eucharist is intimately linked with her meditation on Christ's Passion, as through her meditation on Christ's physical sufferings, the anchoress prepares herself to receive his body in the Eucharist, as the house of her soul becomes the receptacle for the body of Christ:

set quis est locus in me quo ueniat in me deus meus quo deus ueniat  
 aut maneat in me.... Quis michi dabit ut uenias in cor meum & in-  
 ebries illud. ⁊ unum bonum meum amplectar te? Quis michi es  
 miserere ut loquar. angusta est tibi domus anime mee. quo ueni as  
 ad eam dilatetur abs te. ruinoso est refice eam. habet que offendant  
 oculos tuos. fateor ⁊ scio. set quis mundabit eam? aut cui alteri pre-  
 ter te clamabo?... Efter þe measse cos hwen þe preost sacreð. þer  
 forȝeoteð al þe world. þer beoð al ut of bodi þer i sperclinde luue  
 bicluppeð ower leofmon þe in to ower breostes bur is iliht of

heouene. 7 haldeð him heteuest aþet he habbe i3ettet ow al 7 3e  
eauer eakið. (AW i.20-21, fols.8a.26-27, 8b.1-6, 18-23)

(But what place is there in me where my God may come, where God may come and dwell in me....Who will grant that you may come into my heart and make it drunk, that I may embrace you, O my one good? What are you to me? Have mercy, that I may speak. The house of my soul is too narrow for you—so that you may enter it, let it be made large by you. It is ruined; repair it. It contains what offends your eyes, I know and confess—but who shall cleanse it, or to whom else but you shall I cry?...After the kiss of peace when the priest consecrates the host, forget all the world, be wholly out of your body, embrace in shining love your lover who has alighted into the bower of your heart from heaven, and hold him as tight as you can until he has granted all you ever ask. (Genesis 32.24-26) [S/W 59])

In this passage we find the consummation of the entire anchoritic life: the narrow, ruined anchorhouse, which is at the same time the anchoress's body and her heart, fragmented by sin, is repaired and enlarged by Christ, who by entering into the anchoress's body through the Eucharist transforms her heart into the bower where she is united with her beloved (cp. AW vi.192-193 [S/W 186-187]). Grayson correctly notes that the movement of the passage is inward, as the bower becomes a symbolic place, replacing the house of the soul in ruins.<sup>27</sup>

This passage is found at the beginning of *Ancrene Wisse*, in a section concerned with daily devotions. The integral relationship between the anchoress's union with Christ and the Eucharist, evoked by meditation and prayer in the context of her daily devotions, indicates that the spirituality of *Ancrene Wisse* is deeply rooted in the liturgy of the Eucharist. It is essential, therefore, not to separate the erotic imagery of mystical union from its framework of prayer and contemplation.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, it is significant that the devotions

<sup>27</sup> Grayson's discussion of this passage is found in *Structure and Imagery*, 34-5.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that the author simply assumes that this kind of mystical encounter with Christ is a daily feature of the anchoress's enclosure. Thus, as Savage and Watson correctly note, although the passage concerning the mass-kiss is frequently cited as a rare mystical moment in the text, it is in fact intricately related to the imagery found throughout the anchoritic texts and draws its force from the conviction that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist. It is for this reason that participation in the Eucharist and the union with Christ—the goal of the anchoritic life—is associated with

which follow this passage focus on the cross and prayers to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ.<sup>29</sup> This context suggests once again that the devotion which finds its fulfilment in the Eucharist is more than an ecstatic encounter with a spiritual lover. It is also the moment of the anchoress's engagement with the Incarnation of Christ, as she identifies both with Christ himself and with Mary, in whose womb he was nurtured. This engagement is portrayed in imagery that emphasizes Christ's humanity, his Incarnation in a physical body, borne in the body of a woman.

The author thus creates an interplay between the literal anchorhouse, the anchoress's body, and the metaphorical bower, as through the literal reception of Christ's body into her own through the Eucharist the anchoress encloses him in the physical anchorhold of her female body and the spiritual bower of her heart. This interaction between the literal and metaphorical is reinforced by the fact that the erotic union with Christ in the Eucharist occurs whenever the priest says mass (i.e. daily), not only when the anchoress actually receives the Eucharist, which, as we know from part viii, was less frequent. Bynum points out the intricate relationship between the Eucharist and mystical union in thirteenth-century female devotion: "To receive was to become Christ—by eating, by devouring and by being devoured." She notes, however, that "devotion and reception were separated,...the mass was as much the occasion for inner mystical eating as for real reception of the awesome sacrament." Hence, as in *Ancrene Wisse*, "ecstasies come at the moment of elevation rather than of reception of the host."<sup>30</sup> The power of the Eucharist is based on the physical presence of Christ at the moment of consecration, not the actual reception of the Eucharist by the communicant. It is the presence of Christ's *body* in the host that is the source of power. The anchoress can participate in this power through meditating on the body of Christ (on the cross and in the eucharistic host), and through preparing her own body to receive him.

The anchoress's body, and the heart which it encloses, are thus transformed into both the bower into which Christ descends, and the

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meditation and prayer during the celebration of the Mass and is not tied to actual reception (AW i, n. 17, p. 346).

<sup>29</sup> Grayson offers a detailed analysis of the structure of these devotions in *Structure and Imagery*. See also Robert W. Ackerman and Roger Dahood, *Ancrene Rivale: Introduction and Part I* (Binghamton, New York: State Univ. of New York, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Bynum, "Women Mystics," 185-6.



womb in which Christ is nurtured. As her fragmented female nature is unified and redeemed in Christ, she herself becomes part of the process of redemption, both for herself and others. In her meditation on Christ's body, present in the cross on her wall and in the eucharistic host on the altar, the anchoress's weak, female flesh becomes a source of power as she reenacts the Incarnation within her own body. She is empowered to seek her heart's desire through prayer, as she is granted authority over Christ himself through her union with him in his humanity, exposed in the Eucharist:

3et 3e habbeð þ̅ ilke blod þe ilke blisfule bodi þet com of þe meiden  
 7 deide o þe rode niht 7 dei bi ow. nis bute a wah bitweonen. 7  
 euche dei he kimeð forð 7 schaweð him to ow fleschliche 7 licomli-  
 che ínwið þe measse. biwrixlet þah on oþres lite under breades  
 furme. for in his ahne ure ehnen ne mahten nawt þe brihte sihðe  
 þolien. Ah swa he schaweð him ow, as þah he seide. lowr ich her  
 hwet wulle 3e. seggeð me hwet were ow leof. hwerto neodeð ow?  
 Meaneð ower noede. (AW iv.135, fol.72a.5-13)

(And you have that same blood, that same blissful body which came out of the maiden and died on the cross by you night and day; there is only a wall between. And every day he comes out and shows himself to you in a fleshly and bodily way in the Mass, but changed into another appearance, under the form of bread—for in his own form our eyes could not endure the bright sight. But so he shows himself to you, as though he was saying: "See, here I am. What do you want? Tell me what you long for. In what way are you needy? Speak your need." [S/W 144])

As Bynum points out, the concept of the encounter with the incarnate Christ through the Eucharist as a source of empowerment is typical of medieval women's devotion:

The eucharist was, to medieval women, a moment at which they were released into ecstatic union; it was also a moment at which the God with whom they joined was supremely human because supremely vulnerable and fleshly.<sup>31</sup>

The anchoress is encouraged to take advantage of his vulnerability as she embraces him in the bower of her heart: "haldeð him heteuest aþet he habbe i3ettet ow al þ̅ 3e eauer easkið" ("hold him as tight as

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 192; cp. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 54.

you can until he has granted all you ever ask," AW i.21, fol.8b.21-23 [S/W 59]).<sup>32</sup>

The only response to such vulnerable love is to love in return, and in the end it is the anchoress's love for Christ that empowers her, transforming suffering into joy. As Christ stretches out his arms on the cross to embrace the anchoress, so too she is to stretch out her love to Christ and possess him:<sup>33</sup>

luue haued a meistrie biuoren alle oþre. for al þ̅ ha ríned̅, al ha turned̅ to hire, 7 madeð al hire ahne....streche þ̅i luue to iesu crist, þ̅u hauest him iwunnen. Rín him wið ase muche luue. as þ̅u hauest sum mon sum chearre. he is þ̅ín to don wið al þ̅ tu wilnest. (AW vii.208, fol.110a.15-17, 23-25)

(Love has an authority before all others, for all she touches she turns it to herself and makes it all her own....Stretch out your love to Jesus Christ, and you have won him. [Touch]<sup>34</sup> him with as much love as you sometimes have for some man. He is yours to do all that you want with. [S/W 197])

The sense of touch, condemned in the image of the white hand extended beyond the confines of the anchorhold window, is re-deemed as the anchoress's senses are united to Christ's. The anchoress's outstretched hand reaches for Christ, and Christ is touched with love and succumbs.

Through its erotic and fertile metaphors of the female body, *Ancrene Wisse* celebrates the femaleness of the anchoress, presenting a rich tapestry of images in which sinful human flesh is recognized in contemplation, controlled through chastity, cleansed through confession, and prepared through suffering so that it can be transformed

<sup>32</sup> Her prayers, the author makes clear, are not only for herself, but for others, as she urgently pleads for her own redemption and for that of the church. It is for this reason that she is an effective "beodes mon" for others (AW vi.182 [S/W 179]), the anchor which upholds the church through her example, her holiness, and her prayers (AW iii.74-75 [S/W 101]).

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the mystical possession of God, see Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, trans. Bernard Standring (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 128f.

<sup>34</sup> S/W translate "Reach for." However, in light of the repetition of *rine* and its various cognate forms in this passage (four times within the space of nine lines), it seems clear that the author is deliberately referring to the sense of touch. Compare the translation by Millett and Wogan-Browne, *Medieval English Prose for Women*, 126.

through the redirection of its own desires. This transformation is presented in images unique to the female anchoress, focusing as they do on the female body, which is both the dangerous site of potential sin and the enclosed space in which spiritual fulfilment is attained. The female body, fragmented through sin or temptation, is reconstructed as the sealed chamber that encloses and protects the pure heart as the anchoress prepares to receive Christ, and is transformed and redeemed, as the body which is vulnerable to sin (her own and others') becomes the vessel that bears Christ in erotic union and communion. Erotic imagery is combined with images of motherhood and fertility in order to present the anchoress's union with Christ as both a sensual union with her divine lover and a reenactment of the Incarnation, as the anchoress's body becomes the bower in which she dallies with Christ and the womb which encloses and nurtures him. Her suffering becomes her "labor," in imitation of Christ's labor on the cross. Through these birth pains, the anchoress becomes a mother to her own love for Christ and indeed to Christ himself, as she reenacts the mystery of the Incarnation within her heart. Ultimately, female flesh is uniquely transfigured as it reflects and reenacts the supreme paradox of Christianity, in which that which is weak and shameful is that which redeems the world.

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