

RHETORICIZING BODY AND RITUAL:
WOMEN WRITING IN
THE MIDDLE AGES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

Laura J. Sims, B.A.

San Marcos, Texas
December 2010

RHETORICIZING BODY AND RITUAL:
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Committee Members Approved:

Edgar Laird, Chair

Rebecca Jackson

Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler

Approved:

J. Michael Willoughby
Dean of the Graduate College

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In presenting this thesis, I would be remiss if I did not give credit to the teachers, mentors, and others who have made its completion possible. First, the professors who have worked on my thesis committee have been exceedingly generous with their time, knowledge, and forbearance. I would like to particularly thank my thesis chair Edgar Laird for refining my style, pinpointing my omissions, correcting my misinterpretations, and excusing my delays. I am a wiser writer today because of his support through this project. I also owe my gratitude to Rebecca Jackson, who first exposed me to the field of composition studies and who has permanently altered my understanding of authorship, audience, and written texts. I would additionally like to thank Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler for challenging my assumptions and forcing me to consider, and to verbalize, the wider implications of my research. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Susan Signe Morrison. She introduced me to all four of the writers I discuss in this project, she inspired and guided my ideas from the earliest stages of my research, and she provided a tireless source of encouragement through the obstacles and set backs of my writing journey.

I would also like to express my appreciation for the individuals who have supported me during my academic career. I owe my decision to pursue graduate studies to Donna Donald's persuasion, personal assistance, and role modeling. I am likewise extremely grateful to Rita Hartless, whose energy, good will, and generosity sustained me through the toughest trials of my undergraduate degree. I am indebted to my parents, for

opening their pockets and their ears to my dreams. Lastly, but most importantly, I need to thank Paul for believing in me, pushing me, trusting me, and reassuring me. I could not have done this without you.

This manuscript was submitted on October 19, 2010.

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING AS PERFORMANCE

Medieval women writers have been widely studied as theologians, as philosophers, and as proto-feminists, but in the last twenty years compilers have begun to include such authors in Western anthologies of rhetoric as well. As Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald attest, women have historically deviated from traditionally male rhetorical methods because they have been forced to speak from a disadvantaged position. Drawing on Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as an appropriation of "available means" for persuasion, Ritchie and Ronald explain:

The discovery of the available means was for Aristotle an act of invention that always assumed the right to speak in the first place [. . .] The act of invention for women, then, begins in a different place from Aristotle's conception of invention: women must first invent a way to speak in the context of being silenced and rendered invisible as persons. (xvii)¹

Numerous critics already have paid attention to the development of an authoritative voice by authors like Margery Kempe and Christine de Pizan. However, little research exists

1 When applied to the writers of the Middle Ages, Ritchie and Ronald's statement can be misleading. Numerous authors, both male and female, made use of the humility *topos*, which Joan Ferrante describes as "a means of gaining good will in order to be able to move the auditor more effectively" (221). Chaucer, for example, in introducing his *Troilus and Criseyde*, calls himself "the sorrowful instrument, / That helpeth lovers, as I kan, to pleyne" (I.9-10). Therefore, male writers often deny their "right to speak," due to their lack of experience, education, or talent. Female writers, however, are constrained in a different degree: while many men apologize for their personal shortcomings, women often need to defend the status of their entire sex.

analyzing the specific rhetorical methods shared by medieval women writers in discussing religion and women's spiritual and social position. This thesis will argue that, in spite of differences in period, location, language, and position, women authors of the Middle Ages share similar strategies of communicative structure and persuasion.

On the Body

My basis for pinpointing common rhetorical elements from women's writing lies in the widely recognized association of medieval women with the body. Caroline Walker Bynum's study on female piety and food in *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* has provided a foundation, and an inspiration, for numerous inquiries into the medieval delineations of gender and religious identity in the two decades since its publication.² After establishing food as the continual center of female visions and practices, Bynum concludes that the connection relies on the basic ontological understanding of female identity: "It seems likely that women were drawn to identify with Christ's suffering and feeding flesh because both men and women saw the female body as food and the female nature as fleshly" (260). The medieval view relies largely on an Aristotelian understanding of the dichotomy between the body and soul. In his anthology *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, Alcuin Blamires locates the source of the antifeminist tradition, at least partially, in Aristotle's physiology. He states, "Aristotle's considerable authority certainly did substantiate an unflattering equation between woman and 'matter', which found an echo in commonplace etymology" (39). In his *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle claims:

2 Compilations which directly address Bynum's theories include *Gender and Text in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jane Chance, *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, edited by Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, and *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, edited by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury.

An animal is a living body, a body with Soul in it. The female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape; this, in our view, is the specific characteristic of each of the sexes: that is what it means to be male or female. [. . .] Thus the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body. (109)³

The medieval inheritance of Aristotle's conception of gender difference has often been primarily understood in terms of its restriction on female agency and its designation of woman's mental and spiritual inferiority, linked partly to biblical designations of the flesh as morally weak. In elaborating on Aristotle's influence, Jane Chance concludes, "Partly because of biblical commentaries, and partly because of the planetary influence on the body, such as fluctuations of the moon, the body generally acquired a female signification, identified with materiality and passivity, softness, moisture, and mutability" (4). Such associations, of course, run counter to feminist goals for cultural power and political equality, but the female body, and its psychic implications, remains a focal point for gender discussion to this day.

In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz outlines the continuing devaluation of the female body in both patriarchal and feminist circles. The bodies of women, she explains, have conveniently provided misogynists with a physical grounds for assuming male superiority. Because of their reproductive capabilities, women are vulnerable; because of their hormones, women are unreliable; because of their musculature, women are incapable. Women are thus both limited by and confined to their biology: "Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by

3 Translation taken from A. L. Peck's *Aristotle: Generation of Animals*.

connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms" (14). This mind/body dualism, however, is retained within various feminist movements. While misogynists might describe the female mind as imprisoned by the female body, egalitarian and social-constructionist feminists uphold the equality of the mind by freeing it, and in effect separating it, from the body. These systems denigrate bodies as, at most, "[mere] media for communication" or, at least, "alien to cultural and intellectual achievement" (16-17).

Grosz responds to both sides of the gender debate by criticizing the dualism underlying each. Aligning herself with feminists committed to "sexual difference," Grosz explains:

They are concerned with the *lived body*, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures. For them, the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange.

(18)⁴

Instead of designating the body as a tool or limitation of the mind, Grosz argues for the development of a feminist understanding of "*embodied subjectivity, of psychical corporeality*" (22). The body is neither opposed nor fully unified with mind: rather, Grosz considers it "as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and

⁴ Grosz distinguishes this view from the acceptance of essentialism, stating, "there is a wholehearted acknowledgement, even valorization of differences between members of the same sex rather than an uncritical acceptance of universalist essences or categories" (18).

undecidedly at the pivotal point of binary pairs” (23). In such a system, the mind and body are not in conflict, nor is one allowed to negate the other through a purely material or purely rational understanding. Rather, they exist as two attributes of a single substance, or two expressions of the same event.⁵

Accepting Grosz’s interpretation of the mutual dependence of body and mind allows the reader of medieval women to understand their spirituality beyond the political and social restrictions imposed by patriarchal systems. In affirming the body as an active subject in cultural understanding and expression, Grosz legitimizes the body-centered experience of both writing and written women. I maintain that women in the Middle Ages did not focus on the imagery of the body and approach religion in terms of bodily experience solely because they were barred from holding religious office, limited in educational opportunities, or impressed with a sense of female intellectual inferiority (although many women certainly lived in these conditions). Rather, it appears that women writers viewed gendered bodies as important sites for worship and self-knowledge. Bynum likewise understands the medieval emphasis on the needs of the flesh, whether in abstinence or indulgence, as a dedication to bodily concerns, rather than a eschewal of tainted material. She disputes assumptions that asceticism represented “world-rejection” or an “internalized [. . .] self-hatred or masochism.” Bynum’s interpretation of piety instead situates the body as a place of empowerment: “Rather, I argue that medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality” (6).

5 Grosz bases part of her theory on Spinoza’s articulation of monism and its displacement of Cartesian dualism.

I propose that women writers perceived these possibilities precisely where the flesh provided the means for both spiritual understanding and worship. Their texts reveal that their conception of the world, and their communication of identity and spirituality, relies on the imagery of bodily action. However, I do not mean to suggest that utilizing the body as a metaphor comprises a unique factor in feminine rhetoric. In the introduction to their compilation of essays on the medieval body, Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury note that “medieval spiritual abstractions and ideas about morality, moreover, were typically given bodily form: the seven deadly sins were represented as people, that is, as fleshly bodies, just as Dante Alighieri’s spiritual journey to God was cast in the form of an actual, physical journey” (viii-ix). Bodies, and particularly female bodies, directed interpretation and expression for both men *and* women. In the same compilation, for example, Margaret Brose analyzes Petrarch’s personification of his native country as a fragmented female body. My purpose in beginning this study with a focus on the body is not to confine considerations of the flesh as a feminine technique or to dismiss male embodiment. None of the women I discuss in this paper would accommodate either. However, the theories of Bynum and Grosz do illuminate the apparent ontological assumptions that influence the rhetorical choices of female writers in the Middle Ages. The structure and imagery of their texts vividly reflect Grosz’s “embodied subjectivity.”

On Performance

The other critical traditions that will inform my analysis of medieval women writers deal with the actions of and public reactions to individual bodies. Ritual and

performance studies have married topics from anthropological, historical, religious, and literary fields since their reinvention in the 1970s.⁶ Relatively few scholars, however, have tied elements of ritual and performance to medieval rhetoric. Examples of such studies include Jody Enders's essay "Dramatic Rhetoric and Rhetorical Drama: Orators and Actors," in which she investigates the dramatic metaphors of classical rhetoricians. She states, "Rhetoricians have long compared their activity to drama, measuring the efficacy of their own delivery against that of the dramatic actor. Cicero, for example, insisted that actors were to be studied as role models or 'patterns' for delivery" (66). Enders goes on to argue for the application of "rhetorico-dramatic forms" in the study of medieval literature, but attends only briefly to a few specific authors. The collection *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, edited by Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler, is far more comprehensive in attending to the performative aspects of religious practice and language, including Nanda Hopenwasser's essay on *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁷ More recently, Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado, and Marilyn Lawrence have argued for attention to the presence of drama and the dramatic in narrative poetry and prose in their introduction to the compilation *Performing Medieval Narrative*:

Storytellers cannot be confined to a single role: they are shapeshifters, who can step back and forth over the borderlines of narrative; they may tell or read narratives, act out roles within their stories by using gestures and actions, address their audience or comment on their tales from a

⁶ Mary Suydam's "Background: An Introduction to Performance Studies" in *Performance and Transformation* details the history and interdisciplinary considerations of ritual and performance studies.

⁷ See the chapter on Margery Kempe for a consideration of Hopenwasser's analysis.

position outside the fictional world. Readers too may assume the role of a storyteller, performing narratives silently in their imagination, seeing the story unfold in their mind's eye. (3)

While the essays in *Performing Medieval Narrative* focus primarily on epic, romance, and fabliaux, the rendition of medieval authors and readers as performative storytellers applies equally to the autobiographical, hagiographical, and visionary texts of Heloise, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Christine de Pizan.

The performative aspects of these texts are twofold: first, their commitment to embodied understanding and communication leads these women to interpret experiences and interactions in terms of constructed bodily performance. These writers do not record characters and events so much as they create and direct them. Judith Butler's designation of gender identity as a product of "the stylized repetition of acts through time" provides a dynamic analogy for the construction of medieval texts (153-54). For Heloise, Christine, Julian, and Margery, writing enables them to stylize and repeat their own experiences to produce a desired effect on their audiences. At the same time, cultural norms influence their depictions and affect the reception of their performing bodies. Likewise, Butler relates the construction of gender to dramatic performance: "Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (161). As authors and possessors of interpreted bodies, Heloise, Julian, Margery, and Christine are simultaneously empowered and restricted by cultural designations for the flesh.

Secondly, all of these women use ritualized imagery and language to express

spiritual and emotional performance. As confessors, partakers, and petitioners, they lived lives punctuated by ritual processes. At least three married and bore children, at least one took the veil, one embarked on pilgrimages, and one was enclosed in an anchorite's cell. Just as these women receive and relate ideas through representations in the flesh conditioned by a medieval emphasis on the body, it is equally likely that their interpretations and expressions of divine truths would reflect their ritualized backgrounds. Working from this hypothesis, my analyses of Heloise's letters, Christine's *Book of the City of Ladies*, Julian's *Divine Showings*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* will consider performative rhetoric in relation to both gendered bodies and ritual theory. According to Mary Suydam, "To study ritual from a performance standpoint means to examine what ritual *does*, rather than focusing primarily upon the meaning behind or embedded within the ritual. Performance studies scholars attempt to highlight action, space, emotion, and sensory dimensions rather than the intellectual content of the ritual text" (2). My aim, therefore, is to investigate these dimensions within the texts to interpret both character performance and the actual performance of writing as a potential transformative ritual.

On Ritual

Ronald Grimes describes the connection between ritual and performance as "the fundamental impulse toward stylization, mimesis, and transformation" ("Jerzy Bortowski's Poor Theater" 164). Based on this statement, I emphasize three categories in my examination of ritual in medieval women's writing: the stylistic use of space and the senses, the creation and imitation of character roles, and the aim of transformation for

both audience and author. But a fuller delineation of each category requires an explanation of current research in the field of ritual studies. Victor Turner is widely considered the pioneer of a new discourse of performance and ritual due to his break from Émile Durkheim's perception of rituals as "conservative" acts which ultimately "serve to stabilize the social order" (Suydam 3). Turner's theories instead focus on the uncertainties and disruptions present in all social acts. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner first defines his understanding of liminality and applies it to his observations of the Ndembu people. He adopts Arnold van Gennep's description of the three phases in rites of passage and expands on each to explain the universal effects of ritual:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and [. . .] he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (94-95)

Turner later draws on these phases to establish his theory of social drama, in which a group or individual effects a public "breach" from a social norm, leading to a "crisis" of communal unity and a "redress" of the breach. These three phases will naturally lead to a

fourth: the drama will either result in the “restoration of peace and ‘normality’” or “the social recognition of irremediable or irreversible breach of schism” (“Are There Universals of Performance?” 63).

Turner’s descriptions of rituals and social dramas share two distinct characteristics. First, they are both public: the actions of the individual(s) involved in the separation or breach are intertwined with the community’s involvement, and vice versa. Second, both depend on periods of liminality. Turner explains that both crises and attempts at redress often involve ritualistic actions, and he locates the possibilities for change and growth within the chaos of the liminal phase. As he demonstrates in his earlier work, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*The Ritual Process* 95). The primary transformative force in the liminal state, however, belongs to the society, not the ritual participant. In both models, Turner seems to negate the agency of the ritual subject in favor of the enforced will of society: “The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group [. . .] They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society” (103). He reiterates the passivity of the neophyte’s function in his metaphors for the liminal state: it is like “death” or “being in the womb” (95). Religious psychologist H. Barbara Boudewijnse shares a similar interpretation: “Somehow the symbolism of the liminal phase affects the individual in such a way as to transform his inner experience. Collective ritual symbolic action results in destructuring and subsequently rebuilding the individual’s image of self and society” (13). In all of these cases, the participation in ritual appears to be voluntary,

so the process should be interpreted as a submission to social construction, rather than an assault by a dominant discourse.

However, female subjects seem to confound Turner's definitions of ritual phases and liminality. Caroline Walker Bynum, in her critique of Turner's universal application of his ritual theory, argues that women in the Middle Ages either never enter a transformative liminal state or experience perpetual liminality because their stories emphasize "continuity" rather than conversion ("Women's Stories, Women's Symbols" 32). While comparatively powerful ritual participants become associated with inferior states, or the reversal of their starting position, during the liminal period, medieval women never leave their original status of social inferiority. Bynum comments that, "Medieval women, like men, chose to speak of themselves as brides, mothers and sisters of Christ. But to women this was an accepting and continuing of what they were; to men, it was reversal" (48). Thus, Bynum concludes that medieval women do not move through Turner's phases, either in social drama or in ritual, nor do they attain the complete transformation ritual promises. In describing the record of Beatrice of Ornacieux, Bynum bluntly states, "There is no conversion, no breach and reintegration. [. . .] To an astonishing extent, hers is a life in which 'nothing happens,' at least if we expect to find a social drama" (40).

While I maintain that the writings of medieval women are highly dependent on dramatic elements, I also agree with Bynum's argument that the expression of female experience does not line up perfectly with Turner's stages of social drama. However, I propose that the liminal situation does still emerge from the writings I will discuss in this paper, albeit in a different form than Turner's model. As Bynum has shown, the

chronological structure of men's ritual transitions from one state to another does not fit the stories told by women. On the other hand, women's accounts still describe attempts to attain a transitional state through performative acts. Such acts, as in the life of Margery Kempe, may be multiple, chronologically ambiguous, and limited, instead of singular, definitive, and relatively unconstrained, but they are nonetheless present. Bynum notes, "There are dozens of occasions on which, we might say, Margery strains desperately for liminality, strains for transition in status, for conversion, for escape from her normal role as 'married woman' into the role, two hundred years old at least, of the *mulier sancta*" (40). However, while Bynum concludes that Kempe is prevented by her status from "[writing] her own script" and that "women are *fully* liminal only to men" (emphasis mine), the remarkably common presence of transitional language in women's rhetoric indicates that women can still experience and describe a *kind* of liminality, although the images they evoke are not always associated with the reversal of their current state (41, 49). Instead of recording chronological conversion experiences, medieval women writers create social dramas within their texts in order to define ritual and transition according to their own experience.

On Space

By structuring their works around self-determined social dramas, Heloise, Christine de Pizan, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe each designate a space wherein their own roles, and the roles of everyone they interact with, are under their control. In ritual studies, sacred places are both defined *by* and definers *of* the actions taking place within them. This double role is further complicated by the apparent

contradiction in the presumptions of ritual scholars and participants that areas become sacred both before and after their involvement in religious performance. Several scholars have attempted to elucidate the complex assumptions which determine the sacredness of an object or space. Belden Lane's axioms for sacred place, for example, illustrate the conflicting origins and purposes of sacred places:

1. *"sacred place is not chosen, it chooses"*
2. *"sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary"*
3. *"sacred place can be tread [sic] upon without being entered"*
4. *"the impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal"*

Commenting on his first principle, Lane goes on to conclude that "sacred place, therefore, is a construction of the imagination that affirms the independence of the holy. God chooses to reveal himself only where he wills" (19). This system requires both divine intervention and a human response; in this sense, ritual's purpose is interaction between man and a higher power. In opposition to Lane's emphasis on a holy will, Jonathan Z. Smith argues, "'Sacred is a product of human agency, this or that is made or designated 'sacred.' 'Sacred' is not the human response to a transcendental act of self-display" (111). Smith proves his point by pointing to the Mbiti's use of a stolen water pipe for a sacred trumpet; the sacredness of the instrument depended entirely on its human utilization.⁸ In this study, I will draw from both views as they apply to individual women writers. All of

8 Smith pulls his illustration from the work of Colin M. Turnbull, who was originally horrified at the Mbiti's apparently sacrilegious treatment of the *molimo*, or ritual trumpet. Smith explains, "In this essay, I have sided with the theoretical sophistication of the Mbiti with respect to the sacred—'What does it matter what the molimo is made of?'—over against Turnbull, who has apparently read too many books in the religious studies field and thinks of sacrality as something inherent, as something fraught with ambivalent danger" (112).

their texts focus on the human and divine origins of sacred space, as well as its purpose in providing context for ritual behavior, to varying degrees. What remains constant through each work, however, is the central importance of space, whether physical, spiritual, or textual, for performance, liminality, and transition.

Heloise's letters, Christine's *City*, Julian's *Showings*, and Margery's *Book* all contain episodes illustrating the activity of the body in holy places. Whether the characters physically (and publicly) visit sacred sites, as in Margery's pilgrimages, or encounter the sacred in private visions, as in Julian's apprehension of "alle that is made" in "a litille thinge the quantite of a haselle nutte" (69), the purpose of sacred space within the texts is always to focus and surround performative behavior. It is perhaps more significant, however, that the texts themselves can also be interpreted as places where the authors and readers can experience ritual transformation. In her study *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance*, Susan Signe Morrison declares, "Public movement is like public speech—both function as declarations of faith. Public movement functions as a speech act of motion or space" (129). Inspired by this statement, I will argue that public speech, in this case the act of writing, can also function like public performance. Additionally, the performative act of authorship by medieval women is particularly linked to the purpose of ritual: providing a metamorphosis for either the writer or her audience. Drawing on Turner's theory, and Bynum's critique, I therefore view the actual composition, whether oral or tactile, as well as the reading or hearing of these texts as liminal experiences. I will argue from analyses of the authors' rhetoric that these women apparently intended for their efforts to result "in deconstructing and subsequently rebuilding the individual's [the author's or reader's]

image of self and society” (Boudewijnse 13).⁹ They accomplish this end not through participation in social dramas (although accounts of their lives confirm that they did perform in public rituals as well as in their texts) but through the creation and reinterpretation of social dramas within their writing.

Unlike the passive participants of Turner’s model, these writers actively invent the process, place, performance, and purpose of drama and ritual. As Catherine Bell explains, “Ritual as a performative medium for social change emphasizes human creativity and physicality: ritual does not mold people; people fashion rituals that mold their world” (73). For Heloise, Julian, Margery, and Christine, it may be more appropriate to say that people fashion texts to mold their world.

9 See my comments on liminality under the previous section *On Ritual*.

CHAPTER I

HELOISE AND THE REPOSITIONING OF CHARACTER ROLES

Heloise stands apart from the other writers discussed in this thesis on account of her divergence in period, genre, and audience. Her correspondence with Abelard, beginning with her response to his *Historia Calamitatum*, took place between A.D. 1133 and 1138, over two and a half centuries before the composition of *The Book of the City of Ladies*.¹⁰ Classically educated, Heloise was, according to Abelard, “renowned throughout the realm” for her scholarly gifts (10).¹¹ Their ill-fated affair and marriage, resulting in his castration and her entrance into a convent in 1118, were similarly well-known. Their letters remained in obscurity until more than a century after their composition, when Jean de Meun popularized their story in a reference in the *Roman de la Rose* (Mews 23). In the nineteenth century, readers began to doubt the authenticity of the correspondence, and skepticism regarding the authorship of both Heloise and Abelard has complicated studies of the letters to this day. Some have pointed out the psychological improbability of “an exchange which began with a debate about feelings of the heart but concluded with spiritual advice” (24).¹² Possible theories have included that Abelard was the direct or indirect author of Heloise’s thoughts and that an early editor

10 All dates given are drawn from Betty Radice’s timeline preceding her translation of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*.

11 All English quotations from the letters are from Betty Radice’s translation.

12 As I will state later in this chapter, I think that the conclusion of Heloise and Abelard’s correspondence stands as a realistic compromise between the stated goals of both parties.

may have served as a liberal co-author by shaping the letters into a conversion story for the purposes of edification (Dronke 109). But, as Peter Dronke has noted, questions of authenticity can be set aside when approaching the letters “principally as works of imagination,” rather than as historical documents (109). On this basis, the letters can be studied not as inventions but as highly inventive pieces of literature, in which the authors continually invent both personal identities and the relative positions of their audience. For this study, I will assume that Abelard and Heloise constitute the primary authors of their letters.

Heloise’s letters to her absent lover are highly influenced by classical rhetoric; several scholars, such as Peter Dronke and biographer M. T. Clanchy, have traced her allusions and indebtedness to sources ranging from Ovid to the Old Testament. Martin Irvine aligns her structure with that of the *epistola ad amicum*, or letter to a loved one (90).¹³ In light of the extensive existing research into Heloise’s classical influences, my aim for this chapter will not be to discuss her formal rhetorical training but to illuminate those qualities in Heloise’s letters which correspond with bodily performance and ritual. My primary focus will be on the four “personal” letters because of their repeated presentation and redefinition of space, the body, and relational status. Within these texts Heloise repositions both the contextual stage of their relationship and the performative roles of their characters. Setting herself up as the director of their drama allows Heloise to rhetorically restructure both her own identity and that of her beloved.

The correspondence begins with Heloise’s reaction to Abelard’s self-invention in his *Historia*. In this autobiographical narrative, Abelard uses his star-crossed affair to

¹³ Irvine warns that “the Latin literary letter, however, should not be confused with the modern personal letter. The *epistola* was a formal, literary, and public genre, considered to be an occasion for a rhetorical performance on whatever themes the correspondents chose” (90).

make himself into an object of pity in order to fit the rhetorical mold of the letter of consolation. However, he undermines the character of the pitiful Abelard through his arrogant tone, and his account of his relationship with Heloise ultimately sparks some of the shocking language of the protestations in her first letter. Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod trace the objections of Heloise's first and second letters to two specific errors in Abelard's *Historia*: "Abelard's presentation of her arguments against marriage (and by consequence his portrait of their love and themselves) and his failure to fulfill the generic expectations aroused by the promise of a consolation (and by consequence his failure to depict a genuine conversion)." Wilson and McLeod then show how Heloise strategically combats these two issues "by assuming a posture of greater humility than Abelard," eventually forcing him to conform his language to hers (123). This view empowers Heloise by proving both her rhetorical ability and her influence on Abelard and significantly outlines how she continually reinvents her persona in reaction to Abelard's previous definitions. But Wilson and McLeod primarily focus on the Heloise's ethical philosophy, so they tie Abelard's "portrait of their love and themselves" to his misrepresentation of the core of Heloise's argument against marriage: her own honor as a woman who would choose to be a concubine to maintain the integrity of her devotion. Although Heloise's concern with intention-versus-action greatly affects the identities she creates for both Abelard and herself, the issue only partly explains her continual attempts to define their relationship. In addition to drawing sincerity from Abelard in reaction to her humility, the purpose of Heloise's letters is to regain control over her shared history with Abelard, and in doing so direct their future interactions.

Heloise represents this shared history primarily through attention to the settings

which bind them together. McLeod aligns Heloise's technique with "classical rhetoric's science of memory, which taught students to remember famous personages by placing them in elaborate buildings" (66). In her first letter, Heloise uses spatial and sensory imagery to remind Abelard of their various connections and to shame him with her isolation. She begins by describing her own condition upon reading his *Historia*: she receives his words "by chance," from an unnamed friend.¹⁴ She calls her past inclusion in his life "the reality I have lost," immediately contrasting her desires with the reality of a negligent husband (48). When referring to their romantic relationship, she describes his charms in sight and sound. Abelard's fame, his "manhood [. . .] adorned by every grace of mind and body," and his "gift of composing and the gift of singing" are her treasures (52-53). After recreating the sensations of their courtship, Heloise calls on Abelard to end his negligence and act his part in their separation. The public nature of their love now becomes her weapon: if those who once envied her now pity her loss, how much more compassion might she deserve from him?

The other major setting Heloise uses for reproach is her current residence at the Paraclete. The convent actually constitutes a sacred space according to Belden Lane's definition, in that Heloise emphasizes both God's and Abelard's roles in its construction: "you after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community" (49). She goes on to compare the abbey to a plantation and a vineyard, accentuating both the potential for growth and the dependence on cultivation of its occupants. The fertile imagery Heloise applies to herself and her community corresponds with Victor Turner's metaphors for liminality. In this case, Abelard has

¹⁴ Constant J. Mews points out that Jean de Meun's translation does not include the phrase "by chance"; it is possible that Abelard was not entirely as neglectful as the phrasing implies (24).

failed to complete his sacred duties, and Heloise rebukes him for neglecting her for an inferior calling: “You cultivate a vineyard of another’s vines which you did not plant yourself and which has now turned to bitterness against you.” Heloise again turns her delineation of their shared space into an admonition: “You devote your care to another’s vineyard; think what you owe to your own” (50).

In relation to Abelard’s account of their affair, Heloise is concerned with his representation of himself as the primary guilty party, and thus the one who controlled their sin. Abelard never blames Heloise for his lust; in face of the patristic association of women with temptation and the destruction of man, his refusal to do so seems noble by comparison. On the other hand, he simultaneously dismisses her will to love him, presenting her as a powerless victim, like “a tender lamb” entrusted “to a ravening wolf” (10). Abelard describes their relationship as a natural progression from his initial decision to woo her to its consummation: “I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed, confident that I should have an easy success; for at that time I had youth and exceptional good looks as well” (10). Abelard’s statements could be attributed to his development of a sinful persona to renounce, fitting his model of divine justice and conversion, but the arrogance of his tone makes it difficult to separate the pride he used to have from the pride he continues to display. Either way, he defines their relationship according to his active role in pursuing and winning Heloise, and, as the controlling party, he claims the right to invent their history according to his needs. Abelard evidently assumes that Heloise is content with the space he has allotted her in his personal history and the costume he has thrust upon her character.

In response, Heloise masterfully uses the same language as Abelard to define their relationship, but she creates for herself an identity that finds power and will in their love. She seems to agree with Abelard's depiction of his irresistible charm: "Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence," but she ties his seduction with her desire: "queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed" (52). Likewise, in paralleling Abelard's comparison of the wolf and lamb, Heloise admits that she was "powerless to oppose you in anything" when she took the veil. But her purpose in doing so reinforces the choice she made to sacrifice herself: "in order to prove you the sole possessor of my body and my will alike" (51). By declaring her preference for love freely given, Heloise asserts that whatever power and acknowledgement of merit she has ascribed to Abelard was initially hers to bestow, and he was her lover only because she chose to call him so. She reinforces her insistence on her personal agency in their affair by claiming she would rather have been Abelard's "concubinae" ("concubine") or "scorti" ("whore") than his "uxoris" ("wife"; Radice 51).¹⁵ While Abelard refuses to blame her for their sin, she appropriates the blame for herself, and with it, the responsibility for her own actions.

Heloise's depiction of her entrance into the convent additionally proves her ability to recreate ritual to fit her own interpretation of her social position. She writes that "it is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime" (53). In this case, crime could appropriately be replaced with the meaning of ritual. By writing of her greater loyalty to Abelard than to God, Heloise changes the significance of her physical participation in the ritual from a holy consecration to a romantic dedication, proclaiming, "My heart was not in me but with you" (54). By changing the context of her vows, first

¹⁵ Latin quotations taken from J. T. Muckle pp. 71.

in her will at the point of making them and again in the text of her letter, Heloise rewrites her current status. She negates her transformation into a bride of Christ and instead claims continuity with her original status, that of Abelard's wife.¹⁶

As she stakes her claim to define their history in terms of her own volition, Heloise simultaneously attempts to set out a course for their future relationship by assigning Abelard a role that he has long since abandoned. She repeatedly addresses Abelard as her "amicum" or "beloved" (Muckle 68; Radice 47) throughout the letter, recalling him to their old intimacy and demanding that he acknowledge her heart's desires. Dronke notes that "the words 'beseech' and 'alone' . . . recur almost like refrains" after Heloise's response to Abelard's mortal danger, emphasizing his unique ability, and obligation, to console her (114). In her salutation, Heloise reflects not only on the complications of their past relations, claiming her right to describe him as she will, but also on the extent of their connection, rebuking Abelard's failure to maintain it: "Domino suo immo patri, coniugi suo immo fratri, ancilla sua immo filia, ipsius uxor immo soror, Abelardo Heloisa" ("To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard, from Heloise"; Muckle 68; Radice 47).¹⁷ Such an address could also be interpreted as confession of her reliance on him, as he fulfills every role that could supply her needs or demand her submission. However, as previously shown, Heloise's acknowledgement of Abelard's power over her is inextricably tied to her ability to control the status of their

16 Bynum says much the same for Margery Kempe: "In her own eyes, Margery achieves spiritual growth not by reversing what she is but by being more fully herself with Christ" (41).

17 Dronke ties Heloise's language to the third epistle of Ovid's *Heroides* in the author's choice of dialogue for Briseis, who calls Achilles "'my lord, my husband, and my brother too'" (Dronke 126). He shows that Heloise mimics both the submission and complaint of Briseis, who reproaches Achilles for giving her to Agamemnon and also declares herself willing to take the role of a concubine.

relationship, and thus her beseechings are not merely cries for attention but demands for her due: “Remember, I implore you, what I have done, and think how much you owe me” (54).

In response to Heloise’s usurpation of the authority to define their past and future roles, Abelard, the great debater, curiously avoids the confrontation by ignoring her talk of whoring and demands on his heart and instead reverses her claims on his consolation by entreating for her prayers. Abelard appears to think that it will be easier to make Heloise accept her chaste role for the future if he ignores the sins of their past. Additionally, he refrains from writing on the same level of intimacy, creating a distanced persona and indicating his expectation of an impersonal future. In his salutation and almost all of his textual addresses, Abelard refuses all names for their relationship but “sorori” (“sister”) and “frater” (“brother”; Muckle 73). By calling her “my sister once dear in the world and now dearest in Christ,” Abelard asserts that her new, superior identity has triumphed over the old, thus nullifying the need to dwell on their past (56). Unlike Heloise, Abelard obviously thinks that the ritual she underwent in taking the veil effectively transformed her identity. Then, by defining her position as the same as certain biblical women, whose prayers were heard because of their holiness, Abelard universalizes Heloise, effacing her personality and emotions in a role unsuited to her. In spite of her unapologetic boasts of their pleasures, he persists in describing Heloise, as he did in his *Historia*, for his own benefit: as a woman famous for “piety and wisdom,” who would “devote herself without distraction to prayer and meditation on holy things in a closed cell” (36). A woman of such character, of course, does not need the consolation Heloise requests.

Abelard's attempt to whitewash over all the complications and inflicted suffering of their past to create a neat and innocent foundation for their future evokes a forceful description of emotional dependence and spiritual turmoil from Heloise. As Linda Kauffman has observed, Heloise reacts to Abelard's "utter self-absorption" by repeating "the fundamental motif of amorous epistolary discourse by situating her identity absolutely in the absent beloved" (68-9). She drops all of the titles used in her first salutation and simply uses "unica" ("her only one") and "unico" ("his only one"; Muckle 77; Radice 63) throughout the text. In protest of his description of the mortal danger he is in, Heloise cries, "If we lose our life in you, we shall not be able to go on living when you leave us" (64). The effect of her emotional outburst is twofold: she once again claims power over Abelard by forcing her entire being into his care, and she rebukes his continued presumption that her affection, as a result of his initiation, can be annihilated simply because he chooses to no longer acknowledge it.

Heloise then proceeds to break down the facade of purity Abelard has cast over her unrepentant countenance by abhorring God's judgment and announcing herself a hypocrite because she "feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him" (69). She counteracts Abelard's identification of her with universal sainthood by claiming her place among women who "bring total ruin on great men" (66). Heloise's self-portrait is far from flattering, but, unlike Abelard's self-serving description, it is at least sincere. Brooke Heidenreich Findley argues that "Heloise emerges from these letters as a self-identified 'sincere hypocrite': faithful to Abelard and herself, yet posing as a servant of God (250). The person she describes is, as stated in her first letter, both "wholly guilty" and "wholly innocent" (53). Abelard cannot force her into the mold of a

saint, nor can he dismiss their previous relationship while she continues to define herself entirely by its terms.

In his response, Abelard at least proves that his assumed indifference has limits; he drops most of his attempts to distance himself from her problems, and, while he will not accept Heloise's depiction of her sinful nature, he directly addresses the problem of her identity. In effect, he now enters the stage Heloise has constructed—a site where their marriage still affects their current roles and actions. But while Heloise defines herself in terms of her relationship to Abelard, Abelard defines Heloise according to her relationship to the third player in their drama: Christ. His salutation gives them entirely separate identities: “*Sponsae Christi servus eisudem*” (“To the bride of Christ, from His servant”; Muckle 82; Radice 72). Abelard rejects the location of Heloise's identity within himself and hands her to God, in a move much like his previous inducement to have her wear the nun's habit. By defining the discrepancy between her devoted appearance and her spiritual rebellion as a direct result of her faithfulness in love, Heloise places her relationship with Abelard in opposition to her relationship with God. Abelard responds to this by rhetorically destroying the “love” they shared, claiming that Christ is Heloise's true lover. True love, according to Abelard, lies in thinking “more of their friends' advantage than of their own,” disqualifying his own affection as lust because he did not act in her best interests (78). Yet in the end he accepts that their history still binds them together, beseeching Heloise to “come too, my inseparable companion, and join me in thanksgiving, you who were made my partner in both guilt and grace” (83). By his own definition, Abelard, who did not love her in their sin, invents a future in which their love is sincere through mutual charity.

In this letter, Abelard's motives seem not to stem from a need to force Heloise into a more suitable role; rather, he argues that her current position in relation to God is not as hypocritical as it seems. Abelard's description of the Ethiopian bride from the Canticles reveals the difference between their views: as Findley observes, "While Heloise considers exteriors to be superficial and potentially deceitful, for Abelard the bride's exterior is an aspect of her identity as a whole" (255). Her external purity, then, is not negated by her desire for passion, but is rather a means of conversion provided by a merciful God. However, Abelard's emphasis on Heloise's chaste body seems to rather indicate the opposite: while Heloise glories in the remembrance of fleshly pleasures and unites desire with her will, Abelard divides body and spirit in the hope that one might reform the other (as in his own experience). Heloise's complaint is not that her body betrays her soul; rather, she revolts at wearing a costume that conflicts with her own designation of her body's situation (that of the whore rather than the abbess).

Heloise expresses some difficulty in restraining her emotions in her final extant reply, but she ultimately agrees to conform, rhetorically at least, to Abelard's model. Her lengthy description of female piety and request for directions, as well as the *Problemata* she collects for Abelard's theological guidance, do not directly refer to their past relationship again. Barbara Newman remarks that "for many readers [. . .] Heloise's last letter is precisely the one where her spirit dies, or at least goes underground forever" (74). To an extent, Abelard has won: by naming her a bride of Christ, he has effectively created her as one. Responding to his comments on her assumption of a veil to hide her pregnancy, Findley remarks that:

Although, at the beginning of this passage, Heloise's habit is a deceitful

covering serving to conceal truth, it turns out in the end that the habit has actually reshaped truth. God supplies a remedy for false representation, not by changing the representation so that it will reflect reality more accurately, but by changing reality so that the representation will become, at least in retrospect, true. (258)

But all we can know of Heloise is that her words, the “representation” of her character, have accepted her new role. She again sacrifices her identity to Abelard’s direction, but from a different angle, she has accomplished what she initially set out to do. In the process of their correspondence, both she and Abelard have lived “betwixt and between” states, neither conforming to the other’s desires (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95). In effect, both have experienced a kind of liminality, following their initial separation, through composing and exchanging letters. Heloise’s third letter, addressed “Suo specialiter, sua singulariter” (“To him who is specially hers, she who is singularly his”; Muckle 94; Radice 93), reveals that the process has finally led to the final phase of Turner’s ritual process: both have moved into new, “relatively stable” positions (Turner 95). For Heloise, writing and reading have transformed her will, but not her heart: “I have set the bridle of your injunction on the words which issue from my unbounded grief; thus in writing at least I may moderate what is difficult or rather impossible to forestall in speech. For nothing is less under our control than the heart—having no power to command it we are forced to obey” (93). But her words have also altered Abelard, and according to the stated purpose of her first letter, her efforts have largely succeeded: “I beg you to restore your presence to me in the way you can—by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God”

(54). The thick narratives of Abelard's continued correspondence prove that her complaint has finally been answered.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN'S DRAMA OF THE SEXES

For the study of women's rhetoric and performance, Heloise's letters provide a convenient starting point, because of their comparative brevity and the accessible reactions of her direct audience. Her address to a singular man, notwithstanding her likely expectation of reaching a larger secondary readership, additionally invites analysis of her personal motives and the isolated conditions of the two lives most directly involved in her authorship. Her goals for ritual transformation are likewise personal and isolated: she seeks to alter a relationship between two individuals. Unlike Heloise, Christine addresses an audience of all women instead of one man; the responses to her prolific pen are varied and often intangible; and she seeks to transform the relationship between the whole of the two sexes.

Like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, Christine lived and wrote at the juncture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the details of her personal life, particularly her education and social standing, divide her and her works from her English contemporaries. Elizabeth Petroff observes that "her only real peers may have been in the past: Hrotsvit or Hildegard of Bingen or Heloise, not in her own time"¹⁸ (304). Christine and Heloise were thorough literary scholars and are today reputed for their

¹⁸ Chronologically, *The Book of the City of Ladies* was likely written after Julian's *Divine Showings*, but I have grouped her with Heloise, and Julian with Margery Kempe, for the parallels often drawn between them.

learning more than their piety. Just as Heloise matched her wits against one of the greatest philosophers of the Middle Ages, so Christine raised her pen to duel with authorities of the past and present. Both began their literary efforts in response to tragic upheavals in their domestic relationships: while Heloise wrote to restore life into her shattered marriage, Christine wrote to support her remaining family after her husband's death. Finally, their obvious rhetorical influences and sources reveal their willingness to engage with writers both past and present: while Heloise reveals her classical influence in her adherence to the forms of Latin letter-writing, Christine structures her *Book of the City of Ladies* as a dream-vision, popularly chosen by medieval poets and philosophers alike.¹⁹ But Christine also seems to have more in common with the mystics Julian and Margery than merely their sex. While her inclusion of herself as a character in her text ties her to famous authors like Boethius and Chaucer, it also links her to the more personal narratives of her female peers. Rather than address the detractors of womankind through direct appeal, as Heloise directed her petitions to Abelard, Christine instead inserts herself into a dialogue with the ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, much as Julian and Margery recorded their insights through dialogues with Christ.

The writings of all four women deal with personal liminality and transformation in one way or another. Heloise's letters served as markers of her liminality as well as instruments for her eventual entry into another state. Similarly, in the introductory pages of her *Book*, Christine dramatizes her (presumably fictional) crisis of identity and liminal period of ambiguity. Upon reading various attacks on the female nature from respected authorities, Christine reflects:

19 See Donna Oestreich's study "Christine de Pisan's *Book of the City of Ladies*: Paradigmatic Participation and Eschewal" for an analysis of the extent of Christine's adherence and deviation from the dream-vision paradigm.

To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women. Yet I still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men—such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear-sighted in all things, as it seemed—could have spoken falsely on so many occasions [. . .]. (4)²⁰

The three ladies who find her in this state take pains to correct her misplaced trust and assign her the task of redressing the wrongs to womankind on a grand scale by constructing the city of ladies. Christine transforms from the victim of misogyny to the defender of her sex: like a boy becoming a man, she must shed her weakness and take on the responsibility of protecting her community. The Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice lead her to recognize the current crisis of women's role in society and its root in the disparagement of such unreliable authorities. Christine's *Book* thus moves quickly past her individual transformation to the illustration of a much larger social drama. Despite the inconsistencies between Turner's ritual theories and women's lives, his four phases of social drama—breach, crisis, redress, and restoration—directly correspond to Christine's professed goals for both the city and her text ("Are There Universals of Performance?" 63). However, while Turner's social dramas result in a return to the social norm, Christine's paradigm rather leads to a return to what she represents as the natural order, or the divine intention for the relationship between the sexes.

In order to redress the present crisis, or liminality, of her sex, Christine must first revisit the breach from God's original purpose for the role of women in society. She

20 All quotations are taken from Earl Jeffrey Richards' translation (revised 1998).

accomplishes this through two main channels: by describing, albeit selectively, a sequence of historical women to prove the true nature of female behavior and by attacking the misogynist authorities whose words have caused such an influential break from true understanding. In the process, Christine borrows heavily from antifeminist rhetoric and sources for her compilation. As Karen Casebier explains, “she appropriates both their methods and their texts and re-casts them in her own ethical and moral form” (36). Her “re-casting” of these texts has already been widely analyzed: numerous scholars have shown how Christine uses her revisions of famous women’s stories to create and authorize female identity, voice, and space. Maureen Quilligan, for example, explains that Christine, while refraining from a full attack on patriarchal systems of power, strategically moves within these systems to attain her goals: “Although she herself assumed otherwise, the ‘difference’ authored by Christine in her careful and minutely significant variations from her authorities is not due to a natural, essential difference. Rather, we see her ably maneuvering in the available discursive spaces” (6). Within these spaces, However, few scholars have focused on the ways she specifically redefines male roles in authorship and in relationships with her female characters. Christine’s efforts to reform negative female stereotypes are dependent on her ability to rewrite not only female characters but also the male characters who interact with them, the stage on which they perform gender, and the male authorities who interpret them. Ultimately, Christine reinvents the physical and intellectual prowess of man in terms of woman.

Before she can recreate misogynist representations of men and women, Christine must deconstruct and rebuild the set where they play out their roles. The *Book* provides an effective symbol of protection for female identity, but it is also Christine’s

interpretation of a history populated and progressed by women. While her defense of women, as Casebier has argued, does appropriate the rhetorical weapons of the authors of antifeminist literature, Christine still refuses to fight on her enemies' grounds. All of her arguments rest on her presupposition of a world where women are divinely approved primary agents. She establishes this position early through the instruction of Lady Reason. Christine's character poses a series of misogynist arguments for Lady Reason to discredit, as if presenting the pillars supporting the antifeminist worldview for destruction. In response to an author's declaration that Nature is ashamed of the weakness of the female body, Reason asks, "If the Supreme Craftsman was not ashamed to create and form the feminine body, would Nature then have been ashamed?" (23). Likewise, Reason uses the example of Mary Magdalene to prove God's respect for female speech: "if women's language had been so blameworthy and of such small authority, as some men argue, our Lord Jesus Christ would never have deigned to wish that so worthy a mystery as His most gracious resurrection be first announced by a woman" (28). Both answers emphasize the divine appointment for the worthiness of the female body and tongue. Christine's premise thereby allows her to view the actions of all famous women, whether traditionally good or evil, according to their natural function to be a positive force in the course of history. The setting of the city of ladies not only represents a stronghold against misogyny but is also, according to Earl Jeffrey Richards, "a new female-centered universal history of humanity where women's experiences afford the literal sense of the creation itself" (46). By building her city from female lives, Christine claims all of female experience as sacred ground. Her own ritual transformation, and the change she seeks by directing the social drama of her *Book*, will

purify the taint of slander from her heroines' memories. Her methods for doing so correspond to the dual construction of sacred space; it exists as a result of both divine choice and human agency. Christine sets out to prove that God created women virtuous by recounting their good works, and she simultaneously claims her right to name their lives sacred because she is an abler judge than those who have disparaged them.

Christine's first duty, then, is to attack the worldview of authors who build their arguments on the premise that man is the sole agent of history. The conclusions drawn from the faulty premise of woman as morally and intellectually inferior cannot be corrected without rebuilding the theological framework, and the process of redefining woman's divine appointment necessarily redefines man's position as well. Christine's discussions of the Incarnation of Christ and the creation assert man's indebtedness to woman for his divinity and his share with woman in corporeality. To prove Mary's redemption greater than Eve's fall, Christine uses the voice of Reason, who states, "if anyone would say that man was banished because of Lady Eve, I tell you that he gained more through Mary than he lost through Eve when humanity was conjoined to the Godhead, which would never have taken place if Eve's misdeed had not occurred." Christine therefore assigns the state of man's soul to the actions of both women, concluding that, as she says, "thanks to woman, man reigns with God" (24). Man's passive role in his attainment of this state prevents him from claiming control over his connection to God, for his soul was brought to both ruin and salvation by a woman's activity. In her account of creation, Christine counters the medieval association of woman with the flesh by placing emphasis on Adam's body, noting that "it was from the body of man from which God made woman" (24). In her account, man is passive,

sleeping while God provides the active force that gives shape to woman and implants her with the divine image. Christine thus removes man's control over his status with God, negating his right to condemn the active players in the divine drama, and disarms accusations that woman is more fleshly, and thus more worldly, than man, because they share the same material.

Christine's emphasis on the male body, formed by God in the creation and glorified through woman in the Incarnation, serves multiple purposes. Mary Ann C. Case points out that, in response to the traditional association of the flesh with woman, "Christine never lets us forget that men, too, inhabit bodies and that their opinions of women are similarly embodied and partial" (75). By focusing on the embodiment of the male sex in general and describing the bodies of her male opponents in particular, Christine simultaneously refutes a hierarchical order of gender based on the relationship of mind and matter and situates the writings of misogynist authorities within subjective, imperfect individuals. As an example, Lady Reason points out the self-confessed impotence and lust of Mathéolus, a member of a category of authors who, according to her conclusions, "do not know how to overcome their sadness except by attacking women, hoping to make women less attractive to other men" (19). Christine's method serves a dual purpose: because the embodiment of texts humanizes and restricts the authority of arguments to the uniquely situated bodies of their authors, she can simultaneously weaken the position of misogynist authors by assigning them damaged or corrupted bodies and strengthen her own by claiming what Case calls her "insider perspective" (71).

As a woman writing of her own sex, Christine can stake out her authority on the

basis of her female body, because she can interpret female lives from their shared experience. In response to allegations of the inferiority of the female body, Christine counters by claiming, "If Nature did not give great strength of limb to women's bodies, she has made up for it by placing there that most virtuous inclination to love one's God and to fear sinning against His commandments" (37). She makes clear that such virtue does not exist in the behavior of many of her opponents, who, she contends, defame women precisely because they recognize Nature's favor to women: "Those men who have attacked women out of jealousy are those wicked ones who have seen and realized that many women have greater understanding and are more noble in conduct than they themselves" (19). In view of the prejudice of misogynist authors, Christine presents herself as a more reliable interpreter of women's bodies. Casebier observes that Christine "posits female biological experience as a legitimate challenge to male textual authority" (36). A female body therefore provides Christine with the unique understanding that enables her to depict and pass judgment on the lives of other women. Quilligan goes even further: she interprets Christine's quotation of Mary when confronted with the daunting task of building the city as a recognition of "the peculiar strength of the female body to do the impossible" (55). As the first to undergo the ritual transition from victim to protector, Christine must then enact a similar ritual, the redress of female notoriety, for the whole of her community.

While embodiment authorizes Christine's perspective, it discredits the point of view of her opponents. If misogynist conclusions truly do not reflect actual experience, their authority must depend on bodies of text, disconnected from tangible situations as the mind is traditionally disconnected from the flesh. In the introduction, Christine's reading

of the multitude of testimonies by famous authorities overpowers her better judgment, “like a gushing fountain,” despite what she perceives as “the natural behavior and character of women” (4-5). After Lady Reason teaches her to have faith in personal experience “regardless of what you might have read,” Christine shifts from seeming to trust the texts of misogynist authors to attacking their bodily situations (7). Her philosophical discussion turns into a character debate, but while her argument may at first appear to be *ad hominem*, she is actually expanding her defense of women by demanding that men be held to the same standards. As philosophers and doctors of the Church have repeatedly associated woman with the flesh, they have also judged her by her flesh; famous women are rendered good or evil based on the purity of their bodies.²¹ Christine, in a sense, brings man down to woman’s level by defining him as the source of woman’s flesh. And because her enemies’ authority derives from their texts, not their physical behavior, she discredits them by overturning the value system that gives more credence to philosophy than bodily experience.

Whether vilified or praised, until Christine’s retellings the ladies of her city have usually been described from a male point of view. Quilligan compares her necessary task, that of setting her version of female experience against the writings of the antifeminists, to the reappropriation of space for the foundation of her city: “in the economy of allegorical metaphor, the clearing of the Field of Letters represents the

21 Blamires explains both practices in his anthology *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*. On one side, he offers Tertullian as an example of an author who defamed women by their flesh: “He wrote of women as creatures of dangerous sexual allure, whose urgent duty it was to suppress their attractiveness in order to minimize the spiritual damage it wrought in men” (50). Blamires also summarizes the literary impact of the principle of basing a woman’s worthiness on her fleshly purity: “In the period of the Fathers there had already developed several varieties of (male-authored) female panegyric. They fell into categories relating to the three tiers of perfection thought to be attainable by women, with faithful wifehood at the bottom, and chaste widowhood and virginity higher up the scale. Catalogues of Old Testament heroines in each sector were already making an appearance in Ambrose and Jerome, though the greatest admiration was inevitably reserved for virgins” (13).

readjustment of the canon to allow for the insertion of the *Cité* as a corrective answer to the tradition of medieval misogyny” (59-60). Christine was well aware of the power of rhetoric to shape the same individual into angel or demon. She must have considered that her tales would stand as only one more version among many if she followed the same system of authority as the writers preceding her. Thus she undermines the antifeminist voice by disparaging her opponents’ physical behaviors instead of only their mental activities. By refusing to treat with a disembodied text, Christine challenges the legitimacy of a self-replicating textual tradition and asserts the subjective nature of interpretation. In response to potential arguments against her authority to write as a woman because she lacks the reasoning capabilities of a man, Christine attacks the objectivity of male authorial control over female subjects. By specifically dressing her opponents in defective, tainted flesh, she shows how the bodily situation can skew reasoning and claims a higher right to judge historical figures by virtue of her purer motives.

Christine specifically plays on the idea of woman as “made up of every abomination” to condemn her opponents by their own standards (17). Returning the designation through the words of Lady Reason, she describes those who slander women as monstrous, calling them “corrupt” as if by “an incurable leprosy,” with “impotent and deformed limbs” (19).²² She roots their accusations of women in self-loathing, accusing men who observe defective members, lust, and enjoyment of wickedness in themselves of soothing the pain of their bodily imperfections by slandering those who display attractiveness, constancy, and natural goodness. Her description of Ovid ties physical

22 Christine refers to “ses viellars ainsi courrompus, qui sont comme la mesellerie qui garir ne puet” and asserts that “ceulz qui ont esté meu par le deffault de leur propre corps, sont aucuns impotens et diffourmez de leur membres” (644). All French quotations taken from Marie Curnow’s edition.

deformity to immorality: according to her version of his life, Ovid's failure to maintain virtue in the flesh leads to his "fitting reward"—castration, a physical representation of his previous departure from upright behavior and reasoning (21). Interestingly, Christine seems to define impotence as the inability to appreciate woman's service to mankind as well as the inability to experience sexual pleasure: "They have found no other way to avenge the pain of their impotence except by attacking women who bring joy to many" (19). The authorities' lack of appreciation provides the first hint of Christine's definition of how man ought to act.

Lack of gratitude for female contributions to society becomes a major point in her accusations against authorities; they not only destroy the reputations of others for their own sins but also denigrate those who have done them good. Christine designates male hatred for the female sex as "contrary to reason and contrary to Nature" in light of man's dependence on the daily services of women (20). Her repeated references to Nature when defining both men and women indicate that Christine has fully considered how their relationship should function when restored to the natural order. However, Adam's lack of agency in creation is mirrored by the male characters in her tales, and, at first glance, man really has no active position within the city of ladies. Christine creates a fully functional, autonomous society where men have been replaced at every level of the body politic—particularly at the head. The institution of Mary as Queen seems to indicate that Christine believes the world would be a far better place if led by women. Rosalind Brown-Grant has even noticed that Christine usually follows medieval tradition in viewing her current age as inferior to previous times, except that "when discussing women's role in the history of civilisation in the *Cité*, Christine adopts a perspective of

progress rather than one of decline” (159). Christine does maintain that women are unneeded in courts of law because “God has [. . .] ordained man and woman to serve Him in different offices” (31), but in view of the powerful women she describes, it is difficult to fully believe her. Perhaps Christine did at times wish for an idyllic Amazonian world, but her exempla actually describe a much more practical, if still out-of-reach, ideal: man’s role in the city of ladies is as a supporting actor in the drama of a female protagonist.

The ancient and modern literary heroines available to populate Christine’s city had been, more often than not, merely passing characters in lives of male heroes. Even women famous for virtue and courage in their own right were appropriated for minor parts in greater epics; Virgil, for example, reduced Dido from revered royalty to a brief romantic fling on Aeneas’ route to Rome. A woman like Medea was either applauded for constancy or reviled for infanticide, but ultimately she remained an interesting episode in Jason’s adventures. In the Middle Ages women often appear as the leading stars in romance, but often not, as Christine demonstrates in her writings on *The Romance of the Rose*, without misogynist influence. Hagiography provided the most promising ground for recording female characters as true heroines, so Christine appropriately recounts the lives of famous women as if recording the actions of saints. By resituating the focus of literary history around female protagonists, Christine pushes male actors to the fringes of her stories as lovers, husbands, and sons. In the life of Semiramis, the queen is the only character with any kind of depth. Her husband enters the story early, and they conjointly conquer several nations before he dies only a few lines later. Quilligan observes that the actions recorded by Boccaccio in his *De mulieribus claris*—the son’s rejection of his

mother's sexual advances and matricide—are not included in Christine's narrative. Quilligan goes on to show the difference in Christine and Boccaccio's attentions to character perspectives: while "Boccaccio spends time speculating about Ninus's possible motives in killing his mother, Christine points out the possible reasons Semiramis may have had for taking her son as a husband" (78). Christine, then, not only justifies Semiramis's incest but eliminates the male perspective entirely.

The theme of male passivity established in Christine's accounts of creation, the Fall, and redemption resurfaces in several of her tales of individual women. Male characters in Christine's accounts often fit into recurring roles that serve as motivation for the heroine's actions. Queens Zenobia and Fredegund enter leadership positions to defend their young sons; in Fredegund's story, the son is even objectified as a symbol of sovereignty used to inspire the queen's troops. The cowardice of Theodoric spurs his mother to public chastisement; Christine then credits the martial victory to Lilia's actions. The accounts of Camilla, Queen Berenice, and several Amazonian women use wronged (usually murdered) male family members to provide the female protagonists with a reason to participate in war. In revenge narratives, men are reduced to objects of female purpose and passion. The story of Queen Penthesilea puts the dichotomy of female agency and male inaction in the most vivid light. Hector is first pursued as an object of desire, but like many other male characters in the city of ladies, his relationship to the queen is one-sided: he never gets the chance to return her passion because he dies before she arrives at Troy. Through his lack of agency, Hector becomes the feminized beloved, while Penthesilea takes on the actions of suitor, admirer, and avenger. First, his

reputation as her “peer” (i.e. her equal)²³ causes the queen of the Amazons to fall in love with him before ever seeing him (48). Christine then emphasizes the beauty of Hector’s body, and the queen is moved to tears upon beholding the “flower and excellence of the world’s knighthood” (49). Finally, in taking revenge on his enemies, Penthesilea seizes responsibility for Hector’s reputation, just as Christine holds Eve and Mary responsible for man’s spiritual condition.

The text of Christine’s *Book* is thus simultaneously her attempt to redress the breach of the natural order as well as a description of an ideal restoration. M. Bella Mirabella calls the city “a utopian dream in which women live without men, exist in a world of dignity and self-respect and have control over their lives” (13). However, the subject/object positions of the female and male roles in Christine’s narratives do not necessarily require male subjugation or exile. Rather, the absence of active men in many of Christine’s stories simply redirects attention to the accomplishments of the heroines. Rhetorically, Christine’s limitation of male agency and authority stems from her valorization of female experience, and her descriptions of male embodiment primarily serve to redefine man according to the language generally reserved for woman. Christine even steps forward at the conclusion of her narrative to emphasize that the city is intended as a fortress to stand against attack, not a foundation for arrogance or even independence. To borrow Richards’ phrasing, Christine has not completely rewritten the relationship between the sexes as much as she has re-centered it (46). The *Book of the City of Ladies* is intended as a defense against misogynist texts, but it also creates a foundation for women to view their own identity as an active, valuable force in a world

23 Christine attributes Penthesilea’s attraction to the fact that “it is normal for someone to love one’s peer freely” (“ainsi comme c’est usage que volentiers chacun aime son semblable”; 48; Curnow 695).

that traditionally delegates them to supporting roles. Ultimately, it is the men who have learned to value women as peers whom Christine respects. Hercules and Theseus, who defeat famed Amazonian warriors Menalippe and Hippolyta, “considered themselves so greatly honored by this capture that they would not have preferred the captured wealth of an entire city” (46). For Christine de Pizan, man can achieve agency, and true manhood, only through appreciation for the female sex.

CHAPTER III

JULIAN OF NORWICH AND TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE

The next two writers share very little in common with the classical scholars I have discussed so far. Heloise and Christine de Pizan drew their models and examples from Latin poets, and neither claimed authority to write from mystical encounters with God.²⁴ Their purposes in writing separate them as well: while Heloise wrote for her love and Christine on behalf of her gender, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, at the most fundamental level, wrote for their devotion to Christ. Like many writers of the Middle Ages, men and women alike, these four authors do share an emphasis on the body; additionally, like many women writers of the period, they overtly address the problems of their sex in society and in authorship. But their works also resemble each other in the method used to effectively achieve their goals: despite their widely differing backgrounds, Heloise, Christine, Julian, and Margery all depend on the rhetoric of ritual to convey their ideas, identities, and desires.

Julian and Margery have often been compared because of their status as being among the first female writers of English, their shared concentration on Christ's humanity, their use of scribes, and their physical meeting recorded in Margery's *Book*. Their similarities also highlight the stark differences between their personalities, writing style, and experiences. Their distinctive qualities correspond neatly to the spatial

²⁴ While the frame story for *The Book of the City of Ladies* does involve the inspiration of personified virtues, Christine obviously does not base her ideas on a mystical experience of the divine.

metaphors which define them. Margery, the pilgrim, dwells on external events, both real and visionary, wherein she actively, and often intrusively, interacts with the world. On the other hand, Julian, the anchoress, focuses inward and meditates on the universal applications of her private visions. Julian's status as an anchoress moreover leads Andrew Sprung to argue that Julian's numbered showings "[constitute] a safe space into which Julian may retreat at will," comparing the structure of her text to the use of frame stories in various other genres of the Late Middle Ages, including "the poem of consolation or confession, the dream vision, [and] the debate" (184). I maintain that both women define the spaces they occupy, both physically and textually, as sacred areas where their performance can invoke ritual transformation.

Julian of Norwich, born shortly before the onset of the Black Death in England, spent at least twenty years in a cell attached to the Church of St. Julian, from which derives her only known name. In early May, 1373, at the age of thirty, Julian was struck with a severe illness. As she lay in her sickbed, expecting imminent release from her earthly life, she received a series of visions which would constitute the subject of two works. The dates of both compositions, as well as the date when Julian entered her enclosure, are uncertain; all that is generally agreed upon is that the first, known as the short text, was written several years before the second, or the long text.²⁵ Numerous scholars, such as Lynn Staley Johnson and Liz Herbert McAvoy, have analyzed Julian's construction of an authoritative, feminine voice, particularly through tracking her revisions of her original record from the first text to the second. Johnson argues, for example, that while Julian relates her personal experiences as a seer in the short text, "the

25 See Nicholas Watson's article "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*" for a full treatment of this topic.

long text testifies to her growing understanding of her role as a writer. In effect, she became her own secretary or scribe” (833). Liz Herbert McAvoy locates the transition of Julian’s role from a young receiver of visions to an aged and ardent student of the divine within the act of composition itself: “In effect, Julian’s very act of articulation of this perpetual prophetic announcement and its ongoing fulfillment, emerging as it does from her location of enclosure, serves to transform Julian into sibylline wise woman whose voice has indeed been privileged by God” (215). Thus, as an anchoritic author, Julian’s writing reflects both the isolation of a private mystic and the universality of a public teacher.

The idea that Julian fulfills two roles, that of a seer of visions and that of an interpreter of visions, has also been addressed by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins. They explain, “the figures of Julian the participant in her revelation and Julian its interpreter have discernably different functions: one existing to ground the two works’ thought in the confusing textures of lived experience, the other to elucidate the experience’s general claims, meanings, and implications” (7). Julian’s dual function in the relationship between mystical experience and authorship has significant implications for her authority to write as a woman.²⁶ But more importantly for this study, her shifting role also illustrates the interplay between aspects of performance and ritual within the two texts. The first of these figures, that of the participant, corresponds to the reception of concepts through bodily performance. Julian emphasizes character roleplaying within sensory and spatial dimensions in both her apprehension of and reactions to her visions. The latter function, that of the interpreter, is displayed in Julian’s concept of human life as a transformative drama. Inspired by God’s revelation, Julian is led to describe

26 See, for example, Grace Jantzen’s discussion in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, pp. 176-84.

creation, penance, and salvation in terms of Turner's phases of ritual: "separation," "liminality," and "reincorporation" (*The Ritual Process* 94-95).

As a participant in her visionary experience, Julian first perceives with her senses, then contemplates God's message and responds emotionally, and finally tells of her inspiration for the benefit of others. In the short text, Julian introduces her desire for three "wounds" with a brief personal account: "I harde a man telle of halye kyrke of the storye of Sainte Cecille, in the whilke shewing I understode that she hadde thre woundes with a swerde in the nekke, with the whilke she pinede to the dede. By the stirring of this, I conseyyede a mighty desire, prayande oure lorde God that he wolde graunte me thre woundes in my life time" (65; *S* sec. 1).²⁷ The rest of her text follows the same basic pattern. Julian begins by describing her reception of an embodied performance—in this case, she hears of Cecilia's injury and death. Next, she relates the effects of such experiences on her feelings and desires. Here, Julian prays for "the wounde of contrition, the wounde of compassion, and the wounde of wilfulle langing to God" (65; *S* sec. 1).²⁸ These reactions illustrate Julian's typical two-way transference between the body and abstract ideas: she interprets Cecilia's physical wounds as spiritual virtues, and then she maintains the image of the broken body in transmitting her understanding to others through her text.

Within both of her records, Julian positions herself as a receptor and relayer of divine communication, but she is not a mediator between man and God, like Christ or

27 "I heard a man of Holy Church tell the story of Saint Cecilia; from his description I understood that she received three sword wounds in the neck from which she slowly and painfully died. Moved by this I conceived a great longing, praying our Lord God that he would grant me three wounds in my lifetime" (4). All quotations from Julian's works are taken from Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins' publication *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*. Selections from the short text are designated with *S* and the section number; selections from the long text are designated with *L* and the chapter number. Quotations in modern English are taken from Elizabeth Spearing's translation.

28 "the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of an earnest longing for God" (4).

Mary. Instead, Julian describes herself as unified with all of mankind: “we be alle one in love” (153; *L* ch. 9).²⁹ Unlike Margery Kempe, who repeatedly emphasizes her special relationship with God,³⁰ Julian explicitly claims that she does not love God more than anyone else and that God does not love her more than any other, concluding, “For if I look singulery to myselfe, I am right nought. But in general I am, I hope, in onehede of cherite with alle my evencristen” (155; *L* ch. 9).³¹ Julian’s designation of her individual significance as “nought” or “nothing” seems in accordance with the lack of autobiographical information present in her writing, particularly in comparison with Margery’s highly personal *Book*. Julian’s purpose in writing, therefore, is not primarily to illustrate or attain a personal transformation, like Heloise or Margery. Her visions, and thus her writings, are not for her or any other individual specifically: when she asks God about a certain friend’s salvation, God reasons with her to “take it [the showings] generally, and beholde the curtesy of thy lorde God as he sheweth to the. For it is more worshipe to God to beholde him in alle than in any specialle thing” (229; *L* ch. 35).³² Just as Christine writes to defend all women, Julian writes to enlighten all of her “evencristen,” but unlike the densely packed narratives of famous (or notorious) female characters in *The City of Ladies*, Julian’s works refer to fewer than a dozen individual men and women, including herself.

The universal application of Julian’s revelations corresponds with her role as an anchoress in medieval society. Grace Janzten, commenting on the involvement of

29 Spearing translates this phrase as “we all need support,” tying it to Julian’s claim that she is no better than anyone else.

30 See further discussion on this point in the following chapter.

31 “For if I look solely at myself, I am really nothing; but as one of mankind in general, I am, I hope, in oneness of love with all my fellow Christians” (54).

32 “Take these showings generally, and consider the kindness of the Lord God as he gives them to you; for it honours God more to consider him in all things than in any particular thing” (89).

anchoresses in litigation, remarks, “The *Ancrene Riwele* gives some prohibitions which offer clues—and which indicate that though in one sense the anchoress is dead to the world, in another sense, she is very much alive, and the world entered the anchorhold when she did” (*Julian of Norwich* 33-34). Just as the law assumes that the events of the world permeate Julian’s cell, so does Julian understand that her personal experiences affect the whole of society. Despite the symbolic separation of her status, having received the last rites, and the physical barriers of her enclosure, Julian refuses to recognize any of her visions as private, isolated, or closed off from the rest of humanity. In emphasizing the public implications of her mystical encounter, Julian creates the foundation on which she will stage the universal drama of life, sin, and death. She states, “If alle oure lorde shewed me that I shulde sinne, be me allayn I understode alle” (99; *S* sec. 17).³³ Julian intends for her readers to experience, and respond to, the revelations with her; she treats us as fellow participants in the contemplation of divine mysteries. Thus, Julian’s purpose in writing is ultimately to benefit her audience in a mutual quest for knowledge and salvation. Such a goal is in accordance with her anchoritic duty to pray for souls in purgatory; as Jantzen points out, “It was not only her own death and her own soul’s destiny with which an anchoress was to be concerned but also the death and destiny of others” (*Julian of Norwich* xvii).

Julian’s self-representation as an everyman (or, more accurately, an everychristian) relies on her adherence to and divergence from medieval concepts of textual authority. Julian’s marriage of the genres of hagiography and autobiography leads Kate Greenspan to label her an “autohagiographer.” According to Greenspan, the aim of autohagiographers, “to inspire their readers,” rests on two factors: “to express a common

33 “Although our Lord showed me that I would sin, by me alone I understood everyone” (25).

identity, not an individual one, and to express truths that existed beyond the realm of human sensibilities” (220-221). Julian’s conscious acceptance of the first has already been established; she accomplishes the latter by aligning abstract truths with sensory images. While the short text tends to present scenes of Christ’s suffering and Mary’s maiden body with relatively little interpretation, the long text compounds evocative images with both additional detail and multiple layers of meaning. While the contemplation of the Passion often served a devotional purpose in medieval writing and ritual, Julian complicates the typical emotional responses of adoration and remorse with intricate theological arguments. As Susan K. Hagen explains, “Julian vivifies and expands the recollections of the showings more with the purpose of making them evocatively memorable and clear in their import than of moving her audience to ardent devotional responses” (93). Hagen goes on to tie Julian’s method to the medieval utilization of images in religious instruction to communicate divine mysteries to the educated and illiterate alike: “they provided a way to make essential yet intellectually difficult concepts clear through extended metaphor” (98). In light of this purpose, Julian’s repeated emphasis on sensory cues ties her work to the symbolic representations of saints in art, the performance of divine dramas in the mystery plays and saints’ plays, and, most significantly for this discussion, the ritualized acts of worship through the sacraments.

For Julian, physical sensations and spiritual understanding are inextricably linked. The aggravation and alleviation of her sickness have direct causes in her visionary interactions. Jantzen notes, “She speaks of the fluctuations of pain and its cessation, corresponding to spiritual desolation and consolation in similar flux [. . .].” Building

from these observations, Jantzen goes on to conclude that Julian “takes it as a matter of course [. . .] that her spiritual experience is also bodily experience” (*Power and Gender* 240). The visits of the Fiend provide evidence of Julian’s assumption that physical or spiritual actions can affect events in the opposite plane. Julian describes the beast according to four senses: she sees red skin with black spots and “here [. . .] rede as rust”; she feels his paws on her throat and “a grete heet”; she smells “a foule stinch”; and she hears “a bodely jangling” (333-335, 341; *L* ch. 67, 69).³⁴ Julian’s spiritual trauma, described as a full sensory experience, leads to the deterioration of her body, so her attenders notice a physical change and thereby respond with physical attentions: she records, “The persons that were with me beheld me and wet my temples, and my harte beganne to comfort” (333; *L* ch. 67).³⁵ Just as spiritual distress can affect the body, so does bodily comfort in turn affect the spirit. Julian reapplies this principle herself when the Fiend visits again, and her writing again emphasizes her “bodely” actions: “My bodely eye I set in the same crosse there I had seen in comforte afore that time, my tong with spech of Cristes passion and rehersing the faith of the holy church, and my harte to fasten on God with alle the truste and the mighte that was in me” (341, *L* ch. 69).³⁶ In this instance, Julian additionally demonstrates that her visions require performative reactions. At an another revelation of God’s power over the Devil, Julian records, “I laught mightely, and that made them to laugh that were aboute me, and ther laughing was a liking to me. I thought that I wolde that alle my evencristen had seen as I saw” (171, *L*

34 She sees red skin with black spots and “hair [. . .] as red as rust”; she feels his paws on her throat and “a great heat”; she smells “a foul stench”; she hears “a human jabbering” (152-53, 155).

35 “The people who were with me noticed, and bathed my temples, and my heart began to take comfort” (152-53).

36 “I set my bodily eyes on the same cross which had comforted me before, and my tongue to speaking of Christ’s Passion and reciting the faith of the Holy Church, and my heart to clinging to God with all my trust and with all my strength” (156).

ch. 13).³⁷ Therefore, Julian not only experiences and responds to her visions with her body, she also desires that her readers would do the same.

By grounding her spiritual experiences within physical sensations, Julian recreates her visions into performances. She does not merely listen to divine messages; she interacts with the Divine. Additionally, as the representative for all of humanity, she comes to describe this interactive relationship through universal characters. Her parable of the lord and the servant emphasizes the importance of the body and senses for both man and God. The servant, eager to fulfill his lord's commands, falls and gets hurt while attempting to fulfill a mission. Unable to seek his lord's help, he focuses instead on seven bodily torments:

The furst was the sore brosing that he toke in his falling, which was to him felable paine. The seconde was the hevinesse of his body. The thirde was febilnesse that foloweth of theyse two. The fourth was that he was blinded in his reson and stoned in his minde so ferforth that almost he had forgeten his owne love. The fifth was that he might not rise. The sixth was paine most marvelous to me, and that was that he leye alone. [. . .] The seventh was that the place which he ley in was a lang, harde, and grevous. (275; *L*, ch. 51)³⁸

The lord, of course, responds to his servant's distress and determines to give him a greater reward than if he had not fallen. Like the servant's distress, the lord's virtues are

37 "I laughed heartily and that made those who were around me laugh too, and their laughter pleased me. I wished that all my fellow Christians had seen what I saw [. . .] (61).

38 "The first was the grievous bruising which he received when he fell, which was a torment he could feel. The second was the weight of his body. The third was the weakness caused by these two. The fourth that his reason was blinded and his mind was stunned to such an extent that he had almost forgotten his own love for the lord. The fifth was that he could not rise. The sixth was the most astonishing to me, and it was that he lay alone [. . .] The seventh torment was that the place where he lay was long, hard and full of difficulties" (115).

couched in his physical characteristics. Julian gives an extensive description of his clothes, face, and expression, then equates each element with the lord's intentions toward his servant: "The blewhe of the clothing betokeneth his stedfastnesse. The brownhe of his fair face, with the semely blackhede of the eyen, was most according to shew his holy sobernesse. The larghe of his clothing, which was fair, flamming about, betokeneth that he hath beclosed in him all hevens and all enlesse joy and blisse" (281; *L* ch. 51).³⁹

The use of symbolic costumes for both lord and servant reinforces Julian's performative paradigm for receiving visions. Additionally, Julian uses clothing as a repeated metaphor for intimacy with God throughout the long text. Both man and Christ wear the characteristics of the other to achieve closeness, and God even puts on multiple roles to fulfill all of man's relational needs. For mankind, Julian explains, "For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skinne, and the bones in the flesh, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, cladde and enclosedde in the goodnes of God" (145; *L* ch. 6).⁴⁰ God, on the other hand, dresses his son to better serve humanity: "oure hye God, the sovereyn wisdom of all, in this lowe place he arayed him and dight him all redy in our poure flesh, himselfe to do the service and the office of moderhoode in alle thing" (313; *L* ch. 60).⁴¹

Like Heloise, Julian places God in various character roles in order to fully encompass herself, and all Christians, with their relationship.⁴² She states, "God enjoyeth

39 "The blue of his clothing signifies his steadfastness. The brown of his fair face with the handsome blackness of the eyes was most suited to showing his holy gravity. The fullness of his clothing, which was fair, glowing brightly about him, signifies that he has enclosed within him all the heavens and all joy and bliss" (119).

40 "as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the chest, so are we, soul and body, clad in the goodness of God and enclosed in it" (49).

41 "our great God, the most sovereign wisdom of all, was raised in this humble place and dressed himself in our poor flesh to do the service and duties of motherhood in every way" (141).

42 Heloise assigns Abelard to multiple roles in the salutation of her first letter: "To her lord, or rather

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 loved wife” (289, *L* ch. 52).⁴³ But Julian also recreates both man and God as places of residence for the other’s experience. In her understanding, God’s care for his people requires more than the usual comparisons to a father and husband, and even more than her rather unusual comparison to a mother. By describing God as the embodiment of a sacred space, and the occupier of a similar space in individual Christians, Julian compounds the performance elements of both character and setting. Furthermore, she sets the stage for the social drama which encompasses the division and eventually reunion of God and man. Christ first invites Julian to enter the wound in his side, to see the future seat for all of Christendom: “he led forth the understanding of his creature by the same wound into his side, within. And then he shewed a fair, delectable place, and large inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees and in love” (201; *L* ch. 24).⁴⁴ By having all Christians inhabit the bodily site of Christ’s sacrifice, Julian affirms the ritual significance of the interaction between man and God. As both body and place, Christ fulfills the roles of both community and sacred space. Julian therefore expresses the reintegration of fallen man and the transcendent Godhead as both a return to social unity and a fulfillment of ritual requirements. But until that time, she maintains that Christ resides within his people:

I saw the soule so large as it were an endless warde, and also as it were a blisseful kingdom, and by the conditions that I saw therein I understode

father; to her husband, or rather brother” (47).

43 “God rejoices that he is our father, and God rejoices that he is our mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul is his much-loved bride” (125).

44 “he led his creature’s understanding through the same wound into his side. And then he revealed a beautiful and delightful place which was large enough for all mankind who shall be saved to rest there in peace and love” (76).

that it is a wurshipfulle citte. In middes of that citte sitteth oure lorde
 Jhesu, very God and very man [. . .] The place that Jhesu taketh in oure
 soule he shall never remove it withouten ende, as to my sight, for in us is
 his homeliest home and his endlesse wonning” (335-36; *L* ch. 68).⁴⁵

In naming the soul Christ’s seat, Julian conceives all lived experience as a participation in ritual, because the soul itself places all experience on sacred ground. Indeed, Julian’s concern for the locality of both Christ and the human soul reflects her own enclosure on holy ground. Just as she never leaves her place of worship, neither do her brethren travelling outside the anchorhold, because they carry the divine within them. Belden Lane describes sacred place as “local and universal” because, while it marks the site of God’s presence, it likewise cannot contain him: “One is recurrently driven to a quest for centeredness—a focus on the particular place of divine encounter—and then at other times driven out from that center with an awareness that God is never confined to a single locale” (19). However, in Julian’s paradigm, God is continually centered in human souls, just as they are continually rooted in him: “God is more nerer to us than oure owne soule. For he is ground in whome oure soule standeth” (301; *L* ch. 56).⁴⁶ In effect, the sacred place of ritual transformation is both “local and universal” precisely because they are one and the same. Just as Julian experiences her visions both as an individual and as a representative for all of humanity, so does God’s presence simultaneously inhabit the individual Christian and all of Christendom.

Having grounded the relationship between man and God in both sensory

45 “I saw the soul as if it were an endless world and as if it were a holy kingdom; and from the properties I saw in it I understood that it is a glorious city. In the centre of that city sits our Lord Jesus, God and man [. . .] It seems to me that in all eternity Jesus will never leave the position which he takes in our soul; for in us is his most familiar home and his everlasting dwelling” (153).

46 “God is nearer to us than our own soul, for he is the ground on which our soul stands” (133).

experience and embodied space, Julian enters a lengthy exposition on the dual nature of humanity. Her description of the evolution of this nature directly corresponds to Turner's three phases of rites of passage, thus linking her mode of expressing theological concepts to Heloise's and Christine's methods for seeking ritual fulfillment. While Heloise and Christine use their texts as the means for reinventing identities in order to affect future behavior, Julian opts to use her text to illuminate the process by which spiritual transformation is achieved. According to her vision, humanity was created with a division of its nature, which corresponds to the separation phase of a rite of passage. Man's "substance" and his "sensualite" (Spearing translates these two as the "essential being" and the "sensory being") work together yet remain apart until the resurrection:

And anemptes oure substance, he made us so nobil and so rich that evermore we werke his wille and his worshippe. [. . .] And of this grete riches and of this high noble, vertues by mesure come to oure soule, what time that it is knit to oure body, in which knitting we be made sensual. And thus in oure substance we be full and in oure sensualite we faile; which failing God wille restore and fulfil by working of mercy and grace, plentuously flowing into us of his owne kinde goodhede. (303; *L* ch. 57)⁴⁷

The two aspects of the human soul therefore represent the faulty nature experienced through the flesh and the perfect nature originally endowed by God. The reunion of the two is made possible through the Incarnation of Christ: "I saw that oure kinde is in God

⁴⁷ "And so far as our essential being is concerned, God made us so noble and so rich that we always work his will and his glory. [. . .] and from the great riches and exalted nobility of our essential being, virtues come to our soul in due measure when it is bound to our body and we become sensory beings. And so in our essential being we are complete and in our sensory being we are lacking, but God will remedy this by making mercy and grace flow abundantly into us from his own natural goodness" (135).

hole [. . .] For oure kinde, which is the hyer party, is knitte to God in the making; and God is knit to oure kinde, which is the lower party, in oure flesh taking. And thus in Crist oure two kindes be oned” (305; *L* ch. 57).⁴⁸ Christians thus work out the whole of their earthly lives in the interim between the initial separation and the eventual reincorporation of their natures.

The liminal period of the human life comprises the greatest volume of Julian’s discussion. She repeatedly emphasizes the qualities and symbols Turner ascribes to liminality. Turner notes that, because “liminal entities are neither here nor there,” their position is “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (“Liminality and Communitas” 79-80). Julian therefore focuses on the uncertainty and transience of human life: “But oure passing living that we have here in oure sensualite knoweth not what ourselfe is but in our faith” (261, *L* ch. 46).⁴⁹ Just as the neophyte lacks a stable identity in society, so does the Christian lack full knowledge of his or her self.

Furthermore, Julian ascribes spiritual blindness to man’s fallen nature: “And by Adams falling we be so broken in oure feling on diverse manner by sinne and by sondry paines, in which we be made derke and so blinde that unnethes we can take any comforte” (289; *L* ch. 52).⁵⁰ Likewise, Julian compares the Christian’s earthly existence, waiting for the reunion of “substance” and “sensualite,” to youth, similarly waiting for the culmination of adulthood: “And I understode none higher stature in this life than childehode, in

48 “I saw that our nature is complete in God [. . .] for the higher part of our nature is bound to God in its creation; and God is bound to the lower part of our nature in taking on our flesh. Thus the two parts of us are united in Christ” (135).

49 “But in our transitory life that we live here in our sensory being we do not know what we are” (107).

50 “And by Adam’s fall our perceptions are so shattered in various ways, by sins and by different sufferings, that we are so darkened and blinded that we can hardly find any comfort” (125).

febilnesse and failing of might and of witte, into the time that oure gracious moder hath brought us up to oure faders blisse” (321; *L* ch. 63).⁵¹ Finally, Julian combines metaphors of the womb and death to describe Christ’s role as a mother in bringing us out of our liminal state: “And thus oure moder is to us diverse manner werking, in whom oure pertes be kepte undeverted. For in oure moder Crist we profit and encrease, and in mercy he reformeth us and restoreth, and by the vertu of his passion, his deth, and his uprising oneth us to oure substance” (309; *L* ch. 58).⁵² The life in the womb of Christ is thus one of constant growth and change. To lead Christians forth to their eventual rebirth, Christ joins their liminal state in his incarnation and death so that his resurrection might become their own.⁵³

Julian’s depiction of Christ as mother and her use of womb imagery lead her to naturally illustrate the reintegration of man’s “substance” and “sensualite” as a rebirth. In her fifteenth revelation, Julian sees “a body lyeng on the erth, which body shewde hevvy and feerfulle and withoute shape and forme, as it were a swilge stinking mire. And sodeynly oute of this body sprong a fulle fair creature, a litille child, full shapen and formed, swift and lifly and whiter then the lilye, which sharpely glided uppe into heven” (325; *L* ch. 64).⁵⁴ She interprets the vision as the soul leaving behind the sinful nature,

51 "And I understand that in this life no one grows beyond childhood, in feebleness and inadequacy of body and mind, until the time when our gracious Mother has brought us up into our Father’s bliss" (147).

52 “And so our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways; for in our Mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again [ritual], he unites us to our essential being” (138).

53 Maria Lichtmann ties Julian’s use of womb imagery to her development of the motherhood of God: “Julian’s notions of the union of opposites in God and the nondualist vision of the self have, I believe, a nonrational bodily origin, reflecting a female capacity, the capacity of the womb, to hold otherness and opposition within itself. [. . .] God is the womb of all beings as we are the womb of God” (273).

54 “a body lying on the earth, a body which looked dismal and ugly, without shape or form as if it were a swollen and heaving mass of stinking mire. And suddenly out of this body there sprang a very beautiful creature, a little child perfectly shaped and formed, quick and bright, whiter than a lily, which glided swiftly up into heaven” (148-49).

noting that not a trace of its foulness taints the pure child. Significantly, Julian maintains the image of the body to describe both sin and innocence. Only sin is left behind; the flesh, housing the “sensualite” or “sensory being,” moves up to join with the “substance” or “essential being” in God. Julian additionally equates the reintegration of the Christian’s divided nature with a maturation, at which time God will endow the Christian with the rewards he entrusted to Christ:

Which giftes he, wonning in us, hath beclosed in him into the time that we be waxen and growen, oure soule with oure body and oure body with oure soule, either of them taking helpe of the other tille we be broughte up into stature, as kinde werketh. And than, in the ground of kind, with werking of mercy the holy gost graciously enspirith into us giftes leding to endlesse life. (299; *L* ch. 55)⁵⁵

Though separate, the body and soul develop side by side, and the completion of their growth allows the Christian to enter into a new status, marked by the previously withheld ownership of God’s gifts and a new place of residence. Julian’s final analogy for the human being’s transition and eventual destination further emphasizes her ritualized interpretation of the Christian life. She compares her vision of Christ’s seat in the human soul with her conception of his involvement in human life: “And in other manner he shewde him in erth thus, as it were a pilgrimage: that is to sey, he is here with us leding us, and shalle be tille whan he hath brought us alle to his blisse in heven” (373; *L* ch.

⁵⁵ “And he, dwelling in us, has enclosed these gifts within himself until such time as we have grown and matured, our soul with our body and our body with our soul, neither of them receiving help from the other, until by the operation of nature we achieve our full stature; and then, on the basis of nature and with the operation of mercy, the Holy Ghost graciously breathes into our body gifts leading to eternal life” (132).

81).⁵⁶ The transitory nature of the pilgrim, as well as the permanence of the pilgrimage site, completes the parallels between Julian's depiction of man's creation, earthly life, and resurrection and Turner's phases of separation, liminality, and reintegration.

As a participant in her visions, Julian represents all of Christendom, but as an interpreter, Julian herself emerges as a modeler of Christ's work in birthing and leading his children.⁵⁷ As an anchoress, she already mimics Christ's death and resurrection. In her introduction to *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, Jantzen points out the connection between Julian's use of womb metaphors and her role in society: "The anchorhold may be a tomb, but it also womb: a womb in which Christ comes to new birth in the anchoress, and through her in the world. If the anchoress is dead and buried, symbolically, she is also fully alive, reborn" (xviii). By expressing Christ's work in the human soul through the same imagery of her own ritual experience, Julian recreates the transformation of her own enclosure in the authorship of her texts. Just as the anchoress enters her tomb while still alive to exemplify Christ's death and resurrection, so does Julian use ritualized rhetoric to reveal Christ's work in man's liminal state. In the final pages of her work, Julian again emphasizes the necessity of personal participation in the reception of divine instruction: "This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight" (379; *L* ch. 86).⁵⁸ Commenting on this remark, Lynn Staley Johnson writes:

The book's "performance" will be the life lived in the knowledge and love

56 "And he showed himself on earth in another way as though on a pilgrimage: that is to say, he is here with us, leading us, and will be until he has brought us all up to his bliss in heaven" (174).

57 Maud Burnett McInerney argues that the act of writing itself parallels Julian's description of Christ's motherhood: "The text's development [. . .] reflects to an astonishing degree the physical experience of childbirth, so that Julian's book reproduces for her readers the experiences of both Christ and visionary as it labors to give birth to understanding" (173).

58 "This book was begun by God's gift and his grace, but it seems to me that it is not yet completed" (179).

of God. The book, then, stands as a text whose authority is derived from God and manifested in the life of prayer. Its author has become our mediator and our guide for this still-unfinished text. She thus suggests, not that we should read her book because she is a holy woman, but that her book might be used as a guide to the holy. (833)

The performance Julian hopes to inspire in her audience is made possible precisely because she is, herself, a ritual performer. Just as she participates in and interprets visions from God, so must her audience participate in and interpret her words on the body, the soul, and earthly existence through the performance of their lives.

CHAPTER IV

MARGERIE KEMPE AS A WRITTEN WOMAN

According to the *Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery lived as a brewer, a miller, a wife, and a mother of fourteen children in the town of Bishop's Lynn, Norfolk. It records her extensive travels, including pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Germany, as well as her interactions with both physical characters, from beggars to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and visionary ones, including Christ, Mary, and numerous saints. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Margery's text reflects the nature of her experiences: just as she moves outward from her home to Europe and the Middle East, so does her text repeatedly emphasize her interactions with circumstances outside of herself. Although both she and Julian ascribe their inspiration to their visions, and both participate in those visions as active, responsive characters, Margery gives far more attention to the specific details, rather than the universal attributes Julian describes, of the world and community around her. Her *Book* is also far more personal in nature, despite the fact that, of the four authors considered in this study, Margery is the only one whose work is written in the third-person.

Margery's illiteracy and dependence on scribes has raised considerable debate over her role as an author. Rosalynn Voaden explains that, compared to other records of the experiences and visions of holy women, neither the structure nor the scribes of

Margery's *Book* adhere to conventional methods (114).⁵⁹ Moreover, the *Book* provides the only source for the facts of Margery's life; the lack of outside verification, combined with the extraordinary details of her behavior, casts doubt on the authenticity of her recorded experiences. On the other hand, Lynn Staley points out the possibility that Margery wrote the *Book* herself and feigned her own illiteracy to align her character with other illiterate visionary women (835). Although the true nature of the relationship between Margery, her scribes, and her text remains unknown, the existence of the protagonist in the *Book*, or Margery the character, remains constant. For the purposes of this study, I hold the historical Margery Kempe, or Margery the author, as the primary author of her text. The reality of every detail contained in her *Book* is largely insignificant to my argument: I am more concerned with Margery's construction of a persona and that character's movement in physical and visionary spaces.

The performative aspects of Margery's *Book* have been addressed more often than those of any of the other works discussed in previous chapters. Margery is obviously a performer, both physically and textually. In every place she visits, her unbridled tongue and incessant weeping draw an audience, whether critical or sympathetic. Nanda Hopewasser calls Margery a "performance artist" (97) and an "inveterate improvisationalist" (102) who adds her own flair in the process of following God's directions. Many interpret the public and somewhat ostentatious nature of her reactions to private visions as a deliberate strategy for the formation of her identity. Sarah Salih explains, "Margery's choice of theatre [versus private space] for her enactments ensures that the response she provokes will never be simple; [. . .] the resulting hostility is then

⁵⁹ Voaden specifically mentions the anonymity and initial unwillingness of the second scribe and the apparently haphazard organization of the text.

co-opted into her project” (*Versions of Virginity* 169). Salih identifies Margery’s “project” as the redefinition of virginity, a move that allows her to claim the hagiographical power of the virgin’s spiritual role. Furthermore, Carol M. Meale compares Margery’s dramatic depiction of Christ’s Passion to English mystery plays and even goes so far to suggest that the *Book’s* “unwritten agenda” was the possible canonization of its heroine (64). But while the performative elements in Margery’s story are conspicuous, Margery’s true goal in dictating her experiences remains elusive.

Unlike Heloise, Christine, and Julian, Margery refrains from explicitly explaining what she wants her composition to accomplish. In the first proem to her text, Margery’s scribe mentions only that, twenty years after the onset of her visions, God commanded that “sche schuld don wryten hyr felyngys and revelacyons and the forme of her levyng, that hys goodnesse myght be knowyn to alle the world” (47).⁶⁰ While Margery, who is otherwise more than willing to voice her opinions or grievances, remains strangely silent on her authorial motives, the other three women considered in this study all point to detrimental breaks in either a personal or universal state that require redress: Heloise focuses on her separation from Abelard, Christine criticizes the unnatural castigation of women by textual authorities, and Julian describes the faith and patience needed to endure the temporal ambiguity and suffering of earthly life. Margery’s break from the norm, on the other hand, is her spiritual awakening: after the birth of her first child, she loses her wits and forsakes her faith, until Christ appears to her and pulls her out of her madness. Her *Book* records that she struggled to overcome temptations of greed, vanity,

60 “she should have written [i.e. have caused someone to write] her feelings and revelations and the form of her living so that his goodness might be known to all the world” (4). Middle English quotations are taken from Barry Windeatt’s edition. Modern English translations are by Lynn Staley. Hereafter all citations following the Middle English text will include the book and chapter number of the quote.

and lust for years afterward, but she still recalls that at the point when she “was thus gracyowsly comen ageyn to hir mende, sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt” (57; I.2).⁶¹ But Margery never names a specific audience for her spiritual autobiography, nor does she expound on her scribe’s stated purpose of spreading the knowledge of God’s goodness by telling “alle the world” her personal account of his mercy.

As the first English autobiographer, Margery draws from multiple genres to inform her literary project. There is no evidence that she was familiar with Augustine’s *Confessions*, but her ideas of personal piety and feminine spirituality show influence from the hagiographical tradition, particularly the revelations of Bridget of Sweden (Morrison 128). Additionally, both Carol M. Meale and Sarah Salih tie her performative style to the history of English drama.⁶² But despite these influences, Margery’s *Book* must still be considered a largely unique undertaking in Middle English literature. However, the *Book* does exhibit characteristics of the subsequently defined autobiographical genre, such as the author’s level of intimate disclosure, which suggests that her authorial purpose may relate more to personal motives than the benefit of her fellow Christians, as Julian intends to accomplish. Sidonie Smith explains that autobiographies result from the subjective recitation of fragmented memory: “There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating” (108). Moving from the premise that the self expressed in autobiography has no cohesive

61 “was thus graciously come again to her mind, she thought she was bound to God and that she would be his servant” (8).

62 See Meale’s article “‘This is a Deed Bok, the Tother a Quick’: Theatre and the Drama of Salvation in the *Book of Margery Kempe*” in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain* and Salih’s article “Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and *The Book of Margery Kempe*” in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*.

existence before its expression, Smith goes on to conclude that “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (109).⁶³ I will argue that this effect, the establishment of the coherent self, appears to be a primary goal of Margery’s authorship. In the terms of ritual transformation, she attempts to complete a transition in status from ambiguity to stability through the medium of her text.

Margery’s method for attaining such a transition requires her to utilize three kinds of stages for the performance of her piety. The first, physical spaces, include churches, pilgrimage sites, and the otherwise nondescript places where she responds to divine inspiration. Margery has great respect, and often severe emotional associations, for the “divers placys of relygyon” the Lord sends her to visit (90; I.12). Official establishments, such as churches or shrines, provide major scenes for her performances, and her visions and weepings often occur in direct response to hearing the mass or a sermon. In one instance, she hears that a certain doctor of divinity has fallen ill, so she runs to her church in order to pray for him (316; I.70). But the recorded events of her *Book* describe common places, or rather, the places in between her official destinations, just as often, if not more so, than the sacred sites recognized by the Church. Like Chaucer’s pilgrims, Margery enacts stories on her way to somewhere else, and these stories are often far more revealing of her character. While detailing her trip to Rome, for example, Margery relates the following incident before mentioning her visit to the room where Saint Bridget died or her mystical conversation with Saint Jerome at his burial site:

Another tyme, ryth as sche cam be a powr womanys hows, the powr

⁶³ For a collection of studies on the intersections between feminist theory and the autobiographical tradition, see *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

woman clepyd hir into hir hows and dede hir sytten be hir lytyl fyer,
 yevying hir wyn to drynke in a cuppe of ston. And sche had a lytel
 manchylde sowkyng on hir brest, the whech sowkyed o while on the
 moderys brest; another while it ran to this creatur, the modyr syttyng ful of
 sorwe and sadnes. Than this creatur brast al into wepyng, as thei sche had
 seyn owr Lady and hir sone in tyme of hys Passyon, and had so many of
 holy thowtys that sche myth nevyr tellyn the halvendel, but evyr sat and
 wept plentyvowsly a long tyme, that the powr woman, havying
 compassyon of hir wepyng, preyd hir to sesyn, not knowyng why sche
 wept. Than owr Lord Jhesu Crist seyde to the creatur: ‘Thys place is holy.’
 (202; I.39)⁶⁴

Margery’s immediate reaction to the scene of a mother breastfeeding her son is characteristic: she repeatedly sees Christ and Mary in the babies and mothers she encounters. One of Margery’s most significant abilities is her recognition of the divine presence in mundane places. The mother’s concern at her weeping is another common occurrence in the *Book*: some find Margery’s tears awe-inspiring, some think them fraudulent, and others want to comfort her, but all of them respond to her emotionality with some form of bewilderment. In the physical spaces she visits, Margery is consistently an unsettling presence. Finally, Margery’s composition of her performances on holy ground exemplifies both major interpretations of the origin of sacred space in

64 “Another time, right as she came by a poor woman’s house, the poor woman called her into her house and had her sit by her little fire, giving her wine to drink in a cup of stone. And she had a little man child sucking on her breast. He sucked one while on the mother’s breast; another while he ran to this creature, the mother sitting full of sorrow and sadness. Then this creature burst all into weeping, as though she had seen our Lady and her son in the time of his Passion, and had so many holy thoughts that she might never tell the half, but ever sat and wept plenteously a long time so that the poor woman, having compassion for her weeping, prayed her to cease, not knowing why she wept. Then our Lord Jesus Christ said to the creature, ‘This place is holy’” (69).

ritual studies. The first position, represented by Belden Lane, emphasizes divine agency, or that “God chooses to reveal himself only where he wills” (19). The second position negates the divine role in favor of man’s: as Jonathan Z. Smith explains, “Sacred is a product of human agency” (111). In Margery’s visit to Rome, both principles appear to work together. Christ himself designates the breastfeeding mother’s house as holy ground; likewise, Margery’s spontaneous receptions of spiritual visions, as during her visit to Jerome’s remains, indicate divine control over sacred space and thus over her spiritual experiences and performances as well. On the other hand, it is Margery’s weeping that appears to prompt Christ’s announcement, just as Saint Bridget’s former presence renders her chamber a memorable destination of Margery’s pilgrimage. Therefore, in her *Book*, Margery appears to recognize sacred space as sites of both divine and human performance. Moreover, Margery’s depiction of holy places continually includes bodily interaction between God and herself.

The second type of stage present in the text lies within Margery’s visions. Like Julian, Margery emphasizes both body and space in relating to the divine, but Margery moves beyond Julian’s level of mystical participation by actually inserting herself into biblical stories. In her visions, Margery acts as a maidservant to Mary, from her childhood through the birth of Christ (I.6-7). She follows Christ through his Passion, comforts the Holy Mother after the crucifixion, and mourns with Mary Magdalene at the tomb (I.79-81). In her mystical visits to the holy places of the Bible, Margery wails at the sight of Christ’s suffering just as she cries when she sees him symbolically through suckling babes. However, the physical and spiritual sites of Margery’s “pilgrimages” have two distinct differences which affect the interpretation of her performances. First,

the characters in her visions often move from place to place, requiring Margery to move her contemplations past the mere images of Christ's body to its performance. In recalling her observations of Christ's body in motion, Margery enters the role of the audience within her own text. Her own performance thus represents an embodied dialogue between biblical characters and herself. By following Christ's suffering body with her own scene of emotional turmoil, Margery fulfills the roles of both audience and actor; as Susan Signe Morrison attests, "the spectator becomes the spectacle" (135).

The other significant difference between Margery's physical and mystical stages lies in her audience's reactions. One of Margery's constant complaints is her constant condemnation by both clergy and laymen. Some despise her white costume because she is not a virgin;⁶⁵ some claim she is possessed by devils; some accuse her of deceit; and some merely point out the impropriety of her public displays, protesting that "ther was nevyr seynt in hevyn that cryed so as sche dede" (219; I.44).⁶⁶ But as to the latter allegation, Margery claims to know better: in her visions of the Holy Mother and Mary Magdalene, the women who loved Christ in his incarnation are just as emotional as she. At the crucifixion, Christ's mother's dramatic performance rivals any of Margery's scenes: "Than hir thowt sche sey owr Lady swownyn and fallyn down and lyn stille as sche had ben ded. Than the creatur thowt that sche ran al abowte the place as it had ben a mad woman, crying and roryng" (349-50; I.80). In another vision, during her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Margery writes that Mary encourages her to maintain her weeping:

‘And therefore, my derworthy dowtyr, be not aschamyd of hym that is thi
God, thi Lord, and thi lofe, no mor than I was whan I saw hym hangyn on

⁶⁵ God orders her to don white clothes as a sign of virginity.

⁶⁶ "there was never a saint in heaven who cried so as she did" (77).

the cros—my swete sone, Jhesu—for to cryen and to wepyn for the peyn
 of my swete sone, Jhesu Crist; ne Mary Mawdelyn was not aschamyd to
 cryen and wepyn for my sonys lofe. And therfor, dowtyr, yyf thu wylt be
 partabyl in owyr joye, thu must be partabil in owyr sorwe' (171; I.29)⁶⁷

Margery starkly contrasts Mary's assurance with the varied reactions of her physical audience. Most witnesses to Margery's tears find her repulsive or remarkable; Mary finds her like-minded. The ability to partake in ecstatic joy and sorrow over the thought of Christ's body separates Margery from everyone except those who can partake with her.

By describing a closer affinity with the characters in her visions than those in her community, Margery effectively divides her own identity from her earthly connections. In reality, she has vowed celibacy with her husband, given up her economic endeavors, and embarked on numerous lengthy journeys away from her home and children. Perhaps her pilgrimages are partially motivated by her desire to follow the lives of those with whom she has more in common. As an outcast in her own society, Margery would naturally seek companionship among those who share her thoughts, feelings, and even her flair for the dramatic. In elaborating on his theory of liminality, Victor Turner defines two coexistent models for human relationships:

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less.' The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured

67 "“And therefore, my worthy daughter, be not ashamed of him that is your God, your Lord, and you love, no more than I was when I saw him hang on the cross, my sweet son, Jesus, to cry and to weep for the pain of my sweet son, Jesus Christ; nor was Mary Magdalene ashamed to cry and weep for my son's love. And therefore, daughter, if you will partake in our joy, you must partake in our sorrow”” (54).

or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. (“Liminality and Communitas” 80)

Turner is not describing two separate societies but rather a single society during different phases of ritual. However, Margery fits in neither category. In a structured society, she is an anomaly. She moves in various social circles, from the Bishop’s table to the leper colony, without belonging to any. She is simultaneously considered “more” or superior by those who love her and considered “less” by those who hate her. Her liminality likewise does not fit Turner’s description of *communitas*. She is no one’s equal, and her submission to elders varies with her divine instructions. A recognized visionary like Julian might hold a somewhat stable status as a wise woman, complete with her own place (strictly defined and limited) and her own voice (placed neatly within the hierarchy of the system which enclosed her). But Margery is indefinable, at large, and contradictory; she is a mother in a virgin’s clothes, and she is a religious woman without a rule. It is no wonder that she finds common ground with Mary.

Elaborating on the implications of liminal periods for social groups, Turner explains that “social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. The passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness” (81). However, Margery’s social status alters between reprobate and holy woman based on varied public opinion, without any kind of transition whatsoever. It might be more appropriate to conclude that Margery never escapes her “statuslessness,”

at least during her interactions with those around her. Caroline Walker Bynum uses Margery as a test case to prove that Turner's theories describe only the rituals of men: "It is not possible to see Margery's dominant symbols [. . .] as moving her through a crisis, redressing or consolidating a breach or a conflict of norms. This is because Margery, for all her fervor, her courage, her piety, her mystical gifts and her brilliant imagination, cannot write her own script" (41). Bynum defines the "script" Margery cannot escape as the boundaries imposed on her by her social role as a married woman and emphasizes that Margery's spiritual development occurs through enhancing her identity as a wife and mother instead of reversing it. However, while I agree with Bynum's assertion that Margery never attains a complete social transition and that her growth does move according to consistent symbols of womanhood, I still maintain that Margery interprets her own experience as transitional. In a sense, Margery does "write her own script" by becoming her own author.

The text itself comprises the final space where Margery performs, and it is the only space where she fully achieves the transformation she seeks. Numerous scholars have claimed that Margery recreates herself with her *Book*. For example, Salih analyzes Margery's use of virginal symbols and argues that her text "is both a record of the process of remaking a virgin, and itself one of the techniques used to do so" (*Versions of Virginity* 170). Cheryl Glenn claims that Margery writes in order to recast her behavior into the socially-acceptable mold of Franciscan affective piety: "Within that discourse, she self-consciously created and owned the story of her life, authored her *self*, recorded her spiritual development, and, most important, validated her life and her visions to her authorial audience" (54). However, neither of these arguments considers the possibility

that, instead of seeking to redesign either a role to fit her character or her character to fit a role, Margery is actually seeking a community that will accept her just the way she is. In her book *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, Lynn Staley notes that, while Margery does not fit Turner's model, she still finds a way to achieve transition from her present state: "I see Kempe as creating a figure whose liminal status is ultimately resolved, not by reintegration into the community, but by her rejection of its demands and practices" (40). Such a rejection necessarily involves an acceptance of an alternative. Because her social status remains consistently ambiguous, she must seek stability outside of social norms. Margery's transformation, therefore, is located entirely within her text; she cannot escape her position as a living woman, so she must become a written character.

Margery represents the shedding of her liminality through a key scene in her text: that of her marriage to God. As a ritual, her wedding involves a break from her previous state, her integration into a stable community, and the period in between. Margery leaves her initial status, or her spiritual immaturity, behind at the start of her *Book*: in devoting her life to the performance of worship, Margery abandons the comforts of social acceptance and inherits a liminal nature which cannot cohere with the world around her. Her spiritual journey is a procession of faith and doubt; even when God the Father proposes, Margery hesitates, trusting only her knowledge of the Son. But the vows God makes to her symbolically break her uncertainty, in both mind and identity. In her spiritual marriage, Margery joins her audience of apostles and saints, who rejoice with her and welcome her into their midst. Her own happiness is expressed through her senses: "sche felt swet smellys wyth hir nose;" "sche herd wyth hir bodily erys sweche sowndys and melodiis that sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyde to hir in that tyme";

“sche sey wyth hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al abowte hir on every syde, as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne”; and she felt “a flawme of fyer, wondir hoot and delectabyl and ryth comfortabyl” (194-95; I.35).⁶⁸ By writing her body and soul into her new position, Margery disavows her earthly need for social belonging. As Hopenwasser explains, “Her self-depiction implies a belief that her life’s drama unfolds on Christ’s eternal stage” (102). Indeed, she *must* perform on “Christ’s eternal stage” in order to establish herself as more than an aberrant character before a confounded audience. After her spiritual marriage, God assures her that he will never treat her with the inconstancy of her previous community:

‘And yet, dowtyr, I wyl not be displesyd wyth the, whedir thu thynke, sey, or speke, for I am alwey plesyd wyth the. And yyf I wer in erde as bodily as I was er I deyed on the cros, I schuld not ben aschamyd of the, as many other men ben, for I schuld take the be the hand amongs the pepil and make the gret cher, that thei schuldyn wel knowyn that I lovyd the ryth wel.’ (195-96; I.36)⁶⁹

In her earthly community, Margery exists as a continually liminal entity. Public reactions to her weeping vary between acceptance and rejection, but she is always designated an anomaly. Her *Book* is troubling precisely because it does not entirely accept the one constant of public perception: her anomalous status. Margery does seem to believe that she is special, and naturally recognizes (and often criticizes) her treatment

68 “she felt sweet smells with her nose;” she heard with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she might not well hear what a man said to her in that time”; “she saw with her bodily eye many white things flying all about her on every side, as thick in a manner as motes in the sun”; and she felt “a flame of fire wonderfully hot and delectable and right comfortable” (64-65).

69 “And yet, daughter, I will not be displeased with you whether you think, say, or speak, for I am always pleased with you. And, if I were on earth as bodily as I was before I died on the cross, I should not be ashamed of you as many other men are, for I should take you by the hand among the people and make you great welcome so that they should well know that I loved you right well” (66).

by the people around her, but despite both of these factors, she never thinks herself alone. Denied any stable role by her community, Margery seeks to recreate herself in the one community where she is not strange or ambiguous. Morrison interprets her performances as purposely subversive to her social status: “Her behavior renders her marginal in her culture—this is how she wants us to read her” (140). By separating herself from the culture which renders her eccentric, first through her public action and secondly by depicting herself as an outcast in her *Book*, Margery effectively translates her identity into a culture of her true peers. The mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene are just as dramatic and abnormal as she, by the standards of social norms. To join them, Margery must become, like them, a written woman.

CONCLUSION

ON RHETORIC AND RITUAL

When I first began my research for this project, I had no intention of drawing ritual theory into what was originally intended as a rhetorical review. The possible connections between women's writing and ritual transformation occurred to me while I was rereading Abelard's account of Heloise taking her vows. Rushing to the altar, sobbing and ignoring her dissuaders, Heloise spends her last words as a lay woman by quoting Lucan's Cornelia:

O noble husband,
Too great for me to wed, was it my fate
To bend that lofty head? What prompted me
To marry you and bring about your fall?
Now claim your due, and see me gladly pay (18)

Heloise's juxtaposition of a pagan lament with her holy vows challenges the very foundations of ritual. She breaks with her past and becomes a new entity in the eyes of everyone but herself. Turner's neophytes achieve ritual transformation by allowing their community to recreate them; he compares them to "a *tabula rasa*" awaiting their inscription (*The Ritual Process* 103). Heloise, on the other hand, inscribes her own ritual meaning by altering the context of her motivations. She says the words to make herself a nun, but she vows her devotion to Abelard first, whose "due" she will "gladly pay." In

her letters, she argues that neither words nor habit can truly transform her into a nun, for, as she declares to Abelard, “It was your command, not love of God, which made me take the veil” (69).

Realizing the ineffectuality of Heloise’s vows led me to connect the completion of ritual acts with the authenticity of the postulants’ speech and performance. Therefore, those seeking effective ritual transformation might feasibly utilize speech, or text, and performative behavior as tools, particularly if orthodox rites of passage are barred to them. For medieval women who, as in the cases of the four authors considered in this study, sought a change in position outside of the few official avenues open to them, the possibility of inscribing their own meaning onto their lives, as Heloise did in repurposing her vows, may have inspired them. If, as Bynum attests, “women’s dramas were incomplete” due to the restrictions on their actions (43), then it is possible that they sought to complete dramatic cycles through other available means. Now that I have revisited the works of Heloise, Christine de Pizan, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe with this consideration in mind, I have concluded that all of them did view their texts as means for achieving what Turner calls a “redress” of critical conditions (“Are There Universals of Performance?” 63).

As means for attaining a desired end, rhetoric and ritual are not very different. I. A. Richards states, “Rhetoric [. . .] should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies. We struggle all our days with misunderstandings and no apology is required for any study which can prevent or remove them” (3). Many of Richards’ theories are built on the instability of language: a word, he argues, does not have “a meaning of its own” independent of its context (11). This context extends beyond the word’s, or

symbol's, textual or visual surroundings to the associations, or references, of individual people based on their past experiences. Heloise, Christine, Julian, and Margery all recognize the need to address the misunderstandings, particularly of symbols, that limited their lives. Heloise, for example, cringes when others judge her pure because of her habit. Christine challenges the traditions that associate the body primarily with women. Julian describes Christ as a mother, effectually making a place for female symbols in approaching the divine. Finally, Margery chooses to dress as a virgin, despite the criticism of the people she meets. Each uses her text to repeatedly define and contextualize her experiences in face of a world that is predisposed to misunderstand her. When interpreted as ritual subjects, all four of these authors can be seen as attempting to leave behind the ambiguity of their liminal status and find a stable definition for both themselves and the world, or context, around them.

By classifying the works of Heloise, Christine, Julian, and Margery as ritual exercises as well as rhetorical ones, I came to realize distinct similarities among their methods, despite extreme disparities between languages, styles, and structures. First, all four ground their ideas in descriptions of bodies, the senses, and physical spaces. Julian and Margery, for example, both describe the soul as Christ's seat.⁷⁰ Second, each author constructs her text around symbolic ritual actions. Heloise continually reminds Abelard that her taking of the veil has not brought her to identify her soul with her costume. Like a nun's vows, the themes of Heloise's letters revolve around submission and self-effacement for the sake of her beloved: in one instance, Heloise claims that she "found strength at [Abelard's] command to destroy [her]self" (51). Christine, instead of

⁷⁰ Julian states that Christ "sittes in the saule even right in pees and rest" (111; *S* sec. 22). Margery describes three cushions placed in her soul, on which each person of the trinity takes a seat (373; I.86).

describing a ritual from her experience to represent the goals of her text, creates an imaginary ritual, that of her commission to build a fictional city, to represent her calling to build up the defense of women. Finally, each author composes the deconstruction and personal recreation of her own character. Unlike Turner's models of liminality, assigning passive submission to the ritual subject, Heloise, Christine, Julian, and Margery all emphasize personal agency and ownership in their transformations. Heloise objectifies herself as Abelard's possession (51), but she claims full responsibility for her choice to become his lover. Christine purposely inserts herself into her text so that her character might model the transformation from hating herself, from losing all faith in her gender, to protecting all womankind. Julian asks her readers to "leve the behaldinge of the wrechid, sinfulle creature that it [her vision] was shewed unto" (73; *S* sec. 6). By denying her particular importance in her revelations, Julian is then able to set herself up as a model of visionary participation for all of her "evencristen" (155; *L* ch. 9). Finally, I am convinced that Margery consciously depicts herself as a social outcast in order to gain a place in a more eccentric community: that of the saints.

The rhetorical aims of these methods are somewhat difficult to pin down. In recent years, the canonization and characterization of female writers have led to the tenuous establishment of women's rhetoric as a field of study. However, the existence of a separate rhetorical tradition for women can be interpreted as either empowering, in its recognition of the contributions of writers who often have been overlooked in what has been a discourse of mostly men; or limiting, considering that such a designation could encourage stereotypes and overemphasize boundaries between masculine and feminine techniques. Nevertheless, the study of rhetorical women has elicited some tentative

remarks on common factors among female writers across genres, periods, and languages. In the afterward of *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, Annika Hallin points out the existence of “a sense of urgency” in women’s rhetoric (Lunsford 323). This conclusion coincides with my observation of the need to enact or describe the necessary redress of a critical situation in all four of the works considered in this study. In Christine’s *City of Ladies*, for example, Lady Reason announces, “it is my duty to straighten out men and women when they go astray and to put them back on the right path” (9). Arabella Lyon, noting a reduced attention to persuasion in women’s rhetoric, observes that women tend to focus instead on subjectivity and identity. She reasons, “If self-definition is a major impetus in women’s rhetoric, then rhetoric is as much directed at the speaker as the audience” (Lunsford 322). Margery Kempe’s autobiographical style provides an illustrative case of using text to reconstruct the fragmented self. Furthermore, as detailed above, the need to define the symbols and designations affecting personal identity lead all four authors to rely on their subjective perceptions.

Despite these correlations, I do not wish to claim that ritual theory provides insight only for the rhetorical efforts of women writers. However, it may be the case that women in the Middle Ages, because of cultural emphases on the body and the substantial presence of religious ritual in literature and everyday life, were predisposed to understand identity and context in terms of ritual performance and transformation. Additionally, the inability of women such as Margery Kempe to achieve a stable status within their own communities may have led female writers to describe their experiences as tenuous and uncertain. The breaches and transitions of their lives do not fit neatly into Turner’s paradigm of rites of passage. Rather than steadily progressing through the linear phases

of “separation” from a previous state, “liminality,” and “reincorporation” into a new role in society (*The Ritual Process* 94-95), the experiences of medieval women often blurred the boundaries of social status, trapping them in a kind of perpetual liminality and making a complete transition impossible. All of the writers considered in this thesis recognize the ambiguity of their lives, and each attributes it to a different cause. Heloise cannot reconcile her heart with her religious vocation; Christine blames misogynist authors for the female reputation for inconstancy; Julian looks forward to the stabilization of human nature in the resurrection; and Margery condemns those who doubt her mystical gifts. However, none of them are able to enact a transformation of their current status through social rituals. Indeed, their inability to achieve the ritual transformation Turner describes may have led them to use their texts to seek the closure denied them in social dramas.

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VITA

Laura Jean Sims was born in Bellevue, Washington, on January 14, 1984, the daughter of Stephen Louis and Janet Lee Rickelman. After graduating from Langham Creek High School in Houston, Texas, in 2002, she attended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois, for one year. She transferred to Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 2003 and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English, with secondary teacher certification, in July 2007. Following the completion of her undergraduate studies, she married Paul Elliott Sims and worked as a proofreader for Educational Testing Service. She entered the Graduate College at Texas State University-San Marcos in September 2008.

Permanent E-mail Address: simslaurajean@gmail.com

This thesis was typed by Laura J. Sims.