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The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg

by Caroline Walker Bynum

Most of us who inhabit the western, post-Christian world are so accustomed to pictures of the Madonna and child or of the Holy Family that we hardly notice the details.¹ When we encounter such images in museums, on posters, or on Christmas cards, we tend to respond sentimentally if at all. We note whether the baby looks like a baby or not. We are pleased if the figures appear happy and affectionate. Perhaps we even feel gratitude for the somewhat banal support of an institution—the human family—that seems worn a little thin in the modern world. But we are not shocked. Recognizing that the Incarnation is a central Christian tenet, we feel no surprise that Christian artists throughout the western tradition should have painted God as a male baby. It takes a jolt to make us look carefully at

¹This essay was first delivered as a University lecture at Cornell University in November, 1985, and was subsequently presented at Brooklyn College and Columbia University. I am grateful to my hosts at those institutions: Elizabeth A. R. Brown, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Eugene Rice and Robert Somerville. I would also like to thank Stephen Greenblatt, John Najemy, and Richard Trexler for their suggestions and criticisms. I owe special gratitude to Colin Eisler, who read a draft of this article with patient attention to detail and gave sage advice. Finally, I thank Patricia Fortini Brown, Anna Kartsonis, and Ruth Mellinkoff, who guided a novice in the field of art history through the complex process of acquiring photographs. Some of the material in this essay is explored at greater length and from a different perspective in my forthcoming book, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley 1986), especially chapters ii, ix and x.
how such artists depict family and child. I want to begin this essay with just such a jolt: the impish painting made in 1926 by the surrealist painter Max Ernst, which shows the artist himself and two contemporary surrealist poets looking through the window at an unusual scene [plate 1].

This picture of Mary spanking Jesus is, of course, “anti-theology.” If Jesus needs spanking or if Mary spanks unjustly, something is badly wrong between the supposedly sinless mother and her supposedly sinless son. The picture brings home to us a profound truth. Not every aspect of family life is depicted in artistic renderings of the Holy Family. There are all sorts of homely scenes within which Jesus is not located, all sorts of childish actions that are not attributed to the baby God. Immediately we realize that there are complex reasons for what is depicted concerning the Holy Family. It is not enough to say, as historians have sometimes said, that scenes of the Holy Family were merely opportunities for artists who wanted to draw domestic interiors, to depict bodies naturalistically, or to render in paint the affection of parents and children. Pictures of the Holy Family are themselves theological statements. For example, the very large number of statues and paintings in medieval and Renaissance Europe that depict the so-called Anna Selbdritt—that is, Mary’s mother Anne, Mary, and Mary’s baby Jesus—are not merely paintings or statues of grandmothers [see plate 2]. It is true that such representations, which are particularly common in northern Europe, present a kind of female genealogy for Christ that perhaps reflects the importance of women in late medieval conceptions of family despite the development of primogeniture. But the pictures also reflect the emergence in the late Middle Ages of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—the claim that Mary was born of her mother Anne without the taint of original sin. The sinless baby in the lap of his

2Although art historians have long cautioned against doing so, historians and social scientists have tended to read art (often quite creatively) as evidence for social history. See, for example, Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life, tr. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962); Jack Goody, The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 153–56; David Herlihy, Medieval Households (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p. 12.


4Mirella Levi d’Ancona, The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, Monographs on Archaeology and Fine Arts. 7 (New York, 1957).
sinless mother who herself sits in the lap or on the arm of her own female forebearer emphasizes the purity and the physicality of the flesh Christ takes from Mary and the flesh Mary takes from her own mother.

The realization that not all possible human actions or settings are attributed to Christ in paint or sculpture thus leads us to realize that there is theological significance to what is depicted. It also leads us simply to look more carefully. And when we look, we find that more has in fact been painted—and for more complex reasons—than we have noticed before. This point is the one that Leo Steinberg has recently made in his tour de force, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). Bringing together a number of pictures never before considered as a group, Steinberg has shocked conventional sensibilities by showing that late medieval and Renaissance artists made the penis of the infant or the adult Christ the focal point of their depictions.

Steinberg’s book has been much criticized and much admired. And, as will become clear, I share both the reservations and the admiration felt by his critics. But I do not intend here so much to contribute to the debate about his book as to use it as the starting point for further exploration of late medieval notions of the body of Christ, both in literature and in iconography. Sharing with Steinberg the conviction that medieval art has theological content, I wish to point out another set of paintings and to draw a very different conclusion. I wish to call attention to artistic depictions that suggest another sex for Christ’s body—depictions that suggest that Christ’s flesh was sometimes seen as female, as lactating and giving birth. I also wish to argue that, whereas Steinberg must extrapolate from medieval and Renaissance texts in order to conclude that theologians emphasized Christ’s penis as sexual and his sexuality as a symbol of his humanity, we do not have to extrapolate at all in order to conclude that theologians saw the wound in Christ’s side as a breast and emphasized his bleeding-lactating flesh as a symbol of the “humanation” of God.

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5On this point generally, see Barbara G. Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York, 1984).

Theologians did not discuss Christ as a sexual male; they did discuss Jesus as mother. First, however, I must consider Steinberg’s own argument a little more carefully.

* * *

Steinberg has clearly demonstrated that late medieval and Renaissance artists called attention to the genitals of the baby Jesus. In picture after picture, we find Mary, John, Anne, and other saints uncovering, admiring, pointing to, or even fondling the baby’s penis. Although Steinberg’s reading of a number of pictures of the adult Christ in which he sees an actual erection under the loincloth is questionable, he has been able to show that Christ’s own hands (or even Mary’s) cover or point to the genitals in a number of deposition scenes or pietàs. He has also shown us, without perhaps realizing their full significance, pictures in which the artist calls attention both to Christ’s penis and to his mother’s breast and pictures in which the blood flows from Christ’s own breast into his crotch.

Steinberg’s brilliance and courage do not stop with discovery. He also interprets these pictures in a new way, placing them in the context of Renaissance theology, particularly the extraordinary devotion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the holy foreskin and to the feast of the circumcision. Arguing that theologians from Augustine to the Renaissance increasingly stressed what they called the “hu-

9Ibid., pp. 127–30. A particularly fascinating example of this motif, not discussed by Steinberg, is a painting of the vision of St. Bernard by the Master of the Life of the Virgin, now in the Wallraf-Richartz museum; for a reproduction, see *Late Gothic Art from Cologne: A Loan Exhibition, April 5–June 1, 1977* (London: The National Gallery, 1977), plate 14. In this picture, the baby reaches for the breast, which Mary, however, offers not to him but to the viewer. Bernard points to the baby’s genitals, which the baby himself covers.
manation" of God in Christ, Steinberg shows that "humanation" meant "enfleshing," and that Renaissance sermons often emphasized the bleeding of Christ's penis at the circumcision as a special proof of his true—that is, his fleshly—humanity. Thus Steinberg suggests that artists intended the genitals of Christ, especially in those few pictures that he interprets as erections, as the ultimate symbol of what Christ shares with all of us. Christ was fully male in gender and sexuality, even to the involuntary movements of his penis, and as such he represents the salvation of the totality of what we as human beings are. Christ redeems not only our physiological differences as men and women; he redeems our sexual nature (if not our sexual acts) as well. It is a noble and consequential reading of medieval art and theology and one which several recent commentators have seen as true to essential Christian doctrine.

* * *

I will leave aside here some of the legitimate questions critics have raised about Steinberg, such as the question of how much of the artistic attention to genitals is simply naturalism, or doubts about what certain painted folds of drapery really conceal. Rather I wish to discuss two points that are relevant to my own topic. First, are we entitled to associate genitality with sexuality in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art? Did medieval people immediately think of erections and sexual activity when they saw penises (as modern people apparently do)? Or, to put it another way, is Steinberg right—matters of taste aside—to call his book "the sexuality" rather than "the genitals" of Christ? Second, are there medieval or Renaissance texts that suggest this association? Did theologians of the period themselves talk of the penis as a sign of sexual activity or as a sign of maleness and associate it, as such, with the humanity of Christ?

The first is the harder question. It is impossible to prove that medieval people did not assume what we assume when we look at pic-

12In his interpretation of Renaissance preaching, Steinberg has been much influenced by John W. O'Malley, Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521 (Durham, 1979). The Renaissance sermons Steinberg quotes (Sexuality, pp. 61–65) all emphasize pain and bleeding, not sexuality.

13See, for example, David Toolan, review of Steinberg, Commonweal (Dec. 14, 1984), pp. 692–94. And see n. 6 above.
tures. And we clearly see breasts and penises as erotic. But let me at least suggest that we would do well to be cautious about projecting our ways of seeing onto the artists or the viewers of the past.

Twentieth-century readers and viewers tend to eroticize the body and to define themselves by the nature of their sexuality. But did medieval viewers? For several reasons, I think we should be cautious about assuming that they did. Medieval people do not, for instance, seem to have defined themselves by sexual orientation. Despite recent writing about "gay people" in the Middle Ages, it is questionable whether anyone had such a concept. To medieval theologians, lawyers, and devotional writers, there were different kinds of sexual acts—between people of different sexes, between people of the same sex, between people and animals—and all had some kind of taint attached. But there was no clear notion of being one or the other kind of sexual being.14

Nor did medieval people understand as erotic or sexual a number of bodily sensations which we interpret that way. When, for example, the medieval nuns Lukardis of Oberweimar and Margaret of Faenza breathed deeply into their sisters' mouths and felt sweet delight flooding their members, they did not blush to describe this as receiving God's grace or even as receiving the eucharist. Twentieth-century readers think immediately of lesbianism.15 When Hadewijch, the Flemish poet, described herself as embracing Christ, feeling him penetrate deep within her and losing herself in an ecstasy from which she slowly and reluctantly returned, she thought of—she experienced—the love of God.16 We modern readers think of sexual arousal or orgasm, as we do when we read the account of a twelfth-century monk, Rupert of Deutz, who climbed on the altar, embraced

14See John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago, 1980).


the crucifix, and felt Christ’s tongue in his mouth. When Catherine of Siena received the foreskin of Christ from him in a vision and put it on as a wedding ring, she associated that piece of bleeding flesh 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.

There is reason to think that medieval viewers saw bared breasts (at least in painting and sculpture) not primarily as sexual but as the food with which they were iconographically associated. Dozens of late medieval pictures of the lactating Virgin place her in a grape arbor or associate her feeding breasts with other forms of offering food. There is also reason to think that medieval people saw Christ’s penis not primarily as a sexual organ but as the object of circumcision and therefore as the wounded, bleeding flesh with which it was associated in painting and in text. When artists painted the blood from Christ’s pierced breast running sideways across his groin into his crotch (in defiance of the laws of gravity) they were assimilating the later bleeding of the cross to the earlier bleeding of the circumcized infant [plate 3]. Since medieval physiological theory saw all body fluids as reducible to blood and saw bleeding basically as purging, bleeding was an obvious symbol for cleansing or expiation, and all Christ’s bleedings were assimilated.

I am not here denying that medieval people saw a penis when they saw Christ’s penis. Moreover, as I shall demonstrate below, they sometimes saw a breast (or a womb) when they saw Christ’s side. But they probably did not associate either penis or breast primarily

21 See below nn. 49, 50, 78.
with sexual activity. Rather both their writing and their art suggest that they associated penis and side with pain and blood, and therefore, astonishing as it may be to us, with salvation. For example, Catherine of Siena wrote:

[Jesus] made of his blood a drink and his flesh a food for all those who wish it. There is no other means for man to be satisfied. He can appease his hunger and thirst only in this blood. . . . A man can possess the whole world and not be satisfied (for the world is less than man) until blood satisfies him, for only that blood is united to the divinity. . . . Eight days after his birth, Christ spilled a little of it in the circumcision, but it was not enough to cover man. . . . Then on the cross the lance . . . opened his heart. The Holy Spirit tells us to have recourse to the blood. . . .

And then the soul becomes like a drunken man; the more he drinks, the more he wants to drink; the more it bears the cross, the more it wants to bear it. And the pains are its refreshment and the tears which it has shed for the memory of the blood are its drink. And the sighs are its food.  

None of this is to suggest that medieval writers were completely unaware of what modern interpreters see as erotic elements in affective spirituality. Mystical writers as diverse as Margaret Prete, Eckhart, and John Gerson were suspicious generally of affectivity, in part because of its bodily pleasures. And male theologians warned repeatedly that women’s mystical strivings and visions might be merely sensual “ticklings.” Moreover, it may be that religious women were more likely than religious men to read as encounter with God bodily occurrences that we would attribute to sexual arousal. For physiological reasons, a woman’s erotic (particularly auto-erotic) responses are different from a man’s (and less obviously genital). Nonetheless it seems clear both that bodily stirrings frequently accompanied love of God in the later Middle Ages and that

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what bothered or delighted medieval people about such stirrings was not their exact physiological location, in genitals or heart, mouth or bowels. What worried medieval theorists was whether the sensations were inspired or demonic—that is, whether they were sent by God or by the devil. When John Gerson wrote his famous treatise on the testing of spirits, what he feared was not that lesbianism or eroticism was veiled in the cloister but that nuns and laywomen, even monks and laymen, might be speaking of their visions with the tongue of Satan.

* * *

The above analysis leads naturally to my second, less difficult point: the question of texts. Are there medieval and Renaissance texts that see Christ’s penis as a special sign of “humanation” because the penis is a male or a sexual organ? The answer appears to be that there are not. Although medieval and Renaissance theologians discuss the circumcision in dozens of different ways and repeatedly stress the enfleshing of God at the moment of the Incarnation, Steinberg has been able to find no text that treats the cut and bleeding penis of the circumcized Christ as sexual, no text that treats circumcision either as the cutting off of Christ’s sexual urges or as a sign that his penis was pure and not in need of disciplining. In fact, the only text Steinberg has found that suggests an association of the penis with the erotic or the sexual is one Renaissance sermon in which the word used for

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26 For a comment on the modern tendency to reduce all bodily phenomena (even mystical) to the sexual, see Simone Weil, The Notebooks of Simone Weil, trans. Arthur Wills, 2 vols. (London, 1956), II, 472: “To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colors composed of material substances. We haven’t anything else with which to love. . . .”

27 See n. 23 above. The new book by Judith C. Brown, Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (New York, 1986), is therefore profoundly misleading. It mistakenly places the behavior it considers in the context of sexual orientation. But what contemporaries asked about the actions of Benedetta Carlini, a seventeenth-century Theatine abbess, was not whether they had an erotic component directed toward a woman but whether Benedetta Carlini suffered from demonic possession or practiced fraud. “Feigned sanctity” was an important category in seventeenth-century inquisitorial trials, and Benedetta herself retreated, under interrogation, to the claim that she was possessed. See the review of Brown by Mary R. O’Neil, forthcoming in Sixteenth-Century Journal.
holding the penis before circumcizing it might be translated as "fondle." But surely this refers not to eroticism but simply to tenderness for a baby who is about to be hurt.

It is true that medieval and Renaissance texts increasingly and movingly emphasized the humanation of God as the salvation of us all. And by "humanation" they often meant enfleshing. But the emphasis on humanation appeared earlier in European spirituality than Steinberg notes and was associated with the full range of Christ's bodily members. Growing out of a twelfth-century concern for imitating the human Christ, the theme of humanation was present in a wide variety of saints' lives and devotional texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For example, Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) supposedly said, in words that have clearly been reworked by a scholastically educated redactor:

[The soul in this present life knows] the lesser in the greater, and the greater in the lesser, for it discovers uncreated God and "humanated" God, that is divinity and humanity, in Christ, united and conjoined in one person.... And sometimes... the soul receives greater delight in the lesser.... For the soul is more conformed and adapted to the lesser which it sees in Christ, the incarnate God, than it is to that which it sees in Christ, the uncreated God; because the soul is a creature whose life is in flesh and all of whose members are body. Thus it discovers both God "humanated" and God uncreated, Christ the creator and Christ the creature, and in that Christ it discovers souls with flesh and blood and with all the members of his most sacred body. And this is why, when the human intellect discovers, sees and knows in this mystery Christ the man and Christ-God, ordainer of the mystery, this intellect feels delight and expands in him, because it sees God "humanated" and God uncreated conformed and made like itself—because, that is, the human soul sees the soul of Christ, his

28Steinberg, Sexuality, p. 65. To raise the issue of texts is not to take issue with Steinberg's position that the art object itself is a "primary text," not merely an illustration of a theological tenet. I would myself agree that many of the paintings Steinberg discusses are direct evidence about the theological significance of body. But I also hold that the pictures are about more bodily aspects than Steinberg notices. See, for example, n. 80 below.

eyes, his flesh, and his body. But while it looks. . . , it should not forget also to
turn to the higher. . . , the divine. . . . 30

In Angela’s piety as in that of many other fourteenth-century
saints, all Christ’s members—eyes, breasts, lips, etc.—were seen as
testimony to his humanation, and the devout soul responded to this
enfleshing with all its bodily capabilities. For example, the obscure
French nun Marguerite of Oingt (d. 1310), who swooned with love
over Christ’s bleeding side, received a vision in which she flowered
like a tree in spring when watered by Christ, and her verdant
branches were labeled with the names of the five senses. 31 It is hard to
imagine a more graphic illustration of the medieval conviction that
those who love Christ should respond to all of his body with all of
their’s.

By the fifteenth century, theological attention was focused on the
body of Christ. But theologians did not usually emphasize Christ’s
humanity as physiologically male. The closest they came to such an
emphasis was the well-known argument that limited priestly status
to men because Christ was male physiologically. 32 But even such argu-
ment frequently referred as much to the social preeminence of
males (i.e., the father’s rule in the family) as to the male’s supposed
physical superiority. 33

The major context in which Christ’s maleness was theologically
relevant was the circumcision. But sermons on the circumcision did

30 Angela of Foligno, _Le Livre de l’expérience des vrais fidèles: texte latine publié d’après le
382–84. There is no critical edition of Angela’s works and the extant texts differ widely
from each other.

31 Marguerite of Oingt, _Les oeuvres de Marguerite d’Oingt_, ed. and trans. Antonin

32 See Francine Cardman, “The Medieval Question of Women and Orders,” _The
Thomist, 42_ (1978), 582–99; J. Rétéze, “Le sacerdoce et la femme chez saint Bonaven-
ture,” _Antonianum, 51_ (1976), 520–27.

33 See _Corpus Iuris Canonici_, ed. E. Friedberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879–81),
I. 2, causa 33, q. 5, chaps. 12–17, cols. 1254–55; Thomas Aquinas, _Summa theologiae_,
ed. Blackfriars, XIII (New York, 1964), pt. 1, q. 92, arts. 1–2, pp. 34–41, and q. 93,
art. 4, pp. 58–61. It is worth pointing out that neither male nor female theologians
argued against the denial of priesthood to women. Indeed Hildegard of Bingen sug-
gested that women held a different (and complementary) role as brides of Christ (i.e.,
mystics). See Bynum, _Jesus as Mother_, pp. 91–94, 141–42, and Elisabeth Gossman,
“Das Menschenbild der Hildegard von Bingen und Elisabeth von Schönau vor dem
Hintergrund der frühscholastischen Anthropologie,” in Dinzelmach and Bauer,
_Frauenmystik_, pp. 24–47.
not discuss Christ’s sexuality or his gender. In the scores of texts we have on this topic, blood is what is emphasized—blood as covenant, in part, but primarily blood as suffering. What the texts say is that the circumcision foreshadows the crucifixion. Thus blood is redemptive because Christ’s pain gives salvific significance to what we all share with him; and what we share is not a penis. It is not even sexuality. It is the fact that we can be hurt. We suffer. Steinberg may be right that one could extrapolate from medieval art and medieval texts to the notion that Christ’s coming in male flesh is a sign of sexuality and therefore of humanness. There may even be a profound modern need for such theological argument. My point is simply that the argument as such is not made in medieval or Renaissance texts. Those who preached and wrote in the fifteenth century associated humanness with the fleshliness of all bodily members and found in suffering (rather than in sexual temptation) the core of what it is to be human.

It is clear that the body of Christ was depicted as male in late medieval art. It is far from clear, however, that artists emphasized Christ’s penis as a sign of his sexuality and therefore of his humanity. Moreover, there is both iconographic and textual evidence for the argument that late medieval people sometimes saw the body of Christ as female. There is thus better evidence for the assertion that the late Middle Ages found gender reversal at the heart of Christian art and Christian worship than there is for the thesis that Renaissance artists emphasized the sexuality of Jesus. If we as modern people find Steinberg’s argument more titillating and Steinberg’s illustrations more fascinating than those I will consider now, this may merely suggest that there is a modern tendency to find sex more interesting than feeding, suffering, or salvation. It may also suggest that, pace Huizinga, twentieth-century readers and viewers are far more literal-minded in interpreting symbols than were the artists, exegetes and devotional writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.34

34In a now classic study, the great Dutch historian argued that symbolism in the later Middle Ages became florid, mechanical, and empty of true experiential content; see Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries, trans. F. Hopman (1924; rpt. Garden City, N.Y., 1956). There is, of course, some truth to the argument; see, for example, Francis Rapp, “Zur Spiritualität in elsässischen Frauenkloster am Ende des Mittelalters,” in Dinzelpacher and Bauer, Frauenmystik, pp. 347–65. But it is more accurate to describe late medieval piety as deeply experiential; see my forthcoming book, Holy Feast and Holy Fast.
Medieval texts and medieval art saw the church as the body of Christ. And ecclesia was, of course, feminine, as a noun and as an allegorical personification. Thus church was depicted in medieval art as a woman—sometimes as Christ’s bride, sometimes as a nursing mother [plates 4 and 5].

To depict church as a woman who is Christ’s bride or as the mother of all Christians is not, of course, to make Christ’s physical body female. But medieval texts went further. Ecclesia was identified in texts as Christ’s body, not merely his spouse, and such identification led in a number of passages to discussions of Jesus as mother. The connection was clearly the notion that teachers and authorities should be nurturing: therefore church, and church’s leaders, and church’s head himself were mothers. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux commented on Song of Songs i. 1–2 (“For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments”) in a way that makes clear not only the medieval tendency to associate breasts with food (rather than sex) but also the medieval tendency to assimilate church as Christ’s spouse with church as Christ’s body. Bernard said explicitly that Christ’s bride is the church who nurses us, and that the bride–church nurses from Christ who is also therefore a mother, and that this motherly body is all of us. Following Bernard, William of St. Thierry wrote, addressing Christ:

... it is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones. ...

It was not the least of the chief reasons for your Incarnation that your babes in the church who still needed your milk rather than solid food ... might find in you a form not unfamiliar to themselves.

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4. *Sponsus* and *Sponsa* with Lost Humanity; from Honorius Augustodunensis's Commentary on the Song of Songs, Twelfth Century. Cod. lat. 4550, fol. IV, Bayr. Staatsbibl., Munich.
5. Giovanni Pisano (d. 1314), *Ecclesia lactans* standing over the Cardinal Virtues. Detail from a pulpit. The Cathedral, Pisa.
In this twelfth-century text, Christ’s body is treated as female, as subsuming church, and as accessible to humans of both sexes exactly in its femaleness. Similarly, the fourteenth-century theologian, mystic and ecclesiastical activist Catherine of Siena assimilated Christ and Charity (a female personification), stressed the humanation of Christ, and associated that humanation with motherhood:

We cannot nourish others unless we nourish ourselves at the breasts of divine charity. . . . We must do as a little child does who wants milk. It takes the breast of its mother, applies its mouth, and by means of the flesh it draws milk. We must do the same if we would be nourished. We must attach ourselves to the breast of Christ crucified, which is the source of charity, and by means of that flesh we draw milk. The means is Christ’s humanity which suffered pain, and we cannot without pain get that milk that comes from charity. 39

One might argue, of course, that such texts are merely elaborate similes—statements that saving is like mothering or that instructing is like nurturing. Therefore Christ’s activity is like church’s activity and mother’s activity, and nothing more is meant. But in the Showings of the greatest female theologian Julian of Norwich (d. after 1416), as several scholars have recently pointed out, the use of the Jesus-as-mother motif is clearly more than simile. 40 It expresses a theological truth which is, Julian holds, better said in female than in male images. Julian comments explicitly that holy church is our mother because she cares for and nurtures us and that Mary the Virgin is even more our mother because she bears Christ. But Christ is mother most of all.

For in the same time that God joined himself to our body in the maiden’s womb, he took our soul, which is sensual, and in taking it, having enclosed us


all in himself, he united it to our substance. In this union he was perfect man, for Christ, having joined in himself every man who will be saved, is perfect man.

So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our Savior is mother of all who are saved in our Savior; and our Savior is our true mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.41

To Julian, mothering means not only loving and feeding; it also means creating and saving. The physiological role of the mother, whose uterine lining provides the stuff of the foetus (according to medieval medical theory) and whose blood becomes breast milk, clearly underlies Julian’s sense that, if gender is to be used of God at all, Christ is mother more than father when it is a matter of talking of the Incarnation.42

Such an identification of Christ’s saving role with giving birth as well as feeding is found in a number of fourteenth-century texts, such as the following meditation by Marguerite of Oingt:

My sweet Lord... are you not my mother and more than my mother?... Ah! sweet Lord Jesus, who ever saw a mother suffer such a birth? For when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross... and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly it is no surprise that your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world.43

The same theme is clearly suggested in miniatures that show church emerging from the side of Christ [plate 6]. In the moralized Bibles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artists frequently drew parallels between the birth of Eve from Adam’s side and the birth of the church from Christ’s body.44

Late medieval theologians never forgot that Christ’s person was soul as well as body. Christ was not merely flesh. For example, a writer as effusive (and as orthodox) as Catherine of Siena stressed


42See Caroline Walker Bynum, “‘... And Woman His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in Caroline W. Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman, eds., Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols (Boston, 1986). Colledge and Walsh have stressed that this idea has theological roots in William of St. Thierry; see intro. to A Book of Showings, pt. 1, pp. 153–62.

43Marguerite, Oeuvres, pp. 77–79.

6. The Creation of Eve, the Birth of Church, the Joining of Adam and Eve; from a French Moralized Bible of about 1240. MS 270b, fol. 6r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
both the unity of Christ’s person and the union of divine with human. Discussing the eucharist, Catherine attributed the following admonition to God:

The person of the incarnate Word was penetrated and kneaded into one dough with the light of my Godhead. . . .

I have said that this body of his [that is, Christ’s] is a sun. Therefore you would not be given the body without being given the blood as well; nor either the body or the blood without the soul of this Word; nor the soul or body without the divinity of me, God eternal. For the one cannot be separated from the other—just as the divine nature can nevermore be separated from the human nature, not by death or by any other thing past or present or future. So it is the whole divine being that you receive in that most gracious sacrament under that whiteness of bread.\(^45\)

But despite issuing repeated warnings that souls must “also turn to the higher . . . the divine,” theologians and devotional writers frequently stressed Christ’s humanity (conceived of as Christ’s fleshliness) and associated it with the female. Three very different strands fed into this complex association of feminine and flesh.

First, theologians drew on the long-standing analogy “spirit is to flesh as male is to female,” familiar in exegesis from patristic days.\(^46\) This dichotomy led both to Hildegard of Bingen’s statement that “man represents the divinity of the Son of God and women his humanity” and to the vision in which Elizabeth of Schö nau saw Christ’s humanity appear before her as a female virgin sitting on the sun.\(^47\) It is also reflected in the fact that Hildegard of Bingen’s vision


of *imago mulieris* under the cross links the figure with *humanitas* as well as with *ecclesia*, and in the miniatures and texts from the later Middle Ages that show Christ marrying *humanitas* as a man marries a woman. 48

Medieval writers also drew on a second strand that associated flesh and female: ancient physiological theory. This theory included two different accounts of conception. 49 According to Aristotelian theory, the mother provided the matter of the foetus and the father its life or spirit or form. Aristotelian theory clearly linked woman with the uniformed physical stuff of which the fully human is made. According to Galen, two seeds (from mother and father) were necessary for conception. Galenic theory associated both male and female with the physiological stuff. But even according to Galen, the mother was the oven or vessel in which the foetus cooked, and her body fed the growing child, providing its matter as it matured. Moreover, all ancient biologists thought that the mother’s blood fed the child in the womb and then, transmuted into breast milk, fed the baby outside the womb as well. Thus blood was the basic body fluid and female blood was the fundamental support of human life.

Ancient theory also held that the shedding of blood purged or cleansed those who shed it. Indeed bleeding was held to be necessary for the washing away of superfluity, so much so that physiologists regularly spoke of males as menstruating and recommended bleeding with leeches when they did not do so. Thus medical theory not only associated female bodies with flesh and blood; it also saw bleeding as feeding and as the purging away of excess. 50 Such medical con-


ceptions of blood led naturally to the association of Christ’s bleeding on the cross, which purges our sin in the Atonement and feeds our souls in the eucharist, with female bleeding and feeding.

A third strand of medieval ideas also linked flesh, especially Christ’s flesh, with woman. This strand was the doctrine of the Virgin Birth and the emerging notion of the Immaculate Conception. Whatever the respective roles of male and female in ordinary conception, Christ’s body had to come from Mary because Christ had no human father. Since theologians increasingly stressed Mary’s humanity as sinless from her conception, they were able to suggest that just as the Logos (the divinity of Christ separate from that of God) pre-existed the Incarnation, so the humanity of Christ also pre-existed the Incarnation in the sinless humanity of Mary. Such arguments could, of course, be carried to dubious theological lengths, but a thinker such as Mechthild of Magdeburg began to make them. And the entirely orthodox idea of Mary as the flesh of Christ was suggested by William Durandus’s commentary on the mass and by the prayers of Francis of Assisi, Suso, and others, who spoke of Mary as the tabernacle, the vessel, the container, the robe, the clothing of Christ. The notion is clearly depicted in those eucharistic tabernacles that Mary surmounts as if she were the container, and in the so-called Vierges ouvrantes—late medieval devotional objects in which a statue of Mary nursing her baby opens to show God inside. As


51Levi d’Ancona, Immaculate Conception.

52On Mechthild, see Bynum, Jesus as Mother, pp. 229, 233–34, 244.


54Dumoutet, Corpus Domini, pp. 77–79. See also Joseph Braun, Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung, 2 vols. (Munich, 1924), II, 624. Plates 329, 333, 334, 336, 346, 360 and 361 give a number of examples of the prominence of Mary on retables. This motif tends to associate Mary’s conceiving of Christ with the moment of the consecration.

55Lane, Altar and Altarpiece, p. 28. See also Christoph Baumer, “Die Schreinmadonna,” Marian Literary Studies, 9 (1977), 239–72.
Carol Purtle and Barbara Lane have demonstrated, such a concept is also reflected in the late medieval Marian paintings in which Mary takes on priestly characteristics. Such depictions of Mary as priest have nothing to do with women’s ordination. Mary is priest because it is she who offers to ordinary mortals the saving flesh of God, which comes most regularly and predictably in the mass.\footnote{Lane, Altar and Altarpiece, pp. 71–72. Carol J. Purtle, The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck (Princeton, 1982), pp. 13–15, 27–29, and passim.}

Thus many medieval assumptions linked woman and flesh and the body of God. Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a woman; his own flesh did womanly things: it bled, it bled food, and it gave birth. Moreover, in certain bizarre events of the late Middle Ages, there is further support for the argument that bleeding food and giving life through flesh were seen as particularly female activities. I allude here to the blood miracles of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

As scholars such as James Marrow and Lionel Rothkrug have recently shown, blood became an increasingly powerful symbol in late medieval art and devotion.\footnote{James H. Marrow, Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative (Kortrijk, 1979); Lionel Rothkrug, “Popular Religion and Holy Shrines: Their Influence on the Origins of the German Reformation and their Role in German Cultural Development,” in James Obelkevich, ed., Religion and the People, 800–1700 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), p. 29.} But blood in this period became more than symbol. It literally appeared, on walls and wafers, hands and faces. Blood miracles proliferated. And they took place primarily in the bodies and the experiences of women.\footnote{See Thurston, Physical Phenomena; Dinzelbacher, “Europäische Frauenmystik”; idem, Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter (Stuttgart, 1981); Rudolph M. Bell, Holy Anorexia (Chicago, 1988); and Caroline Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” Representations, 11 (Summer, 1985), 1–25.} The two most astonishing new miracles of the latter Middle Ages are the miracle of the bleeding host, in which consecrated eucharistic wafers turn into bleeding flesh, and the miracle of stigmata, in which the bodies of ordinary people suddenly receive and display the various wounds of Christ. Not only are almost all late medieval stigmatics women; visions and transformation-miracles of the bleeding host (like all eucharistic miracles) were received mostly by women as well.\footnote{On eucharistic miracles, see Browe, Die Wunder, and Bynum, “Women Mystics,” p. 182. On stigmata, see Thurston, Physical Phenomena; Antoine Imbert-}
matic women clearly saw themselves as imitating Christ’s bleeding flesh both as it hung on the cross and as it was consecrated in the wafer. Indeed stigmata sometimes appeared as a result of taking communion. Thus it was women’s bodies almost exclusively that bled as Christ bled, and this blood not only purged the woman of her sin but also saved her fellow Christians by substituting for the expiation they owed in purgatory. Holy women imitated Christ in their bodies; and Christ’s similar bleeding and feeding body was understood as analogous to theirs.

* * *

It is clear then from the many texts I have quoted that medieval writers spoke of Jesus as a mother who lactates and gives birth. They called the wound in Christ’s side a breast. They saw the flesh of God as a clothing taken from Mary’s flesh. Moreover there is iconographic support for the textual tradition of Jesus as mother. When we look at late medieval painting, we find that the bleeding Christ is treated as the feeder of humankind. The wound of Christ and the breast of Mary are clearly parallel in picture after picture.

The lactating Virgin is, of course, one of the most common iconographic themes in all of Christian art. Mary’s breast is linked with other kinds of feeding—with milk soup and with the grape that is a eucharistic symbol. In late medieval and Counter-Reformation art,


60For example, this was true of the Flemish saint, Lidwina of Schiedam (d. 1433). See Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” pp. 6–7 and nn. 24 and 27.

61Two saints who stress substituting their suffering for that of others are Alice of Schaerbeke and Catherine of Genoa. See Life of Alice of Schaerbeke, chap. iii, par. 26, AASS, June II, 476; and Catherine of Genoa, Il Dialogo spirituale, in Umile Bonzi da Genova, ed., S. Caterina Fieschi Adorno, Il: Edizione critica dei manoscritti catteriani (Turin, 1962), 420–21, 424. See also Catherine, Trattato del Purgatorio, ed. Umile Bonzi, II, 343–45. This was also true of Lidwina of Schiedam; see Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” p. 6 and n. 25.

62See Mundy, “Gerard David.” On the cult of the Virgin’s milk in the later Middle
Mary feeds adult males as well, especially Bernard of Clairvaux, whose lactation is depicted in dozens of paintings. Mary also feeds ordinary Christians. In a number of pictures, she directs her breast toward the viewer, while the baby turns aside, thus suggesting that we share the baby’s need for sustenance and that Mary offers to us the blessed food.

Mary’s feeding is sometimes explicitly seen as eucharistic. For example, several art historians have pointed out that van Eyck’s Lucca Madonna presents Mary as the altar on which Christ sits. Vessels to the right of the painting reinforce the suggestion that the artist is depicting the mass. Both baby and breast are the eucharist, presented to us. The two foods are assimilated. We the viewers are offered the bread and wine that are God. Similarly, art historians have also linked Robert Campin’s *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* with the eucharist [plate 7]. Once again, in this painting, Mary not only offers her breast; she also presents her baby, as if he were bread fresh from the oven. Mary is assimilated to Christ and celebrant. Thus we should not be surprised to find paintings that depict Mary as priest, or representations of the Mystical Mill in which Mary as the miller (i.e., celebrant) pours in the flour while Christ emerges below as

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Rafael M. Durán *Iconografía española de San Bernardo* (Monasterio de Poblet, 1953); Léon Dewez and Albert van Iterson, “La lactation de saint Bernard: Légende et iconographie,” *Citéaux in de Nederlanden*, 7 (1956), 165–89. For two other examples, see Hiller and Vey, *Katalog... Wallraf-Richartz Museum*, plates 126 and 159. In the latter (late fifteenth-century) painting, the baby actually pushes the breast toward Bernard. For texts which refer to other lactations of adults, see Albert Poncelet, “Index miraculorum B. V. Mariae quae saec. VI–XV latine conscripta sunt,” *Analecta Bollandiana*, 21 (1902), 359.

See, for example, the miniature from the Milan-Turin Book of Hours in which a stream of milk from Mary’s breast goes toward the donor (with whom the viewer presumably identifies) while the baby turns away from the breast; Lane, *Altar and Altarpiece*, p. 6, plate 4.


Lane, *Altar and Altarpiece*, pp. 1–10 and plate 1; Purtle, *Marian Paintings*, p. 100, n. 8; see also Carra Ferguson O’Meara, “‘In the Hearth of the Virginal Womb’: The Iconography of the Holocaust in Late Medieval Art,” *The Art Bulletin*, 63.1 (1981), 75–88. The cupboard and chalice are modern additions to the painting.

bread fed to the assembled prelates (who become recipients) [see plate 8].

All of these pictures are of Mary increasingly assimilated to Christ. But there are also medieval paintings that assimilate Christ to Mary. Over and over again in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we find representations of Christ as the one who feeds and bleeds. Squirting blood from wounds often placed high in the side, Christ fills cups for his followers just as Mary feeds her baby. Christ’s body, like woman’s, is depicted as food [plate 13 below]. In two very different fifteenth-century paintings, for example, Christ’s wound is treated almost as if it were a nipple and produces in one case the wafer, in another case the blood of the eucharist [see plates 9 and 10].

In medieval experience as in modern, it was women’s bodies, not men’s, that fed with fluid from the breast. Medieval people clearly found this fact symbolically useful, as recurrent representations of nursing Charity or of the lactating Virtues [plate 11] attest. It thus seems possible to argue that a picture such as Quirizio of Murano’s The Savior [plate 9], which treats Christ as body that provides food from the breast, is an evocation (if not a depiction) of the traditional notion of Jesus as mother. The texts on the picture (borrowed from the Song of Songs) underline the emphasis on eating Christ’s body, for they read: “Come to me, dearly beloved friends, and eat my flesh,” “Come to me, most beloved, in the cellar of wine and inebriate yourself with my blood.”

A number of fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth-century paintings make the association of Christ’s wound and Mary’s breast quite clear [see, for example, plate 12]. The parallel is more than visual: texts on the pictures make the point explicitly. In a painting of 1508 by Hans


Holbein the Elder, for example, the words above Christ read: “Father, see my red wounds, help men in their need, through my bitter death.” And above Mary: “Lord, sheath thy sword that thou hast drawn, and see my breast, where the Son has sucked.”

Such pictures are known to art historians as the “double interces-

sion." They are usually glossed as an association of two sacrifices: Christ’s bleeding and dying for us on the cross, Mary’s suffering for her baby and therefore for all sinners. But I would like to suggest that the parallel is not merely between two sacrifices; it is also between two feedings. I argue this partly because, as we have seen, Mary’s
breast and Jesus’s wound, when treated independently, are seen as supplying food [see plates 7, 9, 10, and 13]. I also suggest such an interpretation because artists themselves sometimes indicate that it is really Mary’s breast as lactating that is in question. In an early sixteenth-century triptych from the Low Countries, for example, not only is Mary’s breast parallel to Jesus’s bleeding wound (a wound which is recapitulated in the bleeding heart above) but Mary’s breast is also explicitly associated with lactation through the presence at her
12. Man of Sorrows and Mary Intercede with God the Father, style of Konrad Witz, about 1450. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.
side of Bernard of Clairvaux, who, according to legend, nursed from her [plate 14].

* * *

It thus seems that medieval writers and occasionally even artists represented God’s body with both feminine and masculine characteristics—something modern thinkers rarely attempt and only with considerable awkwardness and embarrassment. How then did it happen that writers and visionaries in the Middle Ages found it possible to mix and fuse the sexes in their depictions of God? The answer lies, at least in part, in the fact that—for all their application of male/female contrasts to organize life symbolically—medieval thinkers and artists used gender imagery more fluidly and less literally than we do. Projecting back onto medieval symbols modern physiologi-

cal theory or post-Enlightenment contrasts of nature and culture, we have tended to read medieval dichotomies too absolutely. Medieval thinkers, however, saw not just the body of Christ but all bodies, as we shall see, as both male and female.

Careful reading of the theological and scientific traditions I discussed above makes it clear that, despite their use of male/female dichotomies, theologians and natural philosophers assumed considerable mixing of the genders. From the patristic period on, those who saw the female as representing flesh while the male represented spirit wrote of real people as both. To say this is not to deny that men were seen as superior in rationality and strength. Clearly they were. But existing, particular human beings were understood as having both feminine and masculine characteristics. Moreover, we must never forget the emphasis on reversal which lay at the heart of the Christian tradition. According to Christ and to Paul, the first shall be last and the meek shall inherit the earth. Thus not only did devotional writers mix gender images in describing actual men and women; they also used female images to attribute an inferiority that would—exactly because it was inferior—be made superior by God. For example, male devotional writers such as Bernard, Eckhart and Gerson spoke of male mystics as fecund mothers or weak women. And women mystics were even more likely to cut the terms “male” and


For examples of hagiographers who praise women as “virile,” see Life of Ida of Louvain, AASS, April, II, 159; and Life of Ida of Leau, AASS, October, XIII, 112. The compliment could, of course, cut both ways.


“female” loose entirely from the social or physiological dichotomies they usually represented, speaking of mothers as administering harsh discipline or of a father God with souls in his womb.77

This mixing of the genders was even more apparent in the scientific tradition, where in one sense it was not even clear that there were two sexes. Medieval natural philosophy held—as Tom Laqueur has pointed out—that men and women are really a superior and inferior version of the same physiology. Woman’s reproductive system was just man’s turned inside out.78

Ancient biology, especially in its Aristotelian form, made the male body paradigmatic. The male was the form or quiddity of what we are as humans; what was particularly womanly was the unformedness, the stuff-ness or physicality, of our humanness. Such a notion identified woman with breaches in boundaries, with lack of shape or definition, with openings and exudings and spillings forth.79 But this conception also, we should note, put men and women on a continuum. All human beings were form and matter. Women were merely less of what men were more. We can see this assumption at work in medieval discussions of specific physiological processes. For example, all human exudings—menstruation, sweating, lactation, emission of semen, etc.—were seen as bleedings; and all bleedings—lactation, menstruation, nosebleeds, hemorrhoidal bleeding, etc.—were taken to be analogous. Indeed, in the case of bleeding the physiological process, which was understood to be common to male and female bodies, functioned better (or at least more regularly) in women. Medieval writers, for example, urged men to apply leeches to their ankles when they failed to “menstruate”—i.e., to purge their bodies by periodic bleeding.

Thus to a medical writer, men’s and women’s bodies often did the

77Bynum, "... And Woman His Humanity." I have considered some of the implications of this observation in "The Complexity of Symbols," in Bynum, Harrell and Richman, Gender and Religion.


79Such a conception encouraged the exuding miracles (e.g., oil-exuding, miraculous lactation, cures with saliva, ecstatic nosebleeds) that characterized female saints. On such miracles, see Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh," nn. 14, 15, 81, 82, 83 and 85.
same things. A medieval theologian, whose assumptions about body were formed at least partly by this medical tradition, might therefore see the blood Christ shed in the circumcision and on the cross as analogous to menstrual blood or to breast milk—an analogy that seems to us, with our modern theories of glands and hormones, very far-fetched indeed. Such medieval ideas made it easy for writers and artists to fuse or interchange the genders and therefore to use both genders symbolically to talk about self and God. As mystics and theologians in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries increasingly emphasized the human body of Christ, that body could be seen both as the paradigmatic male body of Aristotelian physiological theory and as the womanly, nurturing flesh that Christ’s holy mother received immaculately from her female forebearer.

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The analysis above suggests that there is little textual support for Steinberg’s argument that the artistic focus of Renaissance painters on Christ’s penis was a theological statement about sexuality. There is, however, much textual and iconographical support for the argument that the flesh of Christ was seen by fifteenth-century people as both male and female. Thus Steinberg is not wrong to argue that artists gave a new prominence to the body of Christ. He has merely failed to explain the range of that bodiliness in its full complexity. To writers, painters and sculptors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries not only the penis but also the eyes and breasts, even the toes, of Christ engendered extravagant emotional response. 80 Devotion

80 One thinks of the iconographic tradition associating Mary Magdalen and Francis of Assisi with the toes of Christ: see Joanna Ziegler, “The Virgin or Mary Magdalen? Artistic Choices and Changing Spiritual Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages,” paper presented at the Holy Cross Symposium “The Word Becomes Flesh,” November 9, 1985, and Roberta J. Schneider, “The Development of Iconographic Manifestations of St. Francis of Assisi as the Alter Christus in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italian Painting,” M. A. Thesis, University of Washington, 1985, plates 8–20. For examples of the Magdalen kissing or hovering over Christ’s feet at the crucifixion or deposition, see Hiller and Vey, Katalog . . . Walraf-Richartz Museum, plates 86 and 124. For examples of Francis curled around the feet of Christ, see Vincent Moleta, From St. Francis to Giotto: The Influence of St. Francis on Early Italian Art and Literature (Chicago, 1983), p. 26, and Bernard Berenson, Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: A List of the Principal Artists and Their Works: Central Italian and Northern Italian Schools, II (London, 1968), plate 448. Margery Kempe was especially devoted to the toes of Christ: see The Book
poured out to Christ our brother, Christ our mother, Christ our bridegroom, and Christ our friend.

Nonetheless my examination of late medieval concepts of Christ agrees in certain ways with Steinberg’s emphasis. I am arguing here with rather than against Steinberg that things are seldom what they seem, at least if the seeming is based on unexamined modern attitudes. Medieval symbols were far more complex—polysemic as anthropologists say—than modern people are aware. They were, as Steinberg tells us, rooted in theology and piety. Moreover, we can unquestionably learn from their complexity, as Steinberg has also suggested. Rather than mapping back onto medieval paintings modern dichotomies, we might find in medieval art and literature some suggestion of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack.

As my discussion above demonstrates, medieval artists and devotional writers did not either equate body with sexuality or reject body as evil. There was a misogynist clerical tradition, to be sure. But medieval piety did not dismiss flesh—even female flesh—as polluting. Rather it saw flesh as fertile and vulnerable; and it saw enfleshing—the enfleshing of God and of us all—as the occasion for salvation.

We should therefore be wary of any modern appeals to medieval traditions that oppose male to female or equate flesh with sexuality. We should also understand that there is little basis in medieval art or devotion for treating body as entrapment rather than opportunity, suffering as evil to be eschewed rather than promise to be redeemed. My argument then is not titillating antiquarianism. It is rather a challenge to us to think more deeply about what our basic symbols

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Margery Kempe: The Text from the Unique Manuscript Owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon, ed. Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, Early English Text Society, 212 (London, 1940). For a reading of Steinberg (very different from mine) that nonetheless draws attention generally to Christ’s bodiliness, see Jane Gallop, “Psychoanalytic Criticism: Some Intimate Questions,” in Art in America (November, 1984), p. 15.

81See Bynum, “Women Mystics,” and Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls, pp. 89–121, esp. p. 104, for discussion of late medieval notions of using body to approach God. Such an emphasis on body as a means of becoming like Christ is very different from a dualistic rejection of body as the enemy of spirit. To say this is not, however, to deny that medieval thinkers also stressed the disciplining of flesh, especially female flesh. See Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls, pp. 118–20, and Weinstein and Bell, Saints and Society, pp. 233–38.

mean. There may be warrant in the Christian tradition for equating the penis with maleness and maleness with humanity, but I would argue that medieval theology at least as explicitly equates the breast with femaleness and femaleness both with the humanity of Christ and with the humanity of us all. There may be warrant in the Christian tradition for seeing the resurrection as triumph over body, but I would suggest that medieval piety (at least in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) speaks far more urgently of life coming from death, of significance located in body, of pain and suffering as the opportunity—even the cause—of salvation. A better understanding of the medieval past might thus enable modern people to give to age-old symbols new meanings that would be in fact medieval. If we want to express the significance of Jesus in both male and female images, if we want to turn from seeing body as sexual to seeing body as generative, if we want to find symbols that give dignity and meaning to the suffering we cannot eliminate and yet fear so acutely, we can find support for doing so in the art and theology of the later Middle Ages.

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