The Grötesque Mystical Body: Representing the Woman Writer

The soul is the prison of the body.
—Michel Foucault

In “A Preface to Transgression,” Foucault points to the medieval tradition of mysticism to counter the common belief that only during the modern period has sexuality been the object of anything but a murky representation: “Never did sexuality enjoy a more immediately natural understanding and never did it know a greater ‘felicity of expression’ than in the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin. The proof is its whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality which was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that outpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself” (1977b, 29). Foucault’s argument that mystical experience in Western Christianity conflated sexual and divine love is corroborated, in somewhat different fashion, by Lacan. Citing the example of Hadewijch d’Anvers, Lacan says that the “mystical ejaculations are neither idle gossip nor mere verbiage, in fact they are the best thing you can read.” Mystics alone sense what is inexpressible—the jouissance “which goes beyond.” Their testimony is for this very reason intensely political: “The mystical is by no means that which is not political. It is something serious, which a few people teach us about, and most often women” (1982, 146–47).

The anxiety of modernity began, according to Foucault, “when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things” (1970, 304). What recurs at the margins of poststructuralist discourse is the figure of the mystic, and primarily the female mystic, as a sign of the failure
of representation “to provide a spontaneous grid for . . . knowledge.” The contexts of these references suggest that the female mystic represents the many manifestations of the other in contemporary thought—in sexuality (Foucault), in politics (Lacan), in discourse and madness (Irigaray), in representation itself (Kristeva, de Certeau). For Irigaray, mysticism is a means, available primarily for and through women, to collapse subject and other in “an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another.” It is a means to enact a new kind of discourse, which expresses a mistrust for “understanding as an obstacle along the path of jouissance” and for “the dry desolation of reason” (1985a, 191). Finally, Michel de Certeau argues that mysticism is a “historical trope for loss. It renders the absence that multiplies the productions of desire readable” (1986, 80).

These characteristics of mysticism are a product of the anxiety and nostalgia for lost origins, for the recuperation of presence and jouissance, so prevalent in contemporary theory. With the exception of de Certeau, who writes about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mysticism, contemporary theorists who invoke mysticism—and particularly female mysticism—as an example of jouissance tend to approach it from the limited viewpoint of a psychologizing or psychoanalytic framework and therefore view it as an ahistorical, timeless phenomenon. I would like to restore a historical dimension to the discussion of the female mystic to illuminate her role as the locus of several kinds of cultural representation: of the female body, of sexuality, of the unrepresentable—divinity, jouissance—and finally of the woman writer, the empowered woman-as-subject. To this end, this chapter describes as a complex network of relations what de Certeau calls the “mystic formation.” This network includes its privileged places, social categories, and forms of labor, its concrete modes of economic and sexual relations, and most insistently its insertion within the power relations of medieval cultures.

Foucault, in his discussion of torture in Discipline and Punish, reverses one of the central beliefs of Christianity: that the body is the prison of the soul, a miserable container that constrains the freedom of its far more valuable contents. One lesson Christianity since Augustine has consistently drawn from the Genesis story of
The fall is that human beings have bodies that experience pain, desire, and mortality; God does not. The body is a limit; its vulnerability and weakness impede the soul in its progress toward God.¹ Foucault challenges these beliefs by suggesting that the body has instead been constrained, been the prisoner of, the representations of it which necessarily follow from a soul-body dualism that privileges the soul. What Foucault misses in his analysis, however, is the gender component of this dualism, which guarantees that men and women experience the limits of their bodies in quite different ways. In brief, medieval Christianity construed men as spirit and women as body. Like the body, woman is accident to man’s essence, despite the Church’s claims of the spiritual equality of all believers.

Women in the later Middle Ages were nevertheless more likely than men to gain reputations as spiritual leaders based on their mystical experiences. Perhaps because they were in an oppressed social situation, women were especially drawn to radical forms of religious experience. Some scholars have argued that, because religion was the dominant mode of expression in medieval Europe and the Church such a powerful socioeconomic institution, political dissent almost invariably took the form of religious dissent—heresy as well as the extreme religious practices associated with even orthodox mystics.² Women’s claims to mystical experience, then, also asserted their worthiness to appropriate the Logos in spite of the contamination of the female body; such claims enabled women to turn the dominant discourse of Christianity to their own purposes.

My concern, then, is the discourse of late medieval mysticism as it exhibits at least some women’s ability to speak and be heard within a patriarchal and forthrightly misogynistic society. I make no outlandish brief for these women’s anticipation of feminist concerns, nor do I intend to condemn, ahistorically, their conservatism

¹1977a, 3–69, esp. 30. For an important discussion of the relationships between the body and forms of divine power in the Hebraic Scriptures, especially Genesis, see Scarry 1985, esp. chap. 4, 181–243. For a useful discussion of early Christian commentaries on Genesis 1–3 see Pagels 1988.

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or capitulation to patriarchal religion. Rather I wish to examine the discourse of mysticism as a site of struggle between the authoritative, monological language of a powerful social institution and the heteroglossia of the men and women who came under its sway and sometimes resisted it. Mysticism, as I describe it, is not a manifestation of the individual’s internal affective states but a complex network of cultural and ideological constructs that both share in and subvert orthodox religious institutions. Furthermore, linguistic empowerment for women was tied to the social repression of the body in the Middle Ages. The discourse of the female mystic was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body, and it is, paradoxically, through these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power. Specifically, I examine how several mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries fashioned out of cultural representations and technologies designed to contain and suppress the body a means to transcend their own secondary status as powerless members of society.

Although the women I look at in this chapter are widely separated by time, geography, and class, I wish to consider them as a single group for several reasons. These women did not live and write in total isolation. They were aware of the existence of other famous mystics and saw themselves as part of a tradition of exceptional religious women. Younger mystics often modeled their lives and writings on those of their predecessors. This dialogism—this “intense interaction and struggle of one’s own and another’s voice” (Bakhtin 1981, 354)—is central to the visionary experience. Furthermore, these women provide yet another illustration within a particular social formation of the interactions among repression, power/knowledge, and the poaching of the repressed, and I want to emphasize the power and complexity of the cultural representations that paradoxically both confined them and enabled them to challenge their cultural figurations.

In her notes to The Book of Margery Kempe (1940), for example, Hope Emily Allen points out many instances of intertextuality between Margery’s writing and that of several continental mystics. In the book Kempe describes her visit to her contemporary Julian of Norwich, with whom she enjoyed lengthy conversations.
The Life of Saint Leoba, written by a monk of Fulda named Rudolph about an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon nun who participated in the Christianization of Germany, recounts a curious visionary dream that strikingly illustrates the phenomenon Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call "sexual linguistics," "the creation of sex-specific fantasies of linguistic empowerment" (1985b, 515). One night the saint sees a purple thread issuing from her mouth, "as if it were coming from her very bowels." When she tries to draw it out with her hand, she cannot reach the end of it. As she pulls it out she begins to roll the thread into a ball. "The labour of doing this was so tiresome that eventually, through sheer fatigue, she awoke from her sleep and began to wonder what the meaning of the dream might be" (Petroff 1986, 108).\(^4\) Because this is a "true vision" the dream demands an authoritative interpretation. Its meaning must be made publicly manifest by someone empowered to reveal the "mystery hidden in it." It is another woman, an older nun residing in the same monastery at Wimborne "who was known to possess the spirit of prophecy," who offers the definitive gloss on this dream.

"These things," she went on, "were revealed to the person whose holiness and wisdom makes her a worthy recipient, because by her teaching and good example she will confer benefits on many people. The thread which came from her bowels and issued from her mouth, signifies the wise counsels that she will speak from the heart. The fact that it filled her hand means that she will carry out in her actions whatever she expresses in her words. Furthermore, the ball which she made by rolling it round and round signifies the mystery of divine teaching, which is set in motion by the words and deeds of those who give instruction and which turns earthwards through active works and heavenwards through contemplation, at one time swinging downwards through com-

\(^4\)I have chosen to cite the medieval mystics in translation rather than in their original Latin or vernacular because I wish to make these works accessible to general readers as well as to medieval scholars.
Two things strike me as noteworthy about this interpretation of the vision, a rather obscure example from the so-called dark ages of a woman’s speech empowered to produce consequences in a man’s world. First, it calls into question our usual stereotypes of women in the Middle Ages as either the subject of a clerical misogyny that saw woman as the incarnation of every evil or as the docile and virginal saint and martyr; it suggests that the dichotomy between Eve and Mary oversimplifies women’s position in the Middle Ages. The interpretation of the dream by an older nun confers power by revealing that Saint Leoba’s words will be authoritative. Her “wise counsels” will not only be spoken publicly and listened to; they will also guide actions—hers and other’s. More important, her words, the ball she fashions from the purple thread, become the means by which “the mysteries of divine teaching” are realized in human and social terms; they mediate between the human and divine: turning “earthwards through active works and heavenwards through contemplation.” According to the male author of the Life, Leoba’s speech will have powerful material effects on the social institutions of which she is a part, in this case the institutions of nascent Christianity. In Rudolph’s narrative of her life, the dream’s prophecy is indeed fulfilled. At the request of Saint Boniface, Leoba travels to Germany as a missionary to aid in its Christianization. She presides over a convent at Bischofsheim. Her miracles include the calming of a storm and the exposing of an infanticide. In the latter episode, her assumption of the authority of a judge in what is virtually a trial by ordeal exonerates an accused sister and saves the reputation of her convent. According to her biographer, Leoba counts among her powerful friends not only spiritual leaders such as Saint Boniface but temporal rulers as well, including the emperor Charlemagne and his queen Hiltigard.

The second striking aspect of this vision is that it locates Leoba’s power to speak specifically in her body. The thread “issues from her very bowels.” Leoba regurgitates her powerful words in a pro-
cess that has its source in her body but seems beyond her control. This episode violates our sense of the decorum required of religious speech, which traditionally separates the disembodied voice of spirituality from the material body. It also transgresses the ideological boundaries between the classical “discursive” body—viewed as closed, homogeneous, and monumental—and the grotesque body, with its materiality, orifices, and discharges. Leoba (or some other, since the dream challenges the autonomy of the individual subject), speaks the body of her text through the text of her body.

Saint Leoba is only one of a number of women throughout the Middle Ages whose mystical visions gave them an unprecedented authority to speak and write, indeed to preach and instruct, which may come as a surprise to feminists more used to proclaiming women’s historical silences. Her biography suggests that the “fact” of women’s exclusion from the discourses of power in any period may be more complex than it originally appeared. But although they lived in societies that shared the misogyny inherited from early Christianity, there is much that separates an eighth-century visionary like Leoba from her counterparts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Aristocratic religious women in the eighth century enjoyed more institutional power and better education and were more likely to assume duties and privileges that after the twelfth century would be reserved solely for men. Women could preside over convents and even over double monasteries, as the Saxon abbess Hugheberc did. The range of their learning was remarkable for the so-called dark ages, including, for some, Latin, the classics, Scriptures, the Church fathers, and canon law. Often they were instructed not by men but by other women. Leoba was sent to Wimborne to study under its erudite abbess Mother Tetta. Perhaps because the early Church afforded women—at least aristocratic women—a greater scope for their talents and abilities, these women were less likely than their counterparts in later centuries to indulge in abuses of their bodies. On the contrary, they preached, and practiced, moderation in all things pertaining to the

5On the classical and grotesque bodies, see Bakhtin 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986.
body. Rudolph, for instance, stresses Leoba’s moderation in eating, drinking, and sleeping—in everything, indeed, except her studies.⁶

The twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries produced a large number of texts by and about women whose speech was imbued with an authority of divine origins. “This is the only place in the history of the West,” Irigaray writes rather hyperbolically, “in which a woman speaks and acts so publicly” (1985a, 191).⁷ While it is possible to argue that female mystics who spoke publicly merely ventriloquized the voice of a patriarchal religion,⁸ it is worth asking why and how these particular women were empowered to speak with an authority that rivaled and at times seemed to surpass that of the misogynist male clerics who ruled the institutional church. Elizabeth Petroff gives a sense of the kind of social and political power women with the status of orthodox mystic enjoyed: “Visions led women to the acquisition of power in the world while affirming their knowledge of themselves as women. Visions were a socially sanctioned activity that freed a woman from conventional female roles by identifying her as a genuine religious figure. They brought her to the attention of others, giving her a public language she could use to teach and learn. Her visions gave her the strength to grow internally and to change the world, to build converts, found hospitals, preach, attack injustice and greed, even within the church” (1986, 6). Even heretical mystics


⁷Irigaray’s psychoanalytic reading of mysticism in “La Mystérieque” regards the mystical experience as belonging in some essential way to women, or at least to the female: “The poorest in science and the most ignorant were the most eloquent, the richest in revelations. Historically, that is women. Or at least the female” (192). Irigaray’s somewhat romanticized idealizations place the mystical experience outside of language and representation, aligning it, ahistorically I would argue, with hysteria and madness. Irigaray’s opposition of mystical discourse to the “dry desolation of reason” papers over the historical complexity of women’s participation in mysticism as a public, not solipsistic, discourse, which thrived in a dialogic relationship with medieval culture.

⁸To my knowledge, no one has made this argument specifically about the medieval mystics, although it is certainly conceivable that someone might. For the dangers of feminists’ appropriating medieval women writers, see Delany 1987, 177–97.
such as Marguerite Porete and more marginal religious figures such as Margery Kempe enjoyed something of this privileged status and following. As Petroff’s analysis makes clear, the basis of the power the female mystic enjoyed was both discursive and public, not private and extralinguistic. The mystic’s possession of a public language gives her the ability to act not just within a woman’s culture but in a man’s world as well.

What Petroff’s analysis fails to make clear, however, is how the mystic’s identification as a “genuine religious figure” freed her from “conventional female roles” that mandated docility, passivity, subservience, and reticence and how her public activities came to be “socially sanctioned” by a Church anxiously guarding its spiritual and temporal power. These questions can be answered only by examining the relation of mystical discourse to institutional structures and ideologies, by taking into account not only the subversiveness of mystical discourse but also its co-optation by the institutional Church. It is, after all, not just a matter of discovering why women were turning to mysticism and other kinds of religious experiences, both sanctioned and condemned, but also why the Church in certain cases tolerated and even encouraged female visionaries, who occasionally seemed to undermine its own claims to authority. The needs served by mysticism must be understood within the context of a Foucauldian dispositif, or “grid of intelligibility,” the nexus of social, cultural, and historical practices, both discursive and nondiscursive. This dispositif encompasses not only institutional morality, theological statements, and philosophical propositions but such structures and practices as architectural arrangements, the arts, regulations, laws, administrative procedures, medicine, and even hygiene. In the case of mysticism, such a dispositif might be constructed from three sources: the political situation of the Church after the twelfth century, which resulted

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9Although Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in 1310 and her book The Mirror of Simple Souls was ordered burned by the Inquisition, The Mirror survived her death; its popularity is attested to by the number of translations made during the fourteenth century, including one in English (Dronke 1984). Margery Kempe during her religious life was accused alternately of madness and heresy and enjoyed the patronage and support of powerful English ecclesiasts. See The Book of Margery Kempe.
in the institutionalization of religious women, the cultural representations of the female body, and the disciplinary technologies that attempted to realize these representations. Within the disposatif these three threads form a web, but for heuristic purposes it will be necessary to treat them separately in order to see each strand clearly.

**Classical and Grotesque Bodies**

The political situation of the Church in the thirteenth century bore little resemblance to that of its eighth-century counterpart. Concerned with consolidating its own authority by stressing the special power of the priesthood, the Catholic church, from the twelfth century on, had little use for women in official positions of either spiritual or temporal power. This jealous guarding of its prerogatives is evident in the many calls to pastoral care; the emphasis on the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and confession, where the priest most directly exercised his authority; and in conflicts between proponents of a monastic life of contemplation and advocates of an active life of pastoral care, which often erupted into full-scale political conflict over spiritual “turf.” The growing distance between the clergy and the laity coincided with a resurgence of lay piety which left both men and women searching for outlets to express their religious sentiments. The privileged status of the mystic reflected this tension between clerical centralization and lay expressions of piety. On the one hand, her claims of authority could easily be seen as subversive of clerical prerogatives; on the other, they could, when necessary, be co-opted by the Church to strengthen its own spiritual and temporal authority. Although women were officially banned from preaching or administering sacraments (for example, Penance), many orthodox female visionaries had disciples and followers whom they instructed, counseled, and even reprimanded for their sins. The line between preaching and instructing, between hearing confessions and demonstrating concern for the sinfulness and spiritual welfare of others is thinly drawn in the writings of many of the medieval mystics, as the following example suggests.
The Grotesque Mystical Body

*The Herald of Divine Love* by the thirteenth-century mystic of the convent of Helfta, Gertrude the Great, is permeated by a sense of ministry that is articulated in specifically clerical terms. Gertrude’s disciples frequently questioned her about the Eucharist, specifically whether or not they dared approach communion without Penance. “She counselled those whom she thought to be in a correct intention to approach the Lord’s sacrifice confidently and even constrained them to do so.”

And another time when she prayed for someone . . . the Lord replied: “Whatever anyone hopes to be able to obtain from you, so much without a doubt she will receive from me. Moreover whatever you promise to someone in my name, I will certainly supply. . . . After several days, remembering this promise of the Lord without forgetting her own unworthiness, she asked how it was possible . . . and the Lord replied: “Is not the faith of the universal church that promise once made to Peter: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and firmly she believes this to be carried out by all ecclesiastical ministers. Therefore why do you not equally believe because of this that I can and will perfect that which, moved by love, I promise you by my divine mouth?” And touching her tongue he said, “Behold, I give my words into your mouth.” (Bynum 1982, 206)

Gertrude justifies her ministerial activities using the very same scriptural text that the Church used to establish its clerical authority (Matthew 16:19). Her exchange with the Lord has all the force of an ordination ritual; the language is ritualistic, even liturgical: “Behold, I give my words into your mouth.” Caroline Bynum minimizes the subversiveness of Gertrude’s claims to clerical authority, saying that they did not “undermine the structure and rituals of monasticism or the church but rather . . . project[ed] women into one of those structures, the pastoral and mediating role, which is otherwise denied to them” (207). But this analysis misses the audacity of Gertrude’s claim to speak for God. If anyone—even a woman—could communicate directly with God, bypassing the prescribed forms of clerical mediation, and even claim to serve as a

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10See the discussion of Gertrude in Bynum 1982, 196–209.
mediator for others, then the priesthood becomes meaningless as a special and privileged class. That the Church felt this transgression of the boundaries between clergy and laity to be a real threat to its power is attested by its struggles in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with lay spiritual movements such as the Beguines and heresies such as Catharism and the Free Spirit, all of which attempted to bypass clerical mediation to claim a more direct relationship between the laity and God. However orthodox and conservative her religious vision, Gertrude’s daring claim to speak for God challenged the hierarchies of a male-dominated clergy that jealously guarded its monopoly on religious discourse.

But if the mere existence of female mystics enjoying an unmediated relationship with the divine successfully subverted clerical authority, it could do so, paradoxically, only from within the institutional Church and only to further that institution’s ends—the consolidation of its power. The Church strictly defined and controlled the nature and content of the mystical experience. It is tempting for the twentieth-century reader to see the mystic’s visions as highly private and personal experiences brought on by heightened affective and psychological states, but, to repeat, in the Middle Ages, mysticism was a public discourse—not private, passive, or, despite its claims, monological but communal, active, and dialogical. The mystical experience was highly structured, and it was the Church that provided both structure and content because it controlled through various institutional disciplines the lives and learning of women in religious communities. Increasingly after the twelfth century the Church attempted through strict cloistering to bring religious women more firmly under its control, to enforce women’s silence, to institutionalize their powerlessness, and most important from its own point of view, to isolate itself from women’s supposedly corrupting influence.12

After the twelfth century, orthodox mystics were, with few exceptions, cloistered, in keeping with the Church’s sense of women’s spiritual role. To be sure, not all mystics were nuns. Mystics

11See Abels and Harrison 1979 on Catharism; Dronke 1984 and McLaughlin 1973 on the Free Spirit; and McDonnell 1969 on the Beguines.

12For a discussion of these changes in the twelfth-century Church, see Bridenthal and Koontz 1977, 110–16.
could—and did—express their religious ecstasies as nuns, abbesses, wives, mothers, tertiaries, anchoresses, beguines, or itinerants. Most often, when they were not cloistered, religious women tended to be tertiaries—like Catherine of Siena—or beguines. But the model upon which all spiritual organizations for women were based was the cloister. And quite clearly its primary purpose was isolation. For example, even though she had desired to follow the active life prescribed by Saint Francis, living and working among the poor, the rule Saint Clair received from Pope Honorius III required that “No sister is to go out of the convent for any purpose whatever except to found a new community. Similarly, no one, religious or secular, is to be allowed to enter the monastery. Perpetual silence is imposed on all members of the community, and continuous fasting, often on bread and water” (Moorman 1968, 35). Architecturally, the convent fostered maximum isolation from the society outside it, and access to these communities of cloistered women was strictly controlled. Life within the convent was structured by the liturgy and rituals of the Church, including “the seven canonical hours of daily prayers that followed the cycle of the liturgical year . . . [and] specific prayers for special saints days and major feasts” (Petroff 1986, 6). The spiritual disciplines that filled out this life included such practices as mantric prayer, flagellation, fasting, and vigils, which, when carried to excess, as they sometimes were, seem designed to produce an emotional state conducive to mystical experience.

These technologies both resulted from and fed back into medieval cultural representations of the female body. Woman had to be enclosed, restricted, and isolated because, in the eyes of the Church, she was the quintessence of all fleshly evil, a scapegoat—the “devil’s gateway” or “devil’s mousetrap”—whose expulsion allowed the Church to purge itself of the corruption of the body. This loathing of the female flesh, expressed in countless Church documents, must be understood in light of its cultural meaning. To do so, we must abandon the usual biologistic understanding of the human “body.” Ordinarily, we attribute to the body an a priori

13For a recent and illuminating analysis of official medieval misogyny, which sees it as evidence of a “deep mistrust of the body and of the materiality of the sign” (14), see Bloch 1987; on the “devil’s mousetrap,” see Remley 1989.
material existence without considering how our experience of our bodies is organized by cultural representations of them. These representations are not universal but historically specific. Similarly, the material body can itself be one of those discursive practices. It is a sign, imbued with meaning that can be glossed. In other words, as Stallybrass and White maintain, “the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social formation in a collectivity.” Citing V. V. Ivanov, they declare that “no absolute borderline can be drawn between body and meaning in the sphere of culture” (1986, 21).

We might conclude, then, drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between the “classical body” and the “grotesque body,” that two antithetical representations of the body structure discursive norms in any culture. In the Middle Ages, too, this opposition between classical and grotesque bodies structured those discursive practices that constituted women’s understanding of their bodies. In my usage, the classical body denotes the form of official high culture. Medieval “high” culture was Latin, male, and homogeneous, incorporating such discourses as philosophy, theology, canon law, and liturgy, as well as art and literature. In the medieval Church, the classical body was harmonious, proportionate, and monumental; it attempted to represent a sort of disembodied spirituality, and thus, it never existed except as cultural representation. The grosser, more material aspects of “the body” were displaced onto the “grotesque body.” Women—along with other marginal social groups, specifically the lower classes—were constructed by the dominant culture as the grotesque body, the low other, whose discursive norms include heterogeneity, disproportion, a focus on gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth. The grotesque body is at once feminized, corrupt, and threatening; it is a reminder of mortality, imperfection, and the wretchedness of human existence.

14Much recent work on the female body has illuminated this problem; see for instance Suleiman 1986. Although it appeared too late for me to address it here, Caroline Bynum’s most recent book (1991) offers a fascinating account of the relationships between medieval conceptions of the body and mysticism which confirms my own argument.

15Bakhtin 1984, 19; see also Stallybrass and White 1986, 9–26.
This sketch describes the writings of many female mystics, whose emotionalism, intense personal involvement, polyglot mixture of genres, and open-endedness contrasts markedly to the monumental rationalism and harmonious proportion of classical theological writing by men. The emotionalism so often attributed to female piety, its so-called affective nature as compared to the rationalistic nature of male piety, is not an essential part of a feminine literary experience but a manifestation of the disciplinary technologies female mystics internalized and expressed through self-inflicted violence on their bodies—torture, screams, and howls.16

In this passage from Angela of Foligno's Liber de vere fidelium experientia (Book of the Experience of the Truly Faithful), Angela, who was herself a notorious “screamer” (“Even if someone stood over me with an axe ready to kill me, I could not have prevented myself [from screaming]” [Petroff 1986, 259]), measures her “fire of love” exclusively in the bodily injuries she wishes to endure.

And so I disposed of myself on account of [Christ’s] love that I wished that all my limbs might suffer a death unlike his passion, that is, a more vile death. And I was meditating and desiring that if I could find someone to kill me, in some way that it would be lawful to kill me, on account of his faith or his love, that I would beg him to do this favor for me, that is, that since Christ was crucified on the wood of the cross he should crucify me in a low place, or in some unsavory place or with a loathsome weapon. And I could not think of a death as vile as I desired, and I grieved deeply that I could not find a vile death that would in no way be like those of the saints, for I was totally unworthy. (Petroff 1986, 257)

Piety for Angela, as for virtually all the female mystics, is palpably physical and sexual. Images of degradation abound; Angela compares herself to a nursing baby, drinking the blood of Christ from the wound in his side. Mystical writing features representations of grotesque bodies that open up and spill forth their contents—blood, milk, excrement—bodies that endure wounding and muti-

16 For an important discussion of the affective nature of female piety in the fourteenth century, see Kieckhefer 1984.
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The mystic's own body becomes a contested site of cultural discourses about sexuality and the female body. The mystic's sexuality becomes at once an emblem for her degradation and unworthiness, evidence of the forces of repression within medieval culture, and a means to transcend the physical altogether. If women in the Middle Ages were defined as sexual beings, as body, then it is only through an excessive indulgence in the body, in the mortification of the flesh, that the mystic can transcend her sex and refashion her grotesque body as a classical one.

These conflicts about sexuality and the body emerge most clearly in rituals designed to chastise the flesh. In a passage from Angela's Liber, for instance, we see an intense loathing for the physical body, especially the "lower-bodily stratum," expressed through the desire to inflict humiliation on it: "I do not blush to recite before the whole world all the sins that I ever committed. But I enjoyed imagining some way in which I could reveal those deceptions and iniquities and sins. I wanted to go through the squares and the towns naked, with fish and meat hanging about my neck, saying, 'Here is that disgusting woman, full of malice and deception, the sewer of all vices and evils, ... behold the devil in my soul and the malice of my heart'" (Petroff 1986, 7). The metonymic association of the female body with the corruption of rotting meat and fish paradoxically invokes the grotesque body to exorcize it. The female mystic's only means of escaping her body is to indulge in an obsessive display and denunciation of its most grotesque features. This obsession with sexual display as a form of penance suggests the extent to which the female mystic has internalized the discursive norms of the dominant "high" culture.

We might compare this cultural construction of the grotesque female body with a very different, if related, representation of the classical body. In hagiographies of women saints, written primarily by men, the elaborate infliction of bodily pain often leaves the saint's body miraculously untouched. Unlike the grotesque body of the mystic, the classical body of hagiography is closed, miraculously impervious to wounding, invulnerable to penetration.17

This passage from Thomas de Cantripre's *Vita* of Christina Mira­bilis indulges in a fiery spiritual purging of the female body which leaves it physically unharmed:

Then Christina began to do those things for which she had been sent back by the Lord. She crept into fiery ovens where bread was baking and was tormented by fires just like any of us mortals so that her howls were terrible to hear. Nevertheless when she emerged, no mutilation of any sort appeared in her body. When no oven was at hand, she threw herself into roaring fires which she found in men's houses or else she thrust her feet and hands into fires and held them there for so long that they would have been reduced to ashes had it not been a divine miracle. At other times she jumped into cauldrons of boiling water and stood there immersed either up to the breast or the waist, depending on the size of the cauldron, and poured scalding water over those parts of her body which were untouched by the water. Although she howled as if she were suffering the pangs of childbirth, when she climbed out again she was quite unharmed. (Petroff 1986, 185–86)

Several details in this passage suggest the need to discipline the flesh so prominent in Angela's writing. Although it is subtler, there is the same emphasis on what is specifically female about the saint's body. The reference to the "pangs of childbirth" calls attention to the sexual function that Christina, as a virgin, has specifically renounced, as well as to the "opening up" of the body entailed in both sexual activity and childbirth. (It is probably worth mentioning that unlike Christina, who remained a virgin, Angela of Foligno was both a wife and mother.) The immersion of her breasts and genitalia (up to the breast or waist)—the signs of her sexuality—in boiling water reminds the reader that Christina's body is a female one, subject to all the weaknesses of femininity. But Christina's chastisements differ in one significant respect from Angela's. If the torturing of the classical body produces pain, it does not wound; there is "no mutilation of any sort." Indeed, the saint's voluntary endurance of pain in imitation of Christ's bodily suffering invokes the Eucharistic miracle. The ovens into which Christina casts herself are ovens for baking bread, suggesting without explicitly stating it, her symbolic connection to the ritual of the
Eucharist. But the symbolism, in Christina's case, is reversed. In the Eucharist, the bread is transformed into the body of Christ. The central act of Christianity is Christ's assumption of a body that can be—and is—wounded, opened up by torture. Christina is transformed in the oven from body to "bread"; she escapes her body into the monumentality of a cultural symbol. She cannot be wounded. She transcends the pain of physicality—of her feminine sexuality—and emerges as an icon of religious devotion; the asexual, transcendent, because virginal, woman.

Female mystics internalized the disciplinary technologies evolved by the Church to subject and contain feminine sexuality not only discursively but physically as well. As one might guess, these technologies, misogynistic in their intent, were designed to suppress and control a female body the Church deemed disruptive and threatening. The disciplines of the most famous mystics were often spectacular examples of self-torture through extravagant abuse of their bodies. Rudolph Bell, in Holy Anorexia, describes Angela of Foligno's struggle to control her flesh.

Demons filled her head with visions of her soul being strung upside down so that all her virtues turned to vices; in anger, pain, tears, desperation, she pinched herself so hard that her head and body were covered with bruises, and still the torture continued. Human vices, even ones she never had known before, tormented every member of her body. Even when these desires may have shifted away from her "intimate parts" to places where she felt the pain less, so on fire was she that until Friar Arnaldo prohibited it, she used natural fire to extinguish the internal burning. As her spiritual understanding deepened, her wish changed from instant death to a drawn out physically painful and tormenting ending, one in which she would experience all the sufferings of the world in her every limb and organ. Her love had sacrificed and so would she. . . . Earlier she had undertaken a detailed examination of each part of her body, judging them member by member and assigning to each its due penance. (Bell 1985,107–8)\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18}Although I would want to distance myself from its conclusions, Bell's book, like Caroline Bynum's Holy Feast and Holy Fast (1987), provides many examples of this kind of self-torture.
One can only assume that those penances would have been much like those practiced by Catherine of Siena, another Italian visionary, who wore rough clothing and bound an iron chain so tightly around her hips that it inflamed her skin and who flagellated herself three times a day with an iron chain for one and one-half hours. Angela of Foligno’s obsession with the grotesqueness of the body is strikingly illustrated by another anecdote, also related by Bell: “She and her companion one Holy Thursday had gone to the local hospital of San Feliciano to wash the feet of sick women and the hands of men who were there. One leper they tended had flesh so putrefied and rotten that pieces peeled off into the wash basin they were using. Angela then proceeded to drink this mixture, it giving her almost the sensation of receiving communion, and when a bit of flesh got stuck in her throat she tried to swallow it too until against her will she choked it out” (1985, 108). In this anecdote, the juxtaposition of the putrefying rotten flesh and the Eucharist vividly recalls the opposition between the grotesque and classical bodies. Indeed, it powerfully merges these two cultural representations of the body, investing the Eucharist with the power to transform the grotesque. In this way, the physical torture so prominent in the histories of many female mystics assumes an unending, ritualistic quality: its purpose is to mortify the flesh—feminine sexuality particularly—until that sexuality no longer exists. It enacts a desire to “erase” sexual difference through acts of barely repressed sexual humiliation and degradation.

Frequently, at least in legend, the mystic might seem to achieve this desire. The vitae of several mystics report the cessation of all ordinary forms of elimination. As a result of excessive fasting, many excreted neither feces nor urine, did not menstruate, never sweated, and discharged neither tears nor saliva. Some exuded sweet fragrances or oils instead, which had the power to heal others. The mystic’s grotesque body was transformed into a classical one, closed and monumental.

19Caroline Bynum writes that the drinking of pus was a common practice among female saints, see 1987, 144–45, for instance. For another argument on the “hidden alliances” between mysticism and torture, see de Certeau, “The Institution of Rot,” in 1986, 35–46.
20See Bell 1985 and Bynum 1987 for examples. The cessation of menstruation and the diminution of other forms of elimination would be consistent with what we now know about self-starvation.
What, one might ask, does the female mystic gain from such spectacles of abuse? My initial answer might be, like Petroff’s, quite simply, power. But I would like to explore more specifically the nature of the power claimed by the female mystic, beginning with a reminder of just how audacious some of these claims were. Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake by the Inquisition for self-deification, but she was not the only woman to make such grandiose claims. Several orthodox mystics made strikingly similar statements: “My Me is God,” wrote Catherine of Genoa; Hadewijch of Brabant wished “to be God with God”; Angela of Foligno wrote that “the Word was made flesh to make me God.” These are not the statements of individuals who have accepted the traditional and subservient religious roles allotted to women. These women claim a virtually divine authority, which they frequently sought to exercise by preaching, writing, founding convents and hospitals, caring for the poor and sick, and occasionally meddling in Church politics. To be sure, I am not suggesting that these women “intended” in any conscious way to seek either temporal or spiritual power. Rather my analysis depends upon what Paul Ricoeur has called a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” The fact that none of the mystics says her specific goal is empowerment (which in itself would be a strikingly modern statement) cannot be accepted as an indication that their utterances can be confined within a traditional rhetoric of intention; their descriptions of their intentions must be interrogated. These women were certainly capable of entertaining as part of their cultural ideology motives of which they were not fully conscious and which they could not even fully articulate. If we embed the discourses of medieval mysticism within a network of other discourses, within the Foucauldian *dispositif*, we can then interrogate the mystic’s “intention” from the perspective of cultural ideology.

Mystics took disciplines designed to regulate and subject the body and turned them into what Michel Foucault has called “technologies of the self,” methods of consolidating their spiritual power and authority, perhaps the only ones available to women. According to Foucault, individuals often effect, “by their own
means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, and/or supernatural power” (in Blonsky 1985, 367). Although Foucault is describing the medieval Catholic discipline of confession, he might just as well be describing the lives of many medieval mystics. De Certeau echoes Foucault’s argument about technologies of the self in his descriptions of the practices of poaching, which enable those subjected to disciplinary technologies to manipulate or evade them, or even to shape them to their own ends, by seeming to conform to them (1984, xiv–xv, 165–76). For women mystics, excess—the repression of the body, the mortification of the flesh—paradoxically becomes a revaluation of the self in relation to spiritual power.

To understand how self-torture could become a form of poaching, a means of empowerment, we must first understand the place of torture in medieval society. In the Middle Ages, torture was not regarded simply as a form of punishment. It was, as Foucault has said, a technique and a ritual, a semiotic system that “must mark the victim” (1977a, 34), inscribing on his or her body the “signs” of the ruler’s power. It was one of the most visible displays of that power, an art, “an entire poetic” (45) that competed with other visual displays of theocratic rule—public spectacles, processions, coronations, and investitures. The marking of the victim’s body signifies the power that punishes. According to Foucault, “in the ‘excesses’ of torture, a whole economy of power is invested” (35). In the excesses of her self-inflicted torture, the female mystic becomes at once both victim and torturer, she who is marked and she who marks. This duality constructs the female body as a reflexive locus of power. It is at once what seems most fascinating and most appalling about the mystic's appropriation of cultural representations of her body. The mystic’s pain—her inflicting of wounds upon herself—allows her to poach upon the authority of both Church and state, enabling her to speak and be heard, to have followers, to act as a spiritual adviser, to heal the sick, and to found convents and hospitals. Her body bears the marks, the “signs,” of her own spiritual power.

The mystic's spiritual progress through the various stages of
mystical experience, then, is discursively organized by the disciplines authorized by religious tradition and performed on her body. She changes the meaning of the forces that oppress her, however, by usurping their power to discipline her, to chastise and purify the corruption of her flesh. She assumes for herself the power to define the authority that represses her sexuality: not man but God. Significantly, the Church at no time advised or condoned the severe fasting and self-flagellation of mystics such as Angela or Catherine of Siena. It advised moderation in all penance. In fact, the mystics themselves did not urge such extremes on others and were never seen as models to be imitated. They were considered special instances of God’s grace because they chose their own suffering and thus were free to define its significance. That is why Angela of Foligno could desire such a violent and painful death, why Julian of Norwich could beg God for a terrible illness, and why Catherine of Siena starved herself to death at the age of thirty-two. Technologies that, in the hands of a powerful Church, were meant to limit severely the autonomy and authority of women became for the mystics a source of self-determination, virtually the only one available to women during this period.

It is this power to manipulate cultural representations which creates the dialogism of the mystical text, the interpenetration of its words, its signs, with other ambiguous words and signs. The mystic does not merely call upon what she has read or seen to give words to an essentially wordless experience. Instead, these “spiritual exercises,” and the meanings she gives them, are constitutive of her visions. In the Long Text of Julian of Norwich’s Showings, the fourteenth-century English mystic meditates on Christ’s suffering during the Crowning with Thorns.

And during the time that our Lord showed me this spiritual vision which I have now described, I saw the bodily vision of the copious bleeding of the head persist. The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets, looking as if they came from the veins, and as they issued they were a brownish red, for the blood was very thick, and as they spread they turned bright red. And as they reached the brows they vanished; and even so the bleeding continued until I had seen and understood many things. Nev-
ertheless, the beauty and the vivacity persisted, beautiful and vivid without diminution . . . The copiousness resembled the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain, falling so thick that no human ingenuity can count them. And in their roundness as they spread over the forehead they were like a herring’s scales. (1978, 187–88)

At first glance, this passage seems idiosyncratic, its metaphors positively bizarre. What perhaps most repels the twentieth-century reader is the disjunction between Christ’s pain and suffering at the hands of his torturers, the ostensible subject of the vision, and the artifice with which it is conveyed. The images of the pellets, the raindrops falling from the eaves of a house, and particularly the herring’s scales work against the impression of suffering; they detach the reader from any realistic sense of pain. Instead they point to the symbolic nature of Christ’s suffering. In Julian’s vision, although the torturers attempt to leave their mark of temporal power on Christ’s body, she shows that the “signs” contain messages other than those intended by the torturers, symbols of divine power which transcend mere physical pain, which shade over into the decorative, into art.

Indeed, the scene reminds me of nothing so much as a painting. Although Julian calls it a “bodily vision,” suggesting a vision appearing to her eyes, reading the passage, one is put in mind of an intense meditation upon a visual image—a picture in a book of hours, a station of the cross, or some other church painting Julian might have seen. As she meditates on particular details, they lose their relationship to the whole composition and begin to remind her of other inanimate objects. As she traces the brushstrokes, following the change in color from brownish red to bright red, finally vanishing from the canvas, other images—pellets, raindrops, herring’s scales—suggest themselves to her, transforming the suffering into an artistic vision, a representation that seems self-conscious in its artifice. Hence the contradictory description of the vision as “beautiful and vivid,” “hideous and fearful,” “sweet and lovely.” The mystical vision, seen from this perspective, takes on the character less of a chance event, whether the sign of psychosis or of spiritual grace, than of a calculated event, carefully pre-
pared for and highly structured by the religious experiences available to medieval women, including those designed to chastise the flesh and imitate Christ’s suffering.

But women like Julian of Norwich or Angela of Foligno were not nearly as disingenuous as they had to appear in order to win the toleration and acceptance of the Church. Women could serve no ministerial or sacerdotal function within the medieval Church. They could claim no spiritual authority in and of themselves, nor could they claim it, as the clergy did, from the institutional Church. The source of the mystic’s inspiration was divine; she claimed to be the receptacle, the instrument of a divine will. Hildegard of Bingen, for example, represents her authority in precisely these terms: “She utters God’s miracles not herself but being touched by them even as a string touched by a lutanist emits a sound not of itself but by his touch” (Dronke 1984, 160). But any visionary experience made public is always, ipso facto, a re-visioning of that experience, an attempt to represent the unrepresentable. The doubleness of their experiences becomes a means to achieve a representational power—as both object and subject—at the very moments they seem bent on annihilating themselves. Their words, and even their bodies when necessary, became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness.

The Woman Writer?

Any attempt to celebrate medieval mystics as feminist, as self-fashioning subjects, or as the authors of themselves, however, risks applying to medieval texts feminist theories of creativity which have been developed primarily from the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realist fiction by women. We should be wary, in particular, of feminist readings of medieval women’s writing which privilege, in Patrocinio Schweickart’s words, “the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author—the ‘voice’ of another woman” (1986, 47). Of course, feminist proponents of what Elaine Showalter calls “gynocritics” are not the only literary critics who ground signification in the subjectivity of an absent author. They are merely following in a long tradition of empiricist
criticism that posits authorial intention as the locus of meaning. For instance, writing recently on orality and literacy in the Middle Ages, the medieval scholar Jesse Gellrich makes the claim that “if writing does not possess the magical property of speaking for the person who wrote it, it is nothing” (1988, 468). Explorations of textuality by Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, and others, however, have opened up to scrutiny writing’s “magical property of speaking for the person who wrote it.” As my previous discussion should suggest, medieval mystics cannot be isolated from the cultural nexus—or disposatif—that produced them as writers, nor can they be subsumed within twentieth-century notions of authorship. In fact, these women may not have been “writers” at all, at least in the sense we use the term.

Most often when medieval women visionaries recorded their lives and works, the writing was done by a male amanuensis, usually a priest or confessor. This was the case with all or most of the visions of Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena (whose vita was recorded by Richard of Capua), and Marie d’Oignes (whose life was written by Jacques de Vitry), among others. The “scene within which the woman mystic—often illiterate, but not necessarily uneducated—was transformed into the “woman writer” is crucial to understanding the complex nature of the mystic text, the limits imposed on that text, and the problem of determining who authorizes its final significations. The contributions of a (usually) male scribe who shaped and edited the oral accounts provided by the female mystic creates a “doubled subject” or, more accurately, a dialogic subject for the text, an “author function” resulting from the dynamic interplay between the male and female, the literate and illiterate, the clerical and lay. To investigate the gender relations that accompany the writing of these marginalized texts might deepen our understanding not only of the cultural situation of medieval women but also of the situations in which women have subsequently been empowered to write within patriarchal cultures. A critique of medieval authorship may lead to the formulation of more culturally aware (and perhaps politically powerful) feminist theories of reading and authorship which go beyond straightforward notions of “authenticity,” “voice,” and “experience”—all of which postulate the author as the transcen-
dental signified of her text. These theories of authorship may enable feminists to examine the dialogic cultural activity that structures the writing of any text, whether medieval or modern.

I have chosen *The Book of Margery Kempe* for my analysis of the dialogic writing subject because the proem of this "autobiography" describes a scene of writing in which we see briefly figured the relationships between the female visionary and the male priest who records her visions in writing. This scene calls into question the claims of autobiography to represent the immediate expression of an authentic and authenticating "voice" and, at the same time, foregrounds the difficulties involved in preserving life stories within a culture that is still functionally oral, except for an elite that jealously guards the tools of literacy. The conflicting interests of men and women, clergy and laity, Latin and vernacular cultures, oral and written traditions intersect within visionary texts like *The Book of Margery Kempe*. An unpacking of this cultural activity may tell us much about the gender ideologies of the late Middle Ages, particularly the ways in which female "experience" gets translated into writing.

The "Proym" of *The Book of Margery Kempe* works very hard to establish Margery's credentials as the authorizing "voice" within the text, to make her "presence" felt by linking her voice to God's voice, her words to the divine Logos: "By the leave of our merciful Lord Christ Jesus, to the magnifying of his holy name, Jesus, this little treatise shall treat in part of his wonderful works" (Kempe, 1940, 1; 1985, 33). No doubt such disclaimers express a conventional piety in medieval religious works, but again and again the prologue asserts that Margery is recording her story not for self-aggrandizement but "that his goodness might be known to all the world." The anxieties surrounding female self-assertion and female speech require that this mode of textual production—the mystical autobiography—be explained, justified, and even mediated by some other authority. Like other female mystics, then, Margery does not claim to speak and write in her own name; she does not claim "authority" over her "authorship" in the same way a modern author might. But she could and did claim to ventriloquize a divine voice, to become a vessel through which God speaks.

Yet even within the short scene of the prologue, Margery domi-
nates the text, dictating the terms on which the writing will take place, mediating between human cultural activities—like writing—and God’s “goodness,” creating a struggle between two concepts of the subject. Even in small details, the prologue works to establish Margery as the controlling voice, the text’s authoring presence. The explanation of the autobiography’s failure to keep to chronological sequence is a disarming example of the book’s claims to “orality,” to a successful representation of the speaking voice and its guarantee of the author’s presence: “This book is not written in order, everything after the other as it was done, but just as the matter came to this creature’s mind when it was to be written down, for it was so long before it was written that she had forgotten the time and the order when things occurred” (1940, 5; 1985, 36). Memory, the organizing principle of the oral culture, structures Margery’s memoirs. The possibilities that writing holds out for revision, for the shaping of experience, are at the same time prof ered and withheld, perhaps because of the perceived dangers these possibilities harbored: such shaping and revision might call into doubt the authenticity, the truth, of the book by transforming and deforming memory into a self-consciously literary form.

Other problems associated with writing, the circumstances that might come between the author’s words and meanings—bad penmanship and spelling, poor eyesight, language barriers, fear of ostracization, punishment, and censorship—are all negotiated through Margery’s powerful presence. Her demonstration of God’s favor is the enabling condition of the narrative. Finally, nothing short of a miracle, mediated by Margery, will ensure the completion of the project.

When the priest first began to write this book, his eyes failed, so that he could not see to form his letters and could not see to mend his pen. All other things he could see well enough. He set a pair of spectacles on his nose, and then it was much worse than it was before. He complained to the creature about his troubles. She said his enemy was envious of his good deed and would hinder him if he might, and she bade him do as well as God would give him grace and not give up. When he came back to his book again, he could see as well, he thought, as he ever did before both by daylight and by candlelight. (1940, 5; 1985, 37)
Even though Margery is illiterate, even in the act of writing itself, which is presumably out of her powers, the text tells us it is “she for God alone, he for God in her.” She reverses the typical medieval gender relation which sees the male as essence, the female as accident. Margery attempts through this “miracle” to cancel or transcend the deferral of writing from speech, of inscription from the monological voice of God, and thereby to ensure the absolute authority of her own claims by locating her written text within an authoritative Logos that is spoken and prophetic. The text consciously strives to overcome the difference that writing necessarily preserves—the openness to interpretation and deformation—and to recuperate logocentric assumptions about the spoken word as a guarantee of access to the truth. Time and again the text self-consciously attempts to reproduce the structures of oral communication. Throughout The Book, Margery depends upon the spoken word as the source of her power. She preaches, confesses, narrates her life story to anyone who will listen, hears confessions (of sorts), and converses both with God and with powerful churchmen.

But at the same time that it creates Margery the visionary as the ground of the text and guarantor of its significance, the proem displays a curious anxiety about writing and its possible abuses. Writing occasionally reveals itself as an alienating technology in The Book; it is more closely associated with the literate clergy than with homegrown visionaries. What is interesting in the prologue is the variety of ways in which writing is shown to deform Margery’s story, creating barriers between the reader and the authorizing presence of Margery’s divinely inspired experience. The effect of the prologue is to make us doubt the existence in the text of a transcendent “self” whose words reflect accurately and in an unmediated way a life story.

The proem repeatedly calls attention to the difficulties involved in writing Margery’s life and the distance between the actual recording of her story and the original events. Twenty years pass, we are told, between Margery’s first visionary experiences and her decision to record them. When she finally finds someone to write her story down, it is a man—possibly her son; the text is unclear—“dwelling in Germany who was an Englishman by birth and after-
wards married in Germany” (1940, 4; 1985, 35). He dies before the project can be finished. Margery then takes his work to a priest and asks him to read it. “The book was so ill-written that he could make little sense of it, for it was neither good English nor good German, nor were the letters formed or shaped as other letters are” (1940, 4; 1985, 35). Still, the priest promises to try to rewrite it. When a scandal arises around Kempe, the priest “for cowardice” refuses to speak with her and “avoided and deferred the writing” for four years. Finally he tells her he cannot read the book, will not finish it, and furthermore is afraid to put his life in peril by having anything more to do with her. He advises her to take the book to yet another man who had known the original scribe, “supposing that he would best know how to read the book.” This man tries to write a leaf and finds it too difficult, “the book was so badly set down and written quite without reason.” Finally the first priest, being pricked by his conscience, agrees to try to read and finish the book. “Trusting in her prayers,” the priest begins to read the book and miraculously is able to understand it: “so he read it over before this creature every word, she sometime helping where there was any difficulty” (1940, 5; 1985, 35).

To say that this book was beset by problems of writing would be an understatement. Between Margery’s experiences and the first transcription of them there is a gap of twenty years, the gap of memory. The language problems created by the first, bilingual scribe further deform these memoirs before they can be reconstructed (with Margery’s help) by the priest who finally, after four or five years, agrees to redraft the text, a gap of memory, transcription, and translation. The processes of transcription and retranscription work against the overtly stated claims to an unmediated presence of Margery’s authoritative voice. She becomes a literary construct. Margery’s experiences, her “self” (in the Cartesian sense of the word), recedes in the face of the “violence” of writing. The reader encounters “Margery” at three removes (at least); the presence of her voice—of mystical experience—cannot be recuperated.

There is, then, no “woman writer” in The Book of Margery Kempe. Instead the “self,” Margery’s self, is experienced as diffuse, incomplete, internally contradictory and in dialogue with other re-
constitutions of herself. What is particularly interesting is the constitution and interaction of male and female "selves" in this text. Jacques Derrida has, somewhat enigmatically, described this intersubjectivity in "The Ear of the Other" when he writes, "I will even risk affirming this hypothesis, that the very sex of the addressee receives its determination from the other who will perhaps decide who I am, man or woman. And it is not the case that it is decided once and for all; but it can be decided like that some other time" (quoted in Miller 1982, 48). The text's concern with the struggle between Margery and her priest/scribe does not end with the proem, with the description of the text's transcription. Their relationship has not been given stable reference by its account of writing or by the attempt to create a subject, Margery, who can exist unproblematically on the written page. Instead, the text of her life is dialogic, a recreative process that diffuses Margery's story and shapes the narrative of events. In one sense, the priest functions as part of Margery's "self," a skeptical voice within the voice of the authoritative mystic. His faith in Margery's spiritual powers must be constantly validated. In chapter 24, for example, the priest suddenly emerges as a central actor in the narrative when he refuses to continue working on the book unless Margery shows some sign of her special grace by revealing the future to him. Reluctantly she agrees and reveals her prophetic "felyngys" to him, but in this case, he does not believe her or act on her advice. I would venture to guess (although it is impossible to verify this hunch) that it is at least partly his and not Margery's obsession with what other people are saying about her—his concern about slander, gossip, and censure—that permeates the text and makes Margery seem so self-obsessed, so conscious of how others view her. He functions at one and the same time as editor and critic. His textual space becomes that between literary transcription and the ideal of authoritative speech.

What the reader encounters in this instance and throughout The Book of Margery Kempe is not the "authentic voice" of a medieval woman, not a revelation of a female subjectivity that the rest of medieval history has erased, but a dialogized subjectivity, fractured and intersected by other voices. The collaboration between Margery and her scribe produces no neat synthesis, no single unified "voice," but a babel of contradictory and conflicting cultural
signs—noise—which can be read only against the backdrop of the social realignments of fifteenth-century England. Besides illuminating the relations between men and women in medieval society, this collaboration also reveals, among other things, the insecurity of an "urban bourgeoisie" struggling to define itself in a world that recognized only two classes and the attempts of the religious laity to find an outlet for their spirituality within a Church monopolized by the clergy.\(^{21}\) Finally, as I have suggested, this collaboration exposes the conflicts between a conservative, logocentric oral culture, in which voice and bodily presence confer meaning, and an increasingly literate and disseminated one, which challenges the authoritative claims of hierarchical models of oral communication. All these developments contribute to the complexities of fifteenth-century gender relationships. An analysis that focuses only on the relentless pursuit of the woman writer risks effacing this kind of cultural and political activity, as well as its effects on gender relations.

The more complex and diffuse notions of subjectivity that are at work (subversively) in *The Book of Margery Kempe* may help illuminate how the act of writing itself focuses the cultural as well as gender anxieties of the late Middle Ages. In the last chapter, I examined some of the ways in which writing, as a technology, accelerated political, economic, and familial changes that accompanied a redistribution of power and wealth among the aristocracy of twelfth-century France. In "The Emergence of the Individual," Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein describe the effect of the dissemination of writing on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century life, particularly on the moneyed and propertied classes:

Writing was associated with a concern that one's property be administered well and that one's heirs inherit a capital consisting

\(^{21}\)See Delany 1983, 76–92, for an analysis of the economic realignments in the late Middle Ages which created this "urban patriciate." In the economy of the early fifteenth century, she argues, money began to mediate relationships in some of the same ways it would under capitalism: "The development of industry and of mercantile capitalism meant that goods were no longer being produced for immediate use, but rather for sale in domestic and foreign markets; they were to be exchanged not for other goods but for money. Money could be accumulated then reinvested for profit or lent at interest; large fortunes could be rapidly made; the big bourgeoisie could subsidize kings and impoverished aristocrats, buy titles and estates, and successfully compete with the feudal aristocracy for political power" (85).
not only of real estate but also of spiritual precepts and memoirs. . . It was difficult to administer or bequeath such spiritual capital if it was not organized. After 1350 an effort was therefore made to catalog and arrange the material in these family archives, stored in shops, offices, and palace studies: contracts, accounts, lists of births and deaths, remedies and potions, correspondence, family trees. Originally these records were kept on note cards, reminders which can often be seen stuck on nails in portraits of merchants and artisans. These gradually gave way to notebooks and ledgers in which debits and credits were recorded. It was some time before a distinction was made between commercial and household accounts, and between household records and personal memoirs. (in Duby 1988, 549)

This businesslike approach to writing—with its cultural construction of the self as a life, a narrative to be documented rather than assumed from orthodox religious conceptions of spiritual growth—is frequently displayed in Kempe’s narrative, which bizarrely juxtaposes economic and social insecurities to religious concerns. Much at first glance might seem puzzling and even repellent in The Book of Margery Kempe, but in the emerging writing economy of the fifteenth century, the detail with which Margery’s business ventures and losses are rendered along with her spiritual debits and credits registers the class-specific nature of the transcription of her religious experience. It suggests why her spiritual last will and testament, appointing God as executor, has about as much lyricism as a tax audit (1940, 20–21). And it explains both the niggling concern with the documentation of outlays—debt repayments, traveling expenses, and the like—and the tendency for Margery’s spirituality to draw upon this same language of economics. Writing has not yet “organized” experience into neat little packets that distinguish business records from household accounts or from spiritual and visionary events; it has not yet constituted a “male experience” in the public sphere apart from a “female experience” of the private, domestic “self.”

“What is an author?” Foucault asks. “What difference does it make who is speaking?” (1979, 160). Clearly, it makes a difference, a political difference, if one wants to recover something of medi-
eval gender relations from the perspective of the powerless as well as the powerful or if one wants to understand the material oppression and resistance of real women. But the sorts of questions such an inquiry spawns also make a difference, and that too is finally a political difference. If as feminists we ask, to paraphrase Foucault (1979, 160), Who really spoke? Is it really she and not someone else? With what authenticity and originality? And what part of her deepest self did she express in her discourse? then we are perpetuating essentialist notions of the subject, of masculinity and femininity, and of the text as a closed hermeneutical totality. If instead we ask, again paraphrasing Foucault, What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for herself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions? then we open up our criticism to a more dialogic conception of subjectivity and gender relations, as well as to the historical and political struggles through which they are constituted and resisted. This concept of the “dialogic subject” and its effects on the formulation of gender relations in eighteenth-century England is the subject of the next chapter.