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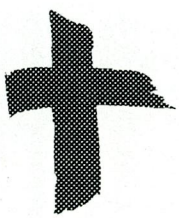

Mystical Masochists.

by Tania Tynan.

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Introduction

'What was said of the thane of Cawder in Macbeth was true pre-eminently of Jesus: "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it." (Pelikan, 1997,P.103.). Religion was of great significance to the people of the medieval ages, preoccupying their daily lives; they were especially concerned with the Passion of Christ, that is, his moment of dying on the cross. An examination of twelfth-century religious devotion shows an emerging shift, from an emphasis on the glorified Christ to an increasing interest in the humanity of Jesus. In the fourteenth-century reflections on the suffering Jesus became the focus. From the twelfth-century to the fourteenth-century, theological texts concerning the nature and effects of Christ's crucifixion proliferated. In the visual arts, depictions of the suffering Christ in agony replaced the majestic Christ of resurrection and judgement. Fourteenth-century church interiors featured paintings depicting Christ's crucifixion, thus surrounding churchgoers with vivid images of Christ's death. This had an enormous impact on the devotion of the medieval worshipper, indeed the impact was so strong that it sometimes resulted in a physical reaction. The subject of this thesis is the relationship between the body of Christ on the cross, and the effect it had on the body of the late medieval worshipper.

The body of Christ was a multiple signifier to late medieval audiences. He was seen to possess many qualities, including those of mother/ father/ brother/ sister/ lover/ saviour..."The idea of gender reversal in men has a more benign history in medieval times, beginning especially if ironically, in the twelfth century which accommodated also the most anti-feminist treatises ever written."(Psakis Armstrong; Bartlett,1995,p. 107.) Through this feminization by medieval mystics, I shall explore the concept of Christ as a mixed-gendered figure.

Many medieval mystics developed such an intense relationship with Christ that their behaviour became very extreme. In the name of Christian devotion they were known to subject themselves to self-mutilation, starvation and self-abasement. It is not completely clear why they saw fit to express themselves by such drastic measures, one can only surmise that it was an attempt to somehow resist the pressures of the intense doctrines of patriarchy of the time. While many mystics explored and experienced such devotion, I have chosen to look especially at that of Julian of Norwich (1342-after 1416) . Julian experienced personal visions of Christ . She developed an intense devotion to him and her writings tell of their erotic nature. She related to Christ because of the feminine aspects she ascribed to him. To understand this mentality in the late middle ages we must first consider how Christ was visibly depicted. In painting and in sculpture Christ was depicted as a very austere figure. It is imperative that we question the relevancy of such austerity. His body looks horribly tortured. This became the inspiration for the subsequent treatment of the worshipper's body . Worshippers too would torture their own bodies to resemble the suffering of Christ. While both men and women practised extreme forms of penance, one form was exclusively female. This was the psycho-somatic imitation of the sufferings of Christ. The marks of scourges and nails that Christ bore during the crucifixion would appear on women's' bodies. Their extreme behaviour became known as *'Imitatio Christi'*. Thus, in chapter one I shall begin by considering the construction of Christ's body at the time. I shall explore the metaphors ascribed to the body of Christ. The Eucharistic host was believed to literally be the physical body of Christ. The people of this period were particularly inclined towards literal thinking. In chapter two I shall consider the reasons behind the worshipper's psycho-somatic behaviour.

As this thesis will consider selected medieval texts and visual documentation of the time, it is of course important to remember the problems involved in doing so. Such a study focuses on the past in retrospection using secondary sources. It is impossible for contemporary eyes to view the scenes of long ago without the fantastic aid of time travel.

> Medieval mystical texts are borne of religious experience, recollections of union with or nearness to God filtered through memory and embodied with an array of associated sensory imagery. The experiences they narrate are not only lodged in the personal histories of private lives, but embedded in historical time as well. We cannot help but to view them as "Other".(Drage Hale; Bartlett, 1995, p.3.)

To view a medieval text in the twentieth century, one has to respect its cultural context. As a thinking, speaking subject of the late twentieth-century I deal with my chosen topic as such. Our understanding of the past is limited by our access to it. As Benjamin reminds us "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it the way it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory....." (Bartlett, 1995,p.3)

Chapter One

The representation of a body is a construct. In this chapter I shall examine how the body of Christ was perceived by late medieval audiences. In the middle ages the metaphorical power of the body was vast. According to Michael Camille,

> The metaphorical power of the body to stand for 'any bounded system' was never more relevant than during the Middle Ages when it served as the locus of a variety of social displacements, intensely felt religious practices, medical and philosophical debate as well as courtly self-fashioning.(Camille; Baker,1994,p.62.)

Attitudes and ideas were articulated through images, particularly images of the body. To understand how the medieval mind interpreted the body we must first of all attempt to displace our own interpretation of it which is informed by twentieth-century evaluation. In contrast the medieval mind was at ease with imposing the literal over the metaphorical and adopting this as official doctrine. The Eucharistic discourse aptly reveals this.

In 1215 Transubstantiation (the conversion of the Eucharistic elements wholly into the body and blood of Christ, only the appearance of bread and wine remaining) was made official doctrine. This effectively meant that to participate in the taking of communion was no longer, merely, a symbolic gesture. Instead it was believed, or rather taught as factual, that the host was the flesh of the Lord God. Communion was henceforth a ritualised group feast, where the devout ate God's flesh and drank His blood. It was not a metaphor , it was a definite presence. In 1264 a feast day was instituted dedicated to Christ's body, *"Corpus Christi"*. This

was to lead to the English Cycle plays and dramas dedicated to the enfleshing of the Word, the corporeal carnivalization of the Divine.

From 1200 onwards, the priest elevated the host at the moment of consecration. The devotional attitude thereby engendered, involved all the senses, especially sight. "The naive religious conscience of the multitude had no need of intellectual proofs in matters of faith. The mere presence of a visible image of things holy sufficed to establish their truth." (Huizinga,1924, p.159.) This emphasis on sight was symptomatic of a yearning for physical intimacy with Christ. For the worshipper just to see the host was in itself a sublime experience. The viewer believed he was consuming the body of God simply by looking at the Divine flesh in the hands of the priest on the altar. The body of God was the Word becoming flesh in the host. The cult of the relic had gained full credence at the time, and as the host was the body of God it was treated as the most precious relic of all. According to Camporesi, the Eucharist was of huge significance. It was the initial site for the beginning of a chain of causality.

> The Eucharist, the sacrifice of the altar, a moment of the highest magio-liturgical tension, Grande mysterium, the culmination of the entire Mass, the dramatic apex of divine participation and supernatural presence, could also be the stage for *mutationes, apparitiones, miracula.* Everything was possible in the arcane atmosphere of Transubstantiation, in the prodigious alchemic balance of divine permutations: the heavenly and the demonic could explode into a war of conflicting powers. (Camporesi; Feher, 1993,p.225.)

A climate of sensationalism resulted from the literal interpretation of the Eucharist. Stories were rampant about the wonders worked by the host.

> As a 'miracle of miracles', the 'divine Sacrament' produced 'holy and marvellous effects' which, as well as the internal effects it had on the soul, showed itself 'in external signs and miracles': the possessed were exorcised, the lame were healed, incurable infirmities disappeared, 'prisoners' were freed from their chains and warriors and duellists drew from it additional energy for their battle.(Camporesi; Feher, 1993,p.223.)

The body of Divine humanity, in his moment of dying, was the object of orthodox and institutionalised Christian devotional consciousness. The body of God , seen as a silent suffering victim, was their adoration. Suffering, on every level, both mortal and divine, has long been important in the Christian faith, but never as intensely as in late medieval times. We must consider the reason behind this shift of interest, from Christ's triumph to his passion. He died suffering to relieve the sins of the people on earth but the daily suffering of the people continued unabated. Celebration of his triumph had only succeeded in making them more sensitive to their own sufferings. This in their minds should not have been the case, as Jesus died to redeem them of their sins, they should not have continued to suffer. They needed, therefore, to feel a worthy justification for their suffering. The crucifixion was consequently elevated to fulfil this function. Suffering itself thus became a valued connection to God and was especially psychologically comforting. Christ had endured torture, he could empathise with their sufferings, as they could with him. This new way of thinking led to a greater emotional attachment to Christ's presence in the host, although the literal medieval mind tortured itself with the horrifying implication that the Divine body would still suffer by being broken by the priest and then consumed by the faithful.

Not everybody agreed, however, that the host was literally the physical body of Christ. It was especially difficult to believe that something physical had changed in the host, when no actual physical change could be seen. This was reinscribed by doctrine, dogma, and ritual, but some people could not believe what they could not see. The desire to resolve this doubt became so ardent that, remarkably, people began to satisfy their own beliefs; they began to see what they wanted to see, they had visions to reaffirm their belief. Langmuir informs us that

> In the chronicle he wrote between 1150 and 1186, Abbot Robert of Torigni of Mont-Saint-Michel recorded a number of host miracles in his entry for 1181/2. A woman, who had not swallowed the host she had received at Easter, wrapped it in a cloth and placed it in her money box. When her sweetheart opened the box, he found it transformed into the likeness of flesh and blood.(Langmuir; Waugh,1996, p.293.)

Other visions reported that the host changed into the living Christ. In his great pioneering book on the subject Peter Browe, for example, documents visions where

> Christ was seen as slaughtered, as crucified with blood flowing from his flesh, or even as being held by his feet by God the father and being pressed into a mill. To these must be added the visions in which the host turned, briefly or lastingly, into flesh and blood, obvious reminders of physical suffering. (Laingmuir; Waugh, 1996, p.294)

It is clear that medieval people needed to believe that Jesus Christ was still suffering for the delivering of their own suffering; in this way the feast day of *Corpus Christi* became another manifestation of the obsession with the body of Christ.

The Eucharist was not alone in representing the body of Christ. The phrase "mystical body" was once only applied to the Eucharist, but it

then came to encompass the entire Catholic Church. This form of metaphor was important in establishing the Church as a very powerful institution. It enabled it to execute more control in governing the faithful *en masse.* Transubstantiation and the Feast of *Corpus Christi* were merely parts of the body politic within the Church's prerogative. Sight had an enormous importance in medieval times and it was the image not the word, (after all illiteracy was widespread,) which mediated most strongly between God and the believer in late medieval spirituality. The new devotional images emphasised Christ's bodily suffering

It is important to remember that the function of an artist was different in medieval times than today. As an image-maker, his work was not about creating "art" according to our understanding of the term. Instead, he was commissioned by the Church to make "visual propaganda" directed at a congregation of barely literate, medieval people desperate for access to the divine Word through the flesh of the image. There are connections between the sacred and the social which have often been overlooked in devotional attitudes because they were considered too personal and privately expressive. This link can be seen in a fifteenth-century English miniature illustrating Lydgate's *Fall of Princes,* (see fig.1.) where Christ occupies the central position and is surrounded by a representative of the various orders of society. Below his feet are common workmen and above his head are princes. In so far as this image was aimed at the higher members of society; it justified their vanity: and in so far as it was directed at the lower orders it reaffirmed their subservient status. Furthermore, it is clearly intended to confirm that Christ resides at the centre of society and that the social hierarchy of the world revolves around him.

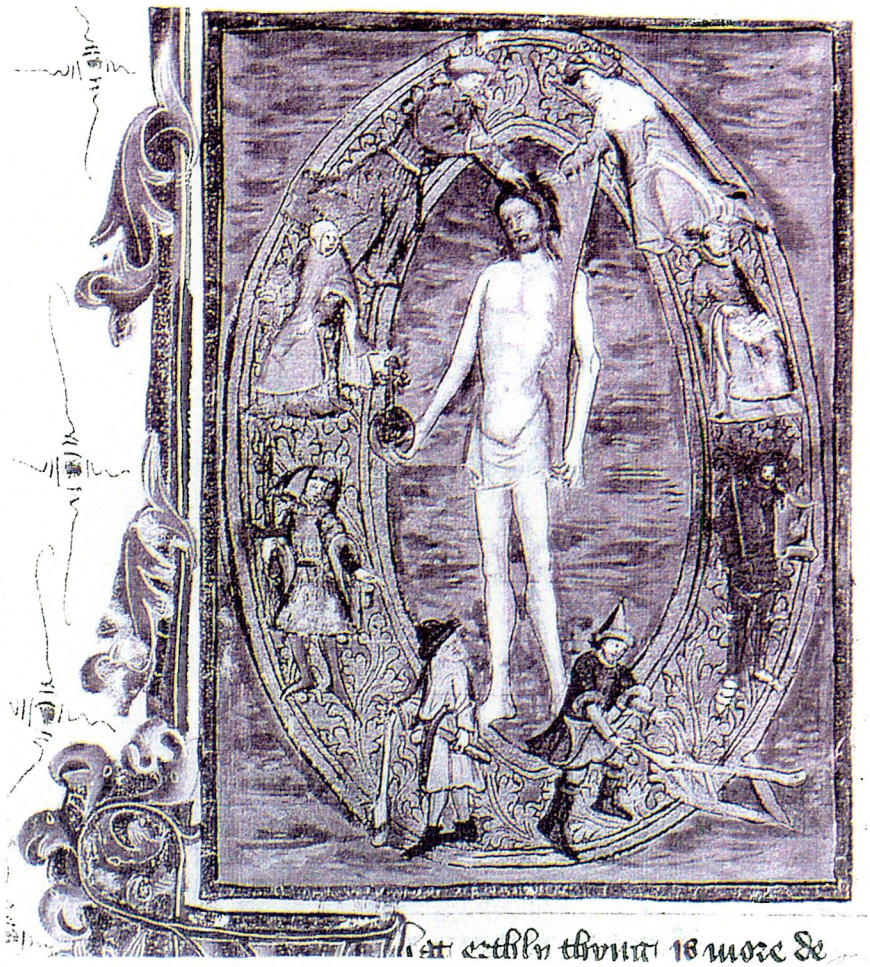

Figure 1. English miniature illustrating Lydgate's *'Fall of Princes'*.

Christ's Bride

The body of Christ was heavily coded. The use of Christ's body as metaphor begins with the *Song of Songs*, a medieval Christian text. It is from the *Song of Songs* that we get the metaphor of Christ as lover/ groom /husband. On an allegorical level , the Song can be interpreted as a passionate love-longing between the soul and God. In this case, however, the human soul is feminised and her beloved-other is the Divine Word. In this sense every human soul is feminised and effectively becomes the bride of Christ. This is the metaphor used in the discourse of affective spirituality or 'positive' mysticism. I intend to further explore the concept of affective spirituality later in this chapter. The erotic nature can only be surmised to intend or to constitute the mystery of such an experience, that is, a relationship with the Divine.

Saint Bernard , Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux, devoted numerous years of his life to sermonising on the text of the *Song of Songs* upon which was based a system of mystical theology. Unfortunately Bernard died in 1153 before this was fully developed. The concept of the mystical marriage metaphor was exaggerated enormously by the female mystics to the effect of misinterpreting Bernard's initial intention. The metaphor of the Christ bride which was incorporated into Bernard's sermons was directed at an entirely male audience of monks. On a metaphorical level they viewed themselves as the brides of Christ; they wished to serve Christ as a woman of the time served her husband as master. The women of late medieval Christianity, however, were to take the metaphor of the Songs literally. They could identify themselves with the

bride of Christ on an actual physical level in a way that the monks could not physiologically do.(see fig. 2.)

> The phenomenon of mysticism increased dramatically in the later Middle Ages; Bernard's mystical theologising had been only the beginning. But it was the eruption of a 'feminine' mysticism which disturbed church authorities. For these women took the language of mysticism, the language of the *Song*, and made it their own; these women appropriated the metaphoricity intended for the monastic mysticism which was produced within the bounds of institutionalised orthodoxy. These women took the metaphoric from Bernard's texts and made it literal. But to make metaphor literal was to materialise the immaterial: theirs was 'a very material mysticism' , a discourse obsessed with fleshliness and actuality, the substantiality of the bodily being, a discourse which focused on the bleeding, dying body of the God-man.(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.91.)

Such women were often termed 'bridal mystics'. They spoke of sexually-gratifying visions of God. The concept of ' woman as wife' was deeply rooted in the medieval mind .This contributed to religious women expressing their mystical experiences in terms of marriage to, and sexual union with Jesus.

> Mechtild of Magdeburg had a visionary relationship with Christ, who was both 'a mortal man ...our Redeemer is become our Bridegroom.' Beatrice of Nazareth stressed the physical satisfaction of the soul given over to the love of Jesus: It seems... the veins are bursting...the bones softening...the throat parching...the body in its every part feels this inward heat, and this is the fever of love. (Williams, 1994,p.124).

Other women were inspired by the intensity of Beatrice's union, and choose to follow a similar lifestyle hoping to attain the same spiritual level where this form of relationship was possible. The convent was an ideal place to devote themselves to the pure contemplation of Christ's love, without any worldly distractions. One of the important mystics was Julian of Norwich.

Figure 2. A miniature of *'Christ and the Church'* from the Alardus Bible (before 1097).

Julian of Norwich was born in 1342, but little is known about her personal life. We do not know anything of her social circumstances or her parentage. We know that she was an anchoress, and lived in an anchorhold attached to the Church of Saint Julian at Conisford in Norwich. It is unknown at what age Julian entered the anchorhold, or whether it was before or after her great vision. The concept of anchoring was common in her day involving a religious life of hermitic contemplation. The anchoress would make a vow with the bishop that she was not to leave the anchorhold-probably just a single room. A servant would attend to food and any other essential contact with the outside world. Aside from formal prayer, the anchoress might sit behind a curtain at the window and act as counsellor to those needing her spiritual advice. It is likely that her name was derived from the church (a common custom with anchoresses) and was not her original name. The exact date of her death is unknown, only that it must be after 1416 since a bequest is made to her in that year, one of several Norwich wills to mention her.

It is not known if Julian was like many women of her time, illiterate. Even if she was, her intelligence cannot be denied. She possessed an acute knowledge of the Bible and of other spiritual classics of the time. This knowledge may have come from hearing the Bible dictated aloud, and indeed, her own writings may have been dictated also. Arguably, when one considers the extent of her interest in theological ideas , one would expect that so dedicated a mind would have disciplined herself to learn to read and write. Her writings were in the vernacular, whether this was by choice or ignorance of Latin is unknown. Writing in the vernacular makes one's work appear more personal and less academic. This is both a benefit and a hindrance to the understanding of the work: a benefit because it was her first language and she could express herself more fluidly and exactly ; a

hindrance because popular romantic fiction was also written in the vernacular leading critics of the time to compare Julian's devotional writings to the more swooning approach of the romance novels accessible to the literate women of the time. Patriarchal society denied women access to any serious academic work.

Julian experienced her visions during a serious illness when she was thirty years old. The date of her "Showings" was May 8, 1373. She had previously prayed for such a desperate illness. She wanted to have a near-death experience so that she could identify with the suffering of Christ. While she was experiencing her illness she did not realise that it was the answer to her prayer, she believed that she was actually dying. Julian hovered between life and death for three days. Her curate held a crucifix up before her eyes so that she could focus her mind on Jesus. But Julian was to recover and to document her extraordinary visions. In fact the rest of her life was preoccupied with this intense experience. She wrote two accounts of her great vision, a long and a short text. The short text she wrote immediately afterwards and the long text twenty years later. Her second text bears all the material of the first but she elaborates on and adds some significant theological material. In her "Showings" Julian gives a graphic account of how she saw Jesus dying on the cross. She recounts with scrupulous attention to detail the pain Christ endured. She notes every aspect of his physical deterioration. At the climax of this agony she changes the scene , Christ becomes joyful and converses with her. He answers her questions about suffering and salvation.

In examining the concepts of suffering and salvation we need to explore the associate concept of affective spirituality. The fact that the curate held a small crucifix before Julian's eyes to direct her thoughts is

very interesting. It is this which commences the re-enactment of the sufferings of Jesus in his Passion. Julian describes in graphic detail the corporeal visions of the body of Jesus grotesquely disfigured as he is crowned with thorns, is scourged, and dies. She vividly portrays the bleeding head of Christ;

> I saw the red blood trickling down from under the crown ,all hot, flowing freely and copiously, a living stream, just as it seemed to me that it was at the time when the crown of thorns was thrust down upon his blessed head. (Furlong, 1996, p.194.)

The shift of emphasis from the resurrection to the crucifixion, the recognition of physical pain in the crucifixion and a desire not only to worship Christ but to suffer with him informed affective spirituality. In visual imagery, the figure of the majestic Christ is gradually displaced " by the suffering Christ; the calm features of the regal Son of Man, the royal crown replaced by a crown of thorns, and the erect body of the victor twisted into the battered torso of the victim."(Baker, 1994,p.16) (see figures 3,4,5,6.) In the later middle ages there is an increased interest in the emotional reactions of those surrounding the crucifixion. As Mary Magdalen grieves the death of Jesus, for example, her expression is one of lamentation. She laments not only the dying Jesus but her own sins. This double lamentation informs affective spirituality. The altered perspective on devotional practices led Christians to alter their devotional response. They responded to the humanity of Christ's suffering with intense emotion. They connected with Christ through his suffering, and this connection brought about a consciousness in them of the mutual nature of love between the

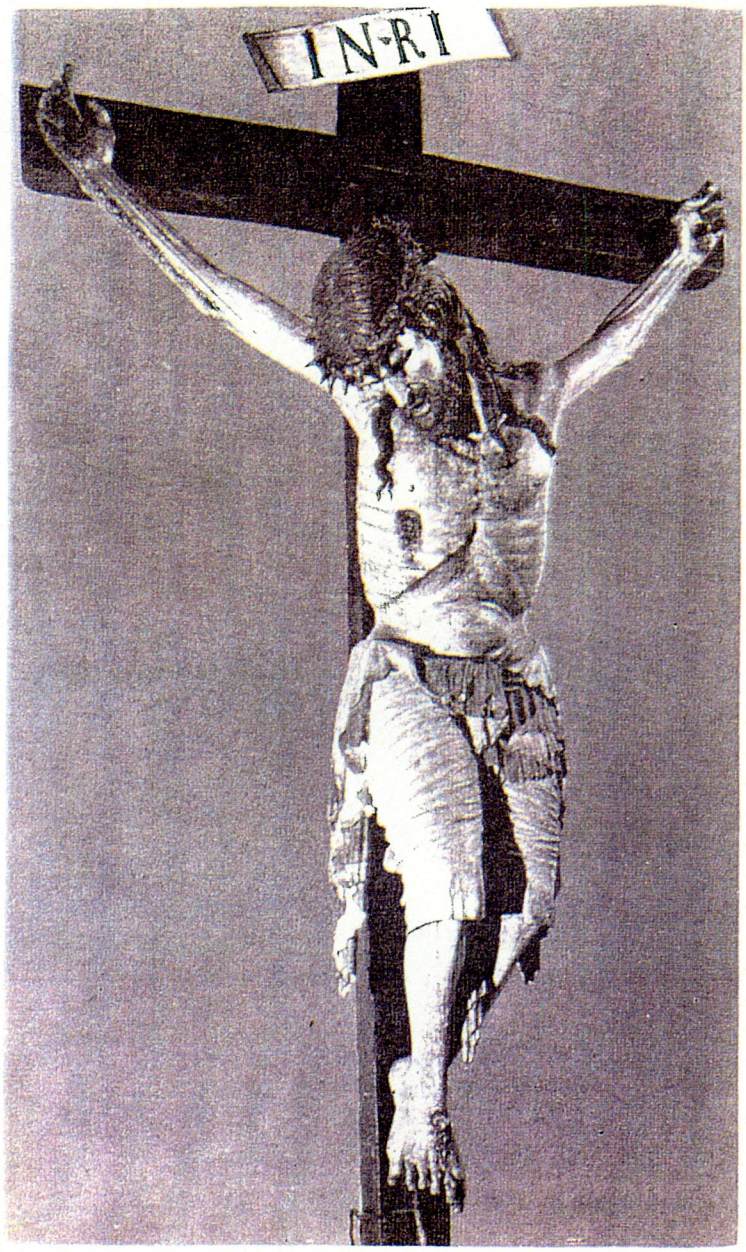

Figure 3. Wood carving, (first half of the fourteenth-century), Alps, Salzburg.

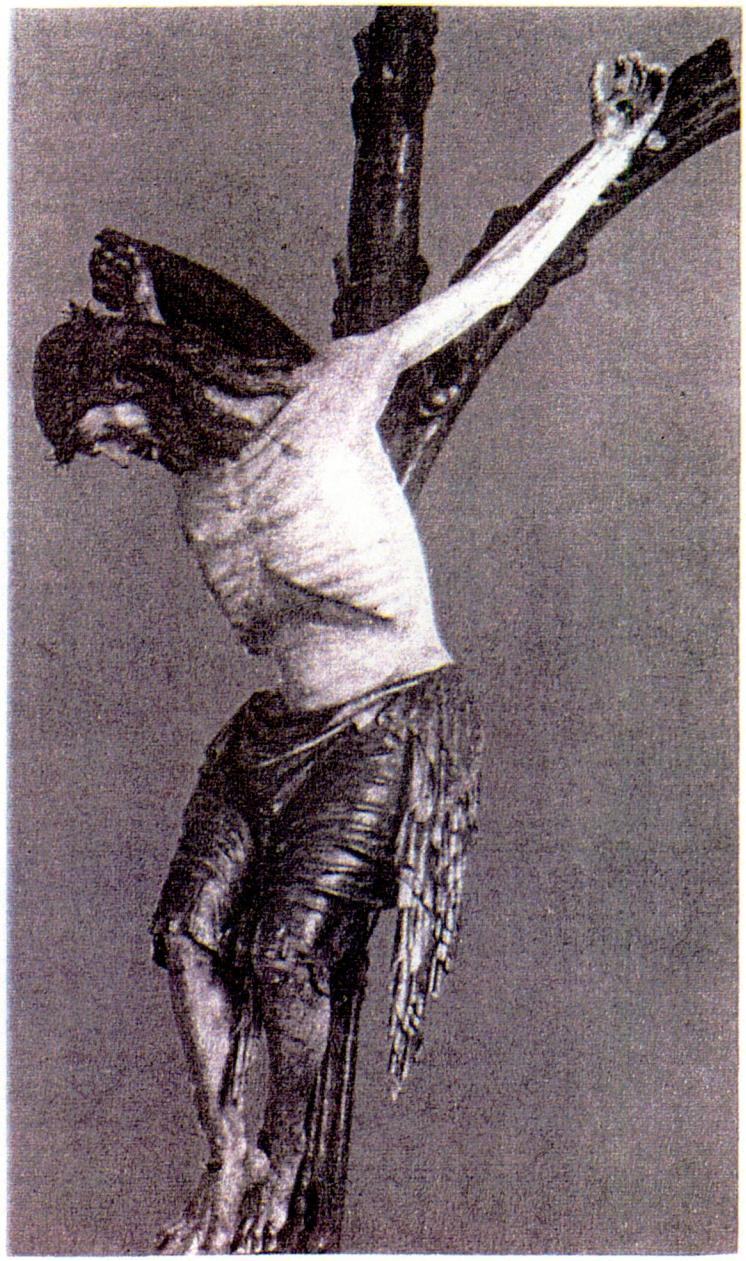

Figure 4. Wood carving, (c.1300),
Y-cross, Friesach.

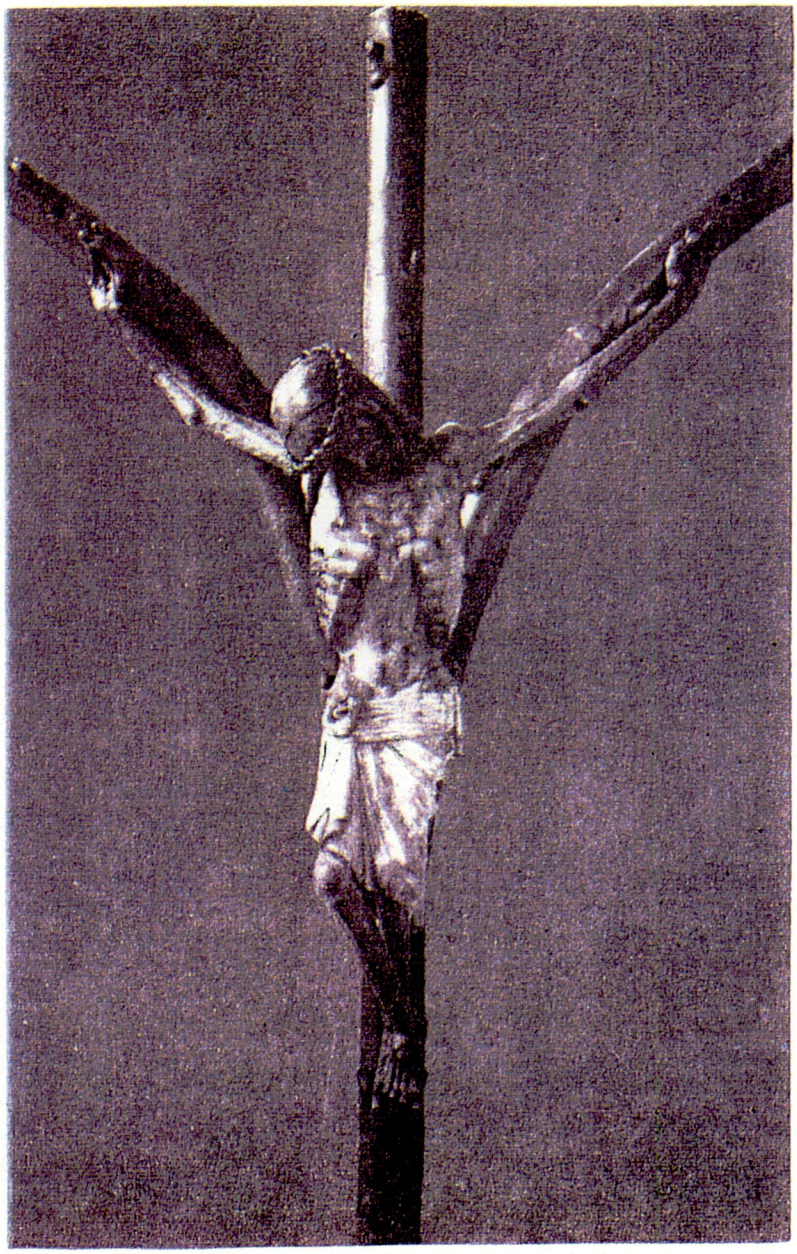

Figure 5. Wood carving, (c. 1300),
Y-cross, Cologne.

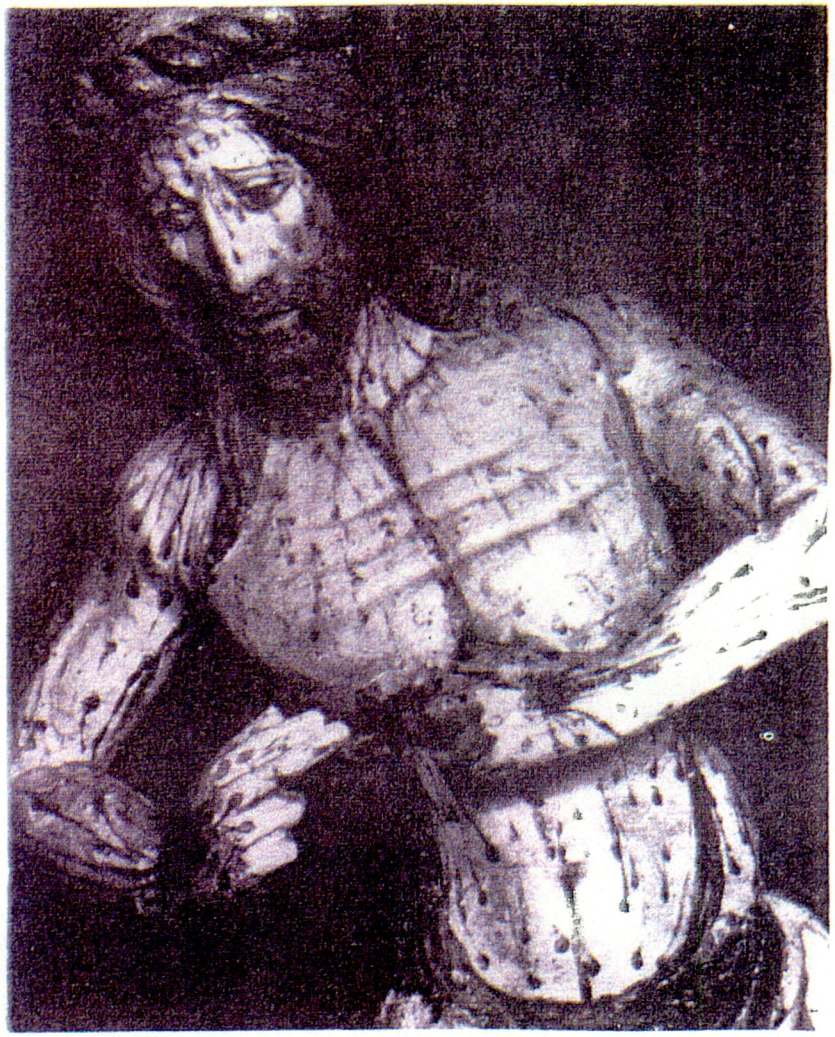

Figure 6. Wood carving (detail),
(1370-80),' *Man of Sorrows,'*
Southern Germany, Frauenworth.

Redeemer and the redeemed. Peter Abelard's statement in the twelfth century is a radical expression of this;

> It seems to us that this is the way in which we have been justified in the blood of Christ, and reconciled to God: that by this singular favour shown to us (that his Son took our nature, and preserved until death, providing us with both teaching and example) he bound us more fully to himself by love...And so our redemption is that great love awoken in us by the passion of Christ, which not only frees us from the slavery of sin, but acquires for us the true liberty of the sons of God, that we may fulfil all things more by love of him than by fear. (Baker, 1994, p.19)

Abelard composed a sequence of hymns between 1128 and 1140 which express the sentiments that would become commonplace in the following century: "For they are ours, O Lord, our deeds, our deeds; Why must thou suffer torture for our sin? Let our hearts suffer for thy passion, Lord, That sheer compassion may thy mercy win." (Baker, 1994, p.19) Bernard of Clairvaux , a contemporary of Abelard, believed that God assumed a human nature in Christ's suffering in order to elicit the love of humankind.

> I think this is the principle reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love. (Baker, 1994, p.20)

Even though Bernard clearly expresses the view that the carnal attraction to God is merely a stepping stone to the greater methods of loving God, he does admit it to be an integral part. In his words "Your affection for your Lord Jesus should be both tender and intimate, to

oppose the sweet enticements of sensual life. Sweetness conquers sweetness as one nail drives out another." (Baker, 1994,p20) Julia Kristeva cites Bernard of Clairvaux as she speaks of this revolution in Western consciousness during the twelfth century:

> Saints and troubadours seem to proclaim, *Ego affectus est,* thus glorifying what, in the light of Reason, will appear to be base irrationality. They impart willpower to their love, enlighten it with reason, tinge it with wisdom, in order to raise it to the dignity of a divine essence...For God is love.(Baker, 1994,p.20)

This emotive focus on the passion of Christ and the complementary feeling of compassion in the worshipper informs the range of devotional attitudes, practices and rhetoric of affective spirituality.

Julian of Norwich displays the influence of affective spirituality in her statement regarding her prayers prior to her visions.

> I desired three graces by the gift of God. The first was to have recollection of Christ's Passion. The second was a bodily sickness, and the third was to have , of God's gift, three wounds. As to the first, it came into my mind with devotion; it seemed to me that I had great feeling for the Passion of Christ, but still I desired to have more by the grace of God. I thought that I wished that I had been at that time with Mary Magdalen and with the others who were Christ's lovers, so that I might have seen with my own eyes our Lord's Passion which he suffered for me, so that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him, even though I believed firmly in all Christ's pains, as Holy Church shows and teaches, and paintings of the Crucifixion represent, which are made by God's grace, according to Holy Church's teaching, to resemble Christ's Passion, so far as human understanding can attain. (Furlong, 1996, p.190)

Julian herself knows that her first two desires are unusual and leaves them both pending on God's will. Her third request was for three wounds.

> I conceived a great desire, and prayed our Lord God that he would grant me in the course of my life three wounds, that is, the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing with my will for God. (Furlong, 1996, p.191.)

These are metaphorical wounds; as Julian did not attach a condition of God's will to her final desire she must have viewed it as more conventional. These three desires indicate that Julian was familiar with the tenets and customary practices of affective spirituality of the times. This situates Julian and the genesis of her *Book of Showings* within a specific cultural matrix. Even though Julian has five desires, if one counts the wounds in the singular, the first two are but outward, physical manifestations of the last three. Julian is typical of late medieval times in her longing to partake in the suffering of Christ. Through a psychological experience she wants to attain the physical experience of Christ, *imitatio Christi*. Through masochism it was believed that one could become closer to the Divinity. Richard Kieckhefer's observation about the affinity among these concepts in the thought of the fourteenth-century saints aptly describes Julian's attitude : "Compassion and imitation were responses that closed the distance between oneself and the suffering Christ: identifying oneself with him, one suffered along with him and strove to partake of his sufferings." (Baker, 1994, p.21.) Meditation was also an integral facet of affective spirituality. In a guidebook for anchoresses, *De institutione inclusarum (Rule of Life for a Recluse)*, Aelred of Rievaulx wrote that compassion and imitation were the necessary groundstones in attaining the love of God and these were best infiltrated through meditation on the

crucifixion. In *De institutione inclusarum;* He says that" to speak of affection, spiritual and bodily, you must nourish it with holy and beneficial meditation." (Baker, 1994, p.22) The fact that Julian was an anchoress testifies to a knowledge of contemporary devotional practices, including the desire for visionary experience.

Imitatio Christi or masochism

The literal physicality of *imitatio Christi* was considered a perfectly appropriate response to meditation on the Passion. *The Prickynge of Love,* a late fourteenth-century translation of the popular *Stimulis amoris,* probably written by James of Milan but attributed to Bonaventure, attests to this:

> First you should consider Christ's passion, for by concentrating on it you shall set Christ in the sight of your soul....And make that your rule and your exemplar to live by and conform yourself to be like him and his passion through voluntary suffering of all kinds of discomfort. And in that be your comfort and your solace that you might in any way suffer for his love. (Baker, 1994, p.23)

As Baker says, in late medieval hagiography, intense compassion often manifests itself somatically. The thirteenth-century chronicles of Dominican convents in the Rhineland frequently recount the physical pains suffered by sisters engaged in ardent meditation on Christ's passion. St. Francis of Assisi is probably the most famous of all to bear the physical evidence of intense compassion as manifested by the stigmata, for example.

According to the prerequisites of affective spirituality , compassion for Christ's suffering, achieved through meditation or a vision evokes feelings of guilt. This is so, because the visionary realises that the pain of Christ was caused by human sinfulness and this increases the individuals' regrets. The visionary also recognises that Christ sacrificed himself out of love of humanity and this in turn engenders a stronger love in the visionary. This chain of causality is echoed in the pain evoked in *imitatio Christi* as penance for the sins that made the initial pain necessary. Julian's desire for a bodily sickness and her third wound of longing for God are similar in the sense that they both request a union with God. She says:

> In this sickness I wanted to have every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I should have if I were dying, every fear and assault from the devils, and every other kind of pain except the departure of the spirit, for I hoped that this would be profitable to me when I should die, because I desired soon to be with my God.(Furlong, 1996, p.191.)

Julian hopes that this will prove to be a good repentance for her sins in life , and a preparation for her union with God. Julian's "longing for God " categorises her as *Brautmystik,* (Christ's Bride),in which she uses the same rhetoric of desire.

It was accepted that affective spirituality had a three stage approach to spiritual growth. One began with compassion, then contrition or guilt, and then progressed to contemplation. This makes the carnal aspects of the devotee's love acceptable .

> Just as carnal love comes before spiritual love, meditation precedes contemplation, for devotion to the humanity of Christ is 'carnal with comparison to that other love which does not know the Word as flesh so much as the Word as wisdom, as justice, truth, holiness, loyalty, strength, and whatever else could be said in this manner.(Baker,1994,p. 24.)

Adopting the language of erotic desire, meditation both sustains the Bride's love for Christ and attracts the Bridegroom to greater intimacy with the soul. Thus, by considering Julian's request for three wounds and by approximating them to the three stages of progression of affective spirituality, we can conclude that she must have possessed a prior knowledge of religious devotional practices.

Julian of Norwich and visual representation.

Remembering the importance of the sense of sight in the medieval period we must not overlook actual visual depictions of the crucified Christ. Many artists utilised the words of the mystics as research for their grotesque imagery. The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, a polytych, by the German artist, Grunewald, is one of the best known depictions of this genre.(see fig.7.) The main emphasis of this work is on physical suffering. The realism of the crucifixion scene is related to the writings of the fourteenth-century mystic, St. Bridget of Sweden (published in German in 1502)

> A catholic scholar found that her *Revelations on the Life and Passion of Jesus Christ and His Mother, the Holy Virgin Mary* was known to Grunewald and was a source of some of his imagery. Indeed, her vision of the crucified Christ reads like a description of Grunewald's painting:
>
> the crown of thorns was impressed on his head; it covered half of his forehead. The blood ran in many rills...Then the colour of death spread....After He had expired, the mouth gaped, so that the spectators could see the tongue, the teeth and the blood in the mouth. The eyes were cast down. The knees were bent to one side: the feet were twisted around the nails as if they were on hinges ...The cramped fingers and arms were stretched. (Dillenberger, 1986, p.145.)

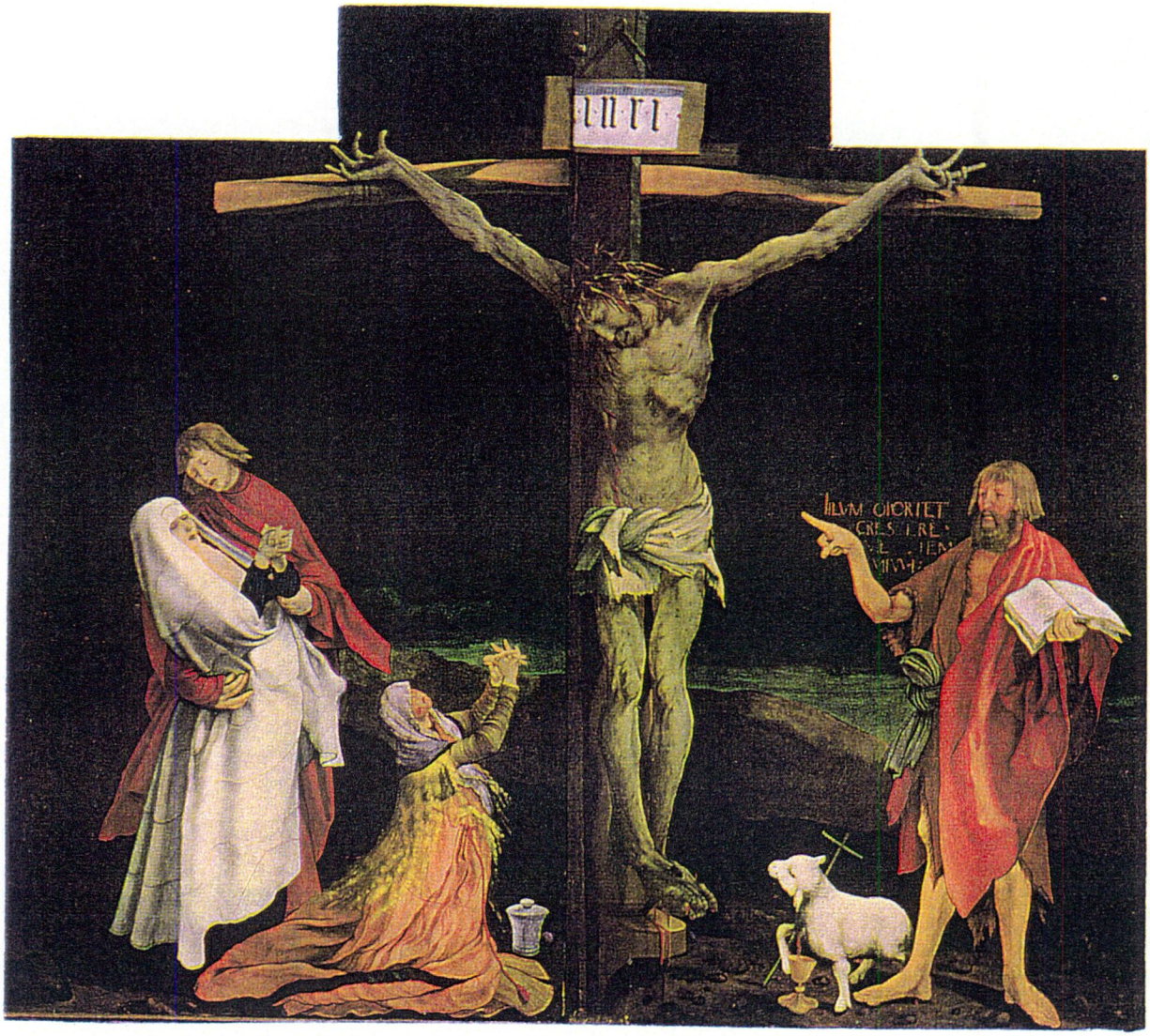

Figure 7. *'The Isenheim Alterpiece* '(central panal of the Crucifixion) by Mathias Grunewald. (c. 1515), Colmar Museum.

Grunewald can translate the incidents of the saint's vision quite literally into visual terms. H.R. Wackrill believes, however, that it is not St. Bridget's influence alone at play in the Isenheim Altarpiece.

> The grief or sadistic cruelty of his characters is rendered with such intensity that we suspect a more-than-normal part of it must be native to the painter...there is a feeling that the physical suffering itself has reactivated a deep-seated personal obsession with cruelty. (Wackrill, 1967, p.3)

The Book of Showings by Julian of Norwich gives a particularly vivid description of Christ dying. Comparisons can be made between the intensity of Julian's account and visual depictions of the crucifixion.

> Richard Kieckhefer, for example, observes that Julian achieves verbally the same violence of emotion that the German plague crosses do visually. 'German crucifixes of the fourteenth century frequently portray Christ's body in grotesquely distorted fashion, with blood gushing profusely from his wounds. Something of the same effect comes from Julian of Norwich's vision of the crucifixion, in which Christ's body undergoes almost kaleidoscope transformation through various shades of blue, brown, and black, as a piercing cold wind dries his flesh.' Catherine Jones attributes Julian's descriptive powers to the influence of the school of East Anglian art, at its height during the fourteenth century. The vivid pictorial quality of the bodily showings, Jones contends, 'might well be compared to the skilled modelling techniques and fine colours used so sensitively by the East Anglian artists, who characteristically excelled at endowing passion scenes with exquisite pathos'. Sixten Ringbomeven suggests that an artistic rendering of the crucifixion was the catalyst for Julian of Norwich's visionary experience.(Baker,1994, p.40)

There was certainly an austerity in the prevailing style of representing the Passion of Christ in late medieval art and in Julian's Showings.

There are two works of art situated near Norwich with which Julian could have been familiar. One is a wall painting (circa 1250) in the building that was once the refectory of St. Faith's Priory, a Benedictine Foundation in Horsham. What is unusual is the imposing size of the painting, in which the figures are double life-size. It is a particularly intense depiction of the crucifixion, not unusual in that Christ is interposed between grief-stricken Mary and John. Blood is flowing from Christ's wounds and his body is emaciated. (see fig. 8.)

Another example of an empathic work with which Julian may have been familiar is the *Gorleston Psalter*, (circa 1325) executed for Gorleston parish church in Suffolk.(see fig.9.) There is a full-page devoted to the Crucifixion. It is a very moving image set on a jagged headland with skulls scattered around. The body of Christ dominates the picture space. Again the grief-stricken Mary and John are placed on either side. Mary Magdalen clutches the base of the cross, her emotions are always more physically expressive than that of anybody else. The blood spilling from Christ's side wound flows down the loincloth. Christ's body looks too heavy for his thin arms to bear. The tension created here is painfully effective. "The quiet intensity of this painting suggests that it is a devotional rather than a didactic image."(Baker,1994,p.42.). It is likely that this manuscript was in the cathedral of Norwich during Julian's lifetime. Norwich, like London, in the fourteenth century, was a centre for the production of illuminated manuscripts. It was therefore a focal point for artists and artisans, and their presence would indicate that Julian would have seen representations of the crucifixion of an evocative nature like the Gorleston Psalter.

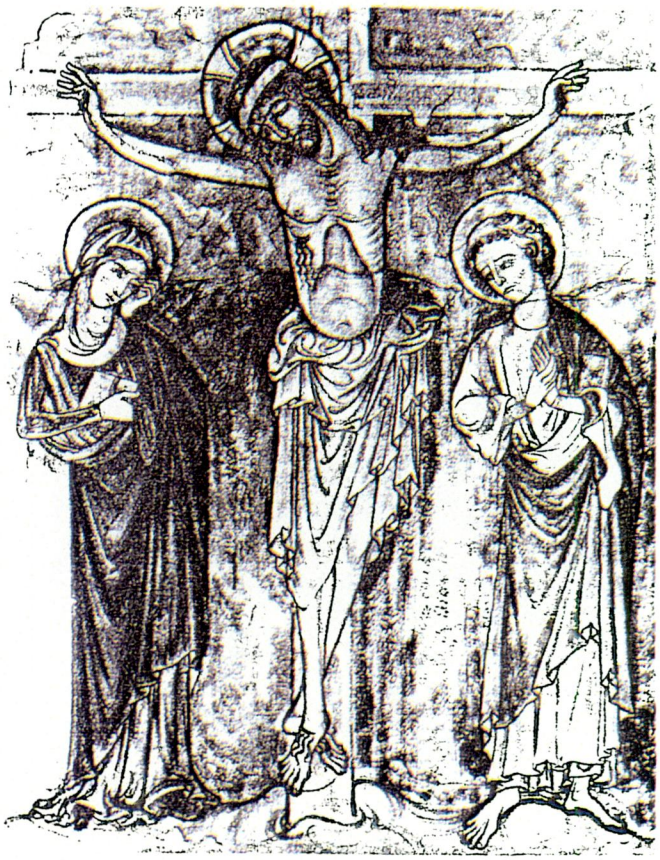

Figure 8. *Crucifixion,' Horsham St. Faith's Priory*', Norfolk.

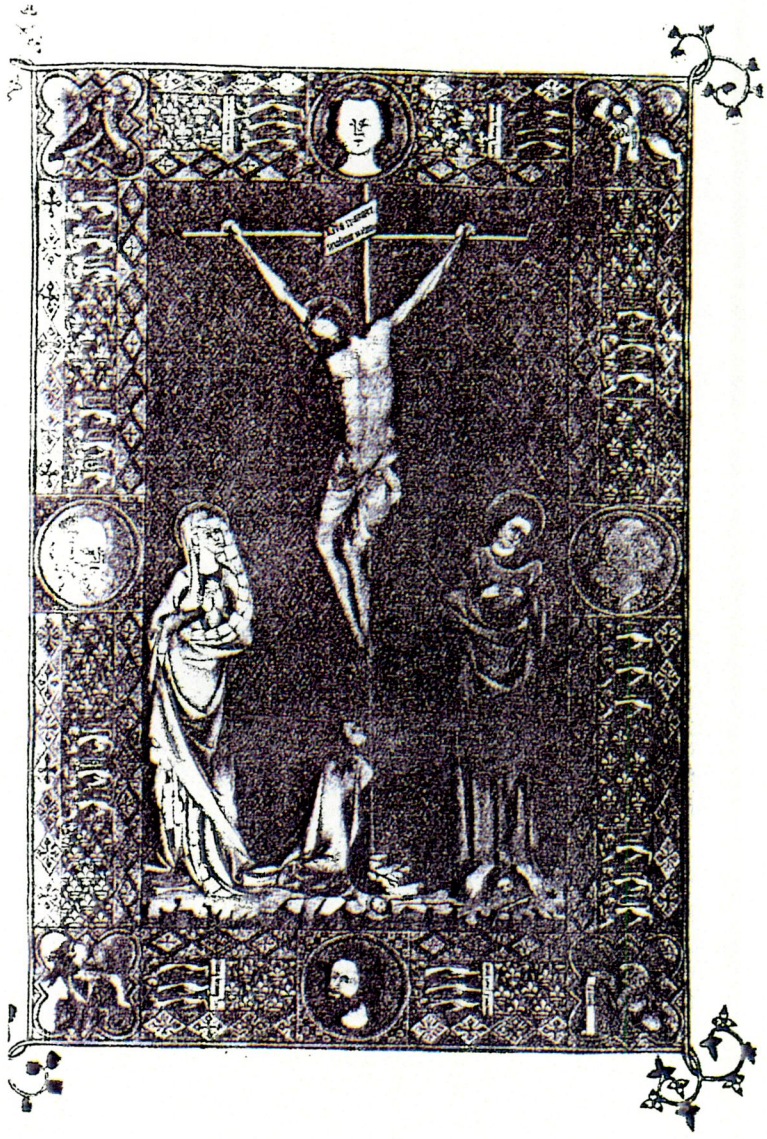

Figure 9. *Crucifixion,'Gorlston Psalter'*. England.

Julian herself gives credence to the fact that she was influenced by devotional imagery. She says;

> I believed firmly in all Christ's pains, as Holy Church shows and teaches, and as paintings of the crucifixion represent, which are made of God's grace, according to Holy Church's teaching, to resemble Christ's Passion as far as human understanding can attain. (Furlong,1996,p.190).

She possessed an acute visual eye as the graphic descriptions in her *Showings* attest to. It is likely that she drew her inspiration for this graphic account from the visual stimulus in the cathedrals around her. But was this the only stimulus for such an experience?

Meditation

Considering the emphasis on meditation at the time it is reasonable to ascertain that it too played a large part in Julian's bodily *Showings*. Meditation was fundamental to affective spirituality and involved an imaginative involvement in the sufferings of Christ's death. By means of meditation the meditator could close the time gap between him/herself and the time of Jesus Christ. They effectively became an eyewitness to the event, and more than that, as the event was physically re-enacted through their actual bodies. Meditators were encouraged to 'see' the events of the passion with their imagination.

> Pseudo-Bonaventure often appeals to the meditator to envision the events of Christ's life in 'the minds eye.' For example, the fourteenth-century Middle English translation of the Passion section of the *Meditations vitae Christi* , 'The Privity of the Passion', begins with a promise of 'newe gostely

> comforthe' to the person who raises up all the acuity of his mind and opens wide the inner eye of his soul to behold this Passion, and forgets and casts behind him for the time all other occupations and business; and he who makes himself present in his thought as if he saw completely with his bodily eye all the things that befell concerning the cross and the glorious passion of our lord Jesus, not briefly and fleetingly, but lovingly, busily, abundantly, and lastingly; not harshly, nor with dullness and heaviness of spirit.(Baker, 1994, p.45.)

This emphasis on imagining, visually, the events of the passion tuned the meditators' eye for visual details. Another device used to attune the meditators' eye was the use of the first person in prayers of meditation. Pseudo-Bonaventure in *The Privity of the Passion* says;

> Ah, Lord Jesus, what made you suffer all this hard penance, torments and pains? Truly the immeasurable love that you had for us, and our great wickedness that might be washed away except with the precious liquid of your precious blood. (Baker, 1994, p.46)

Through devices such as these the imagination transforms that which is not present and material into the concrete and visible. Julian creates this sense of presence with Christ. Julian asked to be of Christ's lovers. To be;

> at that time with Mary Magdalen and with the others who were Christ's lovers, so that I might have seen with my own eyes our Lord's Passion which he suffered for me, so that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him.(Furlong,1996,p.190)

The eidetic quality of Julian's descriptions results from her training in meditation to visualise imaginatively and from keenly observing religious paintings.

Julian tends to read her vision as a picture rather than as a story. She describes seven bodily scenes; the head of Christ , the face of the mocked Christ, the bleeding body of the scourged Christ, the discoloured face of the crucified and dying Christ, the blissful countenance of the Saviour, the side-wound, and the glory of Christ. This was obviously influenced by viewing devotional art from the Last Supper to the Resurrection. Julian focuses obsessively on the pains Christ endured but does not mention his torturers. Religious painting of the fourteenth-century would have dealt with the chaos of the entire scene, Julian's concern, however, was with the intimacy of the suffering wounds alone. Her interpretation of Christ's fifth word on the cross, 'Sicio',(meaning 'thirst') was taken to suggest both bodily and ghostly thirst, she chooses, however, to neglect the consequences which apparently followed this whereby his torturers gave him vinegar and gall to quench his thirst, focusing instead on Christ's inward dryness. She offers a graphic account on his desiccated body lingering on his physical pain.

> The blessed body was left to dry for a long time, with the wrenching of the nails and the sagging of the head and the weight of the body, with the blowing of the wind around him, which dried up his body and pained him with cold, more than my heart can think of, and with all his other pains I saw such pain that all that I can describe or say is inadequate, for it cannot be described. But each soul should do as St. Paul says, and feel in himself what is in Christ Jesus.(Furlong, 1996, p.206)

Julian's long text differs from the short in that its powers of description are more acute. In the short text for example Julian describes Christ's bleeding head thus; "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."(Furlong, 1996,p.206). She elaborates on this in the long text.;

> The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets, looking as if they came from 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.(Baker, 1994, p.53)

Julian's ability to enhance her descriptions is evident in her own analysis . She says,

> At the time three things occurred to me: The drops were round like pellets as the blood issued, they were round like a herring's scales as they spread, they were like raindrops off a house's eaves, so many that they could not be counted.(Baker, 1994, p.53)

She uses images of daily life, thus showing her natural power of acute observation. This leads to a more intensive response from her readers. As Windeatt puts it, "Julian quite literally alters her way of looking at the original shewings...The details of colour, quality, and extent reflect an emotional response in Julian and summon a corresponding response from the reader."(Baker, 1994, p.55) The treatises of meditation have not only influenced her visions but they also determined how she choose to report them.

Chapter Two

How the body of Christ was interpreted by the audience of the time.

There is evidence to suggest that Christ's (human) body was variously constructed in late medieval times. These different constructions are apparent in a number of media. The construction of the body of Christ on the cross functions on a metaphoric level as well as a manifestly literal level, especially when one considers the construction of Christ's body as a battered, bleeding, dying victim. This is a polysemous signifier, in that it has different meanings in different contexts. The wounded body of Christ can signify a variety of different interpretations simultaneously. Christ's body is polyvalent. Thus the relationship between the worshipper and Divinity is signified through different discursive and rhetorical possibilities. Julian of Norwich in the long text of her *Showings* elaborates on the various manners in which Christ appears to her;

> And thus I saw that god enjoyeth that he is our fader, and god enjoyeth that he is our moder, and god enjoyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule his lovyd wyfe. And Cryst enjoyeth that he is our broder, and Jhesu enjoyeth that he is our savyour.(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.82)

From such a variety of signifieds we can gain insight into the various forms of relationship different Christians had with Christ by considering how they viewed him. The rhetoric of a familial discourse was often used to indicate the intimate nature of the worshiper's relationship with Christ. Many mystics saw Christ as a beloved "other". There is evidence for this in the texts of the *Middle English Passion Lyrics*, *Richard Rolle's Meditations on the Passion*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and particularly the texts of poetic prose-*be Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, *On Ureisun of Oure Louerde*, and *A Talkyng of be Lpue of God*. These texts

verbally reconstruct the spectacle of the bleeding, dying body of Christ. (Ash; Threadgold, 1990,p.82) This body is thus a site for the speculation, contemplation and adoration of the worshippers. The crucified body is the object of worship and also the object of desire. The bleeding wounds are privileged. They are invested with a double meaning , of salvation and eroticism . This is seen in the verbal construction of the crucifixion where he poses as the beloved other. In each of the poetic prose texts, speaking begins with an ecstatic rhapsodising to Christ. The opening utterance of *A Talhyng of be Loue of God* is the most spectacular.

> Jesus, true God, God's son!
> Jesus, true God, true man! Man,
> virgin's child! Jesus, my holy
> love, my sure sweetness! Jesus,
> my heart, my happiness,
> health of my soul! Jesus, sweet
> Jesus! Jesus, dear Jesus! Jesus,
> almighty Jesus! Jesus, my lord,
> my beloved, my life, my balm,
> my nectar! Jesus, all powerful
> Jesus! Jesus, You are all that I
> hope. Jesus, my maker, who
> made me of nothing and all
> that is in heaven and on earth.
> Jesus, my Redeemer, You
> brought me so dear with Your
> grievous passion, with Your
> precious blood and with Your
> painful death on the cross.
> Jesus, my Saviour, who shall save
> me through Your great mercy and
> Your great power. Jesus, my weal
> and all my delight! Jesus in whom
> is all my bliss! Jesus, besides that
> You are so fair and so sweet,
> You are moreover so lovely;
> lovely and loveable that the holy
> angels, who always behold You,
> are never weary of looking at
> Your face. Jesus You are all-fair,
> the sun being but a shadow in
> comparison with You and
> ashamed of her darkness in the

> presence of Your bright face.
> You, who give her light and all
> that has light , light
> my dark heart. Grant that Your
> brightness cleanse my soul,
> which is miserably defiled
> with foul sin. Lord, make her
> worthy to be Your sweet
> dwelling. Kindle me with the
> bliss of Your burning love.
> Sweet Jesus, my dear life, let me
> be your servant, and teach me
> to love You and make me serve
> You, loving Lord, so that Your
> love alone be ever all my delight,
> my thought and my longing.
> Amen.(Ash; Threadgold,1990,
> P.84)

There are reports of a number of bodily sensations of a strikingly erotic nature. For example, the medieval nuns Lukardis of Oberweimer and Margaret of Faenza kissed their spiritual sisters with open mouths and grace flowed from one to the other with an ardour that left both women shaken. The thirteenth-century poet and mystic Hadewijch spoke of Christ penetrating her until she lost herself in the ecstasy of love. Catherine of Siena talks of the foreskin of Christ as a wedding ring. (Bynum, 1990, P.191) Returning to *A Talhyng of be Loue of God,* we can see that the construction of Christ as lover is also the construction of Christ as mother:

> Ah! Lord Jesus, thy succour!
> why have I any delight in other
> things than in thee? why love I
> anything but thee alone? O that I
> might behold how thou
> streychedst thyself for me on the
> arms and asks him so sweetly:
> 'Hush, darling; hush, dear'. She
> takes him in her arms. 'He wants
> to be embraced and to kiss me
> sweetly? Who, my darling, who
> has done this to you? 'She

gives him her breast and stops
his tears. That breast be my
pleasure, my care, my longing,
sweet Jesus, King of heaven , to
suck to sayiety, which through
the opening by the spear,
while gaped at by many men,
with the moistening by Your
precious blood relieves all
sorrows. And if anybody
should think that he will share
that same suck of Your
precious heart in the bliss of the
heavenly kingdom and there
be Your darling in Your
affectionate embracing You here,
hanging on the cross and
sharing Your passion through
holy meditation with love-
liking thought and heart-felt
pity...No, certainly not, let no
man believe that. Whosoever
wants to share Your bliss
there, he must share Your
suffering with You here.
(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.85.)

Christ appears here as both lover and mother. His wounded and bloody body is the site of desire as a lover. Yet in conjunction with that the same wounded and bloody body is the site of a nurturing mother. Christ's body is the site where two somatic metaphors combine. There is ambiguity here in the lines "O that I were in thy arms, in thy arms so outstretched and outspread on the cross!"(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.85) It is hard to distinguish if the speaker longs for the erotic embrace of the lover or the heartfelt embrace of the mother. It is difficult for one today to comprehend why the battered, bleeding body of Christ might be considered motherly. But it is important to understand that there were different bodily associations in the medieval ages. In the semiotic sense women's physical bodies in their maternal functioning were seen as food. So the metaphor of a mother's lactating breast was superimposed onto Christ's bleeding side

wound.(see figures 10, 11.) As the speaker in *A Talkyng of be Loue of God* says

> There I shall suck of Your
> side, which opens towards me so
> wide, without moving at all,
> and there I will stay. When it
> was opened for me, so blessed
> be that time
> (Ash; Threadgold,1990,p.86)

In visual imagery Christ with a metaphorical lactating breast was depicted with Eucharistic significance. In a painting of the crucifixion at the back of the Klosterneuberg Altar by the Vienna master, we can see the wound splurting blood.(see fig. 12.)The wound is placed at the breast, and a Eucharistic chalice collects the blood. Ash explains that

> According to scientific theorising in the Middle
> Ages, breast milk was actually blood; the blood
> of the mother which was used to nourish the
> unborn child in the uterus was, after the child's
> birth, converted into breast milk(Ash;
> Threadgold, 1990, P.86)

The association of the side wound with a lactating breast imbued Christ's body with maternal characteristics. However the late medieval audience elaborated on the notion of Christ possessing a maternal nurturing capacity . As was their habit, they made the metaphorical literal as they emphasised Christ's maternity further. Just as the Eucharist had the power to sustain life so too could Christ's wound promote it. Furthermore, it was not viewed simply as a lactating breast but also as a womb. The intense sufferings of Christ's crucifixion were compared to the suffering women endured during the labour of childbirth. Women saw the suffering of their own 'passion' in the Passion of Christ. "Marguerite of Oingt, a fourteenth-century Carthusian prioress, wrote:

Figure 10. *'The Savior'*, Quirizio da Murano. (c. 1475).

Figure 11.' *Pieta,*' Louis de Morales, (1560-70), Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes.

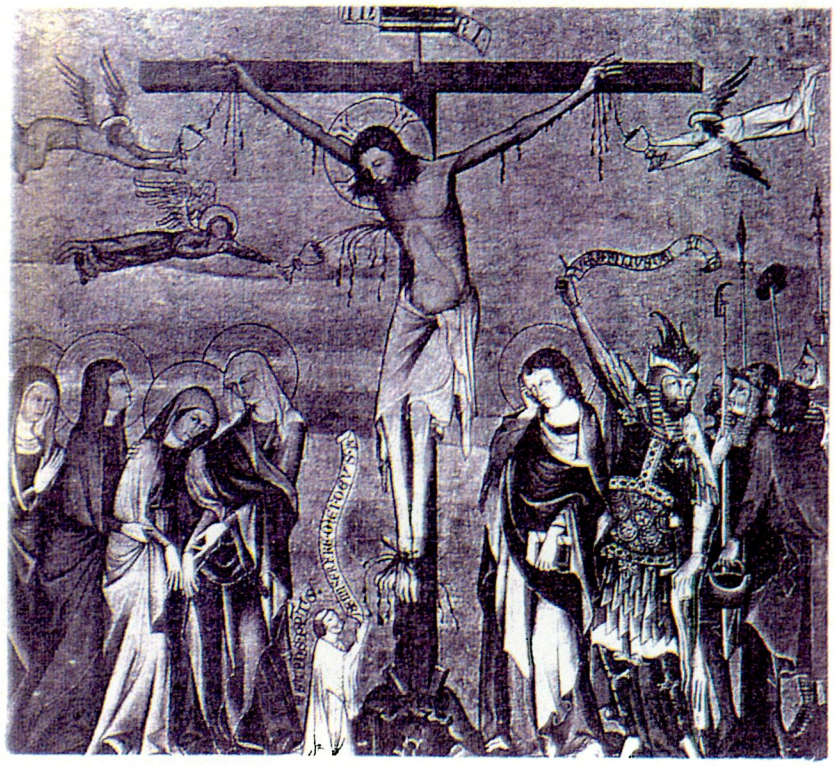

Figure 12. Painting of Crucifixion, at the back of the *'Klosterneuburg Altar,'* by the Viena Master.

> My sweet Lord...are you not my mother and more than my mother? The mother who bore me laboured in delivering me for one day or night, but you, my sweet and lovely Lord, laboured for me for more than thirty years. And my sweet and lovely Lord, with what love you laboured for me and bore me through your whole life. But when the time approached for you to be delivered, your labour pains were so great that your holy sweat was like great drops of blood that came out of your body and fell on earth....Ah! Sweet Lord Jesus Christ, who ever saw a mother suffer such a birth! For when the hour of the cross....and your nerves and all your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world
> (Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.87)

Contemporary notions of biology were different to that of today. By constructing Christ's body as mother was to attribute feminine characteristics to him. A male body can only suggest the maternal through means of a metaphor, but there were other medieval discourses at work to construct Christ's body as feminine. The process of conforming binary classifications in theology, natural philosophy and folk tradition mingled the notions of male and female. As the twelfth-century visionary and theologian Hildegard of Bingen wrote in the *Liber Divinorum Operum:* 'Man ...signifies the divinity of the Son of God and woman his humanity'.(Ash; Threadgold,1990, P.89)

Medieval scientific discourse was informed by the physiological theories of Aristotle. The Aristotelian theory of procreation asserts that the paternal function is most important. It provides the form of life the child will take and it also establishes the soul of the child. The maternal function is treated with little importance. The maternal body acts as a vessel for the child. The female body simply houses the child in her physical flesh. Her body, therefore, is only associated with 'fleshliness'. It is this association of the female body with 'fleshliness' that connects the bodily aspects of the

divine with femininity. Christ's humanity therefore can be viewed as feminine. Christ became flesh because he was born of his human mother, Mary's flesh. As he received his flesh from a mortal woman he possessed a woman's flesh as his own. He literally bore feminine fleshliness, remembering that his conception was without a mortal paternity. It was taken that although Christ occupied a male body its bodily functioning of bleeding and feeding were that of the female.(see figures 13,14,15,16.)

It is very interesting that the mystical woman of the late medieval period related to Christ for his ability to bleed and feed, the functioning normally associated with a female body. These women recognised something of themselves in the body of the crucified Christ. But why should they have felt the need to do this? Hagiography, the writing of the lives of the saints, provides a narrative of the bodily identification which existed between the worshipper and the adored suffering body of Christ. Hagiography attests to the later medieval period being fiercely ascetic and also this asceticism being largely dominated by women. *Imitatio Christi* and the suffering of pain at all was endured for penitential purposes. Bearing excruciating pain was to partake in the salvific achievement of Christ's pain but also to endure some of the pain of purgatory in this life rather than the next.

Considering that it was mostly women who involved themselves in this exaggerated form of religious virtuoso I think it essential to consider the treatment of women at the time. How did society value woman? And how did society value the female body?

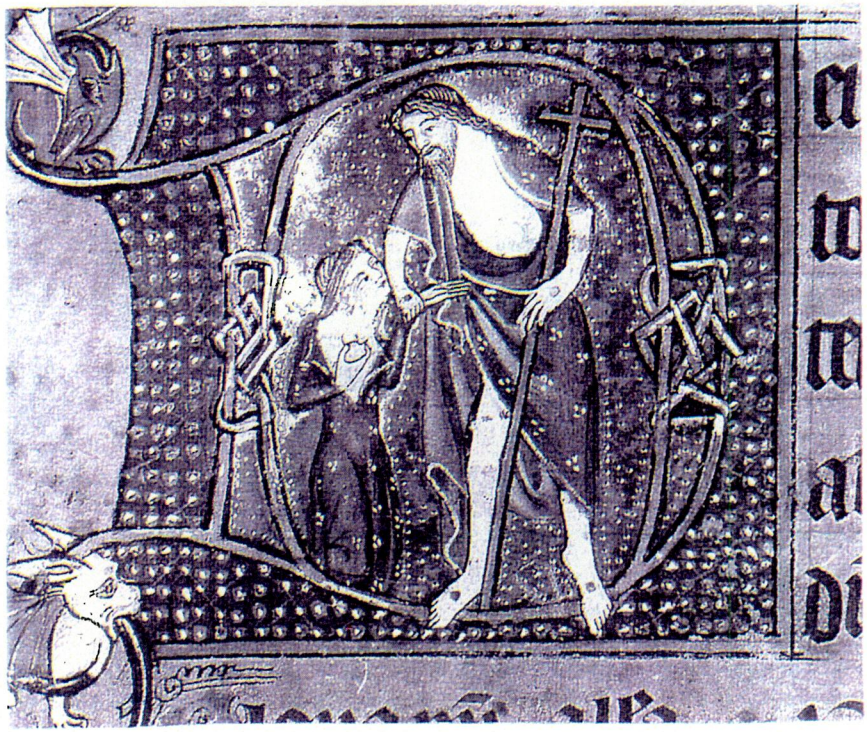

Figure 13. *'Zouche Hours'*,
(mid-fourteenth-century),
Germany.

Figure 14. Painting, *'Eucharistic Man of Sorrows'*, by Jacob Cornelisz, Antwerp. (c.1510)

Figure 15. Painting, *'Pieta with Angels'*, by Master Francke, Leipzig. (c.1425).

Figure 16. Painting, *'Man of Sorrows with symbols of judgment,'* by Master Francke, Hamburg. (first half of the fifteenth-century).

The representation of female bodies at the time;

"Medieval Christianity construed man as spirit and woman as body. Like the body, woman is accident to man's essence, despite claims of the spiritual equality of all believers."(Wiethaus, 1993, P.28) Interestingly, it was women rather than men who were inclined to gain themselves reputations as spiritual leaders based on their mystical experiences. Perhaps this was due to the fact that their social position was one of oppression, and they were therefore drawn towards radical forms of religious experience as a method of rebellion. Some scholars have argued that, because religion was the dominant mode of expression in medieval Europe and the Church such a powerful socio-economic institution, that political dissent almost invariably took the form of religious practices associated with even orthodox mystics.(Wiethaus, 1993, P.29)

According to Elizabeth Petroff

> 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 women 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 convents, found hospitals, preach, attack injustice and greed, even with the church.(Wiethaus, 1993, P.33)

The Church was in a position to control the content of the mystical women's experience. It was capable of enforcing silence upon women. It cloistered them, thereby institutionalising their powerless state. Most orthodox mystics were cloistered, and the reason for this was quite

clearly to isolate them. Even within the cloister silence was enforced. Fasting, mantic prayer, flagellation and vigils were part of the doctrine. The cultural representation of women was fiercely different in the largely misogynistic middle ages from today. Woman was classified as the 'Other', the discursive norms of which included heterogeneity, disproportion and symbolic filth. One might ask what the medieval mystic could achieve by food-deprivation and self-inflicted suffering? The answer suggested by Finke is 'power'. She claims that the mystics did not accept the usual roles allotted to women, they claimed a virtually divine authority which they would sometimes exorcise. The fact that they did not consciously seek power, none of them speak openly of doing this, is precisely what interests Finke. By seeming to conform to their silenced positioning they were actually transcending it. According to Foucault;

> individuals often effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct- all to transform themselves and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, and supernatural power.(Wiethaus, 1993, p.41)

Torture was seen as punishment in the middle ages. Self-torture could operate as a means of empowerment because it enabled the mystics to mark themselves as victims. The semiotic scourges on the mystic's body showed the signs of the torturer's power. It allowed the mystic to be victim and master simultaneously. The more torture she inflicts, the more power she invests. Her pain is evidence of her power and it is this which grants her spiritual voice. Although the Church did not condone such extremes of self-flagellation and starvation, they chose the extent of their own suffering and this was their freedom, perhaps the only freedom available to women at the time.

Psychoanalytic theorising

Freudian psychoanalytic theorising would discern the bizarre behaviour of *imitatio Christi* as 'hysteria.' Even though both men and women took part in this extreme form of religious virtuoso, (St. Francis of Assisi and Peter of Luxembourg, for example, also expressed physical identification with the body of Christ.), there is evidence to suggest that it was a discourse largely dominated by women. Their engenderment was far more intense.

The concept of hysteria using Freud's analysis could be described as follows. When a mind becomes imprisoned by patriarchy and has no voice to speak, the body speaks her silence. The body is used to articulate her psychic suffering. Hysteria is a dramatic voice for the constrained . As women had no representation and were prohibited personal opinion, hysteria was their plea of oppression. The discourse of the hysterical woman shows women's extreme anxiety within a patriarchal society. *Imitatio Christi* was the mystic's method of both constituting and consecrating their position within religion and its practices. It was a means of bodily signification. It is easy to overlook the importance of ascetic achievements and to condemn the mystics behaviour as simply pathological. Asceticism has always been an central part of Christianity. Activities such as heroic fasting, sleep deprivation, the wearing of hair shirts and plates of metal next to the skin, binding the body with ropes and chains, self-flagellation, immersion into freezing water, extraordinarily long periods of prayer and psalm-reciting accompanied by innumerable genuflexions and bodily contortions were commonplace. Hagiography attests to such extreme behaviour in the later middle ages as saints carried out acts of self-abasement and humiliation on their own body. For example, Mary of

Oignies (thirteenth century) hacked off pieces of her own flesh while immersed in a vision of the crucifixion ; St. Catherine Benincasa of Siena (fourteenth century) attempted to overcome physical disgust and nausea by drinking pus from the putrefying, cancerous breast of a dying woman. To Raymond of Capua, her confessor and biographer, she said, 'Never in my life have I tasted any food or drink sweeter or more exquisite'. Similarly Angela of Foligno (thirteenth century) drank the water used to wash the sores of lepers, and when a scab stuck in her throat she commented that it tasted as 'sweet as communion' Francesca de' Ponziani (fourteenth to fifteenth century) would prepare herself for sexual relations with her husband by pouring boiling pork fat or candle wax over her genitals. (Ash; Threadgold, 1990,p. 94)

Fasting was the most common form of asceticism practised by the mystics. The mystics often acted against the advice of their religious superiors, for even they correctly perceived such behaviour as dangerous. Nonetheless, they fasted without mercy and sometimes to the point of death. Catherine of Siena, the Italian mystic died in 1380 aged thirty-three from starving herself. It is probable that these women suffered from the condition known today as anorexia. Just like contemporary anorexics today, the fasting mystics , were acting out a resistance against the severe doctrines of a patriarchal society.

> Anorexia is a woman's strategic play for autonomy within a system which both defines and constructs her in terms of lack and castration, a state of being which is 'not-all'. The anorexic stages her refusal of and rebellion against such a definition and construction of her 'self' through direct action; and it is action effected with her body, the Symbolic body, the 'castrated' body of patriarchal femininity.(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.95)

By destroying her body through starvation a woman quite literally does not allow her body to operate within patriarchal society. She resists patriarchy by not being a part of it. She thus liberates herself from patriarchy. In this way, resistance liberates the body thus creating its own new autonomy. Anorexia is a discourse dealing directly with power and control. The records of female sanctity in the later middle ages provide evidence which supports this. There are, for example, St. Catherine of Siena, Umiliana de' Cerchi, Francesca de' Ponziani- mystical women whom the historian Rudolph Bell has called 'holy anorexics' in order to distinguish them from the outbreak of fasting women in our own time. (Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.95.)

Fasting, however, was not the mystics' only manner of ascetic display. Her radical form of *imitatio Christi* was a literal and flamboyant display of religious virtuoso. It is interesting that these religious women, operating to resist patriarchy, should house themselves within such a male chauvinistic institution-The Church.

> Yet historical evidence of the strict claustration imposed on medieval religious women by the male church hierarchy, the extent of the dependence of the female religious house on male religious for sustenance both spiritual and physical seems to suggest that the religious lifestyle would not and could not provide these women suffering severely from Symbolic constraints with anything different. (Ash; Threadgold, 1990,p.96.)

It is within the confines of this male-dominated institution that religious women carried out their somatic extremes. Significantly, the excess of their behaviour and their relationship with the Divine-other challenged priestly authority. Patriarchal discourse has always located

women in the position of Other. "Women had to be enclosed, restricted, and isolated because , in the eyes of the Church, she was the quintessence of all fleshy evil, a scapegoat whose expulsion allowed the church to purge itself of the corruption of the body."(Wiethaus, 1993,p.36) Women were feared rather than understood. Interestingly, according to Ash, while women occupied the site of the Other so too did religion. The site of God is shrouded in mystery .

> But the site of the Other is also the site of God and Truth: that which has been submitted to an intense process of mystification, positioned behind a veil, a 'cloud of unknowing'. In other words, the site of the Other is the site of excess, of that which exceeds symbolisation and Symbolic processes. Woman and Divinity meet in and through unmediated excess.(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.96.)

The Church in this instance represents the extreme doctrines of patriarchy. As these women were cloistered they were contained. In their excess they rebelled against the silence they were ascribed. Through their ecstasies with Christ they spoke out in a language not understood by the male authorities. According to Celemajor, the anorexic suffers from nostalgia for maternal corporeality, the plenitude of the pre-Symbolic body. (Ash; Threadgold, 1990,p.97.) The fasting women of the late medieval period , the 'holy anorexics', through *imitatio Christi*, were trying to re-establish her Symbolic body, that being the wholeness of the mother-child relationship in an imaginary state of being. The mystical union with the Divine can function as a fusion with the maternal body. The human body of Christ has become for them the phallic mother. They believed that they could achieve a longed for union with the maternal by celebrating the sacrament of the Eucharist. The ingestion of the host was to corporate the body of Christ in a fleshly and substantial manner. The Eucharist was treated with a zealous energy by the mystics and this is what constituted the

religious mood of the late medieval ages. As previously stated , the consuming of the host was sometimes perceived as a sublime experience. It functioned as the site of a holy madness, especially for the women who would eat nothing other than the host, such as Catherine of Siena .Some became ecstatic at the altar, to the extent that Church authorities litigated against the communication of ecstatic women.(Ash; Threadgold, 1990, p.97)

The idea that the body of Christ posed as both the desired body of lover and also the nurturing body of mother is clearly illustrated in the text of the vision of St. Catherine of Siena .She eroticises the fusion of the two bodies.

> As you then went far beyond what mere human nature could ever have achieved, so I today shall give you a drink that transcends in perfection any that human nature can provide.....' With that, he tenderly placed his right hand on her neck, and drew her toward the wound in his side. 'Drink, daughter, from my side,' he said, 'and by that draught your soul shall become enraptured with such delight that your very body, which for my sake you have denied, all be inundated with its overflowing goodness,' Drawn close...to the outlet of the Fountain of life, she fastened her lips upon that sacred wound, and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul, and there she slaked her thirst.(Ash; Threadgold,1990,p.98.)

The speaker in *A Talkyng of be Loue of God* speaks of a similar desire.

> Then the love begins to well
> up in my heart and glows very
> hotly in my breast. The tears
> of love run plentifully down my
> face. My song is delight of love
> without any melody. I leap at
> Him swiftly as a greyhound at
> a hart, quite beside myself., in
> loving manner, and fold in my
> arms the cross at the lower end. I
> suck the blood from His feet;
> that sucking is extremely sweet. I
> kiss and embrace and

occasionally stop, as one who is
love-mad and sick with love-
pain. I look at her, who brings
Him, and she begins to smile,
as if it pleased her and she
wanted me to go on. I leap
back to where I was and venture
myself there; I embrace and I
kiss, as if I was mad. I roll and I
suck I do not know how long.
And when I am sated, I want yet
more. Then I feel that blood in
my imagination as it were bodily
warm on my lips and the flesh
on his feet in front and behind so
soft and sweet to kiss and to
embrace.

(Ash; Threadgold,1990, p.99)

Luce Irigary, the French feminist theorist writes in her work concerning the female mystics of the middle ages, *'La Mysterique'*(1986) that the extremities of the mystics were their liberation. They were not only resisting patriarchy of the time but also gaining a knowledge of their difference as female; their own autonomy.

And if 'God' who has thus re-proved the fact of her
non-value, still loves her, this means that she exists all
the same, beyond what anyone may think of her. It
means that love conquers everything that has already
been said. And that one man, at least, has understood
her so well that he died in the most awful suffering. That
most female of men, the Son.
And she never ceases to look upon his nakedness,
open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at
the wounds from the nails that pierce his body as he
hangs there, in his passion and abandonment. And she
is overwhelmed with love of him/herself. In his
crucifixion he opens up a path of redemption to her in
her fallen state.
Could it be true that not every wound need remain
secret, that not every laceration was shameful? Could a
sore be holy? Ecstasy is there in that glorious slit
where she curls up as if in her nest, where she rests as if
she had found her home-and He is also in her. She

> bathes in a blood that flows over her, hot and purifying. And what she discovers in this in this divine passion, she neither can nor will translate. At last, she has been authorised to remain silent, hidden from prying eyes in the intimacy of this exchange where she sees (herself as) what she will be able to express. Where she sees nothing and where she sees everything. She is closed over this mystery where the love placed within her is hidden, revealing itself in this secret of desire. In this way, you see me and I see you, finally I see myself seeing you in this fathomless wound which is the source of our wondering comprehension and exhilaration. And to know myself I scarcely need a 'soul', I have only to gaze upon the gaping space in your loving body. Any other instrument, any hint, even, of theory, pulls up-unnaturally the lips of that slit where I recognise myself, by touching myself there (almost) directly. (Irigary,1985:199-200)(Ash; Threadgold 1990, p.105).

The body of Christ was seen as a plural signifier. His bleeding wounds are privileged. They are invested with double meaning-eroticism and salvation-signifying both mother and lover. The medieval mind was comfortable crossing boundaries and to mixing categories thus facilitating the mingling of the feminine and the masculine. As patriarchy discredited women, through religious extremism they sought to gain power but seeming to conform, they were actually transcending. Within a patriarchal regime women were deprived of their right to speak out . Their psycho-somatic behaviour was an acting out in outrage to oppression.

Conclusion

The primary concern of this thesis has been an investigation into the body of Christ and the significance it had on the body of the late medieval worshipper. Firstly, we considered the body of Christ on a metaphorical level. The Eucharistic host and the entire Catholic Church were understood as manifestations of the body of Christ. The Eucharist was perceived as the literal body of Christ. This had its repercussions for the literal medieval mind. According to Huizinga's portrayal of the late medieval times we understand it to be a time of violence in its daily practice, morbid, graphic and literal-minded in its images. The Church was a powerful institution and governed society in the misogynistic tradition. Exploring religious practices at the time we see the emergence of austere devotional practices. It is a discourse primarily concerned with the female mystic and her fusion with the Divine. The concept of the Bride of Christ suggested a loving relationship between the worshipper and the adored body of Christ. This relationship often displayed erotic overtones. We have explored the aspects of femininity that were ascribed to the body of Christ, and the presumed reasons for the mystics extreme behaviour. Bynum and others have tried to show how women used their bodies as powerful conduits of devotional display during the middle ages and how, particularly for enclosed women in cloisters, the somatic could be a more positive form of self-expression despite its severity. But this should not blind us to the misogynistic roots of medieval culture that relegated most women to an inferior status medically, socially and spiritually. We have considered the mystic's psycho-somatic behaviour as a form of resisting the intense doctrines of patriarchy.

What of the feminine aspects ascribed to Christ? Although it is obvious from visual depictions of Christ that he was fully male in gender and sexuality but did the medieval viewer view him as such? It is impossible to prove that medieval people did not assume what we assume when we look at pictures. We think of breasts as erotic. But we cannot project our ways of seeing onto the viewers of the past. According to Caroline Bynum, medieval people did not define themselves by their sexual orientation, they did not understand as erotic or sexual a number of bodily sensations which we interpret in that way.

> When Hadewijch, the Flemish poet, described herself as embracing Christ, feeling him penetrate deep within her and losing herself in ecstasy from which she slowly and reluctantly returned, she thought of -she experienced- the love of God. Modern readers may think of sexual arousal or orgasm...When Catherine of Siena spoke of the foreskin of Christ as a wedding ring, she associated a piece of bleeding skin with the Eucharistic host and saw herself appropriating the pain of Christ. It is we who suspect sexual yearnings in a medieval virgin who found sex the least of the world's temptations.(Bynum, 1990, P.86)

It is naive of Bynum to think so, there were undoubtedly erotic associations to the body of Christ within affective spirituality. It is important to stress, however, that medieval writers such as John Gerson were suspicious of the bodily pleasures within affective spirituality. His main concern was whether these sensations were inspired by God or by Satan. (Bynum, 1991,p.88) Leo Steinberg argues that any visual reference to Christ's sexuality is male and is semiotic of his humanity. He says that visual reference to Christ's maleness was to give to the sacred body a sexual potential. This was not to exclude the female but to acknowledge sex as a participant in human nature. Bynum argues that this is not the case. She states that the humanity of Christ by medieval interpretation meant

enfleshing. Theological attention in the fifteenth-century was focused on the body of Christ. This did not usually emphasise Christ's humanity as physiologically male. She accuses modern readers of seeking titillating antiquarianism when they read of the late medieval period She stresses an interest not on sex but on feeding, suffering and salvation. As medieval texts saw the Church as the body of Christ and the mystic as the bride of Christ, they attributed feminine characteristics to the teachers of the faith. Medieval people used gender imagery more fluidly than we do today. They often combined the two together in a symbolic fashion. She says "Although medieval theologians did not fully understand why, they were convinced that God's creation was more perfect in two sexes than in one."(Bynum, 1991, p.238)

As the feminine aspects of Christ are more evident in medieval texts than in visual imagery one can ascertain that the audience imposed these qualities on him. They obviously felt a need to do this. Was there something deficient in his character before? Were they seeking some help or salvation for doing so? Is this not normally the case when one turns to Christ, to be saved? Indeed the women of the medieval period were oppressed by a patriarchal society. They sought an escape from this and found it in religious extremism. In a manner they found their salvation there. They could resist the pressures of patriarchy within its fold.

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