

**SPEAKING AS A WOMAN
FEMALE BODILY TRANSFORMATIONS
AND THE DIVINE**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's articulation of the divine as a means of the reinscription of female bodies in "western" culture. According to Irigaray, the physical excess constituted by female bodies in the patriarchal "west" is denied specific expression through the symbolic function of the Christian God as man's transcendent, disembodied representative. And yet Irigaray's work implies that the "excess" of both female bodiliness and the cultural construction of the divine is ultimately uncontainable and open to symbolic transformation and political use.

In this study I read Irigaray as a visionary theorist and supplement consideration of her own reworking of the concept of God in the "west" with a reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a fifteenth-century mystical text by an English woman. In Kempe's *Book* the mystic's body, understood by her culture as dangerously excessive, is the primary agent of her representation of God, whereas Irigaray rereads the divine as the means of rearticulating female bodiliness.

The Introduction connects Irigaray's writings with the discourse of late medieval female mysticism and the psychoanalytic category of hysteria, in terms of the destabilising representations of female bodiliness present in all three discourses. Chapter One pursues this connection in more depth, while Chapter Two focuses on *The Book of Margery Kempe* and considers the presentation of the female body in Kempe's text. In Chapter Three I read Kempe and Irigaray together as "hysterical" writers in terms of the interaction of female body and written text which is highlighted in their work. Chapter Four explores in more depth the ethical dimension of the Irigarayan reworking of the divine as an agent of symbolic exchange between sexually specific subjects, and Chapter Five (re)approaches this topic from the angle of women's experience of mothering and "madness" in patriarchal culture, returning to the conjunction of the divine, mysticism and hysteria set out in the beginning.

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INTRODUCTION

But there is simply no way I can give you an account of "speaking (as) woman"; it is spoken, but not in meta-language (Irigaray 1985a, 144).

In answer to a question from a philosophy seminar regarding the specific practices involved in "speaking as a woman," Luce Irigaray produces a statement that attests to the paradoxical nature of female speech. According to her view of the linguistic order of "western" society¹ as a thoroughly masculinised system, Irigaray posits "speaking as a woman" - as a specifically female subject of language - as an excessive or transgressive act. "It is spoken, but not in meta-language." By its nature female speech exceeds the symbolic system ordered by masculine parameters (meta-language), since that system orders itself as such at the expense of "the feminine." Hence, female speech is that which appears in the interstices of masculine language, because no dualistic, dominating system can wholly repress or do without its "other."

These passing moments in which female speech occurs are the focus of much of Irigaray's philosophical and psychoanalytic investigations. She appears to be interested primarily in suggestively elaborating the terms on which she believes "speaking as a woman" might become more than a transgressive act; might, in fact, transform the system in which masculine representation relies upon the appropriation of the female. No trifling agenda, this. Irigaray is renowned for the sheer philosophical scope of her work, for the hyperbolic terms of her intentions. For myself, a fascination with her work which led to the radical transformation of my initial thesis topic, is centred around her idiosyncratic conception of the divine. Interested originally in pursuing a study of late medieval female mysticism via *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an English text, I was struck by the ways in which the physical excesses depicted and celebrated within this type of discourse, along with the centrality of religion, were echoed in Irigaray's writings.

In both the discourses of late medieval, female mysticism and Irigaray's poststructuralist feminism, understandings of female bodiliness are destabilised in the interests of a future transformation. For the mystic the alteration is a spiritual one, which is nonetheless inscribed

upon her body, and her body's ultimate transformation will occur in the afterlife when she is united with her divine lover, Christ. For Irigaray, the transformation is more difficult to define because it is oriented towards a future in which women can become active subjects in bodies understood as specifically female. And in her analysis, the means of this transformation have yet to be brought into existence and so must be imagined, like the mystic's rapturous visions, so that political change can occur.

For Irigaray as for the mystics, a particular understanding of "the divine" or God is the means of the bodily transformations which, in her view, will enable women to signify as active rather than as male-defined, passive subjects. Thus Irigaray herself acts as a visionary whose focus is the future metamorphosis of the cultural meanings of female bodies. And the works of medieval women mystics, whose distinctively physical engagements with the sufferings of Christ she sees as having empowered them (Irigaray 1985b, 191-202; 1993a, 63), shed light on Irigaray's own contentions and visionary pronouncements about the divine.

This project, subtitled "Female Bodily Transformations and the Divine," attempts to chart some specific ways in which both the notion of God (or the divine) and the cultural representation or morphology of female bodies are put into process through their interaction in certain mystical/philosophical/psychoanalytic texts. Principally this involves a reading of Irigaray as the producer of a particular kind of "visionary feminism" centred on the (female) body. In addition, one complete chapter and several chapter sections are devoted to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a visionary text in another historical sense, read in the light of and sometimes against Irigaray's feminist concerns.² While I also examine, more briefly, other texts in relation to Irigaray's work, the choice of texts for study has been governed mainly by the desire to explore Irigaray's interest in "bodies and God" (Stockton 1992) in relation to her visionary feminist stance.

My reading of Kempe's fifteenth-century visionary text, in particular, alongside Irigaray, is intended both as a contextualisation of and counterweight to the feminist philosopher's work. I read Kempe so as to contextualise Irigaray in the sense that a text like Kempe's shows us a time when the representation of "God" and "the female body" were explicitly and implicitly linked together, in ways which I will elaborate, and this "slice of history" regarding the

Christian tradition's attitude to female physicality may help make sense of Irigaray's interests, five centuries later, when "God" is a mystifying term to so many. To read Kempe with Irigaray is also to counter Irigaray's ideas with the historical record of a woman from the middle ages who claimed privileged access to the divine. As I hope to show, reading texts from the present *and the past* together, with a feminist agenda, can help to broaden that agenda by highlighting aspects of its construction that might otherwise normalise themselves.

I also make use of the work of Julia Kristeva in this study to illuminate both Kempe's text and Irigaray's writings, and consider Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" in more depth in the final chapter. Like Irigaray, Kristeva has demonstrated a continued concern with questions of religion, particularly Christianity, in relation to (female) subjectivity and language. She has described this interest as "a never abandoned effort to take transcendence seriously and to track down its premise into the most hidden recesses of language." She claims that her "prejudice is that of believing that God is analysable. Infinitely" (Kristeva 1983, 46-7, qtd. in Rose 1991a, 32). To my mind this claim echoes Irigaray's view that rethinking "God" is not only a possibility but a necessity and that the divine, if rethought, can serve as an "infinite" resource for feminist theorising. While Kristeva abjures the title "feminist" and her concerns are different from Irigaray's, her writings on religion have been useful in helping me forge connections between the texts which make up this study.

The following pages represent, then, in their focus on future change, also a type of visionary endeavour. They form a point of alignment with Irigaray's thought, although not always an untroubled one. As a result, this project itself may seem idiosyncratic in its scope and specific choice of texts. However, Irigaray is a thinker whose intellectual and philosophical range, as well as her interlocutive tone (which seems to demand or require a personal response (Whitford 1986, 6; 1991a, 5)) can lead to a wide variety of feminist readings. I hope that the chapters to follow will justify my choice of texts to read in relation to Irigaray on "female bodily transformations and the divine."

Elizabeth Castelli notes that, recently, "the body's emergence as a central cipher for cultural studies" has meant that it has "come to be seen as a map of social meanings, a terrain upon which battles of interpretation are waged or within which contradictions are mediated...[as]

a physical fact but also a producer of signification and a transformer of political and philosophical givens" (Castelli 1991, 134). My own study has this notion of the (female) body as a volatile site of the encoding and transforming of cultural meanings firmly in focus throughout. Castelli further notes that developments regarding the issue of the body in the study of religion in recent years means that "the question of the body (in all of its varieties) in religion may now be posed non-theologically, or [at least]...non-doctrinally" (Castelli 1991, 135). It is certainly my intention to avoid, as far as possible, focusing on questions of doctrine and theology as such in relation to the Christian religion. I see my project as distinct from the work of feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and feminist historians of religion such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza insofar as these writers situate their work within a field framed by Christian doctrine (Ruether 1983; 1984; Fiorenza 1983; 1984), however much they question its premises. I am primarily interested in the role of religion as a form of cultural symbolisation, specifically in relation to understandings of female embodiment, which I see as a somewhat broader focus than that of work originating in the fields of feminist theology and religious studies.³ I would describe my work as situated within the domain of feminist cultural studies.

But to return to my subject of study: not only does Irigaray image female bodiliness and sexuality as excessive to a masculinist symbolic system, but one of her principal strategies for change in this area involves rearticulating the female by means of what might be called, with qualifications, a divine "third term." This "third term" mediates between the masculine (the current model for selfhood) and the feminine (its appropriated other); however, it is fundamentally opposed to the notion of the patriarchal Christian God. Irigaray is apparently as interested in calling this symbolic figure into question as she is in transforming the cultural relations between feminine and masculine. In fact it appears that for her the two projects are inseparable.⁴

Irigaray argues that the construction of "God" in the Christian tradition is still operative in the late twentieth century in the "west" because it endorses and is bound up with the patriarchal cultural system which has produced the idea (Irigaray 1993b, 88). Thus in her view, "God is being used by men to oppress women and...therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudoliberal way. Religion as a social phenomenon cannot be

ignored..." (Irigaray 1993d, v. See also 1986a, 6; 1989a, 70). Because Irigaray considers the concept of the Christian God to have an integral impact on social relations (or the lack of them) between women and men in "western," capitalist culture, she aims to rethink God as a means of rethinking "man" and "woman" in feminist terms.

Currently, in her view, the Christian God functions as a symbolic category which simultaneously (re)confirms "man" as a transcendental subject and confines "woman" to a position of immanence, to use Simone de Beauvoir's terminology (de Beauvoir 1976, xxxiii, cited in Keller 1986, 14). The God of Christianity validates a model of selfhood involving separation, dominance, and a negative relation to the body and its functions which is culturally understood as masculine. As Catherine Keller puts it, "in our culture the Divine Outsider who is supposed to rescue us is an infinite inflation of the male ego itself" (Keller 1986, 220). The patriarchal Christian God functions as the ultimate, transcendental signifier which enables "man" to become the symbolically recognisable sign for the genre "human" (Irigaray 1986a, 11; Whitford 1991a, 141-2), and women are disempowered by the setting up of a God who functions as "both the source and justification of Western knowledges," in Elizabeth Grosz's words (Grosz 1986, 12).

Irigaray effectively argues that this mediating role performed by God for man can (and must) be refigured as a means of symbolic interaction between individual female subjects as well as between female and male (Irigaray 1986a, 9, 11; 1993a; 1993b, 68-9, 140). Otherwise, she claims, women will continue to remain without symbolic power in the world, such is the entrenched nature of masculine transcendence (which makes "woman" its repressed and disempowered other) that is aided by the concept of a singular, patriarchal God (Irigaray 1991b, 64-5). She states:

Divinity is what we [women] need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine.... If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity (Irigaray 1993a, 62).

In Irigaray, then, "the divine" refers to the idea of God/gods as a symbolic mediating function, whether in the traditional sense - for men - or in the more utopian sense of her feminist

project.⁵ Because I want to suggest in this study that both categories - the Christian God and Irigaray's idiosyncratic reworking - are in fact productively unstable, I will use the term "divine" to refer at times to both, and clarify which sense is intended by context.

Irigaray's project appears to consist, primarily to date, of articulating the symbolic conditions under which women might achieve cultural status as specific subjects, no longer merely the others of men.⁶ Her refigured version of the divine is intrinsically related to this aim. The divine, which Irigaray also refers to as the "sensible transcendental"⁷ (1991c, 112; 1993b, 32, 115, 129) and sometimes as "god," "gods," or "the angel" (Irigaray 1991a, 173-4), can only be described as a "third term" operating between masculine and feminine in the sense that it exceeds both sides of this binary as they currently operate in the "western" philosophical system. It exceeds both terms because it is intimately bound up with the materiality of both.⁸ Thus for Irigaray the divine (the term will henceforth connote the sensible transcendental along with its other, related meanings already discussed) is the means of (re)articulating the process by which, in her view, masculine and feminine are bound up *together* in representation. She contends that the feminine is hidden yet indispensable in the symbolic system of language and culture operative in the capitalist "west." Hence, the feminine can only "speak" subversively in the gaps of masculine meta-language.⁹

Irigaray's insistent and unusual focus on God and religion, combined with the centrality of the representation of the body (female and male) in her work, suggests some provocative affinities with the texts of medieval female mystics. I have said that Irigaray can be read as a visionary thinker, an idea suggested by Margaret Whitford's description of her work as "positively "utopian" in stance (Whitford 1991a, 9-25).¹⁰ Whitford claims that "Irigaray suggests that we need to distinguish between [feminist] struggle on the one hand, and the long-term vision on the other" (Whitford 1991a, 12), and cites Marcelle Marini's view that for Irigaray "the value of a utopia is not to programme the future but to help to change the present'" (Marini 1978, 621, qtd. in Whitford 1991a, 20). Irigaray's "visionary feminism," then, despite its forward-looking tone and occasional apocalyptic imagery, is fundamentally concerned with the present, with articulating the terms on which women's bodies - the inescapable site of the experience of "femaleness" - might achieve specific representation. In "The Culture of Difference" Irigaray includes in a list of necessary steps toward the re-

presentation of female bodiliness in "western" culture the following injunction: "Don't be confined to the description, reproduction and repetition of that which exists, but know how to invent or imagine that which hasn't as yet taken place" (Irigaray 1990, 51).

The texts of European female mystics of the late middle ages also contain a similar tension in relation to the body, and they reflect the potentially destabilising tendencies of the late medieval notion of *imitatio Christi*. Lay, that is, non-clerical believers were encouraged to model their lives on Christ's in a range of very specific and concrete ways; for instance one highly popular early fifteenth-century devotional work directed its readers/hearers to envisage and act out their participation in scenes from Christ's life, a suggestion that Margery Kempe takes up (Love 1992; Atkinson 1983, 155).¹¹ The kind of mystical behaviour in which continental lay women mystics engaged and helped to popularise tended to take these devotional prescriptions to extremes. Their mysticism privileged the female body, the emotions and the senses, and frequently transformed the body into a site of strange miracles or other excessive acts of piety, as well as the place of an erotic encounter with Christ (Petroff 1986, 14; Ash 1990, 85-91). Anna Antonopoulos, for instance, describes the case of Catherine of Genoa, whose death by an apparently supernatural fire constituted her ultimate experience of mystical union with the divine (Antonopoulos 1991, 186). Margery Kempe was endorsed in her piety by her dramatic and violent gift of tears, which involved bodily convulsions in imitation of Christ's Passion, and she also had visions of taking Christ into her bed (Kempe 1988, 126-7).¹² This kind of mysticism was an extension of the increased focus on human physicality - and on God's physical representative in the person of Christ - which prevailed in Europe in the late middle ages (Bynum 1989, 162; Gibson 1989, 5-8; Lochrie 1991a, 3). I describe this trend in greater depth in Chapter Two.

Since these behaviours were the result of female mystics' imitation of Christ, which was endorsed generally by the Church, such "excesses" were seen as a legitimate participation in Christ's suffering (Petroff 1986, 12-14). Medieval theology and Church teaching are riddled with condemnations of female sexuality and accounts of the dangers of the female body. But female mystics, in their physical engagement with Christ, were involved in a process that necessarily transformed the orthodox, patriarchal understanding of their physical being as a site of danger into a view of the female body as a site of potential holiness. Elizabeth Petroff

connects this transformative process with the increase in social activity shown by visionary women such as Margery Kempe, indicating that it was a source of social as well as personal empowerment for them:

The process of visions taught women not to sacrifice their desire but to transform it, to strengthen it by purifying it, so that finally all their most conscious desire might be directed toward union with the divine.... These visions of the loving encounter with the divine often are accompanied by a burst of activity in the outside world, for it is at this time that visionaries may leave their enclosures to do works of mercy, provide spiritual counselling, administer charitable foundations, and begin to write down their experiences. All these activities required determination, assertiveness, and inspiration in the face of ambivalence and hostility toward women (Petroff 1986, 18).

Irigaray's use of the divine as a means of destabilising and refiguring conventional sexed identity has political implications for contemporary women which echo the trend towards involvement in public life in medieval women's mystical practice. Irigaray, after all, claims that the Christian religion informs the workings of "western" culture in the late twentieth century as much as it ever did; only now, as she says, its social function is simply accorded less attention (Irigaray 1989a, 70; 1993d, v). Her divine is envisaged ultimately as a means of altering cultural representation so that women will be able to speak and act specifically as women in the public sphere and so play a greater role in the development of society. The divine is intended to empower women politically, as medieval lay women mystics were also empowered to active involvement in the world through their relationship with Christ.

A further similarity between Irigaray and the mystics arises from the fact that, in the late middle ages, the Christ whom female visionaries imitated was himself a "feminised" figure. Jennifer Ash notes that, amidst the increased devotion to Christ's bodiliness which occurred in the late medieval period, this body was simultaneously constructed as maternal and therefore "feminine" as well as male (i.e., representative of "humanity"), so that "two separate systems of metaphoricity conflate, two distinct discourses merge in Christ's dying body" (Ash 1990, 89; Petroff 1986, 18-19).¹³ Female mystics engaged with both "feminine" and "masculine" aspects of the figure of Christ in their physical responses to his suffering (Bynum 1989). Hence, the already shifting nature of the representation of Christ at this time (Beckwith

1993, 5) was further destabilised through his representation in the mystical behaviours and written texts of visionary women. Irigaray's portrayal of the divine in her work as a symbolic category which she sees as being profoundly embodied also plays on the destabilisation of conventional sex/gender categories. Irigaray's divine, like the Christ of mystical women, partakes of characteristics of female and male as they are conventionally understood, but in order to produce interactive change in the cultural representation of sexed bodies. As in the works of the mystics, the divine in Irigaray also indicates a strong focus on the future; it may be seen as one of her most visionary notions since it is figured as a means of prospective social changes of a wide-ranging type.

The visionary qualities of Irigaray's work on the divine are, however, *strategically* focused on the female body, whereas in the works of medieval women mystics the female body is the site of heavenly visions perceived as valuable ends in themselves. Indeed I think it can be argued, as Kathryn Bond Stockton has done, that Irigaray deliberately "mystifies" "the female body" in her work as a strategy for suggesting both its place in excess of a masculinist symbolic system and the possibility of its attaining alternative, more empowering meanings (Stockton 1992, 123-5, 135-49; Gallop 1988, 98). This move is impelled by Irigaray's overtly political concerns: to challenge a cultural system in which, according to her analysis, women are invisible on a symbolic level and in which their capacity to enact social change is therefore severely limited, and to produce the symbolic means by which women might accede to specific cultural representation.

Late medieval lay mysticism - that is, mysticism practised by those not confined to convents or anchorholds - as a movement composed largely of women, was also not without political ramifications, although obviously these were not calculated in contemporary feminist terms. Medieval clerics were swift to turn a watchful eye on popular, uncloistered and unofficial women's groups such as the Béguines of Belgium and the Humiliati of Lombardy. These groups consisted of women pursuing an apostolic lifestyle who participated together in spiritual devotions and manual labour. They were condemned in 1312 by the Council of Viennes, and medieval commentators tended to focus on their divergence from already established categories for female spiritual and social activity (Neel 1989, 324).¹⁴

Margery Kempe is an obvious example of a female visionary negotiating the perils and trials (the latter sometimes literally) of a public spiritual life in the fifteenth century. As I attempt to show in the second chapter, Kempe's female physicality is always at issue when she is challenged by male authorities for allegedly usurping authority in the masculine social sphere. By outlining these suggestive parallels between mystical and feminist discourses I do not intend to conflate the two but in the chapters which follow to use each of them to investigate the other. I will say more about this process of mutual reflection in the first chapter.

To return to the destabilising nature of both medieval female lay mysticism and Irigaray's work on the divine. Writers on both female mysticism and Irigaray have described the attention to physical excess in both kinds of work as "hysterical" (on the mystics see Ash 1990, 92; Bynum 1991, 186; Johnson 1992, 192-3; on Irigaray, see Grosz 1989, 137-8; Elliot 1991, 147-89).¹⁵ These uses of the term are clearly figurative and suggest the kind of unusual physical behaviour displayed by Freud's first female patients, who were known as hysterics (the term is generally used to describe the inexplicable female physical afflictions encountered by psychoanalysts in the nineteenth century; it is no longer a generally current term in psychoanalytic practice) (Rose 1991b, 96-7; Evans 1991). A number of contemporary feminist thinkers, including Irigaray, have claimed hysteria as a symptom of female rebellion (Grosz 1989, 134-6; Evans 1991, 200-22). In this view, the female hysteric represents an excess of female desire which, for lack of a legitimate symbolic outlet, manifests itself disturbingly upon her body. Irigaray conflates the figures of the female mystic and hysteric in a central section of her most famous work, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray 1985b, 191-202), producing a celebratory and utopian reading of what she names the "mysterical" body-speech of both.

While mystics and hysterics may both be read as physically excessive, Irigaray can be seen to play the parts of both figures in her writings. Her "mystical" or visionary qualities I have already described. Elizabeth Grosz has figured Irigaray as both a visionary and a self-conscious "hysteric" "insofar as she wants to make woman's body *speak*, be representable, articulate itself" (Grosz 1989, 136):

Like the hysteric, [Irigaray] is unable simply to accept her predesignated role as passive, marginalised support system for the One Subject who counts - the male

(husband-knower). She refuses the position of "philosopher's wife" insofar as this silences woman and precludes her from knowledge except through him, for it covers her with his projections, needs and fantasies.... Irigaray shares the hysteric's *excessive* mimicry, the conversion of her passivity into activity by taking on, in the most extreme forms, what is expected, but to such an extreme degree that the end result is the opposite of compliance: it unsettles the system by throwing back to it what it cannot accept about its own operations (Grosz 1989, 137-8).

Throwing back to the patriarchal system "what it cannot accept about its own operations," Irigaray engages the Christian God, the Virgin Mary, the female mystic, and bodies both female and male in her excessive texts of philosophical mimicry. She focuses on the "excess" that is differently constituted by God and the female body in "western" patriarchal culture (the former serves as an anchor for the male as transcendental subject, the latter as its outlawed materiality), and refigures both together as a means of challenging the masculinist basis of "western" society.

In this sense I see Irigaray as echoing the work of female mystics who, centuries earlier, were also able to cull a kind of symbolic power from the instability written into cultural representations of the divine. The chapter which follows initiates in more depth the particular feminist critique of Christianity which this project as a whole undertakes. It outlines some problems that women customarily experience in relation to their bodies as they become speaking subjects, and considers the "essentially" visionary nature of feminist theories of embodiment. It posits mystical discourse, because of its privileged relation to the divine, as a site of potential experimentation with modes of speaking, inhabiting and representing the female body. The chapter also suggestively aligns female mystical discourse with the hysterical discourse which is central to the origins of psychoanalytic theory. In both systems women predominate as speaking subjects, women who privilege the body in unusual ways as a means of communication. I argue that their attempts at speaking through the body can be seen to advance a rearticulation of femininity which is experienced as a challenge to masculinist representations of women.

The second chapter ("Speaking the Body") introduces Margery Kempe and aims to situate her socio-historically in terms of ideas about female physicality and speech which permeated her culture and with which she was forced to negotiate in order to gain an authorial speaking

voice. I investigate the workings of this process as reflected in her *Book* by considering Kempe in relation to four specific discourses of the late middle ages which focus on "the feminine," and represent the female or feminised male (Christic) body as a site of transgression and mutation.

Chapter Three ("Flesh Made Word") is concerned both with the privileging of the language of the body in Kempe's *Book* and the centrality of the female body in Irigaray's deliberately "hysterical" writings. The strange bodily behaviour which often constitutes Kempe's imitation of Christ is foregrounded in her text as the means by which she proves her holiness and thereby gains the support of a scribe to take down her revelations. Her relationship with her amanuensis, necessary to ensure her *Book*'s orthodoxy and circulation, places her in a position similar to the hysteric, whose bodily speech is represented textually (in book form) by her analyst, but which remains the essential basis and unsettling focus of literary production. In this chapter I consider the interconnection between body and written text in both writers in order to suggest ways in which cultural understandings of bodies and written texts (and the different intentions of the two writers) may radically reinscribe each other.

I introduce more fully the concept of Irigaray's divine in this chapter through my discussion of mystic as hysteric (the figures Irigaray conjoins in the "Mystérique" section of *Speculum*) and from this point onward the Irigarayan divine assumes more importance. My thesis aims both to enact a critique of Christian discourse (the main concern of the first half of the study) through a feminist cultural analysis and to chart the potential of Irigaray's divine for effecting change in the symbolic order in the present and the future (the major focus of the second half). Thus I begin to highlight Irigaray's "feminised," contemporary concept of divinity near the midpoint of my study. In a sense, then, the thesis effects its own "crossing back through the mirror" by which, as Irigaray claims, patriarchy endorses itself in the form of a masculine God (Irigaray 1985a, 77). According to Irigaray, since God mirrors male subjects to themselves as transcendent while appropriating the bodies of women, who form the material ground of "God"'s reflective function, her refigured divine aims to reconstitute both the substance of the female body and the traditional function of "God" as agent of transcendence for the subject together, so that the divine might become a useful symbolic category for women. This process involves challenging the reflective function of God which underwrites

masculinist discourse in the "west." It involves a "*crossing back through the mirror*" (Irigaray 1985a, 77) of divinely-enabled, masculine transcendence that is at the heart of that discourse, a concept in Irigaray which I will elaborate in the first chapter.

Following this idea, I use *The Book of Margery Kempe* in the thesis as the starting point for an analysis of historical connections between "God" and female bodiliness which leads onto a contemporary, philosophical exploration of the use of a refigured divine for the embodying of sexually specific female selves. Hence, the Irigarayan divine comes into its own at the metaphorical surface point of the mirror which Kempe in her *Book* claims to be (3. 2, "A mirror among men"), a discussion of which is at the centre of my thesis. The following chapters attempt to look beyond the mirror to express new, more empowering readings of women and divinity, without losing sight of what is on the other, commonly reflected side, the Christian legacy which is Kempe's means of empowerment and the history that informs "our" own lives.

The fourth chapter ("Divine Imaginings") continues to explore the potential of Kempe's "hysterical" *imitatio* to express an otherwise unsymbolisable feminine desire. Through an analysis of aspects of the critical reception of Kempe's *Book* I produce a deconstruction of the discourses of "positive" (physically-focused) and "negative" (anti-body) mysticism from a feminist perspective which is then extended, in the chapter's second half, into an elaboration of Irigaray's work as that of a "positive" mystic, who privileges the (female) body. Most of the earlier critics of Kempe's *Book* reveal a bias towards the assumptions of negative mysticism while Kempe's mysticism is, I argue, more accurately situated in the affective, or "positive" tradition which privileges the physical in its approach to the divine. I contend that the latter tradition of mystical practice, as depicted in Kempe's *Book*, provides a model for an active embodiment of divinity through which, in Irigarayan terms, a feminine specificity might be expressed.

The second part of the chapter is an attempt to move beyond the duality of negative versus positive mysticism and its limiting construction of the female body in mystical discourse, by pursuing Irigaray's interest in mysticism and the divine in relation to female bodies. Seduction is a theme as is "carnal exchange," because Irigaray's conception of divinity in relation to

women is an attempt to articulate exchanges between (sexually) specific selves, or selves and others who are selves in their own right (e.g., women and men). These exchanges are also necessarily for her the means of re-presentation of the female body, which lacks representation in its own right as yet, hence the need for symbolic exchange with the divine mediating between the female and the male. Overall, I align Kempe and Irigaray on the basis of their use of the liminal space inhabited by the divine in "western" metaphysics and mystical discourse. Both women effectively use this space as a moveable "horizon" by which to project and envision transfigurations of bodily experience.

Chapter Five ("Mysteria/Hysteria") returns to the mysticism and hysteria alignment proposed from the first and brings together "mysterical" activity with some written representations of the experiences of "madness" and motherhood as they are prescribed in "western" patriarchal culture. I suggest that both experiences contain the potential to disrupt phallogocentric systems of representation, a potential which is actualised when they are imaged by women in conjunction with the divine. On these occasions mothering and madness can become sites of female bodily and subjective transformation.

I produce this argument through a reading of the hysterical "labourings" in imitation of Christ which Margery Kempe describes herself performing in her *Book*; the representation of the phantom pregnancy of Freud's hysterical patient "Dora" in Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria"; and Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," an essay on the role of the Virgin Mary in "western" culture, which she intertextualises with an autobiographical account of her own mothering experience. I read the three texts progressively in order to try and ascertain whether they present a continuum of female empowerment, and examine how the bodily speech which the three women present disrupts the meta-text which frames each one's self-representation. I investigate to what extent this eruption of somatic speech enacts a subversive reproduction or "rebirthing" of patriarchal prescriptions of mothering and female madness.

The brief conclusion returns to the themes of the Introduction and recapitulates Irigaray's arguments concerning the (im)possibility of specifically female speech. It reflects on the thesis as an exploration of the conjunction of female bodily excess in patriarchal culture with the

bodily excess that is contained in the representation of the Christian God. It acts as an open-ended conclusion or horizon such as Irigaray recommends; that is, as a statement which places the thesis as a whole in a feminist context as passionate endeavour in which claims to truth are always provisional and open to constructive rereadings.

1. This phrase is problematical, of course, not only because it is falsely totalising but because the vantage point which defines "west" in opposition to "east" and thereby "others" the latter is normally masked by its use. I'm predominantly using it to refer to parts of the world long influenced by Christianity in the context of this project, but as "Christian culture" produces even more difficulties I have decided to stay with "western." However I use quotation marks with the word throughout the text as a means of preventing its naturalisation therein. A further note on terminology: The word "feminine" is used somewhat interchangeably with "female" in order to underline what I see as the artificiality of the traditional distinction made, in English, between the two words; i.e., "female" is often used to signify a state more "natural" or intrinsic to being-a-woman than "feminine." My point is that both terms, the so-called "social" and the so-called "biological," are equally culturally constructed. Similarly, I present the word "woman" in quotation marks where it refers to women as a group, in order to highlight the artificiality of such a universalist conception. However, I generally use "man" without quotation marks since my point in this study is that while it *is* possible for men to take up a universalist, singular subject position (however falsifying this "neutral" position is), the same is not possible for women, and it is women's exile from the domain of subjectivity that I wish to focus on here. The quotation marks with the word "woman" are a strategy to point up the difficulties inherent in "speaking as a woman," difficulties which do not apply to "speaking as a man."
2. I read *The Book of Margery Kempe* in this study as a "mystical" text as well as a devotional one, insofar as it claims to present experience which is different from that of most fifteenth-century believers; for example, Kempe's "mystical marriage" to the Godhead in Rome (Kempe 1988, 122-4). I am aware that a number of earlier scholars have questioned the *Book's* "mystical" status; however, in Chapter Four specifically I critique traditional interpretations of mysticism in relation to the *Book*, and also describe the effects of Christian discourse which claims to be spiritually or mystically privileged, using the work of Michel de Certeau and Karma Lochrie in order to formulate working definitions.

Because this is a Women's Studies thesis, all quotations from the *Book* are from the modern translation by B. A. Windeatt. I have also translated quotations from Middle English texts since I am assuming that the bulk of my readership will not be medieval specialists.

3. One possible exception to this definition in my view is Catherine Keller's book *From a Broken Web* (1986), which is undoubtedly a work of feminist theology but is impressive in its scope and the incisiveness of its feminist cultural critique, taking in psychoanalysis, philosophy, myth and poetry as they relate to the construction of a feminist understanding of self-other relations.
4. Irigaray refers to a "third term" as that which enables the human subject to signify; as a mediating element in the passage to subjectivity (Irigaray 1991a, 170-1); and as that which is present but generally disavowed in the masculinist cultural economy in relation to women (Irigaray 1993b, 20-1). For example, in the discourse of traditional psychoanalysis, the "third term" is that which intervenes between mother

and child, and which "supposedly avoids the fusion that would lead into the chaos of psychosis, and is said to guarantee order" (Hélène Rouch, interviewed in Irigaray 1993c, 42). However, in an interview published in *Je, tu, nous* in which Irigaray questions Hélène Rouch, a biology teacher, about the relationship between mother and child *in utero*, Rouch claims that the "differentiation" performed by the third term as "father, law, Name of the Father" and so on, is already present in the maternal situation. She states that: "It seems to me that the differentiation between the mother's self and the other of the child, and vice versa, is in place well before it's given meaning in and by language, and the forms it takes don't necessarily accord with those our cultural imaginary relays: loss of paradise, traumatizing expulsion or exclusion, etc" (Irigaray 1993c, 42). Irigaray agrees with this view, arguing that mother/child relations before childbirth, while represented by "the patriarchal imagination (for example, in psychoanalysis) as in a state of fusion, are in fact strangely organized and respectful of the life of both" (Irigaray 1993c, 38). Irigaray describes as "divine" the means of representing forms of mediation which in the case of mother and child privilege and articulate rather than annul the female/maternal. In "The Culture of Difference" she writes: "The female body tolerates the other's growth within itself without incurring either the illness or the death of the living organisms. Unfortunately, culture has almost inverted the meaning of this economy of respect for the other. Blindly, it has venerated the mother-son relationship to the level of religious fetishism, but it has not interpreted the model of tolerance of the other within and with a self which this relationship manifests" (Irigaray 1990, 45).

5. Irigaray's concept of a "divine for women" is related to her view of "western" culture as a society bent on self-destruction and the annihilation of nature (Irigaray 1993b, 107). As a consequence she is given to referring positively to matriarchal, pre-Christian goddesses and cultures on occasion, although she does state, in relation to at least one of these references, that in her view "there is no question of us simply returning to the earth goddesses, even if that were possible" (Irigaray 1986a, 11). I have not taken up this aspect of Irigaray's thought in my study since to address her alignment of matriarchal goddesses with the notion of "nature" would require exploring the complexities of the idea of "the natural" in her oeuvre, and I do not have space to address the topic in the context of this project. On the subject of matriarchal goddesses in Irigaray's work see Irigaray (1986a, 10-11; 1989a, 61; 1993e, 129; 1993f, 189-91; 1993g; 1993h; 1993i, 110-11; 1993j, 90).
6. Margaret Whitford points out that "the divine" in Irigaray is used in a variety of different ways, however it may be seen as "a condensed way of referring to all the conditions of women's collective access to subjectivity.... [and] as the symbolic order *in its possibilities of and for transformation*, in other words, language as a field of enunciation, process, response, and becoming" in which both female and male might speak as legitimate *subjects* of language (Whitford 1991a, 47. Emphasis added).
7. This term is introduced in Irigaray's work in *L'Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (1984), translated as *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993b) and is an important theme of the essays in that volume. Whitford argues that the sensible transcendental can be used to "link together the different parts of Irigaray's work - the imaginary

and the symbolic, language, the body, ethics and so on" (Whitford 1991a, 144), a statement which I endorse through my reading of Irigaray in this study.

8. For example in an essay on Descartes in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray represents "wonder" in terms of the sensible transcendental. She describes wonder as "a birth into transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses ('sensible'), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual." Wonder is depicted as "the passion of the encounter between the most material and the most metaphysical, of their possible conception and fecundation one by the other. A *third dimension*. An *intermediary*. Neither the one nor the other. Which is not to say neutral or neuter. The forgotten ground of our condition between mortal and immortal, men and gods, creatures and creators. In us and among us" (Irigaray 1993b, 82).
9. Elizabeth Grosz writes in relation to Irigaray that "to speak as woman means to undo the reign of the 'proper' - the proper name, property, self-proximity. It means to evoke rather than designate, to overflow and exceed all boundaries and oppositions. It involves speaking from a position in the middle of the binaries (the so-called position of the 'excluded middle'), affirming both poles while undoing their polarisation" (Grosz 1989, 132). And Catherine Porter glosses the phrase "speaking (as) woman (*parler-femme*)" in a note to her translation of *This Sex Which Is Not One* in the following way: "Not so much a definitive method as an experimental process or a discovery of the possible connections between female sexuality and writing, 'speaking (as) woman' would try to disrupt or alter the syntax of discursive logic, based on the requirements of univocity and masculine sameness, in order to express the plurality and mutuality of feminine difference and mime the relations of 'self-affection'" (Irigaray 1985a, 222n).
10. Whitford also claims that Irigaray's work has "a visionary aspect" in that "past, present and future are interwoven" in her texts (Whitford 1991b, 13).
11. The work in question is the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Nicholas Love's English translation of which (*The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*) is one of several and is described by Margaret Deanesley as "probably more popular than any other single book in the fifteenth century" (Deanesley 1920, 353, qtd. in Nolan 1984, 84). It is a condensed version of the Franciscan original and displays a greater emphasis on the humanity than on the divinity of Christ (Hughes 1988, 231, 287). Barry Windeatt observes some clear parallels between the *Mirror (Meditationes)* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kempe 1988, 326-7n), as does Gail McMurray Gibson (Gibson 1989, 49-60).
12. Bynum claims of the "especially somatic" quality of female spirituality from 1200 to 1500, that "the emergence of certain bizarre miracles characteristic of women may actually mark a turning point in the history of the body in the West" (Bynum 1989, 162). Further examples of such miracles are virgins inexplicably lactating and curing followers with their breast milk (Bynum 1987, 122-3, 126, 211, 273-5), "trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily rigidity, miraculous elongation or enlargement of parts of the body, swellings of sweet mucus in the throat (sometimes known as 'globus hystericus')...ecstatic nosebleeds," physical survival on

only the eucharistic Host, "mystical pregnancy" or bodily swelling, and so on (Bynum 1989, 165). See also Dickman (1984, 152); Lagorio (1984, 172-3); Petroff (1986, 3-59).

13. See also the prior work of McLaughlin (1975); Bynum (1982; 1989; 1991); Lagorio (1985). Julian of Norwich (c.1342-after 1413) is the medieval proponent of a theology of Christ's "motherhood," which Bynum and others have discussed. See Julian of Norwich (1978); Jones (1984); Lichtmann (1990); Bynum (1991, 96-7).
14. For more information on the Béguines, see McDonnell (1969); Bolton (1973); Devlin (1984); Petroff (1986, 171-5); Neel (1989). On the Humiliati, see Bolton (1972); Petroff (1986, 231).
15. Karma Lochrie also implies as much in her book on Kempe without using the term hysteria. In a chapter entitled "Embodying the Text: Boisterous Tears and Privileged Readings" (Lochrie 1991a, 167-202), she describes the excessive bodily performances of the female mourners surrounding the Cross in medieval depictions of Christ's Passion. She reads Kempe's own physically intense imitation of Christ and his Mother, portrayed in the *Book*, in the light of these aids to devotion, and argues that Kempe's body performs Christ's suffering as a spectacle that demands a response from her readers.

CHAPTER ONE

CROSSING BACK THROUGH THE MIRROR: WOMEN AND DIVINITY

If we needed fire to remind us
 that all true images
 were scooped out of the mud
 where our bodies curse and flounder
 then perhaps that fire is coming
 to sponge away the scribes and time-servers
 and much that you would have loved will be lost as well
 before you could handle it and know it
 just as we almost miss each other
 in the ill cloud of mistrust, who might have touched
 hands quickly, shared food or given blood
 for each other. I am thinking how we can use what we have
 to invent what we need (Rich 1969, 56).

1. 1 "Inventing what we need": Luce Irigaray's Visionary Feminism

The gender of God, the guardian of every subject and discourse, is always...
masculine in the west (Irigaray 1991a, 166).

The concluding lines from Adrienne Rich's poem "Leaflets" which form the epigraph to this chapter reflect a number of themes that are addressed by the work of Irigaray. The extract uses Christian imagery, apocalyptic imagery in fact, to suggest the centrality of the body in acts of interpersonal communication. Rich reminds us, firstly, that "all true images" are body-based, and yet, in the imagery of Christian tradition, women's bodies "curse and flounder," they are negatively portrayed. Rich does, however, finish her poem on a note of hope, mimicking the teleological cast of Christian myth, but in relation to a specific female purpose. The inescapable imagery of Christian rite - "we.../who might have touched/hands quickly, shared food or given blood/for each other" - leads on to a statement which, in the context of Rich's work, concerns the possibility of a future for women: "I am thinking how we can use what we have/to invent what we need."

The final lines of "Leaflets" also remind me of Irigaray in their lyricism, bound up as it is with a sense of prophecy and the need to articulate something (trust?) through the language

of the body. Although Rich's politics are different from Irigaray's in certain obvious ways, the two writers' fundamental concerns are not so dissimilar. Irigaray places great store on poetic language; she uses it as a means of subverting the linearity of conventional grammar, which in her view is the result of a pervasive process of cultural masculinisation (Irigaray 1985b, 78-80; 1989b; Duchon 1986, 89). Also, Irigaray is fundamentally concerned with the representation of "the female body," and, by extension, with the inescapability of the body for male subjects as well. It is her view that women and men must find alternative ways of being in their bodies than those that currently exist. Irigaray articulates this concern through a persistent focus on what she calls "sexual difference": the need for women's bodies to accede to a specific cultural symbolisation instead of functioning as the passive, material flipside of the male sexual subject. Her interest in the divine is primarily a means to this end. Thus Irigaray can be seen to be engaged in the visionary process that Rich represents in the final lines of her poem. Irigaray is concerned with how women's bodies currently signify in the masculinist symbolic system of "western" culture, and how they might be differently signified and more empoweringly experienced by individual women.

Irigaray's thinking on the divine is, then, impelled by her conviction of the need for sexual difference - the different and productive positioning of the two sexes we habitually recognise - to be articulated in all forms of social, philosophical and political life. Her philosophy of a feminine divine, sometimes called a "sensible transcendental" (Irigaray 1991c, 112; 1993b, 32, 115, 129), is envisaged as a means of producing such revolutionary social change. The articulation of a sensible transcendental requires that the model of self as same, unified, consistently self-sufficient and present to itself - in fact, the phallic morphology which underlies classical "western" philosophy and culture - be recognised and reconnected with its own disavowed materiality, a materiality that, in Irigaray's analysis, is displaced onto women. Women may then escape the domain of sheer bodiliness and imagine a divine to represent their own symbolic possibilities.¹

In Irigaray's view, the structures and symbols of the Christian religion enable the stabilising of a form of society that privileges men. However the concept of "God" contains the materiality of the repressions enacted in order for this process to take place. That is, according to Irigaray (following Derrida), binaries such as female/male (passive and active human

subjects) are never fixed but always unstable and prone to shift. Hence Irigaray focuses on sites of "excess" where such destabilisation might be seen to occur. She locates her version of the "divine" in these places and so it serves on one level as a means of symbolising moments of productive displacement in what appears to be a fixed cultural system. As Judith Butler puts it:

When Irigaray sets out to reread the history of philosophy, she asks how its borders are secured: what must be excluded from the domain of philosophy for philosophy itself to proceed, and how is it that the excluded comes to constitute negatively a philosophical enterprise that takes itself to be self-grounding and self-constituting? Irigaray then isolates the feminine as precisely this constitutive exclusion, whereupon she is compelled to find a way of reading a philosophical text for what it refuses to include. This is no easy matter. For how can one read a text for what does *not* appear within its own terms, but which nevertheless constitutes the illegible conditions of its own legibility? Indeed, how can one read a text for the movement of that disappearing by which the textual "inside" and "outside" are constituted? (Butler 1993, 37).

One way in which Irigaray proceeds to analyse the "movement of [the] disappearing" of the feminine in masculinist metaphysics is by investigating how "woman" and "God" serve similar functions for man. That is, "woman" traditionally bears the burden of materiality that is disavowed by the male proto-subject: "man's self-affect depends on the woman who has given him being and birth" (Irigaray 1993b, 60). In place of recognition of his female "other," man posits a male God as his other, thus: "the (female) other who is sought and cherished may be assimilated to the unique God. The (female) other is mingled or confused with God or the gods" (Irigaray 1993b, 61). Both God and "woman" occupy the site of excess that enables the masculine subject to signify (Irigaray 1993b, 145). In the foreword to *Elemental Passions* Irigaray writes that:

man is divided between two transcendencies: his mother's and his God's - whatever kind of God that may be. These two transcendencies are doubtless not unrelated but this is something which he has forgotten. His mother is transcendent to him because she is of a different genre and she gives him birth. He is born of an other who is always Other-inappropriable. For centuries, at least in the so-called Western tradition, that transcendency has seldom been recognised as such. The mother is seen as the earth substance which must be cultivated and inseminated so that it may bear fruit. The father is the one who gives form to the child, who uses earth to create him. The father is in the image of God the creator (Irigaray 1992a, 1).

And in the essay entitled "Sexual Difference" she claims that: "[man] is ultimately the slave of a God on whom he bestows the qualities of an absolute master. He is secretly a slave to the power of the mother woman, which he subdues or destroys" (Irigaray 1991a, 169. See also 1985b, 161-2).² Irigaray also makes this point in "The Female Gender," where she asks whether it is the case that:

the first mover and the first matter cannot *touch*, according to one conception of spirit formed by the race of men?

But the man-god, like the language of the male gender, is born of woman, of an immaculate matter that has been celebrated as such, even when it is clothed in various disguises. Between the two stands man (Irigaray 1993k, 114).

This masking of the female principle with the masculine divine has paradoxical results. While Christianity denies the sexuality and bodiliness of women and mothers in its orthodox, institutional structures, this materiality can be seen to survive or return, I would argue, in popular devotional movements such as that surrounding the feminised Christ in late medieval European affective piety (Bynum 1989; Ash 1990, 95-6), or the extreme emotionalism and bodily convulsions of late twentieth-century pentecostalism, for instance (Lawless 1988, 108-11; Abell 1982, both cited in Armstrong 1992). That it is women who play by far the largest part in such movements should then come as no surprise. Women's involvements in movements of popular religion make clear that there is a sense in which the symbolic excess that God and "woman" each represent in "western" culture can and do meet, and in this meeting they alter, affect and inform each other, with sometimes surprising results. Examples of such excessive transformations are the bodily miracles associated with female mystics mentioned in the Introduction.

The role of religious symbolising in endorsing the patriarchal system of "western" culture can be seen in the mirroring which occurs between the myth of the birth of Christ and the account of the birth of the human (male-model) subject produced by psychoanalytic theory. Elizabeth Grosz shows how the traditional psychoanalytic account echoes the cultural institution of Christianity:

The social order.... covers over the debt culture owes to maternity but cannot accept.... A whole history of philosophy seems intent on rationalizing this debt away by providing men with a series of images of self-creation culminating in the idea of God as the paternal "mother," creator of the universe in place of women/mothers. Man's self-reflecting Other, God, functions to obliterate the positive fecundity and creativity of women. Born of woman, man devises religion, theory and culture as an attempt to disavow this foundational, unspeakable debt (Grosz 1990a, 181).

Kristeva also describes this pattern as endemic to the structures of monotheistic societies when she asserts, with regard to ancient Judaic culture in *About Chinese Women*, that the radical separation of the symbolic roles of the two sexes upholds the social order in relation to the masculine God. This means that "woman" is excluded from "the law of the community" and "its political and religious unity." However, it is "woman" "who knows the conditions, the material conditions so to speak - those of the body, of sex, of procreation - which permit the existence of the community, its permanence, and, therefore man's dialogue with his God" (Kristeva 1977a, 17). Kristeva further claims that "without this localization of the polymorphic, orgasmic body, laughing and desiring, in the other [female] sex, it would have been impossible, in the symbolic sphere, to isolate the principle of One Law - One, Purifying, Transcendent, Guarantor of the ideal interest of the community" (Kristeva 1977a, 19). Irigaray also argues that the God of Christianity excludes women as desiring beings from the sphere of the divine by appropriating female sexuality through the figure of the Virgin Mary (Irigaray 1991b, 64-5; 1991d, 166-7), an idea which I will take up specifically in later chapters.

In Irigaray's view the figure of the sacrificed or unsymbolised maternal body functions, then, as the fertile common ground which enables religious mythology in the "west" to endorse a form of society in which men rule as "creators" of culture while women's creativity and fertility is taken for granted. The symbolically unacknowledged contribution of women within this patriarchal society can be seen, following Irigaray, to form the material ground of the "blank slate" upon which Christianity's dreams of another (or an after-) life are sketched. That is, the exclusion of women from active subject positions - women's functioning only as the passive "maternal-feminine" home for men in the symbolic - ensures the perpetuation of human community, as Kristeva makes clear above, yet without public recognition of this fact. This human community is the *condition* and *source* of "man's dialogue with his God" and the

trappings of Christianity: Old Testament "Law" and its New Testament revision. "Woman" stands for the continuation of human life of which God becomes the transcendental principle and the Christian religion becomes a kind of organising socio-cultural metaphor; the symbolic basis of the organisation of "western" patriarchal society. The absence of symbolic representations of women's bodies - as distinct from a deficient version of men's bodies - functions as a lacuna in this patriarchal system of cultural representation ("woman"'s place being taken by God (Irigaray 1993b, 60-1)) that serves as a utopian space in which male-model subjects fantasise about the regenerative powers of Christian religion.

According to Irigaray, such a fantasy will never be truly regenerative because it negates the possibility of equal symbolic representation between the two sexes and thus the conditions for legitimately productive cultural exchange. In her analysis the fertile "promised land" of Judeo-Christian mythology is an expression of desire for originaive space: the social order's covering over of "the debt culture owes to maternity" (Grosz 1989, 81; Irigaray 1993b, 61). Christian myths both mark and mask the desire for the body of the mother which persists precisely because the figure of the mother does not currently accede to representation in her bodiliness in "western" culture:

For centuries the One has remained entrusted to God, even though this longing for the unique is a specifically male nostalgia, derived from man's desire for the lost womb. With God the Father substituting for the return to and into the mother which can never take place (Irigaray 1993b, 68-9).

In Irigaray's view religion and social relations are bound up together, then, in the patriarchal "west." This culture has its roots in Christian rituals that have traditionally been in the hands of men (Irigaray 1986a, 8; 1991b, 191). Irigaray argues that Christian rite, which ostensibly celebrates God's sacrifice of his son, is in fact based on the prior sacrifice of Christ's mother Mary (Irigaray 1986a, 8-9; 1991d, 166-7; Whitford 1991a, 145), who represents the symbolic status of all women in the "western" tradition. Women have been excluded from active celebration of rituals which would however be meaningless without female contribution (Irigaray 1991e, 45-6). But their exclusion is no accident, since Christian myth provides a narrative according to which "western" patriarchal culture can image itself as defined and birthed by one sex, the male.

The rites of Christianity symbolise a sacrifice which Irigaray, following René Girard, claims "brings the social space into being" (Irigaray 1986a, 6), and serves to mediate conflict in the social domain (Whitford 1991a, 145). But the Christian God mediates conflict according to a model which benefits men and excludes women from active participation. Irigaray sees the sensible transcendental - the divine - as performing the essential task of cultural mediation, but in ways which both require and represent the active involvement of women as well as men.

The sensible transcendental requires the deconstruction and reworking of the traditional binary represented by the concepts "sensible" and "transcendental," that is, women as passive materiality and men as transcendent, active subjects. The sensible transcendental is mobile, active, and seems to be primarily intended as a means of intersubjective exchange (Irigaray 1993b, 82, 128-9, 140, 149-50). It represents female and male subjects as they are currently understood yet enables them to communicate as separate selves without "othering" each other (Gross 1986; 1989, 159-60, 180-1; Whitford 1991a, 140-7). Irigaray's reconsideration of "God," then, is based on a return to the body, especially the female body, in order that it may be alternatively symbolised. The sensible transcendental is a means of revalorising the "sensible" and giving it a means of transcendence in the sense of representation, so that women no longer represent dumb flesh (immanence) in the metaphysical scheme of things. Transcendence is already valourised in "western" patriarchal culture but at the expense of the sensible; therefore, the two need to dialogue together as equals.

This mediating function of the divine is central to Irigaray's project, but its importance for feminism is that it will allow female sexuality and female bodies, in her view, to signify specifically in the symbolic. She states that: "Women, traditionally mothers of god, lack their own God (or gods) with which, individually or as a community, to attain a specificity of their own" (Irigaray 1987, cited in Irigaray 1986a, 11). Irigaray argues that, while female sexuality has no symbolic representation or mediation such as that which she envisages in the form of the divine, it cannot be reimagined. Because of her belief that, in the late twentieth-century "western" world, "the exclusion or suppression of the religious dimension seems to be impossible," she asserts that women need urgently "to rethink the religious question, particularly its *scope*, *categories* and its *utopias*, all of which have been male for centuries and

remain so" (Irigaray 1986a, 6).

This last phrase seems to me to express the extent of Irigaray's interest in religion as a means of simultaneous oppression and enablement. While the *scope* of the Christian religion's effects in upholding dominant patterns of social relations remains unchallenged, the specific *categories* (notably those of women and men) instituted and hierarchised in "western" patriarchy will not be significantly altered, and, most importantly in Irigaray's terms, imaginative possibilities for *alternative* patterns of social relations, which transform the hierarchies we presently live among, will be foreclosed. That is, in her view, unless we can rethink the divine in and for the revolutionary struggles of our own times, the utopias we are enabled to imagine will continue to be male.

1.2 "Using what we have": Feminist theories of embodiment

The deployment of Irigaray's divine as a means for women to become autonomous symbolic selves, as I have said, necessarily involves new ways of imagining and experiencing female bodies. Irigaray describes the way in which women become subjects who are in fact non-subjects or passive subjects (passive bodies) of culture and language in psychoanalytic terms. As a practising psychoanalyst with ardent feminist political interests, Irigaray is deeply critical of traditional psychoanalytic theory. All of her writings can be read in a psychoanalytic light, or, as Whitford puts it, "as a sort of 'psychoanalysis' of Western culture and metaphysics, seeking what underpins its fragile rationality, looking for the repressed or 'unconscious' of culture" (Whitford 1986, 6). From Irigaray's feminist revisionist perspective on psychoanalysis, the non-symbolisation of female bodiliness is written into the drama of achieving subjectivity which traditional psychoanalytic theory describes. Thus, in her view, traditional psychoanalytic theory according to Freud and as revised by Jacques Lacan, unconsciously *constructs* and depends upon female embodiment and sexuality as passive in relation to male sexuality.

In *Speculum* Irigaray takes Freud and Lacan to task for their phallocentrism; for the ways in which their discourse constitutes "woman" as the invisible prop or mirror for male-model

subjectivity. In her interrogation of conventional psychoanalytic precepts, Irigaray insists on the sexual specificity of the (male) subject on whom the theory is based. While Irigaray shares Lacan's view that the body is an imaginary or morphological construct, the product of the intersection of psychical and social processes which causes subjects to experience their bodies in specific ways, she questions his version of how this process occurs for women and men in "western" patriarchal culture.

Lacan has famously described as the "mirror stage" (the equivalent of primary narcissism in Freud) the process by which the ego is formed and the child's (prior) "libidinal impulses" are re-channelled into its own body (Lacan 1977a; Grosz 1992, 36). In Lacan's account the formation of the ego is marked by the child's (mis)recognition of its reflected body image, the image which it perceives as congruent with itself yet split off from its own perception. The body-image, or *Gestalt*, serves as the symbol for the subject's insertion into the social order, the way in which the subject will henceforth realise its perceptions as mediated by others. The body, as the site of the assumption of the split self or alienated ego (symbolised by the subject's misrecognition of itself in the mirror) is thus mediated by the subject's social experience from the moment the ego is formed. The *Gestalt* "symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (Lacan 1977a, 2). The body, then, according to Lacan, is a formation of fantasy and desire, an image which is internalised at the point where the subject is inserted into the symbolic domain:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development... This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (...), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations (Lacan 1977a, 4-6).

In his 1958 paper on "The Meaning of the Phallus," Lacan described the phallus as the "privileged signifier" which orders the workings of desire in the symbolic and the relations between the sexes (Lacan 1987a, 82). Where Irigaray parts company from Lacan is in his

view of how the child must proceed in the taking up of a subject position according to a phallic third term and the "bodily identity" it assumes as a result. In Lacan, the phallus represents the moment of division of the mother-child dyad at which the child recognises that it is not its mother's sole object of interest. At this point the child realises separation from its mother and enters the domain of language, the symbolic order governed by the Law of the Father (Lacan 1987a, 83). The phallus marks the non-satisfaction of desire (symbolic castration or the subject's "lack-in-being" (Rose 1987, 40)), which is the emergent subject's lot in the symbolic. Thus "the phallus forbids the child the satisfaction of his or her own desire, which is the desire to be the exclusive desire of the mother" (Lacan 1957-8, 14, qtd. in Rose 1987, 38; Lacan 1977b, 198; 1987a, 83).

While Lacan and followers of Lacan have persistently claimed that the phallus bears no relation - anatomically or in terms of the morphological imaginary - to the penis, Irigaray, along with other feminists, rejects this claim. Since the phallus is that which orders social and sexual relations in the symbolic with reference to the fundamental notions of desire and lack, and the child becomes a subject with reference to the phallus when it recognises separation from its mother, the phallic function and the position of the mother are significantly connected, in her view (Irigaray 1991f, 52), in ways that are not made explicit in Lacan.

To return to Lacan's account of the mirror stage, which he takes as the schema for the ego's misrecognitive function, the mother is the one who aids the child in its act of misrecognition, which moment, as Jacqueline Rose explains, "only has meaning in relation to the presence and look of the mother who guarantees its reality for the child" (Rose 1987, 30). However in Lacan's description of the mirror stage the figure of the mother is depicted as "support" for the child (Lacan 1977a, 1) in a drama in which the child is precipitated towards the recognition of paternal intervention. The child's first "other" is its mother, yet the formation of the child's ego with reference to the mother is cast in phallic terms which effectively obliterate her physical presence. As Judith Butler points out:

The maternal body prior to the formation of the subject is always and only known by a subject who by definition postdates that hypothetical scene. Lacan's effort to offer an account of the genesis of bodily boundaries in "The Mirror Stage" (1949) takes the narcissistic relation as primary, and so displaces the maternal body as a site of primary identification. This happens within the essay itself when the infant is

understood to overcome with jubilation the obstruction of the support which presumably holds the infant in place before the mirror. The reification of maternal dependency as a "support" and an "obstruction" signified primarily as that which, in the overcoming, occasions jubilation, suggests that there is a discourse on differentiation from the maternal in the mirror stage. The maternal is, as it were, already put under erasure by the theoretical language which reifies her function and enacts the very overcoming that it seeks to document (Butler 1993, 71. See also Gallop 1985, 78-84).

As a result, the part played by the mother in the child's passage to subjectivity remains unsymbolised; thus, Irigaray posits a matricide at the origins of psychoanalytic theory and the social processes it purports to describe (Irigaray 1991e). In Irigaray's view, this "sacrifice" of the mother has negative effects for female subjects who have no means of symbolising the transition from dependence on their mothers to becoming "subjects" of language with reference to the phallus (Irigaray 1991f, 52; Grosz 1990a, 71-2).

What does it mean for women that they become subjects in reference to the phallus and through rejecting the bodies of their mothers? How does the phallus organise "the female subject"'s perception of her body? Butler points out that in "The Meaning of the Phallus" Lacan "refuses the question" raised by the earlier "The Mirror Stage" about how the imaginary body is incorporated by the ego and is experienced as a totality (Butler 1993, 79):

If the phallus is the privileged signifier of the symbolic, the delimiting and ordering principle of what can be signified, then this signifier gains its privilege through becoming an imaginary effect that pervasively denies its own status as both imaginary and an effect. If this is true of the signifier that delimits the domain of the signifiable within the symbolic, then it is true of all that is signified as the symbolic. In other words, what operates under the sign of the symbolic may be nothing other than precisely that set of imaginary effects which have become naturalized and reified as the law of signification (Butler 1993, 79).

In this way the symbolic order, governed by the phallus, masks the maternal function which is nonetheless the site of the subject's first orientation as it enters that order. The symbolic order, where meaning circulates endlessly, is called by Lacan the domain of the Other to which the subject addresses its unsatisfiable desire (Lacan 1987a, 83). But this Other is the mother first, and in fact, all women participate as Other in the symbolic insofar as they must perform the function of "being" the phallus for men (Lacan 1987a, 84; Butler 1990, 44). In this sense women's functioning as the confirmation of the phallus is bound up with their

symbolising the lost jouissance of the pleasures of the maternal body for male subjects. This is a key theme in Irigaray, particularly as regards the current impossibility of women attaining a symbolic home for themselves while they must represent - in phallic terms - the loss of the maternal container ("a sense of *place*," "a kind of envelope" (Irigaray 1991a, 169)) for men (Irigaray 1985b; 1991a, 169-70; 1993b, 60-71, 97-115).

Irigaray asks how women might signify their own maternal loss and, by extension, their relations with others in the symbolic. She claims that women in fact have no symbolic means of mediating their relation to their mothers, since the phallic term which governs language masks the maternal. As a result women are "lost" in the symbolic, in a state of "*déréliction*" (Irigaray 1993b, 126).³ Thus Irigaray sees several problems confronting women: the lack of symbolic mediation between mother and daughter; the fact that women become subjects of language by representing the phallus (i.e, the lost maternal body) for male subjects; and the fact that women cannot become specific, individuated female subjects of the symbolic and therefore cannot differentiate themselves from other women. For Irigaray, these difficulties relate to the impossibility of representing specifically female bodies in a social order which recuperates the maternal into the governance of phallic law. As we have seen, women's bodies can only appear as simultaneous lack and excess in the phallogentric symbolic system. What is needed, according to Irigaray, is the development of a female symbolic in which women's bodies might be symbolised differently, without reference to the phallus as organising principle. And for this to happen, a female imaginary is also necessary.⁴

The imaginary in Lacan is implicitly introduced with his paper on "The Mirror Stage" (although the relation of the terms imaginary and symbolic, along with the real, is not fully elaborated until a later stage of his work), insofar as this account of the formation of the ego concerns "the first images of the self" (Marini 1992, 35). In *Speculum*, Irigaray deconstructs the Lacanian imaginary, arguing that the image of the self represented by Lacan depends upon the female to stand in for the male-model subject's lack. For Irigaray, a female imaginary and a female symbolic are both indispensable and interconnected aspects of attaining representation for female bodies. As Whitford writes: "the creation of a female imaginary [is] a social process, involving intervention in the symbolic.... The symbolic is structure (form) which is given content by the imaginary, and the imaginary pours itself into the available

structures to form representations" (Whitford 1991a, 90-1).

The divine in Irigaray's work is intended as a resource for the construction of a female imaginary on a level with the male. She states that:

We women, sexed according to our gender, lack a God to share, a word to share and to become. Defined as the often dark, even occult mother-substance of the word of men, we are in need of our *subject*, our *substantive*, our *word*, our *predicates*: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy.

To be the term of the other is nothing enviable. It paralyzes us in our becoming. As divinity or goddess of and for man, we are deprived of our own ends and means. It is essential that we be God *for ourselves* so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have already been outlined or determined. It is equally essential that we should be daughter-gods in the relationship with our mothers, and that we cease to hate our mothers in order to enter into submissiveness to the father-husband. We cannot love if we have no memory of a native passiveness in relation to our mothers, of our primitive attachment to her, and hers to us (Irigaray 1993a, 71).

The concern with language evidenced in this passage is linked with the need to construct a female imaginary as a resource for the development of a female symbolic. Since in Irigaray's view God serves to endorse male subjectivity at the expense of the female - an equation which permeates the structures of language and society in the "west" - women must elaborate an alternative conception of the divine as a means of articulating new modes of identity in terms of body, language, and relationships, particularly relationships between women (Irigaray 1991b, 65-6; 1993b, 68-9; 1993d, v).

The development of a concept of a feminine divine - as exemplified by Irigaray's idea of the sensible transcendental - is a means of intervening in primary relationships which are currently figured in phallic terms, or which remain unsymbolised for women; for example, relationships between mothers and daughters or between women in the symbolic. Whitford helpfully expands on the concept in the following way: "it allows for ethics and for responsibilities, a symbolic home for women in the [female] genre which does not limit their capacities arbitrarily. It provides a framework for thinking further the problems of identity and negativity (violence)" (Whitford 1991a, 144).

Irigaray's divine, then, is an attempt to address simultaneously women's alienation from the structures of language and their inability to achieve specific bodily representations of their own (i.e, to signify in non-phallic terms). The current near-impossibility of "speaking as a woman" in the phallogentric order results from the fact that the achievement of active subjectivity is legitimately open only to male subjects, while female subjects must occupy positions, as described above, which reflect the illusory mastery of men. That is, only male subjects have a representable "other" while women must occupy the position of the "other of the same" (Irigaray 1985a, 118; Whitford 1991a, 50).

Rosi Braidotti connects the specific cultural silences of women with these processes of subject-formation:

Women's theoretical silence must be put down to man's appropriation and violation of their bodies.... Psychoanalytic theory...reveals the link between the image of woman and death, that is to say material and temporal limitations. As if every woman stood for, was a figuration of the mother whose symbolic murder is the condition of entry into the symbolic order (Lacan) (Braidotti 1991, 142).

And Irigaray:

If women's bodies must act as the form of exchange between men, it means that women ensure the foundation of the symbolic order, without ever gaining access to it, and so without being paid in a symbolic form for that task. It is their silence, their silent bodies - but yet productive - which regulates the smooth exchange between men, and the social mechanism in general (Irigaray 1977a, 71-2).

The divine in Irigaray is a means of countering Lacan's claim that women cannot "speak as women" because of the way in which social relations are instituted by the phallus. That is, it is both a questioning of the construction of "the female body" in phallic terms and an attempt to elaborate an alternative understanding of female embodiment.

Irigaray connects the divine, for example, with the notion of thresholds, such as those suggested by the mucous membranes of the body which are integral in the functioning of female sexuality, and the female genital lips which are "neither open nor closed" (Irigaray 1985a, 209). While phallogentric logic represents female sexuality as lack, Irigaray depicts as divine the process-oriented nature of female sexuality, which remains unrepresented within

an economy privileging teleology, discharge and a return to stasis, as she argues psychoanalytic theory does (Irigaray 1985c, 81; 1993b, 106, 124). A divine for women is described as a means of symbolising the physical characteristics of female sexuality in such a way that they would attain cultural status as male sexuality does. The divine would serve as a "resurrection and transfiguration of blood, of flesh, through a language and an ethics" belonging to women (Irigaray 1993b, 129). According to Irigaray, female sexuality intimates a model of sexual exchange which exceeds the phallic and offers a constructive alternative to a sexual economy based on singular forms:

As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two - but not divisible into one(s) - that caress each other (Irigaray 1985a, 24).

A divine for women might represent this "self-touching" positively. "Could it be," Irigaray asks, "that one of the qualities of [the] divine process is to leave woman open, her threshold free, with no closure, no dogmatism?" (Irigaray 1993b, 118). The divine, traditionally figured as mediation between men, is suggested as a means of giving female sexuality legitimate symbolic status, of acknowledging and working with rather than negating through appropriation its communicative, mediatory properties (Whitford 1991c, 28). Whereas conventionally, "God is always entrusted to the look and never sufficiently imagined as tactile bliss" (Irigaray 1993b, 162), Irigaray reimagines the divine as tactile mediation:

Immanence and transcendence are being recast, notably by that *threshold* which has never been examined in itself: the female sex. It is a threshold unto *mucosity*. Beyond the classic opposites of love and hate, liquid and ice lies this perpetually *half-open* threshold, consisting of *lips* that are strangers to dichotomy.... Approached in this light, where the edges of the body join in an embrace that transcends all limits and which nevertheless does not risk falling into the abyss thanks to the fertility of this porous space, in the most extreme moments of sensation, which still lie in the future, each self-discovery takes place in that area which cannot be spoken of, but that forms the fluid basis of life and language.

For this we need "God," or a love so scrupulous that it is divine. Perhaps we have not yet witnessed such a love, which delays its transcendence in the here and now, except in certain experiences of God (Irigaray 1991a, 175-6).

Irigaray's work on the representation of "the female body" interconnects strongly with recent debates in feminist theory on the issue of "embodiment": what it means to inhabit a sexed-female body in a patriarchal world. My interest in the intersection of female embodiment with Irigaray's concept of the divine is impelled by a recognition of feminist theory's constant need to create or imagine alternative theoretical and activist spaces from and within which to critique the pervasive constructs of patriarchal dominance. In the rest of this section I will discuss the relation of recent feminist "body theory" generally to a "visionary feminism" like Irigaray's.

As a movement based on shared aspects of individual experiences of living as female under patriarchy, feminism assumes a degree of commonality in the bodily experiences of women whose experiences may in fact be more different than similar. To "speak from our own experience" is rendered uncertain by the ways in which "we" call the notion of "experience" into question through "our" critique of patriarchal models of selfhood, and to add the phrase "as women" further complicates by oversimplifying the issue, masking the repressions of individual differences which are intrinsic to the use of the collective "we" I've just employed. In order to uncover and interrogate ways in which certain kinds of female bodies attain their specific cultural status and how hegemonic discourses organise these differentially poses, then, an ongoing problem for an identity politics such as feminism. For it's evident that while we must continue to "situate" ourselves as female speaking subjects in terms of our specific cultural attributes so as not to replicate the totalising and silencing gestures of phallogentrism, we cannot yet afford (and here again I'm calling on the falsely homogenising "we") to do away with the category "woman." In fact, while the phrase "postfeminism" is being bandied about by the male/mainstream media, presumably to signify that women have now gained all the available privileges which once were unique to men, it would seem to be of primary importance to continue to work to provide the term "feminism" with a wider and more valuable currency (Modleski 1991).⁵

Consequently, to critique the notion of embodiment-as-a-woman within feminist theory from a feminist perspective requires, like the task of the visionary/mystic, taking up a highly mobile position on the margins of current critical understandings of sexual "identity" in terms of its "performance" or construction in and through categories of sex and gender. The idea of gender

as performance has been provocatively elaborated by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* and subsequent work (Butler 1990; 1991; 1993). Butler utilises a radical Foucauldian approach to critique naturalised notions of sex and gender and deconstructs the workings of a number of psychoanalytic approaches to sexual identity. Her theory of concepts of sex and gender as performative positions in culture is the result of her in-depth critique of "essentialist" notions of embodiment, which tend to assume a naturalised material base of sexual identity, or an essence, to which gender labels are then applied.

The issue of "essentialism" has proved to be a somewhat vexed issue also with regard to the reception of Irigaray's writings on working for the articulation of sexual difference as a means of broader cultural change, particularly amongst her American audience. While many of the charges levelled at Irigaray seem to be based on misunderstandings about the poststructuralist situation of her project (e.g., Plaza 1978; Jones 1981; Moi 1985, 127-49; Riley 1988, 102, 107), which investigates the social construction of the category "woman" in terms of its position as always-already having been appropriated by the category of "man" (at least thus far in our cultural history) (Whitford 1991a, 135), the debate has certainly had the effect of highlighting some of the more common anxieties felt by women about the representation and experience of female bodiliness in patriarchy.

While Diana Fuss, in her deconstruction of the essentialist/constructionist dualism and exploration of what she calls Irigaray's "strategic use of essentialism" in *Essentially Speaking* (Fuss 1989), states her belief "that there are...ways to elaborate and work with a notion of essence that is not, *in essence*, ahistorical, apolitical, empiricist, or simply reductive," she goes on to note that the bulk of negative critical responses to Irigaray's work are connected with a "fear of essentialism" (Fuss 1989, 55).⁶ And Vicki Kirby identifies the fear which founds a binarism - essentialism/constructionism - that then outlaws the experience of the physical body, as a fear of limitation, of immurement in the irremediably physical and as evidence of what she describes as the

pervasive belief that the anatomical body is indeed the unarguably real body, the literal body, the body *whose immovable and immobilising substance must be secured outside the discussion*. This improper body is quarantined for fear that its *ineluctable immediacy* will leave us no space for change, no chance to be other-wise, no place from which to engender a different future (Kirby 1991, 91. Emphasis added).

In contrast, Irigaray's divine is envisaged as a means of providing this "space for change" between the current unsymbolised immediacy of female bodily experience and the desire to have this experience mean different things. Her divine is an agent of symbolic extension and mobility which is imagined as enabling movement beyond the feared "immovable and immobilising substance" of the body Kirby describes.

As Kirby makes clear, the "ineluctable immediacy" of "our" experiences as female subjects forces anti-essentialist arguments to confront their own unacknowledged (but essential) "essence" in the physical realm, although ideas about how this "immediacy" is to be understood will inevitably (and most productively) be unstable. As she goes on to state:

Essentialism is the *condition of possibility* for any political axiology: the minimal consensual stuff that political action fastens onto is already essentialism's effect. There is no "outside" this entanglement. However, the task is not to dream of deliverance, of yet another theology that promises to transcend this contamination. Rather, it is to begin to real-ise that we are inextricably immersed within that contamination and that our fundamental complicity with it is, strangely, its enabling moment (Kirby 1991, 93. Emphasis added).⁷

Like Kirby, I would claim that "theologies of transcendence" in the standard sense are necessarily misplaced in the task of seeking to re-form from within, as it were, the cultural significations and women's understandings of their embodiment. However I would also argue that notions of "contamination" and "complicity" have everything to do with religion's role as a cultural instrument in shaping these understandings⁸ and that, therefore, a "theology of transcendence" might also be reworked in just this way: to locate, underscore and open up for exploration points of intimate connection between the outlawed excess that is signified by female physicality in "western" culture and the excess of transcendence (or divinity) which so often makes its physical return through the bodily behaviours of women.⁹

Kirby's "enabling moment" of "our" realised complicity with naturalised constructions of bodiliness marks the body as an active site of cultural change, which is fundamental to the symbolisation of the body in Christianity. To quote Elizabeth Castelli:

The paradox of early Christianity...is that its apparent rejection of the body as a shadowy and passible shell of the immortal soul is located within an ideological and practical matrix thoroughly focused on the body. Every important dimension of early

Christian thought and practice is mediated through language and ideas about and the material realities of the (human or mystical) body.... The early Christians were absolutely obsessed with the fact of human-being-in-flesh. The foundational myth of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus, requires a human body (Castelli 1991, 137).

And so the followers of Jesus could not afford to ignore their human bodies either, especially as the main impulse of Christianity (and, arguably, of all religions) is to *enact bodily* those moral and spiritual precepts which will ensure the coming of the kingdom of God on earth.¹⁰ Christianity works *through* the bodily conduct of its followers to produce (bodily) change in the present, which presages the resurrection and transfiguration of the body envisaged as taking place in the future. There is a remarkable potential within such a system of belief for the activities of women, traditionally guardians of the body and the flesh in patriarchal cultures, to be represented, by themselves as well as others, in surprising, empowering and radical ways. Karma Lochrie observes for example that, while in traditional Christian discourse "the ultimate purpose of [Christ's] Passion is the redemption of mankind, woman seems to be privileged as the means for this redemption" in the late middle ages, in imagery which connects "the bodily, the physical, and the female" (Lochrie 1991b, 118), as described in the Introduction.

I will be examining the effects of symbolic connections between "the bodily, the physical, and the female" in relation to medieval religious discourses more fully in Chapter Two. At this stage I would like to discuss the special status of mystical discourse as a site where this combination is highlighted, and suggest some affinities between mystical discourses and the visionary feminism articulated by Irigaray which I will be taking up in later chapters. I will also discuss Irigaray's interest in "hysterics" and her alignment of female mysticism with hysteria, in relation to her views on transforming female embodiment in the symbolic.

1.3 Mystics and hysterics: Visionary/feminist foremothers?

Mysticism is a discourse which has a privileged place in all religious systems and a highly charged relationship to religious and cultural understandings of the body (which may, however, be concealed in orthodox religious discourse and in the work of commentators on

mysticism).¹¹ Michel de Certeau states that "mystic discourse is obsessed" by the status and meaning of the body and that "mystical literature composes scripts of the body" (de Certeau 1992, 80-1). The privileging of the body in mysticism is evidenced by the unusual bodily behaviours or experiences which normally accompany claims to mystical intelligence, and by which such claims are often judged. In fact Lochrie notes that, in the middle ages, "the body's capacity for amazing transformations marks and measures the soul's capacity for imitating Christ's Passion" (Lochrie 1991a, 14), and hence its holiness.

De Certeau contends that mystical discourse is distinct from similar modes of utterance about the divine (such as theology) because it is not focused on producing a set of criteria which will function as statements of "truth" in the sense that the basic theological precepts of institutionalised religion must do (de Certeau 1986, 89-90; Lochrie 1991a, 61). In this sense it functions as a discourse in excess of the institutions of religion, and therefore is in a position of possible disruption or invasion of their boundaries. But it is also, in de Certeau's analysis, a site of special "lack": "'Communication' (communications from God or those established among the saints) is everywhere a void to be filled, and forms the focal point of mystical accounts and treatises. They are writings produced from this lack" (de Certeau 1986, 88). That this is a "feminised" model of the origins of mystical speech in the soul is made evident by the Annunciation of Christ's birth to the Virgin Mary as an example in the Christian tradition for the reception of mystical confidences, as Lochrie observes: "The Virgin retires from the world of objects, alone and apart, thereby making a space for the divine will to speak. She only wills to hear. The Word is conceived in this speech-hearing act" (Lochrie 1991a, 62). However, the mystical encounter, while bred of a void in the soul of the seeker, is essentially a dialogic one, and in this sense the physical locus of the mystic becomes all-important (Lochrie 1991a, 63).

Now if mystical discourse functions as a site of simultaneous lack and excess in relation to the dominant structures of religion, then it simulates the position of women in phallogocentric culture. And when the person who participates in the mystical encounter is a woman, the potential for her mystic speech to (re)articulate "feminine" excess and lack together, through an abundance of physical behaviours - functioning as excess - which are characteristically allowed no site of legitimate symbolic expression in phallogocentric culture - their status as lack

- is radically mobilised. This would explain why so much of late medieval lay women mystics' affective piety mimics the physical expressions of female sexuality in orgasm or childbirth (and frequently both),¹² experiences which are denied symbolic representation in the phallogentric order as it exists.

But mystical discourse, I would argue, provides an avenue for *transformation* as well as expression of these experiences, not only because such demonstrations of female desire, otherwise outlawed, disrupt on expression the phallogentric symbolic system and thus alter their own status in relation to it, but because of their privileged relation to the special status accorded the divine. Mystical discourse represents a claim by the receiver of divine communications to be in a position both inside and outside the conventional structures of religion, both orthodox in the sense of adhering to traditional doctrine and unorthodox in the sense of professing a unique and personal insight into these basic truths, received direct from the divine. It is no wonder that, as Steven Ozment remarks, mystics typically "set forth what can fairly be called the latent revolutionary possibilities of the Christian religion" (Ozment 1973, 1).

Lochrie, following de Certeau, notes that "the measure of the truth of mystical utterance is its position and presence at the place of the mystical subject," which is, naturally, in the soul of a necessarily humble recipient, never enough to completely quell the mystic's doubts about the validity of her/his inspirations (Lochrie 1991a, 63). In fact, given the troubled positioning of the body (and particularly the female body) in Christian discourses, it is not surprising that this "measure of truth" should be both the source of destabilisation of the mystical text and its claim to divine authority:

Divine utterance is both what founds the text, and what it must make manifest. That is why the text is destabilized: it is at the same time *beside* the authorized institution, but outside it and *in* what authorizes that institution, i.e., the Word of God. In such a discourse, which claims to speak on behalf of the Holy Spirit and attempts to impose that convention on the addressee, a particular assertion is at work, affirming that what is said in this *place*, different from the one of magisterium language, is the *same* as what is said in the tradition, or else that these two places amount to the same (de Certeau 1986, 92-3, qtd. in Lochrie 1991a, 63).

And so it is the mystic's (re)construction of self as revealed through her bodily participation in the mystical encounter (and recorded in her mystical text) which literally constitutes the *difference* between these two places. The mystic's physical manifestation of the presence of God in her soul is simultaneously the site of her particular claim to divine authority and, through this claim, the place of a symbolic reformulation of her culturally assigned "femininity." This occurs most obviously, for example, when the female mystic claims to be driven involuntarily to imitate the physical sufferings of Christ through bodily behaviours which simulate sexual climax and childbirth.

The siting of mystical authority in the bodily response of the female mystic to the divine allows, then, an explosion of *sexual* difference which, according to Irigaray's analysis of women's accession to subjectivity within a phallogomorphic model, is otherwise inexpressible in culture. Through the mystic's imitation of the symbolically ambiguous, feminised Christ, her female sexuality - outlawed in the discourses of medieval religion and society - is redefined and made acceptable. The female mystic's identification with the suffering Christ who is both feminine and masculine, like and unlike herself, opens up a passage between her unsymbolised female physicality (or a physicality symbolised only as "lack," to put it in psychoanalytic terms) and a bodily transformation which enables this physicality to be expressed and to gain new meaning.

The physically excessive behaviour of female mystics is clearly not a manifestation of a "femininity" constructed as passive and docile (like the Virgin Mary receiving the divine Word in her soul at the Annunciation). It may be seen instead as an intensely physical, mobile, and excessive re-production of what it might mean to be female in a patriarchal culture which is both inside and outside the domain of religious orthodoxy. As a consequence female mysticism and its attendant "excesses" have historically proved troubling to male religious authorities and the social structures they oversee. As I will show in the next chapter, the English mystic Margery Kempe endured many censorious responses from male clerics to her passionate mimicry of the sorrows of Christ and his mother, particularly to her uncontrollable fits of tears.¹³ However, Kempe's *Book* presents the mystic's justification of her behaviour through her intimate relationship with Christ, who becomes her bridegroom and grants her a new identity (Kempe had formerly been a wife and mother) as his own daughter,

mother and spouse (Kempe 1988, 126-7).

As Sarah Beckwith observes in reference to the case of Kempe: "Christ's words to Kempe license her to refashion her present and hence herself" (Beckwith 1992, 175). As a result, "identity comes to be perceived not as an inevitable destiny, but as a choice [so that] the past itself is rendered relative, and a critical distance between the immediate and the historical is opened up which coincides with the self differing from itself" (Beckwith 1992, 175). Beckwith perceptively identifies this "self-division" as the focus of the desire shown by a number of modern critics to judge as authentic or fraudulent (and most commonly the latter) Kempe's claims to divine authority, an effect I will discuss in Chapter Four:

Making a self in this instance must mean faking a self since self-production is itself an inadmissible category. Since the self should be simply given (and accepted) and not made, revealed or discovered but not fabricated or constructed, self-making is seen as usurping and destabilizing divine prerogative (Beckwith 1992, 178).¹⁴

Kempe's self-representation has been and continues to be a vexed critical issue precisely because her portrayal of herself as divided also necessarily disrupts the univocity of the divine, who speaks through her and whom she characterises, in the authorial voice of her text. At this point I would like to detour into a brief but broader discussion of modern readings of medieval texts as a way of explaining further why I am reading Kempe with Irigaray in a substantial proportion of this thesis.

If the responses of more traditional critics to the fundamental instability of Kempe's text (what David Aers has called its "resistance to sublimation" of the painful processes by which "female identity might be made in a particular community and class" (Aers 1988, 74)) reveal typical liberal humanist anxieties about threats to the self-sufficiency of the (male) subject, I would argue that the *Book* is especially susceptible to poststructuralist readings. These tend to find in such destabilisation the potential for articulating other ways of being than the eventually unsustainable isomorphism of the male self. I would also argue that it is *because* mystical discourses privilege "the feminine" and articulate fundamental alterations in the (female) mystical subject's understanding of herself - through her intimate engagement with a divine other she strives to emulate and with whom she ultimately desires to achieve a pseudo-sexual union - they exhibit a radical potential for producing alternative understandings

of female selfhood to the norm. It has long been the institutional Church's task to legislate over and attempt to control the exploration of such alternatives.¹⁵

Critics and writers on mysticism have traditionally striven to perform a similar legislative task, as my deconstruction of aspects of the critical reception of Kempe's *Book* in Chapter Four reveals. In recent years there has been a vast increase in medieval scholarship which embraces poststructuralist theories of subjectivities and cultures.¹⁶ There have inevitably been some antagonistic reactions to this work, and my own sense of this response (as produced in published and unpublished formats) is that it centres around two related types of charges of academic "failure": that of "anachronism" and "ahistoricism" (e.g., Higgs 1981; Nolan 1983).

Both words function similarly to outlaw a particular historical (late twentieth-century "western") critical approach which the makers of the charges refuse to countenance by themselves "ahistoricising," in many such cases, their own critical methodologies.¹⁷ In other words, the rejection of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic models of interpretation can sometimes be seen to take the place of a historical contextualising of a writer's own critical framework, of the particular nature of their claims to true or legitimate "historical understanding."¹⁸ Lee Patterson describes this situation as a tautological one which serves to hide "the essentially political nature of the values that govern the modern definition of the Middle Ages" (Patterson 1987, 39):

Knowing what history means, we know what the text means. Established as an interpretive grid, this inevitably oversimplified history thus serves to stigmatize discordant textual elements as interpretive errors, modern subjectivities to be put down to a failure of historical knowledge (Patterson 1987, 45).

David Aers likewise notes the eliminating of "discordant elements" in traditional work by "specialists in medieval language and literature [who].... have tended to present the period as one unified by Christian faith and a common moral theory, the antithesis to a 'modern' world riven by competing ideologies, conflicts, and tensions" (Aers 1988, 6). If such a view of the middle ages is intrinsically conservative (Aers 1988, 7), studies which embrace contemporary literary theories more often (and perhaps predictably) find "a world of material reality whose boundaries (from our viewpoint) seem amazingly fluid," as Stephen Nichols observes (Nichols 1991, 2). My point is obviously not to claim that either of these approaches is more "accurate"

a means of viewing a medieval past from a late twentieth-century present than the other, but nor will I attempt to gloss over where my own political investments lie in the course of this study where it deals with Kempe.

Conversely, I intend to initiate an encounter between "the present" and "the past" such that what appears to me as the "otherness" of the past (or its most apparent differences from the present) is allowed to challenge and disrupt my modern sensibilities at the same time as my twentieth-century assumptions inevitably produce that particular past. Far from professing belief in the necessary ahistoricism of psychoanalytic theories, I concur with Jane Flax's view that "for all its shortcomings, psychoanalysis presents the...most promising theories of how a self that is simultaneously embodied, social, 'fictional,' and real comes to be, changes, and persists over time" (Flax 1990, 16). Furthermore, the counter-transference element in psychoanalytic practice provides a useful model by which the feminist critic can engage in "'tracking [her] own desire' and [her] own attitude towards the analysand's [or the other's] discourse" (Lechte 1990, 212), even as she engages with that discourse in criticism. This process is something I attempt to articulate in the final section of Chapter Four.

In my view the universalising and ahistoricising tendencies of traditional psychoanalytic theories may be effectively countered by setting up a dialogue between feminist reworkings of some of these ideas (such as those produced by Irigaray) and textual material from a distant past. This is an especially productive exercise if the text from the past concerns mysticism, itself a discourse that has typically claimed to be beyond representation, universal and not subject to the vagaries of time (Beckwith 1993, 7-18). Thus, two systems of thought which enact a masking of their own male bias (traditional psychoanalysis and traditional (scholarly) discourse on mysticism) may, in a feminist analysis, shed light on each other.

In stressing Irigaray's status as a visionary thinker with regard to the female body, and the visionary and "excessively" physical experience of a mystic like Kempe, I suggest that it is possible (and productive) to bring these past and present representations of female bodiliness to a sense of constructive crisis. I have in mind here Gayatri Spivak's description of crisis as the moment at which

things...lose their proper names. The moment of the proper name is a transitional moment... These things must bring each other to crisis all the time because that is the relationship between theory and practice. What I mean by crisis is the moment at which you feel that your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself. These are not necessarily moments of weakness..... The relevant outcome...is a problem and a moment when you must think about negotiating (Spivak 1990b, 138-9).

In the context of this comment, presupposition is theory, enterprise is practice, yet both are interdependent upon each other. If we take presupposition to stand for the attitudes we have towards the past without being fully aware of them because they (and we) are the products of our particular present, then enterprise would stand for the consideration of present attitudes along with objects of study from the past, in a mutually interactive relationship which would make the "otherness" of the past also extend to the present. That is, being aware of how present attitudes to the past shape our understanding of that past can make the present seem "other" too and so possibly more open to constructive change, a central facet of any feminist cultural analysis.

Patterson also depicts the unavoidability of negotiating in this way, when he describes the unsettling process in which the writer who treats the past in her/his work faces the paradoxes of "historicism" at every turn:

While wanting to do justice to the otherness of a distant past, the historian is unavoidably conditioned by his (sic) own historical situation; while concerned to incorporate and understand as much of the material relevant to his chosen problem as he can, he is also aware that that material is never raw data but rather produced by elaborate processes of interpretation - many of which are so much second nature as to be unrecognizable as interpretations at all; and while attentive to the particularity and detail in which the significance of the past resides, he also knows that for that detail to be significant at all it must be located within a larger, totalizing context. These are oppositions that can never, in my view, come to resolution; on the contrary, they must be continually negotiated and renegotiated. Like Freud's civilization, historicism both issues from and entails discontent; the insufficiency of the present directs us to the past, but what we recover fails to satisfy. And so history continues to be rewritten (Patterson 1987, ix-x).

I want to argue that in the absence of a singularly reliable version of history, if any "real" history exists then it does so, like the mystic's body, somewhere in the constantly shifting space of the encounter between current interpretive ideas and past objects of study. However,

as with the mystic's body, to describe this space as mobile is by no means to mistake the very concrete political effects of the exchanges it allows. Catherine Belsey, too, describes an encounter with the texts of the past as that which may assist in "the construction of the history of the present" (Belsey 1983, 24), a present whose political interestedness she readily admits in the service of belief in possible changes for the future:

The history of the present is not a history of a fall from grace but of the transformations of power and resistances to power. The claim is not that such a reading of literary texts is more accurate, but only that it is more radical. No less partial, it produces the past not in order to present an ideal of hierarchy, but to relativise the present, to demonstrate that since change has occurred in those areas which seem most intimate and most inevitable, change in those areas is possible for us (Belsey 1983, 26).¹⁹

Therefore, Margery Kempe's "destabilizing [of] the divine prerogative" by means of her "self-making" is a process which I intend to submit to a thorough historical analysis. I will argue that it is the destabilisation of *both* processes - that of "self-making" and of representing the divine - which highlights the materiality of Kempe's bodily experiences of God and her understandings of them and which, in terms of my project, requires a reading of the past which will in turn relativise the present and produce it as open to physical change. Kempe's destabilisation of the divine is as integral to her recreation of a self within her text as the relationship with God which initiates the whole endeavour. As Beckwith points out: "That the spiritualization of God and the promptings of Kempe's ego should be so difficult to distinguish is itself a product of the internalization of God interlocuted by that very self, and one is quite inconceivable without the other" (Beckwith 1992, 197).

In this respect the divine who shows himself to the mystic is caused to function in her discourse in a somewhat similar fashion (obvious differences notwithstanding) to Irigaray's "visions" or envisioning of the divine as a resource for twentieth-century women in their emergent possibilities for present and future "becoming." The following quote from Beckwith makes the resemblances clear:

Potential, transformative, neglecting the confinements of the past for the possibilities of the future, Christ's words to Margery Kempe provide her with the opportunity to change the relationship between the past and the future, in the only place that they

can meet, the present in its moment of becoming that future (Beckwith 1992, 175).

Similarly Irigaray describes a divine for women as an "incentive for a more perfect becoming." She states that "the only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment" (Irigaray 1993a, 68-9).²⁰ As Beckwith suggests, Kempe's mystical encounters are also dynamic occasions where her understanding of her "self" is radically put into question through her imitation of a loving, divine other, and the only place that past and future meet in the present of these encounters is in her own experience as a female subject.

In the mystical colloquy the female mystic's body becomes an "essentially" destabilised place because of its traversal by an alien economy of sacred desire. As Lochrie states: "The [mystical] text can only circulate desire and utterance without ever settling into them. Like the mystic's body, the text becomes a spectacle of desire and utterance, of bodily and textual memory, and of affective excess" (Lochrie 1991a, 69). This is no doubt why Irigaray sees such visionary potential in the figure of the medieval female mystic, as she, too, aims to destabilise conventional understandings of female bodiliness in the interests of an other, hitherto inexpressible desire.

Irigaray, as described in the Introduction, has shown a fascination with the figures of both medieval female mystics and hysterics, depicting them as transgressors who strive to articulate a form of female embodiment and desire for which the phallogocentric order has no legitimate symbolic outlet. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray deconstructs the "western" metaphysical thought-system and reveals its dependence upon the body of "woman," which serves a reflective or mimetic function for man (Irigaray 1985b). In an essay which forms one of ten at the centre of *Speculum*, Irigaray aligns both female mystic and hysteric as figures who confound this passive-reflective female function through their bodily excesses (Irigaray 1985b, 191-202). Female mystics and hysterics, in Irigaray's view, disrupt or exceed the masculinist system by mimicking their own assigned feminine-mimetic (i.e., passive-reflective) role. Hysterics commonly "[defy] through excess, through *overcompliance*," as Elizabeth Grosz puts it, and produce a "parody of the expected" (Grosz 1989, 135). Medieval female

mystics, many of whom were engaged in "taking to extremes" imitative devotional practices recommended by the Church and their culture, may be seen as enacting a similar excessive performance (Lochrie 1991b, 129-38).

Irigaray describes mimicry as the path "historically assigned to the feminine" (Irigaray 1985a, 76) which, if a woman consciously adopts, she may use for subversive purposes: "To play with mimesis is...for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray 1985a, 76). In later chapters I will argue that Kempe, in taking to extremes the practices of mimetic identification with divinity recommended by her culture in her mysticism, is able to find a place from which to speak which is otherwise denied her, and one which unconsciously enacts a possible challenge, by means of the divine, to a masculinist system of representation.

The popular practices of late medieval devotion are sites where "playing" in the dramatic or theatrical sense and an emphasis on the somatic experience of both believers and the divine figures who are the objects of their devotion conjoin. Margery Kempe's mystical practice, for example, aligns her with the hysteric, who "speaks," by means of strange bodily symptoms, in protest at her "annihilation as active subject" (Grosz 1989, 138). As Grosz points out: "Hysterics mime the disorders of others...according to...common cultural ideas," such as the Passion of Christ in the late medieval "west," for example (Grosz 1989, 135). Kempe's mysticism, like Irigaray's writings and like hysterical mimesis, enacts a disturbing drama which contains its own subversive potential.

Kempe has also been consistently charged with exhibiting "hysterical" behaviour (in an uncritical, contemporary and colloquial sense) by modern critics, most of them male (see Thurston 1936, 570; Underhill 1936, 642; McCann 1937, 113; Knowles 1964, 147; Tuma 1977, 43; Howard 1980, 34-5; Medcalf 1981, 114-5; Hussey 1989, 117. I discuss these responses in Chapter Four) and the epithet has usually been linked with the great "cryings" which she enacted in empathy with Christ's Passion and death. I will be arguing that Kempe's mimetic and tearful engagements with the Passion of Christ and the sorrow of his mother in her visions may usefully be seen as "hysterical" in terms of the hysteric's propensity to an excessively troubling mimesis (see Chapters Two (2. 2. 4), Three and Five).²¹ Jennifer Ash

also notes the unusual and imitative parallel in bodily activity between the medieval woman mystic and the female hysteric. She observes that in late medieval mystical practice:

The body of the worshipper, the mimic, would be inscribed with the pain and suffering of Christ's dying body; the stigmatised body of the worshipper would be marked in total identification with the body of the Divine Other, would participate in the hol(e)y wounding of (a) grand Passion. Freudian psychoanalytic theorising names such a display of mimicry of bodily identification with an-Other, hysteria (Ash 1990, 92).

Both medieval female mystics and hysterics, then, engage in "excessive" bodily activities and both types of behaviour are made the object of recording and analysis by men.²² As Jacqueline Rose makes clear, psychoanalysis begins with the (female) hysteric and her bodily symptom's challenge to conscious processes: Freud used "what he uncovered in the treatment of the hysterical patient as the basis of his account of the unconscious and its universal presence in adult life" (Rose 1991b, 97; Irigaray 1981a, 55; 1985a, 45-6). And Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis observe that "it was...in the process of bringing the psychical aetiology of hysteria to light that psycho-analysis made its principal discoveries: the unconscious, phantasy, defensive conflict and repression, identification, transference, etc" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 195).

Likewise, it was necessary for medieval lay women mystics to gain the support of male clerical overseers, men who often acted as the female mystics' scribes. Such priestly authorisation of the women's visions helped endorse their charges' sanctity and save them from charges of heresy and death at the stake. Irigaray makes the point that the priests who supported female mystics in this way were in fact using women to gain access to divine secrets, a special kind of "truth" (Irigaray 1985b, 191-2). And yet Irigaray also sees her own position (and arguably that of all women) as being similarly "compromised": "the female subject" can only speak through a masculinised superstructure of representation; her efforts to "speak as a woman" are always in danger of being re-appropriated. She writes that:

This is moreover the danger of every statement, every discussion, *about Speculum*. And, more generally speaking, of every discussion *about* the question of woman. For to speak *of* or *about* woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition (Irigaray 1985a, 78).

Insofar as Irigaray reads female mystics and hysterics as women who challenge or question, through their bodily excesses, the recuperative qualities of the masculinist system even as they are re-presented within it, her own reading of their behaviour may be said to be both "mystical" and "hysterical" too. It can be read as mystical in the sense that her focus is prophetic and forward-looking: Irigaray outlines the way in which she sees "the feminine" being produced in masculinist discourse in the present so that women may perform specific interventions in this system which will enable them to signify "otherwise," actively and in their own right. Her reading of the mystic and hysteric is also "hysterical" in the sense that the way in which she understands (feminine) intervention as a means of producing change depends upon a copying and displacement of the way "woman" functions in the masculinist system. This mimetic displacement (which mirrors the excessive bodily activity of the mystic and hysteric) is in Irigaray also body-based.

Of this mimetic strategy of displacement, Irigaray writes, continuing the quote from *This Sex Which Is Not One* above:

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and a meaning that are excessively univocal.... [Women] should not put it, then, in the form "What is woman?" but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side (Irigaray 1985a, 78).

While in the phallogocentric system "woman" reflects to man an ideal image of himself - she is his "other" - her body performs a mirroring function: "the female condition" is "nothing but a possibility that the philosopher may exploit for (self-)reflection.... the mirror of the subject" (Irigaray 1985a, 151). "Woman" can only question this mirroring function that she (as unsymbolised materiality or body) performs for man by exceeding her assigned role, which is to reflect, to mimic or copy. Irigaray describes this excess in the following way:

If she ["woman"] can play that role so well...it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this [mediating] function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her. Because her own "self" remains foreign to the whole staging. But she doubtless needs to reenact it in order to remember what that staging has probably metabolized so thoroughly

that *she* has forgotten it: her own sex. Her sex is heterogeneous to this whole economy of representation, but it is capable of interpreting that economy precisely because it has remained "outside".... Because it remains somewhere else than in that general repetition where it is taken up only as *the otherness of sameness* (Irigaray 1985a, 152).

Because what "woman" might be "remains foreign to the whole staging" of the masculinist symbolic system, "woman" can't avoid "reenacting" that which she is said to be in patriarchy. As said earlier, it is not a question of "elaborating a new theory." Rather, in Irigaray's view, women must explore the nature of the "excess" which they constitute in the phallogentric system, the "elsewhere" that women represent, in order to discover how this excess might challenge the system by returning to it or (re)appearing in its inevitable gaps and spaces.²³

This "elsewhere" or site of feminine excess is described by Irigaray as being bound up with "matter," "female pleasure," and also, significantly, "the transcendental" (Irigaray 1985a, 76-7). These three elements are combined in her proposal regarding how a "woman" might undo or challenge the passive mirroring function that she currently serves for man. The outlawed "matter" which women represent in the phallogentric order forms, as Irigaray has shown in *Speculum*, the material substance of the mirror by which man constitutes himself as proto-subject: "Re-semblance cannot do without red blood. Mother-matter-nature must go on forever nourishing speculation" (Irigaray 1985a, 77). But Irigaray suggests that this outlawed materiality (which constitutes "the female body" as passive and lacking) might attain its own sexual pleasure - also outlawed in phallogentrism - by an exploration of what a feminine divine might be: Irigaray uses "the divine" in her feminist revisionist sense to describe how the male as transcendental subject might be challenged and a "feminine pleasure" might simultaneously be expressed.

Irigaray explains how the mirroring function that women perform for men is masked in the phallogentric symbolic system by "God": God becomes the mirror which reflects man to himself as transcendent, separate subject, but at the expense of women. Consequently "that 'elsewhere' of female pleasure" that is masked by "mother-matter" (which is itself hidden), might be found, according to Irigaray, "in the place where it sustains ek-stasy in the transcendental. The place where it serves as security for a narcissism extrapolated into the

'God' of men" (Irigaray 1985a, 77). Thus the discovery of a distinctively female pleasure involves a questioning of "God" as the mask for masculine transcendence at the same time as it reenvisioned God as a means of representing this female pleasure. Irigaray's point is apparently that this God which mirrors man to himself through "woman" is a decidedly unstable construct and so possibly useful for the elaboration of a feminine specificity:

That "elsewhere" of feminine pleasure can be found only at the price of *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*. For this pleasure is not simply situated in a process of reflection or mimesis, nor on one side of this process or the other: neither on the near side, the empirical realm that is opaque to all language, nor on the far side, the self-sufficient infinite of the God of men. Instead, it refers all these categories and ruptures back to the necessities of the self-representation of phallic desire in discourse. A playful crossing, and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her "self-affection." Of her "god," we might say (Irigaray 1985a, 77).

Contrary to the view of Lacan and Lacanians that "crossing back through the mirror" which constitutes human subjectivity is always a regression (Whitford 1992, 181-2), Irigaray posits a connection between female pleasure and the divine which works to undo the singularity (phallogentrism) of the male proto-subject. Thus, she challenges the mirroring structures described by conventional psychoanalytic theory and by Lacan, arguing that not only is the physicality of the mother hidden by the mirror as figure for emergent subjectivity, but also that the mirror is supported by a proto-transcendental subject in the form of "God."

But the purpose of this argument in Irigaray is clearly directed towards women finding a way to accede to specific sexual representation, the possibility that female bodiliness might be differently signified and expressed. Revealing the materiality of the Christian God through bodily behaviours (like hysteria) that challenge the "excessive equation" of God and "woman" effectively transforms the (phallogentric) notion of vision. Whereas in phallogentric representation - and in traditional psychoanalytic accounts of the system's workings - "woman" is the object of the male gaze (Irigaray 1985b, 47-8),²⁴ Irigaray's suggestive challenge to this system through the idea of a god for women makes vision not only visionary (i.e., looking forward to the possibility of specifically female representation) but also something that women *do*: "crossing back through the mirror" means that the mirror - formed from the representation of women as passive materiality that is masked by God - also, with

the aid of a(n other, feminine) god, might *look back* (Irigaray 1985b, 135).

The female mystic, the hysteric, and the visionary feminist (Irigaray) all inhabit writing/speaking positions that are dictated by their cultures while their challenges to these constructions produce a visionary stance. All of these figures "perform" as artful dancers on the edges of culturally constructed subject positions, a situation which Elizabeth Castelli describes with regard to the female mystic as an experience of acting simultaneously as visionary and as object of vision/the male gaze (Castelli 1991, 148, 151n). While female mystics receive divine visions and are themselves - along with their visions - subjected to (male) scrutiny and judgement, their ability to envision potentially recasts their traditional relationship to the specular economy in which they are always-already the object of the phallic look.²⁵

Female mystics and hysterics can be seen as exemplifying the type of cultural boundary-crossing that Irigaray recommends. But to explore mystical and "hysterical" texts in relation to Irigaray can also shed light on her project by highlighting the different strategies employed by women in pre-twentieth-century times. What the mystic, hysteric, and the visionary feminist have in common is their production of an excessive discourse of the female body, that is, a language of the body which is unlike anything dictated by cultural norms. Irigaray's conflation of mystic and hysteric at the heart of *Speculum* re-presents a divine figure (Christ) as the means of articulating this excessive bodily speech. The mystic's embodying of Christ through imitation (hysterical mimesis, in Irigaray's terms) effectively spiritualises her body and enables it to be experienced and perceived in new and more empowering ways. This two-way function of the divine - its traditional use to hide the appropriation of femininity and yet its potential to be engaged in the transformation of "the female body" - may be seen as a kind of symbol for Irigaray's account of (hysterical) mimesis as mirror-crossing. The divine in the form of God/Christ, aligned with "the female body" whose appropriation by man it masks, both alters and is altered by female mimetic activity. It is thus revealed as a productively unstable symbolic category or space.

Hysterical mimesis, according to Irigaray, always produces a physical excess (Irigaray 1985a, 138). When this excess is connected with the divine then the body appears "spiritualised":

where the spiritual and transcendent have traditionally endorsed male selfhood at the expense of the female (body), in female (mystical) hysteria they can become a means of simultaneously returning God (and man) to flesh and re-figuring female physicality. This double act of deconstructing and exceeding the symbolic confines of female bodiliness through a mimetic overplaying of what is culturally expected may itself be seen as an attempt to "spiritualise" the female body, to grant it representation or "transcendence" (agency) such as men more readily achieve. In the final section of this chapter I will explore what this notion might mean in relation to Irigaray's work and her position as a "visionary feminist" concerned with the meaning of "the female body."

1. 4 **Spiritual materialism**

Now we have to spiritualize the biological, and that's a work in itself to be done, to spiritualize precisely those things that belong to the category of wildness, regression, sickness, symptoms, etc. Because the body is lacking spiritualization, it's lacking a language (Chawaf 1991, 30).

The body, in tandem with the divine, is an active locus of the central agendas of both Irigaray's particular feminism and late medieval female mysticism, and functions as a producer - strategically or consciously in Irigaray's case - of an excess of symbolic meanings in both. In considering this alignment between the two discourses I find myself returning continually to the extract from Spivak quoted earlier, in which a "productive crisis" is precipitated by the encounter between past and present, theory and practice. For Spivak, the sense of crisis which results from the transitional convergence of different discourses means that they "must lose their proper names," and the brief moment of connection which brings about this productive event constitutes the shifting site of the dynamic "relationship between theory and practice" (Spivak 1990b, 138). For feminism, certainly, the crisis-ridden place which marks the site of the relation between theory and practice is undoubtedly the female bodies of feminist theorists and practitioners themselves, just as in mysticism, the reception, transmission and enaction of a divine transfigurative message all take place through the culturally mediated "text" of the mystic's body.

Both mystics' and theorists' bodily texts are, according to a feminist psychoanalytic reading, further mediated by their necessary efforts at communicating their thoughts or insights in speech or writing which can only be understood via a phallogocentric linguistic system built on a repressed formulation of female bodiliness as disempowered and dangerous. However in a range of feminist approaches to the question of the body (not just psychoanalytic ones) the task of "rethinking the body" necessitates both physical and political activism and an awareness of theorising as a physically grounded and mediated event.

Both feminism and mysticism can be seen as utopian movements which are committed to an alternative vision of society and so mystify, in order to avoid foreclosure, the eventual outcomes of their statements and concerns in the present. In a recent article, Kathryn Bond Stockton explores several poststructuralist feminists' - including Irigaray's - use of deliberately mystifying, mystical and/or spiritual metaphors in their attempts to figure alternative conceptions of female bodiliness in a dual move which Stockton names a new kind of "spiritual materialism" or "real-bodies mysticism" (Stockton 1992, 123). Stockton pinpoints the philosophical place of my own fascination with both mysticism/spirituality and feminisms of the body in her discussion of a "real-bodies mysticism" by which "spiritual materialist" feminist thinkers reserve a discursive space in their writings for the material and as yet non-representable excess which constitutes female bodies. Stockton shows how the deliberate mystification of this discursive space - through the thinkers' "poeticizing" and "spiritualizing" of the figures of female bodies - claims the benefits of "transcendence" for extending the representational possibilities of physical materiality, again, through and for the bodies of women.

Stockton astutely observes that Irigaray's writings foreground the cultural constructedness of women's experiences of their bodies in order to suggest interventions into and revisionings of this experience capable of producing real change:

Irigaray's uniqueness lies, if anywhere, in the explicitness with which she spiritualizes - not just poeticizes - bodies in order to get to them. Pointedly mystical moves, which effectively locate lack and God between "woman"'s genital lips (no small moves, these), make possible her bold belief in women's bodies that escape the dominant constructions that would suture them. Irigaray, on some level, seems to understand, and to dramatize, what I am calling real-bodies mysticism. This is the

belief (not the certainty) that real bodies may exist on their own terms but that we can reach them only *by the same visionary means that separate us from their reality* (Stockton 1992, 124).

In a sense, then, Irigaray's poststructuralist, psychoanalytic vision of the artificiality of assumed "bodily experience" mirrors the medieval mystic's sense of the physical, mortal world as a poor shadow of that redeeming alternative, the afterlife, in which she necessarily believes.

Nonetheless, both mystics and feminists like Irigaray have persisted in their attempts to speak an as yet impossible discourse of the body and to recoup the symbolic excess of the divine to this end. While their aims are in many ways different, the textual processes they engage in are remarkably similar, not least because both discourses centre on symbolically ambiguous bodies. For mysticism, the central focus is the Incarnation of the suffering, bleeding, "feminised" Christ who is figured as simultaneously female and male and who, in the mystical dialogue, acts as model and love-object for the female mystic in her bodily excesses. For "spiritual-materialist" feminists, the body represents the incarnational possibilities of contemporary women, many of whom strive to express an autonomy of physical being in a world that is still largely male-defined. Both medieval female mystics and feminists such as Irigaray aim to communicate ideas which extend the perceptible and possible limits of their physical worlds. It is in the manifest desire to be able to represent a body and an experience which has not yet been, to effectively "speak as women," that the impulses of the two visionary movements conjoin.

In these attempts to "speak as women," dominant cultural models of bodily experience - that is, phallic ones which figure all bodies according to their reflection of a masculine-coded model of intactness and singularity - are challenged and destabilised. But both kinds of texts also reveal an urgent desire to establish a dialogue with their readers, and their mystifying qualities frequently serve as a cryptic kind of invitation to "likeminded" souls to unravel the mysteries of the text and thence to attempt to apply them in everyday life. My own experience of reading Irigaray has been not unlike that of reading more overtly "mystical" texts, in the sense that both kinds of texts make ordinary things (bodies) seem foreign and strange. In order to try and understand such enigmatic discourses, I must consent

to be mystified, to simultaneously delight in and experience frustration when encountering ideas that challenge conventional ways of knowing.²⁶

Lochrie's description of "the fissured texts and flesh which rupture the masculine integrity of the body in order to make rapture possible" in mysticism reveal that this rapture is always also *impossible* insofar as "the mystical text only *reproduces* [the] hiatus [of Christ's sacrificial death] in and through language" (Lochrie 1991a, 75. Emphasis added). In contrast to exegetical readings, the necessarily open-hearted or dialogical reading of the mystical text which the mystic desires (that is, a reading that is open to the possibility of mystical experience, the embodying of divine communication) challenges "the enclosure of occult truths in external language" (Lochrie 1991a, 75) through the reader's willingness to be physically moved to a spiritual encounter whose consequences cannot be foreseen. Lochrie notes that readers of (medieval) mystical texts "are expected to be able to read the body, not only the displaced mystical body but the body of Christ" in the text (Lochrie 1991a, 75). She argues that the act of seeking to read the body of both mystic and Christ in the mystical text - bodies which necessarily exceed written discourse and create a fissure in language - leads to the recognition of the possibility of mystical experience in the reader: "It is the fissure between flesh and word, utterance and desire which initiates the reader's rapture" (Lochrie 1991a, 75). As Lochrie goes on to state: "Mystical texts traverse this linguistic boundary when they stray across cultural limits assigned to the body" (Lochrie 1991a, 75). Likewise, Spivak observes that "language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries" (Spivak 1992a, 178), and thus where movements of productive change may be envisaged and begun.

The body, then, as it appears and disappears in the linguistic media of mystical and feminist theoretical texts, is constantly refigured through the readings produced by female subjects which reformulate "occult truths" as moveable boundaries for the constructions of alternative selves. It is this productive exchange between writers and readers which Margaret Whitford describes as essential to the impact of Irigaray's work. She claims that:

It is necessary to stress that the women's movement is what gives Irigaray's work its major contemporary significance, and that we cannot judge her with the eyes of posterity. We simply do not know how important she will turn out to have been, in

retrospect. There is no sense in which we can definitively arbitrate on priorities - there is too much to be done, everywhere, both in theory and in action. Trying to think the unthought is an enterprise of colossal difficulty and unpredictability. I want to argue that Irigaray *needs* her readers and interpreters, and that this need is inherent in her theory (Whitford 1991a, 5).²⁷

Whitford describes the relationship between Irigaray and her readers in terms uncannily like those which apply to the mystic and her audience, when she states her view that "the effort needed to read [Irigaray] may be part of the cost of change," and her desire

to reject the idea that immediate intelligibility is always and under every circumstance a desirable goal, since it does not allow for the possibility either of the reader changing over a period of time (and understanding at one moment what was obscure at another), or of being changed as a result of reading, not in an immediate flash but in a slow process of making connections (Whitford 1991a, 5).²⁸

This seems to me to be an insightful caution, particularly in view of the fact that Irigaray remains a practising psychoanalyst and so much of her work has a psychoanalytically-oriented base, in which processes involving remembering and reformulation of women's experiences are highlighted. Ultimately, I believe Irigaray's feminist pronouncements are of most use as ideas which provoke her readers and destabilise the conventional understandings of female embodiment and female experience that we inherit in "western" cultures. Her focus on divinity seems designed to produce the possibility of a symbolic shift for women in which present forms of embodiment might be represented and understood in more empowering ways.

Her focus, then, and mine in this study, is on the possible implications of a female divine for the future experiences of female subjects in female bodies. Irigaray is plainly interested in envisioning and articulating new possibilities for the regenerative transformation of individual women's bodily experiences in all their diversity and difference, and wants to rescue the divine - along with the female sex as it resides and is represented within patriarchy - from a position of near-total incorporation within phallogocentric systems and suggest its redeployment as a means of diverse empowering, as a divine which is not one, to this end.

In the following chapter I will focus mainly on *The Book of Margery Kempe* (whom I then read with and against Irigaray in Chapter Three) in order to explore possible meanings of "speaking as a woman" in the text of a late medieval, lay woman mystic. I hope that exploring

in some depth the specific cultural discourses of Kempe's time will help clarify what is at stake in Irigaray's intention to deconstruct divinity in the Christian tradition, as well as reveal where the (Christian) divine as a cultural construct is most open to redeployment and (reconstructive) change.

1. As Margaret Whitford writes, "a sensible transcendental is the condition of an ethics of sexual difference," that is, "an ethics which recognizes the subjectivity of each sex [and which] would have to address the symbolic division which allocates the material, corporeal, sensible, 'natural' to the feminine and the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, transcendental to the masculine" (Whitford 1991a, 149).
2. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray describes "woman" as "situated on the side of the abyss" which she figures as "perhaps, that other slope of the transcendence of God?" (Irigaray 1993b, 139). In another essay in the same volume she describes how God enables men to displace recognition of maternal origin onto a belief in the neutrality of language. God functions symbolically to underwrite the allegedly neutral metalanguage of men: "From the start, discourse would be for man that other of nature, that mother, that nature-womb, within which he lived, survived, and risked being lost.... His home within the universe.... Language...would dimly represent for man the all-powerful and ever-unknown mother as well as the transcendent God. *Both* (Irigaray 1993b, 113. See also 84-5). In an essay on Merleau-Ponty in *Ethics* Irigaray also asks whether God doesn't in fact function as the symbolic counterweight to immersion in intrauterine touching" (Irigaray 1993b, 162).
3. Margaret Whitford points out that this term is much stronger in French than in English, and connotes a primal sense of lostness such as "the state of being abandoned by God" (Whitford 1991a, 77). In "The Poverty of Psychoanalysis" Irigaray expresses women's "homelessness" in the symbolic order in the following way: "For themselves, women are nowhere, touching everything, but never in touch with each other, lost in the air, like ghosts. Dissolved, empty, abandoned, gone - gone away from themselves" (Lemoine-Luccioni 1976, 154; 1987, 129-30, cited in Irigaray 1991g, 91). And in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* she describes women's lostness as "the suffering and abandonment of the fusional state which fails to emerge as a subject" because "no space-time is available for experiencing it" (Irigaray 1993b, 70). Thus women remain in some sense aligned with the "*pre-objectal*" and the unsymbolised maternal relation because they cannot mediate their own drives in the symbolic so long as they represent the outer limits of subjectivity for men. See Whitford (1991a, 78-9, 125).
4. On the concept of the imaginary in Irigaray, see Whitford (1986, 3-5).
5. In *The Location of Culture* Homi K. Bhabha writes that: "If the jargon of our times - postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism - has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the 'post' to indicate sequentiality - *after*-feminism; or polarity - *anti*-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of practice and empowerment. For instance, if the interest in postmodernism is limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the 'grand narratives' of postenlightenment rationalism then, for all its intellectual excitement, it remains a profoundly parochial enterprise" (Bhabha 1994, 4). Irigaray would doubtless be in agreement with this statement, since in her view the purpose of feminist endeavour is to "transform the present" through a focus on the possibility

of a specifically female future, challenging in the process the phallogocentric master narratives which void the present through an insistent forward-projection and a blind belief in the necessity of "progress." See Irigaray (1986a, 15-16; 1993k).

6. Elizabeth Grosz counters this fear by explaining that "for Irigaray, not only is subjectivity structured with reference to the (symbolic) meaning of the body, but the body itself is the product and effect of symbolic inscriptions which produce it as a particular, socially appropriate type of body.... The body is thus the site of the intersection of psychical projections; and of social inscriptions. Understood in this way, it can no longer be considered pre- or acultural. Common feminist objections to theories utilising notions of the body - the charges of essentialism, naturalism and biologism - are not appropriate in this case" (Grosz 1989, xv).
7. This point is also well made by Fuss (1989, 1-21) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990a, 45).
8. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) builds on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas in this regard, and is discussed by Grosz in "The Body of Signification" (1990b). The work of Alphonso Lingis (1983) also deals with similar issues and is likewise treated by Grosz in "Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal" (1990c, 62-74).
9. By "excess of transcendence" I mean the materiality of the (male) subject which is symbolically repressed in and by the setting up of a masculine God as guarantor of a patriarchal social system. Peter de Bolla also describes, from a somewhat different theoretical perspective, the unique propensity of what he names "the discourse of the sublime" to "produce to excess" as it attempts to formulate commentary on the "excessive experience" of the divine (de Bolla 1989, 12).
10. See such standard Gospel commands as that from Mark 12: 28-31 (*The Jerusalem Bible* 1974) concerning the greatest and second greatest of all divine commandments: "First...Israel...you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength," and "second.... You must love your neighbour as yourself." See also the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: 31-46, which has Christ claiming, on the day of judgement, that those who gave food, clothing shelter and compassion to the needy on earth did this to him and will be saved, whereas those who neglected to do these things will endure damnation. And Luke 17: 20-1: "The coming of the kingdom of God does not admit of observation.... For, you must know, the kingdom of God is among you." Irigaray also makes this point about the bodily focus of Christ's teaching, claiming that, in the gospels, "the course of Jesus's life appears close to the teachings of certain Indian sages, the Buddha, for example," in that "spiritual becoming and corporeal becoming are inseparable. Every stage in the life of Christ is noted and described in the Gospels as an event of the body.... His life cannot be reduced to speeches...in which the body is lost to lessons in tact" (Irigaray 1989a, 65).
11. Lochrie states with regard to positive or affective Christian mysticism, which privileges the human emotions and senses as the means of devotion to and communication with the divine: "Whether the tokens are inscribed outwardly on the

mystic's body or inwardly on her heart and mind, the activity of meditation and particularly remembrance produces the physical effects of [Christ's] Passion image, rendering the mystic's body itself a kind of mnemonic of that suffering. From meditation on images comes the translation of the mystic's own body into image of suffering and yet another sign of remembrance" (Lochrie 1991a, 35). Bynum notes that women's mysticism privileges the body profoundly: "Women regularly speak of tasting God, of kissing Him deeply, of going into His heart or entrails, of being covered by His blood. Their descriptions of themselves or of other women often, from a modern point of view, hopelessly blur the line between spiritual or psychological, on the one hand, or bodily or even sexual, on the other" (Bynum 1989, 168). Lochrie also points out that, "while mystical scholars endeavor to distinguish between 'spiritual' and 'literal,' or 'physical,' mystical terminology, the integrity of these fields, like that of the body, sometimes breaks down" (Lochrie 1991a, 70). Examples of scholars who reveal this kind of somatophobia are Riehle (1981) and Stargadt (1985).

12. Stargadt gives some examples of this behaviour, though she professes to find it "embarrassing" (Stargadt (1985, 299-300). See also Bynum (1986, 274; 1989, 165); Lawton (1992, 113); Weissman (1982, 217).
13. These first began on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in about 1413, near the middle of Kempe's life, and continued frequently thereafter.
14. As I have attempted to show elsewhere (Bremner 1992) and will elaborate in Chapter Four, critical anxieties such as those shown by an earlier generation of Kempe scholars who pronounced Kempe's claim to mystical validity misplaced echo those shown by clerics in Kempe's *Book*. Where the medieval clerics betray their discomfort with the mutable version of self and divine which the mystic represents and through which she claims authority, several twentieth-century critics also reflect an investment in the concept of "the self" as a stable entity which mimics a divine being that is likewise an unquestionable given.
15. It seems to me that this fundamental instability in (female) mystical texts may be another reason for the near-absence of critical commentary on mystical discourse *as such* and the general reluctance to grant mystical texts a status of their own which Lochrie notes in reference to *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Lochrie 1991a, 59-62). Lochrie points out that there is a tendency in medieval scholarship to analyse mystical texts according to the same criteria as more consciously "literary" ones, and that such conventional studies tend towards "a taxonomy of mystical devotion without much attention to mysticism as a discourse." In Kempe's case, for example, this has led to a "collapsing of hagiographic and mystical discourses" which has led many scholars "to focus only on her life" (Lochrie 1991a, 59). Lochrie cites de Certeau (1986; 1992) as the main exception to this rule with regard to mysticism generally. See also Bosse (1979, 9-10); Aers (1988, 74). This insistent focus on the personal and tendency to categorise personalities may well have arisen, in my view, from the prominence of women in medieval mystical texts, which has in the past provoked critical anxiety among medieval scholars. See Underhill (1936, cited in Beckwith 1993); Knowles (1955, 222-3); Riehle (1981, 118).

16. To mention only some examples of this work, see the essays included in the following collections: Aers (1986); Finke and Shichtman (1987); Wasserman and Roney (1989); Frantzen (1991); Brownlee et al (1991); McEntire (1992); Lomperis and Stanbury (1993). For examples of individual books, see: Kristeva (1987); Aers (1988); Noakes (1988); Leupin (1989); Burns (1993). See also the recent (1992) Special Issue of *Exemplaria* 4 (1) (Spring) on Feminisms, Theory, and Medieval and Renaissance Texts. For work specifically on mysticism, see Finke (1988); Lochrie (1988; 1991a); Ash (1990); Antonopoulos (1991).
17. Barbara Nolan, for example, begins a review of Aers' *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination in Speculum* with the statement that the book is "severely limited by an anachronistic thesis" (Nolan 1983, 139), and goes on to reveal her investment in supposedly "objective," scholarly historical analysis by damning Aers' readings as "partial"; "polemical"; "eccentric"; and "showing political bias." Nolan's own inevitable partialities are glossed over through the assumption of a critical community's unproblematical access to the past. She writes: "To discover each poet's voice we must share...their grounding in the literary, artistic, intellectual, and religious idiom of their time," and claims that, in Aers' case, "a lack of historical understanding leads to...distortions." Elton Higgs produces a similar judgement upon the same work. While he censures Aers' book for revealing "the intrusion of the author's personal biases" he suggests that it should instead "countenance the common assumptions of the age of Langland and Chaucer" (Higgs 1981, 121). Both Nolan and Higgs fail to address the difficulties involved in pursuing legitimate historical knowledge and the "distortions" "we" are thereby unwittingly compelled to produce.
18. This is not always the case, of course. I am describing a tendency to reject as "political" certain readings of texts from the past which implies that a non-political reading is possible. This topic is well treated by Belsey (1983) and Eagleton (1983, 194-217). Beckwith, for example, although she rejects psychoanalytic theory as a suitable tool for reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Beckwith 1986, 41), provides an impressive account of the construction of subjectivity in Kempe's time and place, one which does not claim to be non-politically engaged (Beckwith 1986; 1992; 1993, 78-111).
19. Similarly, Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson note the importance of affirming ways in which "engagement with the literature of the past is of value for feminist critical practice," and quote Gillian Beer thus: "The encounter with the otherness of earlier literature can allow us to recognise and challenge our own assumptions, and those of the society in which we live.... The study of past writing within the conditions of its production disturbs that autocratic emphasis on the self and the present as if they were stable entities'" (Beer 1989, 67, qtd. in Evans and Johnson 1991, 172). And Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that "historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the 'universality' of gendered oppression and struggles" in contemporary feminist theory (Mohanty 1992, 75). Finally, Griselda Pollock affirms "the necessity to grasp persons as living, specific configurations of historical placement around deeply and mutually interactive categorizations - race, class, gender - which are never discrete totalities, but complex formations operative as much at the level of psychic as of socio-economic

construction" in both the present and the past (Pollock 1992, 164).

20. The 1986 English version of "Divine Women" (translated by Stephen Muecke) reads: "don't let any parts of us be amputated that could be expansive for us" (Irigaray 1986b, 9, qtd. in Gross 1986, 17).
21. Hope Phyllis Weissman is one of a growing number of critics of Kempe's *Book* to have observed that "to diagnose [Kempe's] case as 'hysteria' need not be to trivialize her significance or reduce her *Book's* value as cultural testimony. On the contrary, social historians have become increasingly aware that the pervasive hysteria of nineteenth-century women cannot be regarded merely as a symptom of individual maladjustments; it was also symptomatic of repressive social and sexual attitudes and of rigidly defined sex roles" (Weissman 1982, 201-2). See also Partner (1991, 63-5); Johnson (1992); Wilson (1992); Long (1994).
22. The medieval female lay mystic had also to deny her female sexuality (which in many cases constituted prior sexual experience) in order to achieve mystical authority and the support of the Church, and reinscribe it into her love-relationship with Christ, just as the hysteric's symptoms are, in a feminist reading, the result of a culturally imposed repression of desire.
23. In the essay "Sexual Difference" Irigaray states her view that women should explore what is left out of masculinist cultural constructions as this lack pertains to the feminine: "I search for myself among those elements which have been assimilated. But I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of disassimilation, and be reborn from traces of culture, works already produced by the other. I should search for the things they contain and do not contain, and examine what has and has not given rise to them, what are and are not their conditions. Woman ought to rediscover herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, rather than through the work itself or its genealogy" (Irigaray 1991a, 168-9).
24. In Irigaray's critique of phallogentric culture, a libidinal economy - a structure or dynamics of desire - based on a morphology of the masculine body is bound up with "an age-old oculo-centrism" or privileging of the visual over the other senses (Irigaray 1978, 50; 1985b, 48; 1993b, 175). As a result, "the contract, the collusion, between *one* sex/organ [the penis] and the victory won by visual dominance...leaves woman with her sexual void, with an 'actual castration' carried out in actual fact" (Irigaray 1985b, 48). Irigaray notes that "psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality" endorses a phallic model of sexuality which "shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, *visibility*...and erection (Irigaray 1985a, 86. Emphasis added). Angela Grooten also treats this issue with regard to Freud and Lacan (Grooten 1991).
25. Castelli describes the situation of a fifth-century saint named Synclitica who, "at the end of her life...is described not only as the recipient of visions but as having become 'as if one herself,' as though her elevated status on the brink of death recreates her relationship to the specular positions" (Castelli 1991, 148). The elevated

status of this particular female saint in early Christianity may be an example of "crossing back through the mirror" in the sense of a connection with the divine which is acknowledged by the Church as special and yet also transforms the ways in which women were understood through Christian discourse as excessive to (and passive within) that system (see Chapter Two).

26. The "foreignness" of reading Irigaray has also, of course, to do with the fact that I initially read her work in English translation in a New Zealand university (reading and discussion group) context, where "French" theoretical ideas can generally be said to have been under suspicion, a suspicion which at the time I shared. I then laboured my way through the French as an adjunct to the more proficient, published translations, but with the sense that in the eyes of many New Zealand feminists the whole enterprise (reading Irigaray and the efforts required to gain understanding) was something of a worthless task. The persistence of an "anti-theory" camp in New Zealand feminism (Jones and Guy 1992), combined with my own contrariness in relation to identity groups of any kind has no doubt shaped my particular experience of reading Irigaray as a kind of "initiation" to special status.
27. Teresa Brennan provides another (also psychoanalytically inspired) comment on "trying to think the unthought" in the preface to her book *History After Lacan*, where she describes "the propositional mode" in (critical) writing as a style more tolerated in "the French academic world" than outside it, in England, for example, where "the secondary mode" consisting of "research, exegeses, and critiques" is more the norm. Brennan articulates these two modes compellingly in psychoanalytic terms: "A certain kind of confidence is as much a symptom of the ego's era as the diffident dependence on the other's social approval. The ego can be original, but if the ego alone governs writing, it will demand that the reader do all the work required to understand what it writes. Either the ego trusts that the other's (like the mother's) main aim in life is to understand it, or the ego believes in and defers to an ideal other with whom it identifies as an imaginary part of itself.... The question of course is how to combine the propositional and secondary modes and thus transcend them. To combine them is to regard yet disregard the other, to regard the right to understand, and thus communicate, to disregard the desire for recognition, and thus risk going beyond the fixed points governing social approval at the time of writing. It is to balance confidence and context, the movement of ideas and fixed points. And that can only be done if one gives out more than one takes in" (Brennan 1994, xii-xiii). While Brennan is writing in this context about (academic) writing, her statements can also, I think, be applied to the process of reading Irigaray. Both Brennan's and Whitford's terms have spiritual or religious overtones and argue for a willing suspension of the desire for comforting forms of knowledge, a kind of "charitable" reading (or writing) which is prepared to risk a stable sense of self in the interest of (future) discovery.
28. Trinh T. Minh-ha also describes the benefits of such a process of reading in relation to pedagogy, in terms which likewise connote a "mystical" sense of actively awaiting new kinds of knowledge or inspiration. She says that "students often find it very difficult to assume freedom; when you give them freedom they experience it as chaos. It is very hard for many of them to accept that we can be confused together

and because of that strain of being confused together, we can move somewhere else, with and beyond the place in which we have been confined. The difficulty lies in accepting that this moment of so-called confusion, the moment of blankness and of emptiness through which one necessarily passes in order to have insight. In other words confusion can be a mode of receptivity if one does not simply try to bypass it" (Trinh 1994, 20).

CHAPTER TWO
 "SPEAKING THE BODY": MEDIEVAL IDEOLOGIES AND
THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher...for I am a woman, ignorant, weak, and frail.... But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the Goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is his will that it be known? (Julian of Norwich 1978, qtd. in Petroff 1986, 26-7)

"God Almighty does not forbid...that we should speak of him" (Kempe 1988, 164).

2. 1 **Conflicting Voices: Women speaking/speaking of "woman"**

So an old monk, who had been treasurer to the Queen when he was in secular clothes, a powerful man and greatly feared by many people, took her by the hand saying to her, "What can you say of God?"

"Sir," she said, "I will both speak of him and hear of him," repeating to the monk a story from scripture (Kempe 1988, 63).

The Book of Margery Kempe is the story of the life and spiritual experiences of Margery Kempe (c.1373-c.1438), an English woman born in the prospering East Anglian town of King's Lynn (then Bishop's Lynn), following her dramatic spiritual conversion in middle age. The *Book* is a retrospective account of Kempe's life as a visionary, written with the help of male scribes since the mystic herself is thought not to have been able to read or write.¹ As such it is a record of Kempe's speaking about or dictating to supportive clerics the events of her extremely active and by no means trouble-free existence.

At the beginning of her illuminating study of Kempe's *Book*, Karma Lochrie quotes the fifteenth-century Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, on the dangers of women's speech, a quotation which I would like to reproduce here. In *De probatione spiritum* (1415), a work which Gerson wrote in response to the declarations of female mystics, he asserts:

There is hardly any other calamity more apt to do harm or that is more incurable

than the unbridled speech of women. If its only consequence were the immense loss of time, this would already be sufficient for the devil. But you must know that *there is something else to it*: the insatiable itch to see and to speak, not to mention...the itch to touch (Gerson 1960-, 177, compare art. 11, qtd. in Obrist 1984, 236, qtd. in Lochrie 1991a, 1. Emphasis added).

As Lochrie observes, Gerson connects women's "unbridled speech" with the "something else" which constitutes "incurable" female bodily excess. Gerson's statement is, in fact, a denial of women's right to teach, preach and prophesy on the basis that, in women, to speak at all is to speak a female body. And in the middle ages this body is figured as a place of disruption and danger.

Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*, two things are most evident and have been remarked by critics: the centrality of Kempe's voice - what Barry Windeatt calls "her strengths as a strikingly individual and vivid talker and rememberer" (Windeatt 1988, 24; Lawton 1992, 102) - and the importance of the physical body in her accounts of everyday events and mystical engagements, what Sarah Beckwith has described as "a very material mysticism" (Beckwith 1986). Thus Gerson's pronouncement is by no means irrelevant to Kempe's life and text. However, as a dictated account of Kempe's celebration of her love for Christ in unashamedly physical terms, the written result of an unusual and courageous life already lived, the *Book* is a challenge to the male view that the corporeal qualities of women's speech annul its purpose. In fact, I consider Kempe's *Book* to be deeply subversive of medieval notions of the unreliable and thoroughly sexualised speech of women, not least because Kempe's sexuality is reformulated by her taking Christ as her (mystical) lover in place of her husband after her conversion, an act which gives her voice new authority.²

In this chapter I examine the ideological construction of female bodiliness in England in the late middle ages, as it is represented in four particular types of discourse, and discuss *The Book of Margery Kempe* in relation to these. The four discourses are medieval sermons (2. 1. 1); accusations of heresy (2. 1. 2); the European tradition of saints' or holy women's *lives* (2. 1. 3); and (broadening the focus of enquiry somewhat) the Virgin Mary and the "feminised" Christ as central and inspirational figures in medieval popular devotion (2. 2). In all of these discourses, women's bodies are in one way or another central, and female sexuality and female desire become bound up with the representation of the divine. My

analysis of the first three discourses will consider how they represent the topic of women's speech and how they reflect, to varying degrees, conventional medieval understandings of female bodiliness which make women's speech suspect. For any medieval woman who desired to assert herself through public speech or writing, these attitudes served to undermine her attempts to re-present herself as a speaking being. However, late medieval depictions of the feminised Christ and his grief-stricken Mother, the Virgin Mary, enabled increasing numbers of lay, visionary women to find an authorised voice through their engagement with holy figures in imagined scenes of worship according to the popular notion of *imitatio Christi*, and through recording these encounters in written form. My attention to this fourth, more generally-operative discourse, will consider how it allows for a kind of subversion of Christian doctrine with regard to the female body by mystical women.

As a married, lay woman mystic, Margery Kempe was something of an anomaly in fifteenth-century England. While uncloistered lay women living both singly and in groups were not uncommon in continental areas (i.e., Germany and the Low Countries) in the later middle ages, England produced a stronger tradition of anchoresses and anchorites (individual, enclosed female and male religious), especially in the northeast, where the mystic spent much of her life (Clay 1914, cited in Atkinson 1983, 183; Hughes 1988, 355).³ The large number of pilgrimages Kempe undertook; her constant visiting and discussions with religious authorities in England and abroad; her public proclamations and especially her notorious weeping and wailing in public when recalling Christ's sorrows made her stand out in a society where women who felt the call to the religious life were encouraged to shut themselves away in silence.

Kempe's family background may shed some light on the radical path she later chose. Although nothing is known of her mother's life, her father was perhaps the most important person in Lynn in the late fourteenth century (Goodman 1978, 351). As Clarissa Atkinson notes, he was five times mayor of the town, the leader of a powerful merchant guild, "six times Member of Parliament, coroner, and Justice of the Peace" (Atkinson 1983, 15). Margery Kempe was thus born a member of the rising middle-class (Delany 1975, 107; Aers 1988, 73). At the age of about twenty she married John Kempe, also a powerful citizen of Lynn although a less notable figure than her father. Her marriage was, then, a step down in status, and her

own reflections on her failure to play the part of the "good wife" (Kempe 1988, 43-4; Goodman 1978, 353) imply some disillusionment with her new role. It seems probable that, as a medieval woman from a family of reasonably high social expectations, Kempe was unable to find a suitable outlet for her ambitions until she created her own as a mystic and follower of Christ.⁴

Kempe's becoming a "professional" lay religious enabled her to speak and "write" (at least via dictation), claiming the authority of Christ through her relationship of special devotion to him. But in order to achieve this singular status she had to negotiate with her husband John her right to "own" her own body, before she could attempt to escape the limitations on women's speech implied in Gerson's proclamation through her visionary role. Chapter 11 of the *Book* documents an encounter between Kempe and her husband which marks a turning point in this process of negotiation and exemplifies the earthiness or prominence of physicality in the *Book's* narrative style. This aspect of the text arises from Kempe's status and experience as a merchant wife, which is translated into the *Book* in the form of domestic imagery and concerns (e.g., Kempe 1988, 127, 236). I will use the passage from Chapter 11 to introduce the topic of medieval attitudes to women's speech and my discussion of Kempe's challenges to this construction to follow.

The extract begins thus, in familiar story-telling fashion:

It happened one Friday - Midsummer Eve, in very hot weather - as this creature⁵ was coming from York carrying a bottle of beer in her hand and her husband a cake tucked inside his clothes against his chest - that her husband asked his wife this question: "Margery, if there came a man with a sword who would strike off my head unless I made love with you as I used to do before, tell me on your conscience - for you say you will not lie - whether you would allow my head to be cut off, or else allow me to make love with you again, as I did at one time?" (Kempe 1988, 58)

John Kempe's loaded question has arisen from the context of his wife's recent entry into "the way of everlasting life" (Kempe 1988, 45) in special devotion to Christ, which has involved her in various bodily privations in penance for former sins, sexual relations with her husband among them, as well as an increase in spiritual activities. Kempe's desire to discontinue sexual relations with her husband has met with resistance before this point, despite her petitions, to both God and man, to be allowed to "live chaste."

What seems most striking to a modern reader about the representation of both husband and wife in the above piece is the centrality of the bodies whose apposite desires are at issue. The opening scene is a good example of the wealth of concrete, physical imagery which is a pervasive feature of the entire chapter and, indeed, the *Book* in general. The text focuses directly on the appetites of Kempe and her husband as we are told of the hot weather on the road from York, the bottle of beer in Kempe's hand and the cake against John's chest, which is followed by John Kempe's hypothetical question of lovemaking and decapitation - sex and death. The debates over issues of bodily control described here by Kempe are crucial to her becoming a mystic at all and so, in turn, an "author." The passage thus symbolises the difficult position Kempe had to negotiate in the construction of the *Book* between maintaining the endorsement of a priestly scribe (because her female body was seen as denying her authoritative speech) and telling the story of her revelations which involve (imagined) bodily encounters with Christ. In the chapter, Kempe wrangles with her husband over who - God or John - should have right of access to her body. The symbolism of body-bargaining in which the female body - Kempe's - is figured as an exchange-object between two subjects who are effectively male, underscores the importance for Kempe of being able to intervene in the exchange process in a bodily manner: first to claim her body back from her husband and dedicate it to God, and thence to record her bodily activities in book form. Kempe's recording her life and revelations, thereby putting her clerically endorsed words into public circulation, is the tangible sign that she has managed to remove herself from - or at least reconstitute herself within - the patriarchal economy of female commodity exchange.

John Kempe's inquiry is revealed to have some basis when his wife, answering that she would rather see John killed than that the couple should "turn back to...uncleanness" (Kempe 1988, 58), asks why he hasn't insisted on making love to her recently as he did before. John replies that an intense fear, plainly of supernatural origin, has stopped him from doing so, which Kempe cites as evidence of her prophecy, three years earlier, that her husband (or at least his desire for sex) "would suddenly be slain" (Kempe 1988, 58). However, Kempe's answer that she would rather see her husband killed than resume sexual activity elicits a typical response: "You are no good wife" (Kempe 1988, 58).

In the middle ages a lay woman such as Kempe, born the legal property of her father, was

transferred to the ownership (if not of the Church) of another man through marriage, and was expected to perform the role of "good wife" - which included availability for sexual activity when desired by her husband, and motherhood - as her spiritual vocation (Erickson 1976, 204; Labarge 1986, 27).⁶ The wife's role as a sexual possession is made clear in the popular medieval treatise, *Speculum Christiani*, which states that, although:

fleshly knowledge between husband and wife is sinful and deadly when it is the result of the fleshly lust of lechery...whomsoever has a lawful wife...[should] make use of her lawfully at appropriate times, that they may receive the blessing of our Lord on bringing forth the fruit of children (*Speculum Christiani* 1933, 28-30. My translation).

Marriage was in fact the least prestigious of three main vocational options for medieval women, in terms of the spiritual literature of the time. The thirteenth-century treatise of advice to young virgins, *Hali Meidhad*, sets this out quite plainly:

Of these three states - virginity and widowhood, and marriage is the third - you can tell by the degrees of their bliss which one is superior to the others, and by how much. For marriage has its reward thirtyfold in heaven; widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity, with a hundredfold, surpasses both. See then from this, whoever descends from her virginity into marriage, by how many degrees she falls downwards (*Hali Meidhad* 1990, 20-1).⁷

The argument which has arisen between Kempe and her husband and is treated in this chapter of the *Book* is the result of Kempe's desire to cross the boundaries which demarcated one form of patriarchal containment of female sexuality - marriage - from another - the life of a "professional" religious - in the middle ages. Virginity was the normal requirement for medieval women who desired to pursue a religious life, a state which was figured in the literature of advice to intending nuns as "an *integritas* of all the senses" which led to "bodily closure and silence (Lochrie 1991b, 126).⁸ Whether she married a man or was wedded to the Church, a woman's seductive speech and sexuality, viewed by theologians and preachers as readily aligned with the devil (like that of her mythical foremother Eve (Phillips 1984)), made her suspect as a vehicle of divine grace. Hence women were directed towards ways of life which confined them physically and placed strictures on their speech through the working out of what Lochrie calls the doctrine of the enclosed female body (Lochrie 1991b, 124). If a

woman chose not to pursue the path of the enclosed religious life, she was generally expected to direct her energies towards her husband, household and children. Kempe had been married to her husband for twenty years at the time at which the above scene took place (Windeatt 1988, 11), but her desire to pursue a spiritual life of independent devotion to Christ conflicted with her prior marital experience. Her choice to live as a pilgrim and mystic, a vocation traditionally reserved for women who were virgins in the middle ages, challenged the strict channelling of female speech and sexuality on which the suppression of women in patriarchal societies depends.

To return to Kempe and her husband on the Friday, Midsummer Eve, on which their dispute occurs. Faced with his wife's determination to continue in chastity, John Kempe attempts to strike a bargain with her, which involves the couple sleeping in the same bed, Kempe paying his debts before she goes on pilgrimage, and breaking her regular Friday practice of fasting from food and drink (Kempe 1988, 59). The importance to Kempe of achieving control over what is required of her body in the bargain is revealed by her answer, in which she states her flat refusal to break her fast "as long as [she] live[s]" (Kempe 1988, 59), although in response, John threatens to have sex with her again. At this point Kempe begs to be allowed some time for prayer, and, kneeling down beside the road, articulates a plea to God which requests knowledge of how to weigh up the detriment of the demands which are being made upon her physical being. "Lord God," she says,

"you know what sorrow I have had to be chaste for you in my body all these three years, and now I might have my will and I dare not, for love of you. For if I were to break that custom of fasting from meat and drink on Fridays which you commanded me, I should now have my desire" (Kempe 1988, 59).

The fasting in obedience to God is a sign of the mystic's reserving her body for him, of which chastity is the most central means. Thus giving up either of these forms of devotion threatens to immure Kempe once more in the life of fleshly "uncleanness" which, since her conversion, has caused her such pain and remorse. In answer to her prayer, Christ tells Kempe to ask her husband once more for her wish, which he says will be granted as she is empowered by that very fleshly abstinence which she requires. Christ also releases her from the need to fast, the purpose of which, he states, will now be achieved (Kempe 1988, 59-60). Kempe then makes with her husband the following agreement:

"Sir, if you please, you shall grant me my desire, and you shall have your desire. Grant me that you will not come into my bed, and I grant you that I will pay your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And I make my body free to God, so that you never make any claim on me requesting any conjugal debt after this day as long as you live - and I shall eat and drink on Fridays at your bidding" (Kempe 1988, 60).

Thus Kempe uses her financial assets⁹ to "buy back" her body which has been under her husband's control since her marriage (Delany 1975, 111-12). It is significant that this bargain is struck before the mystic leaves on her Jerusalem pilgrimage, as on this journey she dramatically embodies the purpose of her vocation, which is to travel both inside and outside her country, proclaiming Christ's Gospel and encouraging his followers. It is also on this journey that she receives the gift of tears in identification with her Saviour's sorrows which is to become her spiritual trademark and is, as I will later explain, a sign of the complexities of the "bodily transformations" which her Passion *imitatio* enacts. A bodily transformation of a kind has, in fact, already been effected by the monetary exchange which has taken place between Kempe and her husband in Chapter 11. By means of this transaction Kempe accedes to the status, if not of virgin, at least of widow, in terms of the role in life she is henceforth freed to take up (Fienberg 1989, 139).¹⁰ Thus the cultural meaning of her bodiliness changes on the striking of the marital bargain and she is able to claim her body as her own insofar as she may now dedicate it wholly to Christ.¹¹

An important part of Kempe's quest for spiritual sustenance in her new life involved listening to sermons, both in her local parish and in places she passed through on her travels. Popular medieval sermons, however, revealed considerable anxiety about women's speech and sexuality, focusing frequently on the perceived need for them to be enclosed in anchorhold or home. Kempe's efforts to "speak as a woman" in ways other than those suggested by the negative construction of women in medieval theology appear in her text, then, in sometimes confrontational interaction with ideas about the female body propagated in sermons. Kempe's *Book* itself contains sermon-like anecdotes, evidence of the great number of sermons the mystic listened to in her lifetime and which helped construct and focus her special devotion to her Saviour. But it also contains what official, popular medieval sermons excluded: a record of the difficulties and anguish involved in carving out an identity which exceeded the categories of legitimate selfhood prescribed by the Church for women.

2. 1. 1 Popular preaching: The appropriation of female voices

Sermons were one of the main devotional discourses which prescribed ideologies of gender through the teachings of the medieval Church to lay people like Kempe. An increase in control over the "private lives" of individuals by the Church was evidenced by the Fourteenth Lateran Council's decree of 1215 enjoining yearly confession by all Christians to their parish priest (Barratt 1984, 413). As de Certeau states, this action had the effect of "introduc[ing] Church legitimacy into the orderly or haphazard course of private experience" (de Certeau 1992, 88). The Church's aim of regulating the physical behaviour of lay people was maintained by the public, educative discourse of sermons - and often by *exempla* (exemplary tales) presented therein (Heffernan 1984)¹² - and the private discourse of confession, in which believers spoke about their (sexual) sins in officially prescribed ways. Jacquart and Thomasset note that the penitentials, compiled for use by parish priests in the confessional situation, "may be considered as the earliest systematic exploration of the many manifestations of sexual desire" in "western" culture (Jacquart and Thomasset 1988, 194). Thus the Church's intervention into the lives of the laity was enacted through discourse about bodily activities in the domestic sphere which then became the basis of public pronouncement in sermons. De Certeau states that:

Verbal exchanges in the confessionals or parlors...furnished the religious "directors" with material from which to construct a literature of edifying "lives" or practical "exercises." Far from subverting ecclesiastical authority, this massively distributed material permitted the authorities to reconquer and "inform" the Christian people. The "privatization" of discourse, analogous to the personalizing of products in our present-day economy, had a social function: it *articulated privacy within Church language*. Hence, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the pastoral resorts to such privatization (de Certeau 1992, 88. See also Rubin 1992a, 48-53).

Sermons were a central means of education of the laity as to the required conduct of their daily lives (Atkinson 1983, 115). The Church's concern with the boundaries of the private lives of the laity focused, in a number of ways, upon the bodies and sexuality of women, which had long served as figures for the disruptive influence of all that was outside Christian orthodoxy both in the individual lives of believers and in the "mystical body" which constituted Christ's Church.

Peter Brown observes that, in early Christianity, the notion of "the flesh" as a disruptive force for evil within the fallen human person "suffused the body with disturbing associations: somehow, as 'flesh,' the body's weaknesses and temptations echoed a state of helplessness, even of rebellion against God, that was larger than the body itself" (Brown 1988, 48). Moreover, the individual believer's body was frequently symbolically aligned with the Christian body of the Church.¹³ Bynum and Lochrie have further noted that, in medieval theological writings, the flesh was figured as female (Bynum 1989, 179-97; Lochrie 1991b, 120-5). Hence, women came to represent the "gap" or "influx" of earthly passions between the human will and God's, all the possibilities of sin aroused by human disobedience. They were identified with "breaches in boundaries," as Bynum puts it; with extreme vulnerability, passivity, and physical excess (Bynum 1989, 186). Since women became the figures for that which exceeded the control of the human person in pursuit of the will of God, as well as the body politic of the medieval Church, they represented the site of severe anxieties about the forces of evil within both individual Christians and the Church as a whole.¹⁴ This attitude to female sexuality helps to explain some of the concern with curtailing the speech and movement of women revealed in sermons as well as in other devotional literature of the middle ages (Lochrie 1991b).

A further explanation for the masculine desire to "contain" women which was evident in sermons lies in the fact that the position of women in the emergent capitalist economy of fifteenth-century England was changing and therefore the subject of specific anxieties regarding their status in the home and in the wider culture. Many of these anxieties are played out in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Delany 1975; Aers 1988, 86-7), as we shall see. The role of the middle-class wife was increasingly becoming that of a domestic asset to her husband, and her own opportunities for professional self-actualisation seemed to be diminishing (Howell 1986, 181). Judith Bennett has recently and compellingly questioned the notion of a "great and negative transition for women" over the late-medieval to early-modern period (1300-1700) (Bennett 1992). However, whether the late middle ages was a period of *decline* in women's working status or not, it remains true to say that women in this era were essential to the patriarchal economy but were largely represented as the domestic property of men (Bennett 1992).

As Peter Stallybrass notes, with reference to the society which arose as a result of the period's changes: "In early modern England, 'woman' was property not only in legal discourse but also in economic and political discourse. Economically, she is the fenced-in enclosure of the landlord, her father, or husband" (Stallybrass 1986, 127). Aers, citing Sylvia Thrupp, states that: "the primary role of the merchant-class wife was to be 'amenable to male authority' and useful in the family unit under the husband's rule" (Thrupp 1962, 169-74, cited in Aers 1988, 87). The negation of women's domestic productivity through their recuperation as property or assets of their male overseers is reflected in the Church's interest in curtailing female speech, evidenced in many sermons. Stallybrass points out that, in early "western" capitalist cultures:

the surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other.... Silence, the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to woman's enclosure within the house (Stallybrass 1986, 126-7).

In their concern with the private lives of individuals, medieval sermons revealed a strong desire to limit women's activities to the domestic sphere and to curb their speech. Hence, the physically active life Kempe depicts in her *Book* - and the *Book* itself, as a spiritual "autobiography" and record of Kempe's speech - is in conflict with a major source of devotional material concerning the life and Passion of the Saviour to whom she is dedicated, Christ. "Woman...is the confusion of Man, an insatiable beast, a continuous anxiety, an incessant warfare, a daily ruin, a house of tempest, a hindrance to devotion," asserts the author of the *Speculum Laicorum*, an encyclopedia of sermons and *exempla* (*Speculum Laicorum* 1914, qtd. in Owst 1961, 377-8),¹⁵ asserting these "truths" in the manner of proverb and clearly reflecting the way in which medieval "woman" served as a figure for all manner of disturbance to male-defined order and government.¹⁶ According to another late medieval sermon, "women's speech...often incites men and women to lechery" (MS. Harley 2398, fol. 366, qtd. in Owst 1961, 382. My translation).¹⁷ In their constant warnings against the evils of women speaking and their equation of women's speech with unbridled passions, medieval sermons constructed a female body understood as both voracious and permeable. "Woman," as Bynum and Lochrie have shown, was equated with the frailty of the human will and the

body as site of the disruption of the concupiscent flesh (Lochrie 1991b, 122). In appropriating women's speech by branding it inherently fleshly, the sermons themselves fashioned an absent female body which was invested with considerable symbolic force and whose carnal corruption was seen as threatening the boundaries of Church discourse.

However there is another absent body, also constructed as feminine, whose physical suffering and shame is celebrated rather than condemned in sermons, and that is the body of Christ, descriptions of which Margery Kempe attended so many sermons to hear. "If I had money enough," Kempe claims in conversation with God in Chapter 58 of her *Book*, "I would give a noble every day to have a sermon'" (Kempe 1988, 181), and the mystic's enthusiasm for encountering Christ and his Word in this way increased as she progressed in her spiritual life (Atkinson 1983, 115). Kempe frequently had extreme reactions to hearing sermons on Christ's Passion (Kempe 1988, 188, 190, 204, 221-2, 225), and Passion sermons provided a dramatic spectacle for a lay audience accustomed to lingering on the graphic details of Christ's Crucifixion, a theme which was similarly played out in popular books of devotion, lyrics, plays, stained glass windows and rood screens (Gray 1972, 125-6; Bennett 1982, 39, 54; Hughes 1988, 234-5, 288-9). The "feminisation" of Christ in late medieval popular culture was enacted through his portrayal as physically passive (suffering), excessive and boundaryless (bleeding), and nourishing (in the form of the Eucharist) at the same time (Ash 1990, 86).

In the following excerpts from late medieval Passion sermons, Christ's body is described in terms which liken it to the permeability of the feminine flesh:

Behold, then, that good Lord shivering and shaking, his entire body naked and bound to a pillar; wicked men standing around him, beyond reason, excessively scourging that blessed body, without pity. Look how they fail to stop their angry strokes until they see him stand in his blood up to the ankles. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot, they leave no piece of skin whole (MS. Harl. 2398, fol. 186b, qtd. in Owst 1961, 508. My translation).

He was beaten and buffeted, scorned and scourged, so that there was scarcely any portion of skin left, from the top to the toe, that a man might have placed a needle's point upon. But his entire body ran out as a stream of blood (MS. St Albans Cath. fol. 20 (=MS. Laud Misc. 23), qtd. in Owst 1961, 508. My translation).

Lochrie points out the similarities between the construction of the female body and the body

of Christ which are operating here: "In the Crucifixion, the scientific and theological theories of the feminine and the flesh find their most graphic expression.... Christ becomes female and mother on the cross when he suffers bodily and when he surrenders his flesh as the *materia* of new life" (Lochrie 1991b, 118). Sarah Beckwith also makes some convincing analogies between representations of Christ and medieval women in terms of Christ's "position in the psychic structure of the Passion story" thus:

In his Passion, Christ is acted upon rather than acting, and his body becomes the site onto which desire is projected. Like woman (as constructed by patriarchal discourse) he is the "gateway to the infinite and the measure [of a man's] finite nature" (de Beauvoir 1976, 75). His submission to the Father acts as a public token that God's power is unchallenged and he functions as an exchange object to guarantee and ratify the mutually beneficial hierarchy of God and man. To understand this as a feminisation, we may trace a series of parallels between these structures and the position of women in medieval patriarchal society. Women were traditionally acted upon rather than acting, their bodies were the site onto which desire was projected (as in the vast literature of courtly love). Marriage for medieval women was an exchange from one man to another, from father to husband. Women's bodies in every way functioned as substitute objects to act as a locus for desire as a guarantee to underwrite complex property deals between families (Beckwith 1986, 48).

Not surprisingly, similar sorts of parallels can be seen in the treatment of the body of Christ and the female body in popular sermons. Both bodies are constantly spoken about but never (officially) speak, both are graphically described as objects of desire. As mentioned earlier, women's bodies acted as the locus of anxieties of a culture experiencing class-conflict and rapid social change (Delany 1975, 109-13; Stallybrass 1986; Aers 1988, 83-9). Furthermore, popular late medieval representations of Christ and the Holy Family reflect the status of the emergent and increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, and are concerned with "the sanctifying and absolutising of social roles" in middle-class families through what Beckwith calls "the Holy Family Romance" (Beckwith 1986, 46. See also Duffy 1990, 192-3; Sheingorn 1990). Beckwith argues that this trend "appears to be both a response to the potentially subversive nature of female desire and new way of domesticating and internalising it" in late medieval patriarchal society (Beckwith 1986, 46).

However, *The Book of Margery Kempe* frequently challenges the recuperation of female desire suggested by official directives for devotion. In Chapter 6 of the *Book* for example, Kempe

imagines herself travelling with the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth of the Christ child. Once in Bethlehem, in her imagination, Kempe busies herself finding places for the couple to stay, begging clothes in which to wrap the newborn, and procuring food and arranging a bed for mother and child (Kempe 1988, 53). Here she follows devotional injunctions such as those set forth in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, which commands believers to "imagine and set our mind and thoughts as though we were present in the place where this was done at Bethlehem" (Love 1992, 43. My translation). While this episode could be seen as evidence of the domestication of female desire, a transplanting of Kempe's former familial responsibilities to the realm of orthodox Christic devotion, the *Mirror's* command to imagine oneself present at Mary's side is the same licence Kempe uses to take on Mary's and Christ's grief in envisioning the Passion in other parts of her *Book*, an identification which causes consternation to onlookers and clerical authorities. I will describe one such episode shortly, as it relates directly to the politics of the representation of Christ in popular sermons.

One way to read *The Book of Margery Kempe* in relation to its social context and the question of the recuperation of female power is with or in contrast to Irigaray's analysis of women's function as commodities in patriarchal capitalist culture(s). Irigaray sets out the negative effects for women of the kind of social organisation described specifically by Beckwith above in terms of an emergent capitalist economy and its exchange of women (e.g., Irigaray 1985b, 170-97); but Kempe's text, while revealing aspects of this cultural situation, also shows that empowerment could be attained in such a system. Whereas Irigaray is writing in a period of advanced capitalism about the effects of this cultural set-up for women, and of her desire to transform it - particularly through a reworked concept of the divine - Kempe's *Book* depicts cultural interventions achieved through Christ and her relationship with him, which suggest a transformation of her appointed social role as domestic asset to her husband. Kempe's *Book* witnesses, as Irigaray's work does also, to a volatile potential in cultural representations of divinity which escapes official attempts to contain it.

Perhaps the most notable way in which Kempe manages to bypass or extend the commodification of women in late medieval culture and its prescriptions for devotion is through her excessive weeping. While her tears have an orthodox basis, they also escape

clerical regulation, and, as Beckwith puts it, "make her a competitor to the very functional centrality of the clergy in the saving of souls" (Beckwith 1993, 89). In Irigaray, too, "fluidity" as expressed by women tends to disrupt and threaten the masculinist linguistic system which is based on an economy of stable forms (Irigaray 1985a, 106-18, 205-18). The threat felt by the clergy from Kempe is expressed in an episode from Chapter 61 of her *Book* through her wild weeping and the response it arouses. The scene suggests points of comparison between the late medieval understanding of Christ's flesh as excessive and as object of speech/desire and the representation of female physicality as an excess to be warned against in sermons. On this occasion Kempe's tears are set off by a sermon on the Passion preached by "a holy man," a famous friar (Franciscan) who visits her home town of Lynn.¹⁸ The episode reveals not only the profound importance to Kempe of hearing sermons for the development of her devotion to Christ, but also the threat which women's "unbridled" expression presented to medieval clerics, even - or perhaps especially - when that speech arose from their (clerically encouraged) identification with their Saviour.

While Kempe's tears constitute a kind of passionate bodily speech, in this episode it is persistently claimed that they are a gift from God and therefore not subject to ordinary control. However her loud crying during the preaching friar's sermon is plainly felt by the friar as a threat to priestly authority, and this is evidenced by the number of times during the entire scene in which prestigious men speak on Kempe's behalf, taking it upon themselves to explain in a diplomatic fashion and re-present her tears to the friar. Even before the friar first preaches in Lynn, for instance, the local parish priest warns the visiting preacher that "a woman will come here to your sermon who often, when she hears of the Passion of our Lord...weeps, sobs and cries" (Kempe 1988, 188).

The friar preaches on the Passion and Kempe cries "amazingly bitterly," which he bears patiently as requested. When, however, he preaches at the church again and Kempe once more falls into "violent weeping," the friar declares: "I wish this woman were out of the church, she is annoying people'" (Kempe 1988, 188). Instead of addressing her directly he represents her to the congregation - as preachers traditionally represented women - in somewhat objectifying terms. The trend is continued as, following this event, various people, almost all of whom are male, continue to mediate on behalf of Kempe and her wondrous gift to the

friar: firstly, her friends; secondly two "good priests" (one of whom has conversed substantially with her); followed by a highly respected "doctor of divinity"; Kempe's confessor (a "bachelor of law"); and finally, a "most worthy burgess" (Kempe 1988, 188-90). While all of these defenders present, more or less, the same message - that Kempe's tears are a gift from God and so cannot be constrained - the friar sees this very statement as threatening. Kempe claims at the end of the chapter that the friar was the only preacher to try to exclude her from sermons on the basis of her loud crying, and his responses to her supporters' defence of her gift reveals something of the reason why.

First, the friar refuses Kempe access to the Word of God unless she takes up the traditional female position and listens in submissive silence to his words. Next, he aims to strike a bargain with the mystic: if she will take back her claim to divine authority and call her tears a sickness (with implications of the gift being an affliction from the devil) then he will allow her to hear the sermon (Kempe 1988, 189). Kempe's own voice in defence of her provocative gift is notably absent from the negotiations between her defenders and the preacher which occur in the episode. The situation is not dissimilar to that which occurs in sermons more generally, where preachers warn against the destructive nature of women's bodily speech and women themselves for related reasons may not speak. The friar, in demanding firstly Kempe's listening silence and secondly an admission of lack of control over her speech (which would then appear divorced from legitimate spiritual origins and become instead aligned with demonic ones) reveals his desire to construct Kempe as the typically calamitous female figure of Gerson's invective. This is the figure of "woman," an "insatiable beast," regularly presented in sermons, and whose speech, with its "insatiable itch," is dangerous precisely because it is physically excessive.

While Kempe's tears do at times appear excessive to other people besides the friar, he in particular is reluctant to accept her claim that they come from God, despite the authority (and the gender) of her allies.¹⁹ He thereby denies the mystic's assertion of alignment with her Saviour and the authority she declares as a result, by denying the connection of the two bodies - Christ's and Kempe's - from which Kempe says her tears arise. Kempe maintains that her tears serve as a sign or reminder to others of Christ's Passion (Kempe 1988, 106-7; Petroff 1986, 302) so that, in effect, her sorrow stands in for her Saviour's and her body, racked and

convulsed with the pains of his suffering, stands in for his. It is clear that this sort of statement could be disturbing to a famous preacher such as the friar in question, authorised as he is to (re)present the body of the absent Christ, the Logos, to the people through the Eucharist and the Word of God in the words of his sermon. Kempe's tears, which "burst out" with amazing bitterness, violence and volume (Kempe 1988, 188, 190), seem to compete for the listeners' attention and so the friar engages in battle with Kempe, treating her, in fact, as a rival.

The drama enacted by Kempe's tears in this episode may be seen as a challenge to the medieval Church's central drama of the Eucharist, by which it asserted its power as sole dispenser of the faith. From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries the Church created an elaborate system of lay education centred around the Eucharist (Rubin 1992a). However, as Miri Rubin points out, the "sacramental world-view" propounded by the clergy, along with "the very ubiquity, the success of its teaching...exposed the symbolic system to ongoing interpretation, to uses, to attempt at its appropriation" (Rubin 1992a, 51). Kempe's dynamic tears may be seen, on one hand, as a legitimate response to the construction of the Mass in the period, which led believers to experience the Eucharist as a participatory and visionary affair. But her own involvement in the Church's representation of Christ's body through identificatory tears has the effect of allowing her to participate in Christ's suffering through herself "embodying" Christ in a disturbing fashion which is seen by the preaching friar as challenging his authority. In the above scene, Kempe embodies Christ not only through recalling the events of the Passion but also through becoming an object of derision - as Christ was at the Crucifixion - in the eyes of clerics such as the preaching friar. Rubin observes that in Kempe's case generally, the Eucharist as the literal embodiment of Christ "allowed her an escape from expectations in family and neighbourhood, it provided the pretext for travel and self-exploration, and most importantly it allowed her an identification of the female as *object* with Christ, the ultimate *object*, sacrificed, mutilated, all forbearance" (Rubin 1992a, 58).

Forbearance is exactly what Kempe displays in the Chapter 61 scene: her voice, so disruptively evident during the sermon (and also evident in her own defence elsewhere in the *Book*, e.g., Kempe (1988, 153-4, 158, 160, 163-6)), is silent on her own behalf here - thus reinforcing her identification with the passive, suffering Christ portrayed in sermons - while

authoritative men take up her claim. While powerful men speak for Kempe in this episode, just as priests speak of women in sermons and thereby exclude them from official speech, depicting their bodies and voices as needing to be restrained (Owst 1961, 387-8), Kempe's alignment with Christ recasts the meaning of her exile from clerical discourse in more positive terms.

Because Kempe only "speaks" in this episode through her importunate tears, their function as a special gift - to which a number of influential men defer - is reinforced. Kempe is able to exploit the identification of medieval "woman" with excessive fluidity and moisture, and circumvent the recuperation of women into forms of devotion which were non-threatening to male clerical power. Elizabeth Robertson describes Kempe's subversion of medieval medical views of female sexuality thus, a subversion which represented a challenge to the Church:

Told by theory that she can only experience God through the body, [Kempe] recounts extreme bodily experiences in her quest for union with God. Told that she has too much moisture, [Kempe] cries excessively, which makes those around her, especially those in power who are challenging her authority, uncomfortable. The very excesses of her writing, her extremes of tears and sensual expressiveness, suggest a destabilization of those assumptions (Robertson 1993, 158).

Irigaray's work on "the 'mechanics' of fluids" (Irigaray 1985a, 106-18, 205-18; 1985b, 227-40; 1989b, 199-200) is provocative in relation to the the alliance Kempe suggests in her *Book*, through her tears, between herself and Christ. Irigaray describes female speech as prone to "fluidity" in the sense that the masculine symbolic economy depends upon the representation of stable forms, of which fluidity is the necessary and unrepresented other: "whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the 'subject.' Which the 'subject' then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow" (Irigaray 1985a, 112). Thus the friar responds to Kempe's disruption of his sermon. Irigaray claims that God is the site in which the unrepresentability of fluids in a masculine economy is posited, and by which this fluid excess (understood as the boundaryless feminine) is contained. That is, the masculinist symbolic system which privileges stability, singularity of meaning and an "objectivity" based on the disavowal of the body, is rendered unquestionable through the idea of God who stands in as transcendent, invisible representative for the male subject. As a result, God

simultaneously marks the place of the masculine subject's repressed physicality, which he projects onto women, and his projection of masculine subjectivity itself into the position of the universal, the transcendent.²⁰ God, then, effectively contains the residue of masculine physicality which has been disavowed in the construction of masculine subjectivity. Thus: "what is left uninterpreted in the economy of fluids - the resistances brought to bear upon solids, for example - is in the end given over to God" (Irigaray 1985a, 109).

However, phallogocentric discourse cannot entirely legislate a relationship consisting of "excess." That is, women can exploit the way in which God contains and neutralises that which is excessive in the masculine symbolic through their own excessive nature. This is because women's physical excess, while it functions as "not-all" in the masculinist symbolic economy, must also exist "elsewhere" (Irigaray 1985a, 109, 77), perhaps in relation to the excess that is constituted by God:

It is already getting around - at what rate? in what contexts? in spite of what resistances? - that women diffuse themselves according to modalities scarcely compatible with the framework of the ruling symbolics. Which doesn't happen without causing some turbulence, we might even say some whirlwinds, that ought to be reconfin[ed] within solid walls of principle, to keep them from spreading to infinity (Irigaray 1985a, 106).

These words from Irigaray echo, perhaps not unintentionally, the position of women in medieval theology and Church discourse. Medieval theological descriptions of female physicality seek to confine women "within solid walls," both metaphorically in the sense of formulating authoritative, restrictive discourse on their nature, and literally in the sense of recommending their containment within convent, anchorhold or domestic home. In Chapter 13 of Kempe's *Book* an old monk tells her, "I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you" (Kempe 1988, 63). That Kempe succeeds on some level at "diffus[ing herself] according to modalities scarcely compatible with the framework of the ruling symbolics," in Irigaray's terms (Irigaray 1985a, 106), is reflected in her text through male responses to what is perceived as her "vagrancy" or relative physical freedom as well as her troublesome tears, a topic I will take up again in the following section.

A "diffusion of self" is perhaps best explained in reference to Kempe through a consideration

of how she takes up so enthusiastically and in a number of different ways the practice of "meditation on the life of Christ" recommended by her culture (Gibson 1989, 49). Thus, as Rubin states above, Kempe's travels (representing a "diffusion" of self in the sense of a challenge to patriarchal efforts to "contain" her) are carried out in relation to her quest for greater devotion to Christ, whether in the form of the Eucharist; sermons; conversation with holy women and men; pilgrimage to holy places and the transfiguration in her visions of various objects into mnemonics of Christ's Passion and life (e.g., Kempe 1988, 113, 227). Kempe was perceived as excessive both in terms of her speech - for example the fluidity of her tears - and wandering ("I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you'") together, two allegedly female traits which were regularly denounced in sermons.

As well as condemning women's speech, medieval popular sermons showed a marked concern with women's "vagrancy," and persistently described women as creatures apt to wander from their appointed sphere, the home, through an excess of lustful desiring: "When her proper place is in the home, she will wander abroad, like the Wife of Bath, 'walkinge out by nighte' as well as by day - 'and for to see and eek for to be seye of lusty folk,'" as G. R. Owst puts it, quoting Chaucer's Wife (Chaucer 1983a, 80-1, qtd. in Owst 1961, 388). The phrase "and even to be seen by lustful men," reproduced in this context by Owst, sounds remarkably like contemporary charges that women who go out at night and dress in a certain way "ask to be raped," an idea which is made explicit in another sermon, and shows how the attitude has a long history linked to cultural developments which restrict women to the home:

As Dinah, Jacob's daughter, who walked out of her inn to see women of the country that she lived in, and was ravished and raped and lost her virginity.... So do foolish girls who walk around in meadows and in fair places leading dances and singing, displaying themselves as it were in order to lose their virginity (MS. Harl. 2398, fol. 39b, qtd. in Owst 1961, 119. My translation).²¹

This passage highlights another central aspect of the representation of women in medieval preaching, the constant disapprobation of "female vanity" and concern with fashion, which is connected with women's alleged tendency to "wander abroad."²² As Owst once again informs us, in a tone of some relish, "it is woman *par excellence* as a lover of finery, the mirror of

fashion, the decked and painted idol of Maytide, that calls down the full fury of the English preachers in satire and complaint" (Owst 1961, 390; Blench 1964, 241, 275).²³ This too is a commonplace which Kempe subverts in her *Book* through the portrayal of herself as a vain, overly fashion-conscious woman in the earlier days before her conversion (Lochrie 1986a, 40-1). She uses the traditional caricature of the sinful woman, propagated in medieval sermons, to represent the woman she once was but is no longer, following the dedication of her life to Christ.

After the madness which follows her first difficult experience of childbirth, and after the healing vision of Christ which terminates it, Kempe relates how she "would not leave her pride or her showy manner of dressing" (Kempe 1988, 143), despite the admonishments of her husband and other men. She describes the "gold pipes" and fashionably fringed hoods which she wore on her head, and her slashed cloaks underlaid with many colours to attract the attention of passers by. Kathleen Casey points out that these were the popular fashions of the period's new bourgeoisie and an expression of the progressive feeling and increasing wealth fostered among them by an emergent capitalist society (Casey 1976, 238). Traditionally however it was women's endeavours in this field which were held up by contemporary preachers as examples of sinful pride: "The expense and presumption of their bizarre headgear, evolving through a swift and bewildering succession of fantasies, and their use of cosmetics drew the most sustained harangues" (Casey 1976, 238). Kempe continues the portrait of her loftiness with the description of the unsuccessful business ventures of brewing and milling which she undertook at this time, as she says: "for pure covetousness, and in order to maintain her pride" (Kempe 1988, 44).

Kempe thus constructs an ingenious description of herself as a typical medieval woman on the path to perdition, requiring God's grace. She then (over)turns this portrayal to her advantage when she says, at the end of the chapter:

And then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, thought they were the scourges of our Lord that would chastise her for her sin. Then she asked God for mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and the desire that she had for worldly dignity, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life as shall be told hereafter (Kempe 1988, 45).

By this method Kempe presents herself as a woman intent on holiness, having learned from her past mistakes and rejected the ways of the world. Lochrie describes her achievement: "Kempe's use of the antifeminist image of the proud woman allows her to reverse it, to dismantle it, so to speak, through her conversion - and to take up her struggle against many of the antifeminist ideas about women which pose a threat to her search for "[the way of high perfection]" (Lochrie 1986a, 42).

Irigaray's speculations on the feminine love of fashion and women's problematical relation to their own bodiliness shed some light here on connections between women as lovers of fashion and women as wanderers in medieval sermons. In Irigaray's analysis, "traditionally, in the role of mother, woman represents a sense of *place* for man" and is "used as a kind of envelope by man in order to help him set limits to things" (Irigaray 1991a, 169). The appropriation of maternity so that it serves as a symbolic starting place for man, deprives women of a symbolic "place of [their] own" (Irigaray 1991a, 169), which they attempt to compensate for with the trappings of conventional femininity. Irigaray states that: "Woman...cannot be located, cannot remain in her place. She attempts to envelop herself in clothes, make-up and jewellery. She cannot use the envelope that she *is*, and so must create artificial ones" (Irigaray 1991a, 169-70). Female adornment, in Irigaray's view, is a symptom of women's lack of "symbolic space," the way in which the symbolic order - the public domain of society - serves male subjects and, in order to do so, confines women to private, domestic environments.

Owst quotes a medieval preacher who claims that, "the women of our time, when they are at home with their husbands take no trouble over their own adornment, but when they display themselves in public, they wish to go forth adorned" (MS. Camb. Univ. Libr. Mm. ii. 10 (Cat. No. 2305), col. 4, qtd. in Owst 1965, 218). In an Irigarayan reading, sermonical diatribes against women's alleged love of fashion and their tendency to wander are related to each other: they can be seen as symptomatic of the appropriation by men of women's physicality in the construction of patriarchal, public space, and the masculine fears to which this appropriation gives rise, fears that women will try (through an excess of artificial coverings or through wandering) to articulate a space of their own. This is seen as threatening to patriarchal society because, in her view, its social organisation depends upon the appropriation

of the female/maternal (Irigaray 1985a, 184-5; 1991b, 64; 198; 1991h, 199-200; 1993b, 71).

Thus in medieval sermons, women's wandering is aligned with their wandering speech, the twin focus of patriarchal suppression of the female sex. In the preachers' view "woman," however carefully enclosed, exhibits "a fatal attraction to the outside world, its freedom, its publicity, and its scope for yet more pleasant gossip" (Owst 1961, 388), as another sermon proclaims: "it is fitting for maidens to be hidden and still...and not standing nor walking about in the streets" (MS. Harl. 2398, fol. 39b, qtd. in Owst 1961, 119. My translation). While man "robs femininity of the tissue or texture of her spatiality," he simultaneously encloses her within the home: "he envelops her within those walls while he envelops himself and his things in her flesh" (Irigaray 1991a, 170). "Femininity" becomes the symbol of male property and possession (Stallybrass 1986, 127).²⁴

"Without her knowledge or volition, then, ["woman"] threatens by what she lacks: a 'proper' place" (Irigaray 1991b, 169). In Irigaray's view, women's "homelessness" in the symbolic order consists of "the absence of adequate symbolisation" for their libidinal desires (Whitford 1991a, 125, 78). Whitford, commentating on Irigaray, observes in the masculine cultural imaginary "a nostalgia for the original home" of the mother's body,

an attempt to keep it for himself, own it and control it, in order to be able to return to it in phantasy (by keeping women in the home, for example, or ensuring their social dependence). But this phantasy, in symbolic form, prevents woman from acceding to her own separate being; she must always be for-men, available for their transcendence (Whitford 1991a, 153).

Kempe may be seen to challenge this masculine phantasy through her resistance to the traditional enclosure of women within the domestic realm.

As we shall see in the next section, Kempe is experienced as "threatening" to male civil authorities as well as clerical ones because she lacks a home in the sense that she is a visionary and pilgrim for Christ. She has to convince men to intervene on her behalf with other men (as in the scene of the preaching friar's sermon), a sign of her lack of public power and authority, and yet she is branded as a danger to patriarchal society, so much so that she is terrorised with the threat of being burned at the stake (Kempe 1988, 64). Kempe's *Book*

reflects the way in which "western" patriarchal society constructs "woman" as excessive by constituting her as the other of male government. Thus women tend to experience themselves as dispersed and relational: "woman always tends *towards* something else without ever turning to herself as the site of a positive element.... [She] remains in motion but possesses no 'proper' place" (Irigaray 1985a, 168). In Kempe's culture, however, the experience of connection between self and other was integral to the dynamic and personal relationship with Christ that was encouraged among believers in a variety of ways. Kempe's "self-dispersion," enacted physically in terms of her giving up her patriarchally-designated "proper place," the home, is relocated in a more empowering fashion in her life as a pilgrim-mystic. Kempe in fact makes Christ the means of a redefinition of female vagrancy as sacred wandering.

The depiction in Kempe's *Book of Church* (and civil) authorities' negative responses to this sacramental mode of life, based as it is on the desire to embody, act out and imitate the life of Christ, suggests both that the Church desired to contain the possibilities for subversion inherent in this kind of devotion and was increasingly unable to do so. Rubin writes that in the middle ages "the dissemination of the sacramental language of religion was accompanied by ongoing attempts to establish its hegemonic status through an appeal to what was taken to be the 'popular mind'" (Rubin 1992a, 52). However by Kempe's time "the success of [the Church's] enterprise of instruction was so great that most people possessed sufficient knowledge of the language of sacramental religion with the eucharist at its centre to attempt further departures from it" (Rubin 1992a, 59). Kempe's "departures" from domestic life, both literal and figurative, involved the manipulation and extension of symbolic norms, and so were experienced as threatening patriarchal hegemony by the male authorities of her culture. In a contemporary reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* demonstrates Irigaray's contention that women in a patriarchal economy repeatedly escape restrictive systematisation. In medieval terms, it reveals that in Kempe's culture the Incarnation of Christ provided opportunities for women to re-present their association with vagrancy and physical excess as spiritually empowering.

Kempe's speaking of Christ in the places where she travels is an integral part of her life's new mission, but it causes her to be perceived as a threat to masculine power on several occasions, and disputes with clerics on the subject centre around the issue of the orthodox distinction

between preaching and teaching.²⁵ Medieval preachers are emphatic on the subject of a woman preaching. One writer claims that, however "learned, holy and 'prelatical'" she may be, a woman must never preach "where men are present" (MS. Harl. 4968, fol. 42, qtd. in Owst 1965, 5). Another justifies women's exclusion from the pulpit on the grounds that "woman" is: first, insufficiently intelligent to instruct men and women; second, her subordinate role in life is divinely ordained; third, her fleshliness would lead to immoral behaviour (presumably among the listening and watching men) were she to take up such a position; and fourth, because Eve is her predecessor and the first woman's speech "brought ruin to the whole world" (*Max. Bibl. Patr.* vol. 25, 435, cited in Owst 1965, 5).

The issue seems to be primarily one of authority. A woman is a man's divinely placed subordinate, and her first virtue, as the preachers tell us, is to obey (MS. Add. 21253, fol. 89, cited in Owst 1961, 389). While a woman's right to instruct was limited to private places such as nunneries and the home, and the teaching of children and of other women, the subversion of the God-given order was seen to be effected by a woman's preaching in *public to men* (MS. Harl. 31, fol. 196r, cited in Aston 1984a, 58. See also Bériou 1987, I: 9n, 2, cited in Berlioz and Beaulieu 1990, 41). The God-given order appears here unmistakably as the masculine social order, in which women's words are constructed as dangerous and are banished from the public arena.

The official distinction between preaching and teaching, while long established in the Christian tradition, was not always easy to mark in practice, especially when those suspected of preaching unlawfully claimed to be fulfilling the Gospel injunction to share the faith with all people (Murphy 1974, 278). In Chapter 52 of her *Book* Kempe quotes scripture in her defence when she is commanded not to teach the Archbishop of York's people, and this may be viewed as a defiant attempt at teaching in itself. As Margaret Aston notes, Kempe's great zeal for sermons contributed not only to her personal devotions but also to "her ability to hold her own with priests" (Aston 1984b, 120). Kempe quotes the Gospel episode when Christ replies to the woman who says: "'Blessed be the womb that bore you and the breasts that gave you suck,'" that they are more blessed who hear the Word of God and keep it (Luke 11: 27-8). Kempe makes her argument on the basis that Christ does not forbid the woman speaking out in this way, and claims that "'God Almighty does not forbid...that we should speak of

him'" (Kempe 1988, 164). The *Speculum Christiani* furnishes the argument Kempe puts forward when she claims her right to use "communication and good words" while she lives. It makes the distinction between preaching and teaching thus:

There is a great difference between preaching and teaching. Preaching occurs where there is a calling or gathering together of people on holy days in churches or other such places and at times ordained for that purpose. And it is fitting for those who have been ordained to do it, who have jurisdiction and authority, and for no others. Teaching is such that everybody may inform and teach their brother in every place and at the proper time, as they see it to be profitable. For this is a spiritual alms-deed, to which every person that has knowledge is bound (*Speculum Christiani* 1933, 2, qtd. in Owst 1926, 4, and in Lochrie 1986a, 47. My translation).

In the face of the charge of preaching unlawfully, Kempe claims only to be fulfilling her spiritual duty as a believer in sharing her faith with others, and as such cannot be officially condemned.

Despite conventional prohibitions of female preaching, some preachers' comments reveal that, due to the increasing popularity of the Lollard movement in England in the late middle ages, lay women as well as lay men were "teaching and spreading the Word of God" (MS. Camb. Univ. Lib. II. iii. 8, fol. 149, cited in Owst 1965, 5-6. 135). This was undoubtedly a factor in the troubles Kempe encountered in her travels as she spoke about the Gospel. While in her *Book* Kempe describes herself being several times tried and declared innocent of Lollardy, she does, as Lochrie affirms: "call into question the antifeminist tradition which forbids women to preach and which further discourages them from reading and interpreting the Gospel." As a result her "personal battle with church authorities becomes a political battle as she attempts to assert her religious orthodoxy at the same time that she overturns orthodox antifeminism" (Lochrie 1986a, 42-3).

In Chapter 52, prior to Kempe's audience with the Archbishop, a monk specifically denounces her in a sermon he preaches to a vast crowd of people in York, having heard that she will be present. When questioned about this, Kempe claims that she is blessed by God through suffering such slander. Kempe's turning public defamation to her vocational advantage in this way is common in the *Book* and is part of her defence of her life as an imitation of Christ. As Gibson notes, it is shaped by her "attempt to participate in the martyrdom pattern of Christ

and his saints; indeed, her qualifications for sainthood depend upon that participation" (Gibson 1989, 48). Following this event Kempe is detained in York and brought for questioning before the Archbishop and many clerics. They test her for heresy and, finding her orthodox in her beliefs, remain reluctant to let her go, because, as they say: "the people have great faith in her talk, and perhaps she might lead some of them astray" (Kempe 1988, 163). The Archbishop grants Kempe leave on the condition that she swears not to teach people in his diocese, but she refuses, first quoting the Gospel and then, when St Paul is quoted against her, responding with the words: "I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live" (Kempe 1988, 164).

Aston remarks that Kempe's education through heard and seen images of the Gospel in sermons and other media equipped her not only with "a good grasp of the Gospel story" on which she drew for her meditations, but also "a fund of moralistic tales, which sometimes came in useful" (Aston 1984b, 120). Kempe has recourse to one such tale in Chapter 52 of her *Book*, during the York interrogation. Her story concerns a wicked priest (in the guise of a bear for the purpose of the story) and when she has finished telling it the Archbishop commends the tale, but a cleric who has previously interrogated her expresses discomfort with it. Having pleased the Archbishop with her story which reveals that priests as well as lay women must take care to live moral lives, Kempe presses home her advantage and furthers the levelling by identifying herself with "a good preacher" from her home town, who, she says, often claims from the pulpit: "if anyone is displeased by my preaching, note him well, for he is guilty" (Kempe 1988, 166). She then informs the cleric who has responded negatively to her story that he has behaved in the same way with her, and that his reaction to her words reveals the suspect state of his own heart. The priest is speechless in the face of this rebuke, and the Archbishop calls for someone at last to lead the mystic from him.

In addressing the powerful figures before her with the words of a preacher from the pulpit, Kempe herself takes on the role of preacher and casts the listening priests as ordinary believers. Following the wrangle about preaching, teaching and her respective rights, the mystic's placing herself in the preacher's position is a bold as well as a subversive move. She thus demonstrates her ability to make use of the official, male-orchestrated media of her faith for her own ends. In "preaching" to the Archbishop and his companion, Kempe reverses the

traditional pattern whereby male clerics speak on behalf of women within a divinely-sanctioned discourse. She can be seen to demonstrate Irigaray's argument that to outlaw women from official social structures is to limit but never to wholly appropriate their speech.

2. 1. 2 Accusations of heresy: Outlawed women

While medieval sermons produced a prescriptive account of women's alleged weaknesses and bodily speech which Kempe can be seen to confront in certain scenes depicted in her text, charges of heresy are also central in her *Book* and constitute a far more insidious threat to her. The negative construction of "woman" as inclined to wander in body and speech put forward in sermons served as an educative warning to medieval lay women as to how to tread the path of Christian orthodoxy and avoid allegations of deviance (i.e, heresy) which could lead to the extreme consequences of imprisonment or death. Since, as I have shown, Kempe takes issue with several of the antifeminist attitudes expressed in popular preaching, it is not surprising that accusations of heretical beliefs, "the next stage" or degree of efforts at female containment, as it were, should be used against her.

Of course, unlike preaching which depicted a somewhat "mythical" view of the female sex designed to forestall the "vices" feared by men and keep women (especially wives) in line, the Church's antiheretical discourses were focused on actual movements of religious dissent, the most pervasive and influential of which, in fifteenth-century England, was Lollardy. There is evidence that women were active in the Lollard movement, particularly in East Anglia where Kempe lived. Claire Cross notes that a considerable amount of material has survived "relating to a Lollard community in East Anglia in the 1420s," and that "there can be no shadow of a doubt that there women took a vigorous part in heresy alongside men" (Cross 1978, 362). It is easy to understand the attraction of heretical religious movements for medieval women, since the circumscribing of women's public roles within orthodox Christianity was and remains a consistent historical phenomenon. In contrast, as Stephen J. Wessley points out:

Some heresies provided avenues for female advancement. Catharism established a female *perfecta*.... Some Waldensians made women priests.... The Guglielmite ideology, which we can interpret as a reaction to an exclusively male priesthood based on a male incarnation, offered female enthusiasts justification for exercising priestly office and promised them ecclesiastical roles beyond their limited opportunities in the medieval church (Wessley 1978, 300. See also Wilson 1984, xiii-iv; Aston 1993, 25).²⁶

And in England these continental varieties of heresy were mirrored in the views of some Lollards, who claimed that women should not be denied the office of priesthood (Aston 1984a, 52). Aston states that, as this view suggests, there are grounds for assuming that Lollard groups had considerable support for women, as Cathars and Waldensians did (Aston 1984a, 49). The several charges of Lollardy, arising from both clerical and civil sources, which Kempe reports being made against her suggest that through Lollardy English lay women were achieving a degree of education and autonomy otherwise unavailable to them, which was found threatening by Church and town authorities alike.

Several aspects of Kempe's calling and behaviour seem to align her (at least outwardly) with Lollard ideas, a view plainly held by the clerical and civil authorities who attempted to convict her of heresy. Lollard activities included teaching, evidently undertaken by women as well as men, and producing and distributing copies of vernacular sermons which would have aided in this project (Owst 1965, 5-6, 135, cited in Aston 1984a, 49-50; 1984b, 128). Kempe's claim to lawful teaching and spreading the Word of God, outlined in the section on sermons, obviously inspired suspicions that she had heretical connections.²⁷ Her vociferous efforts at self-defence, often put to use in the very act of resisting charges of heresy, may also have deepened suspicions of Lollard involvement on her part. In his famous anti-heretical work, *The Repressor*, Reginald Pecock complained that Lollard women "delighted to argue and dispute against clerks" (Pecock 1860, i, 123, qtd. in Aston 1984b, 130), a tendency which the mystic demonstrates on more than one occasion. Lochrie also notes that Kempe's argument in Chapter 52 about her right to teach in the face of the charge of illicitly preaching was taken up by Lollards, specifically by Walter Brute, who was submitted for trial on a heresy charge in 1393. Although Kempe shows her claim to be orthodox, it nonetheless has heretical associations (Lochrie 1986a, 45).

The Chapter 52 episode, discussed in the previous section, is an example of the fine line between orthodoxy and subversion which Kempe presents herself walking in many of the encounters with figures of authority portrayed in her *Book*. Despite being questioned on issues of Church doctrine on several occasions, Kempe always managed to satisfy her questioners as to her orthodoxy and so was never arrested on a heresy charge. In fact the most hostile behaviour the mystic encountered in relation to suspicions of heresy arose from ordinary townspeople and urban authorities. As John Thomson observes, Kempe's case reveals that "popular opposition [to Lollardy] was far more virulent than the criticism of the clergy" in the period, and her experiences "show clearly the success of the clergy in rousing popular opposition to religious eccentricity" (Thomson 1965, 195). But the alliance of civil and Church forces against the "eccentric" figure of Kempe also reveals the extent to which she was perceived as a threat to her culture as a whole. And the ways in which official authority was used to oppose her make evident that this threat was felt as a direct challenge to such authority and to the doctrine of the enclosed and silent female body which was central to medieval patriarchal society.

Atkinson points out that Kempe's answers to questions of Church doctrine are probably carefully shaped by her scribe in defence of his own doctrinal orthodoxy as well as that of his charge (Atkinson 1983, 107). Thus the presentation in Kempe's *Book* of the episodes in which she is suspected of heresy are clearly intended as a defence of her life and person. However the extremes of violence - both physical and verbal - that allegations of heresy posed to Kempe make her body a central and troubled locus of the text. While the discourses of medieval preaching were intended in part to warn against and restrict women's physical movement and speech, heresy charges were designed to implement punishments against women (and men) who exceeded official confines and did not heed this message.²⁸ The specific target of the accusations was the subversive gospel of belief in the powers of individual (including female) convictions and speech. Kempe's responses to the ideas put forward in popular preaching are naturally less urgent than her engagements with charges of heresy since her desire to "own her own body" and yield it to Christ becomes, with these allegations, contestable through the threat of death, the contemporary punishment for heresy.

Kempe's avoidance of this fate depends upon her claim that her body is in the care of Christ,

which she endorses by evidencing devotion to the Church. But it is the freedom and singularity of her way of life, her moving where she pleases and speaking where she wishes - itself bound up with her dedication to Christ - which some Church and lay officials seek to curb. Not surprisingly, then, the scenes in Kempe's *Book* which record accusations of heresy reveal a striking subtext which dramatises patriarchal desire to reduce female autonomy. It is this subtext which shows "speaking as a woman" in the pejorative sense of Gerson's complaint to be an activity which exceeds masculine definition. The "something else" to Kempe's speech when she is charged with heresy is a female body which repeatedly escapes patriarchal containment, becoming for Kempe a place of productive, if frightening, crisis and the means by which she attempts to define and articulate her freedom and her relationship with Christ.

That charges of heresy against independent women often primarily served as attempts at social regulation is revealed by the time Kempe is questioned in Leicester as to the nature of her doctrinal beliefs (Chapter 48). When examined by clerics in the town Kempe reveals her orthodoxy initially by stating her acceptable belief in the value of the Eucharist, which was the first question applied to anyone suspected of Lollardy. Following this she reports that she "went on answering on all the articles [of the Faith] as many as they wished to ask her" (Kempe 1988, 153). Windeatt remarks that, in general, Kempe's "devotion to the sacrament, frequent confession, fasting, pilgrimages and holy images, all of which were questioned in Lollard writings," ought to have more than adequately proven her innocence of anti-Church views (Windeatt 1988, 11-12). However, although she reveals the correctness of her doctrine according to Holy Church, Kempe suffers a much more severe attack from the secular authority of Leicester, the Mayor, who, she says, "rebuked her and repeated many reproving and indecent words, which it is more fitting to conceal than express" (Kempe 1988, 153).

Prior to her interrogation for heresy, she had been brought for questioning before the Mayor, who asked where she came from and, typically, who her father was (Chapter 46). Although Kempe listed the impressive credentials of her father and husband, the mayor called her "a false strumpet, a false Lollard, and a false deceiver of the people" (Kempe 1988, 149), and threatened to throw her into prison. As David Aers points out, in this encounter,

the terms of abuse are not random. They assert that [Kempe] subverts the dominant powers' official version of correct sexual, religious, and social order, a threat to

major and interlocking areas of control.... As for the charge "fals strumpet," it takes us into the familiar realm of male projections onto women, ones given full indulgence in the anti-feminist tradition as well as in the daily life that sustains this.... Here the Mayor who immediately charges [Kempe] as a "strumpet" shows the male propensity to sexualize all that a woman can do or say, something he would not do to a male (Aers 1988, 100).

During the exchange which follows this accusation Kempe reports that the Mayor says "many evil and horrible words to her" before she is locked away in the gaoler's house. Next, she is brought before the Steward of Leicester, who, after questioning her before many priests, takes her into his chamber and tries to rape her, speaking "many foul, lewd words." Kempe pleads to be spared because she is "a man's wife" and, after more "filthy signs and...indecent looks," the Steward finally releases her, but only when the boldness of her claim to be empowered to speak by the Holy Ghost astonishes and frightens him into so doing (Kempe 1988, 150-1).

The civil authorities of Leicester were clearly disturbed by Kempe's travelling and teaching alone, and their making her a sexual target served as an attempt to curtail this independence. It was only when the mystic claimed that Christ spoke through her that they were silenced, just as her evident doctrinal orthodoxy satisfied and silenced the clerics. As Aers notes, "[Kempe] catalyzes specifically masculine anxieties about potential female autonomy, the potential freedom of will to select life-projects in which servicing males is not on the agenda" (Aers 1988, 100-1). This is starkly revealed by the Mayor's statement which follows her clerical interrogation in his town: "I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you" (Kempe 1988, 153). It is evident here that the charge of heresy masks a deeper fear, less easily articulated, about the powers of women's words and female freedom. The Mayor's fear that Kempe will lead away the town's wives reflects how the exchange of women as objects in the patriarchal sexual economy of the middle ages so restricted women's exchanges with each other that a woman who spoke freely was perceived as inciting female rebellion. In claiming her divinely sanctioned right to live an unenclosed and relatively autonomous life, unowned by any man, Kempe also embodies a direct challenge to the patriarchal organisation of sex/gender roles which ensures masculine freedom by appropriating women's bodily space.

In Chapter 13 of the *Book* fears of female insubordination are given a different kind of violent expression. In a monastery church in Canterbury Kempe arouses the ire of monks and priests with her weeping, which leads her husband (to whom she was still evidently attached at this stage)²⁹ to abandon her through shame. Next, she angers an old and very powerful monk by claiming to both hear and speak of God, and repeating to the monk a story from scripture. He is the one who unequivocally declares: "I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you'" (Kempe 1988, 63). At Kempe's answer that the monk should support rather than rebuke her as one of God's servants, a young monk proclaims that the mystic is certainly possessed either by the devil or the Holy Ghost (because of her confidence in reciting scripture), and when she at last leaves the monastery, a crowd of people follows, threatening to burn her as a "false Lollard" and heretic.

While, as Atkinson points out, Kempe's telling a biblical story on this occasion may have fuelled mistrust, "given the Lollards' fondness for Scripture," the passage reveals something else to be at issue, and more markedly shows "an ancient suspicion of religious women who were not safely enclosed" (Atkinson 1983, 107-8). The young monk's belief that Kempe must be possessed either by the devil or the Holy Ghost is based on the fact that what she speaks "is Holy Writ," which knowledge she cannot "have of [her]self," since she is a woman. Here is a direct reflection of the medieval understanding of women as permeable, both physically and spiritually, and therefore easily open to suggestion of all kinds and especially of heretical ideas.³⁰

The construction of women as physically and dangerously excessive achieves its most frightening consequence, however, when Kempe is surrounded by an angry mob shouting, "'You shall be burnt, you false Lollard! Here is a cartful of thorns ready for you, and a barrel to burn you with!'" (Kempe 1988, 64). The *Book* states that the mystic, standing completely alone, "her body trembling and quaking dreadfully...did not know where her husband had gone" (Kempe 1988, 64), a significant aspect of her threatened situation as elsewhere she attempts to escape bodily harm by claiming to be "a man's wife," her body under his ownership and rule (Kempe 1988, 150, 160, 171). Here, Kempe prays for help and two young men ask if she is "a heretic" or "a Lollard." When she says that she is neither they escort her "home" to her lodgings where she is safe upon finding her husband. The entire scene is a

graphic example not only of the threat that clerics felt at a woman's speaking (of) scripture, but of the even more violent response aroused among ordinary townspeople by the figure of a lay woman without her husband who dares to speak publicly of God and on her own behalf.³¹

As Hope Weissman remarks, the fact that women as well as men found threatening the mystic's crossing of the boundaries marked by expected roles for women suggests that she probably reminded many of their own unvoiced or unacknowledged desires and fears (Weissman 1982, 216; Aers 1988, 201n). In Hessle (Chapter 53) the *Book* reports that while "men called her Lollard...women came running out of their houses with their distaffs, crying... 'Burn this false heretic'" (Kempe 1988, 168). And when she reaches Beverley the local men advise her to "'give up this life that you lead, and go and spin, and card wool, as other women do, and do not suffer so much shame and so much unhappiness'" (Kempe 1988, 168). Plainly, the charge of heresy functions here as a means of civic policing of "vagrant" or unclassifiable women rather than a method of deciding spiritual orthodoxy.

The old monk's desire that Kempe should be enclosed in a house of stone, like the townsmen's injunction to "spin and card wool," reflects the anxiety caused by a woman who is "out of her place" and who challenges the established system based on the appropriation of female bodies and speech. The fact that women as well as men turned against Kempe reveals that her behaviour contravened accepted codes of "womanhood" by which medieval women understood and identified themselves. Kempe appears as an anomaly and an outlaw of the patriarchal order, a person who fulfils the criteria for neither sex and whose strange mode of life can and should be eradicated as "heretical."

In *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray answers a question about "speaking as a woman" in terms which make clear the challenge to traditional female roles felt by women's public speech, a challenge evidenced in scenes from *The Book of Margery Kempe*. She says:

How can one be a "woman" and be "in the street"? That is, be out in public, be public - and still more tellingly, do so in the mode of speech. We come back to the question of the family: why isn't the woman, who belongs to the private sphere, always locked up in the house? As soon as a woman leaves the house, someone starts to wonder, someone asks her: how can you be a woman and be out here at the

same time? And if, as a woman who is also in public, you have the audacity to say something about *your* desire, the result is scandal and repression. You are disturbing the peace, disrupting the order of discourse (Irigaray 1985a, 144-5).

In contrast to such disruption, the medieval ideal for women, the role in life which offered the highest spiritual reward, involved bodily stillness, invisibility, and silence. In medieval texts of advice to female virgins (such as *Hali Meidhad*, the *Ancrene Wisse* (both c. 1190-1230), and the *Institutione Inclusarum* of Aelred of Rievaulx (1160-2)), the figure of the anchoress, enclosed in a cell of stone, herself functions as a symbol of the necessary barrier between the outside world and the rampant possibilities of the (female) flesh. As Lochrie notes, "the religious life for women consists primarily in adopting boundaries and maintaining an unbroken body" (Lochrie 1991b, 125), which serves as a physical symbol of the possibility of sanctification for all.

In the *Ancrene Wisse* for example, Christ is described as a shield by which humankind - figured as a courtly lady besieged in a castle by enemies - is saved from destruction (*Ancrene Wisse* 1990, 112-17). The Christ who functions as a shield of salvation is presented as the model for the anchoress' discipline, as that which stands between sinful people (the lady in the castle) and the worldly perils which threaten to invade them. That ordinary sinners should be represented as female in the figure of the lady is not surprising given medieval beliefs about women's alignment with the fallen flesh. But while the anchoress who imitates Christ is the metaphorical barrier between the human condition and worldly temptation, she herself partakes of both these obstacles to holiness. "The flesh," that part of human beings which is always vulnerable to disruption from within and temptation from without, exists in a sense both inside and outside the human person, but the borders separating inside and outside are especially unstable in women. Thus "female chastity preserves the 'invisible frontier' between body and world, a sacred space that resists the condition of abjection posed by the 'heaving powers of the flesh'" (Brown 1988, 354, 349, cited in Lochrie 1991b, 126).³²

The overdetermined relationship between the flesh of sinners, the world and the anchoress' chastity means that she stands in for all three components of her situation as it is scripted in the *Ancrene Wisse*. She represents fallen humankind, worldly perils and the barrier between, hence her position as a symbol of the hope of sanctity is an ambiguous one. The limits on an

anchoress' sensual engagement with the world in terms of speaking, seeing and touching, as articulated in the literature advising her, are, then, necessarily strict. If women are seen to be essentially fluid and infinitely suggestible, their position guarding the boundaries between sin and redemption may at any time become subversive if they fail to keep the rules which restrain their bodies and define their role. Speech and sexuality, as forms of exchange with others which breach the borders of the anchoress' enclosure, are outlawed. Thus Aelred of Rievaulx depicts the anchoress' state of chastity as a form of "solitary living above the conversation of the world" (Aelred of Rievaulx 1984, 9. My translation). Here, as Lochrie observes, "the metaphor of conversation...works at the level of speech and sexuality, levels that Aelred collapses" (Lochrie 1991b, 126).

The female mystic's symbolising both disruption and boundary, sin and salvation, and inhabiting the fragile space between through union with Christ makes her Christic relationship itself appear easily open to change and, by extension, to subversion. Kempe, in choosing to deviate from tradition through the terms on which she allies herself with Christ and the space from which she speaks, makes her spiritual relationship a direct challenge to the ideology of the enclosed female body. She is threatened with the fate of the heretic because she claims the freedom in Christ to reshape the female mystical role. And she does this in terms which exploit medieval understandings of the female body as a place of ambiguity and disruptive excess.

Kempe's *Book* also reflects internal anxieties on her part about the singularity of her visionary role. She describes reassurances she is given by Christ that her spirituality and her non-virginal status are acceptable to him (for examples of the latter, see Kempe 1988, 84-8, 126, 247, 253). These conversations with Christ help provide her with the courage to defend her cross-category mode of living vigorously when she is challenged by priests and town rulers. In Kempe's rearticulation of the English female mystic's calling, her status as a wife, combined with her desire to speak publicly, necessarily involve her in "conversation [in and] of the world," much of it with influential and sometimes hostile men.

Beckwith notes that the foregrounding of conversation and dialogue in Kempe's *Book* is a reflection of its production under "conditions of deep anxiety as to who were to be the keepers

of the Word" in her culture (Beckwith 1992, 185; Windeatt 1988, 25). Kempe's reporting of her dialogues with influential men - including interrogations for heresy - serve as evidence of her orthodoxy in a climate where "the monopoly of the clergy over the transmission of the Scriptures was being fundamentally challenged" through the activities of Lollards and the like (Beckwith 1992, 186).³³ As Beckwith points out:

Where the distinction between clerical and lay, "lerner" and "lewed," is watertight, mystic speech will not necessarily threaten or disrupt the clerical function. But in an environment where the clergy no longer uniquely or legitimately transmit the Word of God, who hears God's voice and who is entitled to speak it is a very vexed issue (Beckwith 1992, 186).

The grounds of accusations of heresy against Kempe appear, then, to be the charge of "producing herself," in Beckwith's words (Beckwith 1992, 178), in a role outside of those instituted by the Church. This, by extension, is seen to be threatening to the ordering of her society through its possible influence upon other women, especially wives. While the construction of Kempe's *Book* as a doctrinally orthodox "treatise"³⁴ must largely suppress the aspect of other lay women's words and records in detail only the mystic's conversations with men, there are favourable references to other mystical women writers in the *Book*, which I will discuss in the following section. These women also sought clerical endorsement and spiritual authority and faced similar difficulties and pursued aims similar to Kempe's. Although most of these writers lived outside of England, they provide a more favourable context for Kempe's own treatise than either the discourses of preaching or of heretical activities, although they reveal pressures that arise from these two sources like those which bear on Kempe. In the *vitae* or *lives* of these holy women (which formed a new literary genre by the late middle ages (Bynum 1989, 169)), conversations with religious authorities and with people in the world are an integral part of their relationships with Christ. And their encounters with their Saviour, like Margery Kempe's, arise from and are intimately related to both physical and verbal conversation in the world.

2. 1. 3 Mystical foremothers: The continental tradition of holy women's *lives*

A reference to one of Kempe's continental foremothers occurs after the series of conversations between the English woman's allies and the preaching friar, when Kempe has disrupted his sermon with her weeping (Chapter 62). The *Book* tells how during this period of strife many former supporters had deserted Kempe, including the priest who had been acting as her scribe. However, upon reading in the *life* of Mary of Oignies (1177-1213) of "the wonderful sweetness that she had in hearing the word of God, of the wonderful compassion that she had in thinking of his Passion, of the abundant tears that she wept" (Kempe 1988, 191) as a result, he is moved to Kempe's support once again. The record of Mary's gift of weeping in her clerically endorsed text thus serves to verify Kempe's.

The similarities between the two women's experiences of Passion(ate) weeping extend to include Mary's also being banished from a sermon because of her unstoppable tears,³⁵ and, after reading about this Kempe's scribe finds other evidence of the virtues of compassionate weeping in "*The Prick of Love*"; the writings of Richard Rolle; and the *vita* of the visionary Elizabeth of Hungary (Kempe 1988, 192-3).³⁶ The reference to Mary's *life* (which is repeated again in Chapter 68, by a supporter of Kempe who has read it and mentions it to another preacher in defence of Kempe's weeping during *his* sermon (Kempe 1988, 205-6) functions as a textual strategy - whether on Kempe's part or her scribe's, or both - for representing an episode in which Kempe was much maligned according to the example of that of a saintly woman, a foremother whose life was much like the English mystic's own.

While Mary's text serves here to authorise Kempe's physical response to Christ's Passion, seen by many as excessive and bizarre, it was originally written in defence of Mary's own mode of living, and its fervent devotion to the Passion of Christ. While Kempe faces continual accusations of Lollardy, Mary's *life* was written as a defence of a particular female way of life - that of the Béguines - which was held suspect by official authorities for some time and eventually condemned (Neel 1989, 324). The book itself was, as Roger Ellis states, "a clear response to the troubled times in which its author was living" (*Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 1937, VII, 60-2, cited in Ellis 1990, 171). It was written by Mary's constant supporter, Jacques de Vitry, to endorse the Béguine way in the face of the Cathar heresy (Neel 1989,

326), and Mary is herself the model of orthodoxy upon whom this defence is founded. Petroff's description of the characteristics of the Béguine calling shows how these women's mysticism was similar to Kempe's:

What Marie d'Oignies and her associates had in common were the practice of evangelical poverty, a willingness to support themselves by the work of their hands, ascetic self-sacrifice in the service of others, and a tendency to have visions. They were...mystics of a new sort who focused their meditative effort on the suffering humanity of Christ, on dedication to the Eucharist, and finally on mystical marriage with Christ (Petroff 1986, 174).

Cited in the *Book* as marking the turning point in Kempe's scribe's renewed support of his charge against opposition, Mary's *life* is then both a standard for Kempe's way of life and a textual model for the necessary clerical alliance out of which her *Book* is produced. Through its citation, both Kempe and her scribe place themselves in an orthodox, antiheretical mystical and textual tradition, of which Mary of Oignies is an early exponent. Mary's life may be seen as a model for Kempe's "very material mysticism" (Beckwith 1986) and her physical independence, as well as the clerical support she required to escape charges of heresy. Mary represents a tradition of European women mystics who achieved a limited empowerment under the watchful eyes of male clerical benefactors.

Kempe's continental predecessors help the modern reader make sense of her own devotional "excesses" - her loud weeping and Passion(ate) *imitatio* - as some critics have suggested (Atkinson 1983, 159-82; Dickman 1984). Susan Dickman writes that, not only were there "hundreds, if not thousands, of women like [Kempe]...attempting to live quasi-religious lives in the middle ages, while remaining in the world," but their piety "was concentrated on three particularly 'human' moments in the Christian story: the infant Jesus, Christ the Bridegroom, and the dying Christ" (Dickman 1984, 152; Bynum 1982, 18, 147). This emphasis on Christ's bodiliness led to the special devotion to and physical miracles associated with the Eucharist performed by female visionaries which were described in the Introduction (18-19n; Dickman 1984, 152; Lagorio 1984, 172-3; Bynum 1989, 165-6).

Such excesses are documented in continental women's piety (particularly in the regions of

Germany and the Low Countries) in far greater numbers than in England, and it was also on the continent that women grouped together or chose individual clerical overseers to support their efforts to live lives of special devotion to Christ, often without taking formal vows (Dickman 1984, 154; Petroff 1986, 171-3). The Béguines are a clear example of this trend. Margery Kempe's life echoes the desires of her foremothers in terms of independence of living as well as in the graphically physical contents of her visions. As Petroff points out, from the thirteenth century onwards, more and more European women sought:

a life of evangelical poverty; they wanted the opportunity to work, to a self-sufficiency not based on the income from property but on the work of their hands; they wanted a daily religious practice and the education to pursue that practice intelligently and the opportunity to discuss spiritual ideas among themselves. They desired flexibility of commitment and lifestyle, so that there would be the possibility for active charity in the world as well as for a solitary contemplative existence when the need arose. They were eager to live chaste lives in completely female communities, but they preferred not to take permanent vows of chastity, and they resisted strict enclosure (Petroff 1986, 171).

For medieval women mystics, writing a visionary text was a complex and often difficult process which involved circumnavigating, by means of male supporters (who were often the texts' scribes), the centuries-old associations of women's words with damnable and deluding bodily passions. This meant that the mystics' texts had to contain a doubleness of voice in that they needed to incorporate orthodoxy as well as a claim to special sanctity. The women's *lives* contain record of the many passionate physical activities they performed in devotion to Christ, such as those Kempe records in her *Book*. But as Kempe's *Book* also reveals, particularly through the example of the preaching friar's sermon, these physical excesses could still be viewed as potentially troubling, hence the need for continued clerical sanction.

The female mystics who succeeded in avoiding conviction for heresy and maintaining orthodox status cast their lives into a narrative at least partly as a strategy of physical survival. Their texts, as "bodies of work" themselves, are in a sense both a record of their bodily experiences and a way of overcoming or transmuting the normal restrictions on women's speech, and particularly on the speech of women who were sexually experienced, as a number of Kempe's continental foremothers were.³⁷ This in itself is evidence that their identification

with their Saviour was in direct contrast to that prescribed as the feminine ideal through the doctrine of the enclosed female body.

Indeed, the women whose *lives* I briefly discuss in this section were all empowered, through the intimacy and fervour of their relationship with Christ, to "speak as women" in the sense that together they and their writings formed a community of female visionaries whose concerns and activities differed from those of most men (and other lay women). However they had also to negotiate the derogatory terms in which women's speech was held to be suspect because "womanly," in the sense of being easily contaminated by currents of heresy and sin. The mystics' empowerment was nonetheless wide-ranging, including not only the act of "writing" and the achievement of clerical support necessary to it but also, in many cases, the freedom to lead lives of unenclosed devotion to their Saviour, to teach, travel and talk with likeminded others about spiritual things.

Of course, while the immediate means of this empowerment was Christ, its maintenance was bound up with more ordinary but powerful men.³⁸ As Beckwith notes, medieval mystics were a source of anxiety to the Church, in its role as "'keeper of the Word,' an anxiety intensified in a period of increasing lay literacy, where mysticism was a vital form of distress and dissent.... Often mystics and the mystical experience could...readily be used as a 'bulwark against heresy'" (Beckwith 1986, 40).³⁹ Petroff notes that Mary's arch-supporter, Jacques de Vitry, was so impressed by the ideals and activities of her Béguine community at Liège that he gave up his career at the University of Paris to become one of her followers (Petroff 1986, 173). The Béguines, like the Humiliati in Lombardy and the early Franciscans in Umbria, as well as several other groups mentioned by Petroff,⁴⁰ all had certain attitudes in common concerning religious life in the world, including a belief in self-supporting work and a degree of freedom to travel, and all were "viewed with mistrust by the ecclesiastical establishment" (Petroff 1986, 173). Petroff points out that de Vitry was theologically conservative and anxious about the spread of Catharism in the region; hence his relationship with Mary and her group benefited both parties. His association with the community at Liège was an important factor in his ascent in the hierarchy of the Church. However Petroff also claims that, because of his activities and writings, we now know much about "holy women" who lived unenclosed lives in the middle ages (before and during Margery Kempe's time), information which might

not otherwise have been recorded (Petroff 1986, 173-4).

In a sense, then, the relationship between lay women mystics and their male supporters was, like the discourses of preaching and heresy charges, based on an appropriation of women's words and the material of their lives. And Margery Kempe's *Book* is certainly not immune to such a reading. And yet, in an atmosphere in which the Church with its male hierarchy was continually reasserting the boundaries of orthodoxy against the activities of those it labelled heretics - many of whom were women - the comparative freedom some female visionaries achieved is impressive. Just as Kempe may be said to engage with the discourses of popular preaching and allegations of heresy in her text, turning them on their heads and confounding their messages about women, so her text reveals engagement with the texts of her foremothers and contemporaries which is equally tactical. Explicit as well as suggestive references to her mentors' lives serve to place her *Book* in a more comprehensible context than that evoked by the devotional and penitential traditions created solely by the English Church to guide the laity. But these references also highlight the contradictions inherent in "writing" a female *life* the authority of which depends upon maintaining the continued favour of men.

The reference to Mary's weeping discussed above, for instance, occurring at the point in Kempe's *Book* when her tears are seen as most challenging to priestly authority, ironically serves as both a strategic authorisation of the gift and an accentuation of its transgressive aspect, since even the tears of an acknowledged holy woman like Mary were seen as disturbing enough for her to be sent out of church. The *Book* goes on to tell how Kempe's scribe reads that the priest who banished Mary from church was himself afflicted with violent weeping, so that Kempe's gift of tears is endorsed at least three times: first by Mary's priest's weeping; secondly by Mary's scribe's recording of it; and lastly by Kempe's scribe's reaffirming his charge's sanctity and noting the whole incident in the *Book*.

Petroff suggests that the reason that female visionaries' tears were so unsettling to others (especially male authorities) was because they functioned, as well as reminders of Christ's Passion, as signs of the women's frustration over having to use male scribes at all, and having to go to such lengths to ensure that they were seen as orthodox and escaped the stake. She describes the experiences of Kempe, Mary and a thirteenth-century Franciscan tertiary (a

member of the third (lay) order of Franciscans), Angela of Foligno:

It seems that [their] violent crying...is the inarticulate cry of one needing a voice, needing to have words, in a world that would deny that voice. All three were married women - which made them unlikely candidates as images of purity and sanctity. All three had unusual vocations that caused them to live on the periphery of religious society.... All three...had to choose...men to write their words for them.... All three women were in part crying in humiliation at their helplessness to communicate, at their dependence on others, their desire to handle and control words (Petroff 1986, 39-40).

If this was so, the circumscription of the women's words and cries was also felt to be necessary because, serving as a reminder of Christ's Passion and arising out of devotion to him, their tears and bodily convulsions functioned as "a claim to a privileged language, the Word made flesh and uttered through the flesh," as Lochrie points out (Lochrie 1991b, 137). And this language may have threatened to bypass, through the mystics' intimate relationship and physical identifications with a "feminised" Christ, the authority of their male scribes and overseers, the official "keepers of the Word."

Kempe's prolific travels would have been the means by which she received some information about her predecessors. Another source was the reading of visionary texts done by her scribe and other clerical supporters, which they communicated with her. Kempe reports being read a copy of St Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations* (Kempe 1988, 182) which would have been one of several in circulation in England at the time.⁴¹ Hope Emily Allen records that there are at least seven English translations of parts of the *Revelations* to be found in fifteenth-century manuscripts (Kempe 1940, 276n).

St Bridget was probably the most well-known continental woman saint in Kempe's England. Her cult became widespread and influential in the century following her death, when the order which she founded spread throughout Europe. A Bridgettine house was first established in England in 1415, at Syon abbey in Twickenham (Atkinson 1983, 172-5). Monks and nuns from Sweden who came to England to teach new members of the order while awaiting its official endorsement passed through Lynn, and as Allen notes, Kempe would have known of the saint from infancy (Kempe 1940, 280n). She would also have been touched by the current enthusiasm surrounding the new order, and records a visit she made to the abbey in 1434 at

Lammas time (Kempe 1988, 290) for a special indulgence obtainable there. The Bridgettine order was, as Atkinson points out, not only "a center of mystical devotion" in England, but of "continental influence, and of feminine piety" (Atkinson 1983, 173). As Windeatt suggests: "The pattern of [Bridget's] life as a married mystic, the transition from wife to Bride of Christ, the sustainedly visionary experience of her life - all such things would have appealed to [Kempe] in vindicating the potential of the female mystic" (Windeatt 1988, 18).

Although Bridget was of a much higher social class than Kempe and so had higher spiritual ambitions, her activities advising and criticising Church authorities, founding an order and leading political campaigns (including working for the Papacy to be returned to Rome from Avignon during the period of its exile there (1309-77) prior to the Great Schism of 1378-1417) (Atkinson 1983, 170; Petroff 1986, 55n; Windeatt 1988, 18) were undertaken at God's command but in necessary alliance with male rulers and her spiritual director. In these diplomatic endeavours and relationships, too, she was an important model for the English mystic, since without allies in high places she would never have achieved such success and renown.

While specific references to the texts of Bridget, Mary and Elizabeth of Hungary occur in Kempe's *Book*, influential works by male mystics from Germany and the Netherlands were also known in England during her lifetime (Windeatt 1988, 17, 299n).⁴² Other continental women's texts in circulation in England were Mechtild of Hackborn's *Booke of Gostely Grace*; Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*; the visions of Elizabeth of Schönau, and the *lives* of Elizabeth of Spalbek and Christina the Marvellous (McNamer 1990, xxxvn; Windeatt 1988, 20). The *Book* also reveals a strong association throughout Kempe's life with "Dewchlond" - the German-speaking regions and the Low Countries (Windeatt 1988, 17) - where women's mystical piety flourished.⁴³ Furthermore, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Kempe's home base, King's Lynn, was a busy port town and centre of communication and trade with the rest of Europe. News of devotional trends on the continent circulated in the town to add to the stories of the lives of her foremothers Kempe may have heard in the places she visited. In addition, Norman Tanner notes that there were communities of lay women in Norwich in the fifteenth century which "closely resembled beguinages" (Tanner 1984, 64), although enclosed religious vocations for women were more popular in

England than such groupings. Kempe, however, may have been inspired by these women and their departure from English conventions, while eschewing a community life for herself.

Other mystics whom Kempe may well have perceived as models include Blessed Dorothea of Montau and St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). Both women, like Bridget and Mary, achieved wide recognition leading to cult status by aligning themselves with astute and ambitious men (Atkinson 1983, 167-8; Kieckhefer 1984, 31). Some information on St Catherine is included in the one surviving manuscript of an English version of Mary of Oignies' *life*, which also contains versions of the *lives* of several other saintly women (Windeatt 1988, 20). Windeatt points out that this sort of collection is suggestive of the material Kempe's clerical advisers would have read, and Catherine's *Dialogue* was translated into English and circulated in late medieval England (Hodgson 1965; Catherine of Siena 1966, cited in Windeatt 1988, 20). Kempe also visited Danzig, where, the *Book* states, "she was warmly welcomed by many people for our lord's love" (Kempe 1988, 275). Dorothea would have become quite famous in her home town by this time, so Kempe would no doubt have heard tales of her life there (Kempe 1940, 258n).

Catherine, like Kempe, faced familial opposition to her choice of religious vocation, which she persevered against and overcame, eventually experiencing a mystical marriage with Christ, as Kempe does (Atkinson 1983, 48n). St Bridget of Sweden and Mary of Oignies, too, achieved vows of chastity in cooperation with their husbands, and were important models for the English woman in this respect (Atkinson 1983, 169; Windeatt 1988, 19), whereas Angela of Foligno had to get rid of her family by more devious spiritual means.⁴⁴ Dorothea of Montau, again like Kempe, had many children and had to try and persuade her husband to let her embark on a life of chastity. He was less compliant than Kempe's husband, however, and Dorothea only achieved her goal after his death, four years before her own (Atkinson 1983, 179; Kieckhefer 1984, 22). While the Prussian mystic makes of her sufferings at her husband's hands a sign of sanctity and blessing, the roles of wife and mother are played down in her biography, which reveals no attachment to her husband and children (Kieckhefer 1984, 32). Kempe's text likewise follows this trend.

On the subject of family and friends, Richard Kieckhefer observes that the whole of

Dorothea's life, as her confessor John of Marienwerder depicts it, "was one of singular alienation." Kieckhefer claims that "it is possible that a theological bias lies behind this picture: the ascetic ideology of the era could lead to disparagement of friendship, and even familial affection could become a sign of worldliness" (Kieckhefer 1984, 31-2). However the downplaying of Dorothea's marital and maternal experiences is more likely to be a strategy necessitated by the Church's attitudes to female sexuality, which placed mothers on a level far below virgins as vehicles of divine communication. Dorothea's acts of excessive corporeal devotion to Christ's suffering take the place of ordinary maternal and familial concerns in her *vita* and may be seen as a form of atonement for past sexual "sins" which transmutes them into a higher form.⁴⁵ This occurs most specifically in her text when she experiences a mystical pregnancy. As Clarissa Atkinson observes, "[Dorothea] identified maternal anguish not with the suffering of the mother, Mary, but with the passion of God" (Atkinson 1991, 186). In this way, like Kempe, the pain of Dorothea's maternal experience was transformed into an identification with the pain of Christ.

Kieckhefer also notes that all the versions of Dorothea's *life* present her "as a woman of exceptionally strong emotion, which her culture, even while ambivalent, encouraged her to channel in the direction of overwrought piety" (Kieckhefer 1984, 23). Like Kempe's, Dorothea's "overwrought piety" disturbed many of those around her, but it also earned her a reputation of spiritual privilege. Her gift of tears, for instance, is cited in her *vita* as evidence of her sanctity (Atkinson 1983, 180), a claim also appropriated by Kempe.⁴⁶ As Kieckhefer acknowledges, Dorothea's moving from her home town of Danzig to Marienwerder on the death of her husband, where she submitted to the direction of her confessor and scribe, was a major factor in the popularity she and later her cult achieved. With her confessor's help she was able to create a new identity as anchoress and holy woman, sidestepping the prejudices she would have had to confront in her home town where she was known through her husband as a wife and mother (Kieckhefer 1984, 31).

For the female visionaries who had been married and had also had children, the devotion to Christ which is recorded in their texts thus involves, as Kempe's does, a continuation of their former physical experience, albeit on a more spiritually rewarding plane. As Petroff states, while virginity or at least celibacy was essential for these women's spiritual development, the

proof of that growth "was not virginity, but visions" (Petroff 1986, 35), visions which, for the formerly married women, were signs of a life transformed but nonetheless embodying the conflicts of its past. Margery Kempe's Passion visions, during which she twisted and writhed like a woman in childbirth (Kempe 1988, 105-6), may be seen in this light. While her physical emulation of Christ's suffering in her visions in Jerusalem and elsewhere reflects orthodox devotional practice, it also serves as an expression of her own sorrow and grief at her former sins and trespasses. Given that she was no virgin, these sins clearly include her prior life of sexual activity and childbearing.⁴⁷ In Mary of Oignies, too, similar extremes of physical devotion are recorded. Her *vita* states that, like Kempe during her weepings in Jerusalem, Mary "cried as a woman in childbirth" (qtd. in Kurtz 1988, 193), and that in meditation - again like Kempe - she mothered the infant Christ (Petroff 1986, 9-10).

Angela of Foligno's piety and life experiences resemble Kempe's more closely than almost any other of her continental predecessors. She, like Kempe, came of a successful family, married while quite young and had several children (Underhill 1912, 89). She also lived a life of worldly vanity before her conversion in middle age. Dickman notes that Angela's post-conversion spirituality presents the closest parallel with Kempe's in her commitment to suffering and shame for the sake of Christ (Dickman 1984, 164), a style of devotion which reflects the difficulties medieval female mystics found in reconciling a sexually experienced past with a chaste and holy vocation.

Angela's devotion to Christ is similar to Kempe's in that it is manifested in extreme physical behaviours which may be seen, following the suggestions put forward in Chapter One, as "hysterical." Lochrie notes how Angela's piety, like Kempe's, involves an outright rejection of the doctrine of the enclosed female body, and she engages instead in public displays of "mystical abjection that draw upon the heaving powers of the flesh to experience rupture, discontinuity, excess" (Lochrie 1991b, 130). Whereas Kempe writhes on the ground in a Passion *imitatio* which recalls her experiences of childbirth, Angela (as well as weeping violently) strips off her clothes before the Cross, and offers her body to Christ in a parody of "the manner of [the] wanton woman" (Angela of Foligno 1966, 4; 1927, II. 8-10, cited in Lochrie 1991b, 134) she had formerly been. Both these behaviours enact a caricature of the medieval understanding of women's bodily being as excessive and seductive, a double act of

mimesis which overloads conventional representations of femininity with an excess of meaning(s). As Lochrie observes, "[Angela's] meditations focus on the wounds, ruptures, dislocations in the body of Christ" (Lochrie 1991b, 134), as do Kempe's Passion visions in Jerusalem, where the physical dislocation and wounding of Christ's body is replicated in Kempe's own anguished convulsions on the ground (Kempe 1988, 105-6; Lochrie 1991a, 174).

The wounded body of Christ becomes the space in which the mystics' bodies and cries are reinscribed as holy, and in which their otherwise unrepresented physicality is offered expression as well as redemption. Miri Rubin notes that in the fifteenth century "Christ's wounds were hailed as the essence of Christ's humanity," and "for mystics they were literally an entry into Christ" (Rubin 1992b, 303. See also Gougoud 1927, 80-91; Gray 1963). Thus: "Experience was drawn into Christ's vulnerable form, which was at once accessible through pity and also the source of all that was good" (Rubin 1992b, 304). Through identification with the wounded Christic body, women like Angela and Kempe were able to transform the meaning of their excessive and boundaryless female flesh.

While Kempe's responses to the discourses of medieval preaching, heretical allegations, and the *vitae* of her foremothers reflect the ways in which each textual system represents the female body differently - the discourses of preaching and heresy negating its activity and the *vitae* showing evidence of its production in visions - her text's portrayal of her direct engagement with popular representations of Christ and his mother appears to be most empowering. In the final section of this chapter I will discuss how and why this empowering identification was enacted. I will proceed to lay the ground for the following chapter by tracing the connections between Kempe's Passion(ate) theatrics and popular medieval understandings of the sorrowing Virgin and the feminised Christ.

2. 2 The flesh of Christ and the bodies of women: The Virgin Mary and the feminised Christ in the discourses of popular devotion

And perhaps He has chosen *her* body to inscribe His will, even if she is less able to read the inscription, poorer in language, "crazier" in her speech, burdened with matter(s) that history has laid on her, shackled in by speculative plans that paralyze her desire (Irigaray 1985b, 198).

And then our Lord's body shook and shuddered, and all the joints of that blissful body burst and broke apart, and his precious wounds ran down with rivers of blood on every side, and so she had ever more reason for more weeping and sorrowing (Kempe 1988, 233).

2. 2. 1 The heterogeneous flesh

Medieval scientific thought manifested the erasure of sexual difference which Irigaray sees as endemic to the history of "western" ideas in that it took the male body as the paradigm for human physicality. As Bynum indicates:

It was the form or pattern or definition of what we are as humans; what was particularly womanly was the unformedness, the "stuffness" or physicality of our humanness. Such a notion identified woman with breaches in boundaries, with lack of shape or definition, with openings and exudings and spillings forth (Bynum 1989, 186).

Or, in psychoanalytic terms, with "lack." While European societies in the late middle ages revealed a fundamental concern with the embodiment of the human person - scholastic thought from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, for example, focused increasingly on the human as a unity of body and soul in which the boundaries between the two often became blurred - there was also a strong fascination with the *limits* of corporeality. This interest on the part of male thinkers in "the nature of bodiliness at its very boundaries" (Bynum 1989, 188-91) meant that "woman" came to symbolise the fascinating and dangerous borderlands of the mortal body, as I outlined briefly in section 2. 1. 1.⁴⁸

As we have seen, "the flesh," site of human frailty and will to evil since the Fall, was figured as female by male theologians; for example, as Lochrie reveals, in the image of a wife who must be ruled by her husband; as the disobedient Eve; and as an old woman in thrall to

corrupting passions (Bernard of Clairvaux 1841-64, ch. 7, par. 12, 182, col. 841d, ch. 6, par. 10, 182, col. 840b-c; 1987, 74, 76, cited in Lochrie 1991b, 121). Peter Brown observes that the theological notion of "the flesh" implies a particular way of regarding the body and its passions. In the Pauline view,

the body was presented as lying in the shadow of a mighty force, the power of *the flesh*: the body's physical frailty, its liability to death and the undeniable penchant of its instincts toward sin served Paul as a synecdoche for the state of humankind pitted against the spirit of God (Brown 1988, 48).

Lochrie notes that for both St Bernard and St Augustine, "woman" represents "influx itself, where the boundaries of body and soul are continually erased" by dangerous passions. She also shows how medieval medical views of women joined with theological ones to depict women's bodies as the ground of "the fissured flesh," the site within the human person through which sin enters through the body to corrupt the soul (Lochrie 1991b, 122):

The key to the representation of woman in the Middle Ages...was...the flesh, the senses and the recalcitrant will. Woman was the "heaving powers of the flesh," the place of disruption, the breach in the harmonious unity of man and God and the flesh and spirit.... The flesh in its Augustinian and Bernardian senses is neither spiritual nor corporeal, but heterogeneous. It is that which cannot be divided, but neither is it unified or harmonious. It is already impure (Lochrie 1991b, 127).

The notion of the flesh as it developed in early Christianity was, as Brown makes clear, suffused with negative female associations at the same time as it was understood as standing between the integrity of the body dedicated to Christ and the surrounding (pagan) society (Brown 1988, 194-5). It was "feminine" in the sense of connoting a state of helpless passion but *female* virginity was also the metaphor behind the idea, fundamental to the early Church, of virginity (*integritas*, literally "intactness" (Bugge 1975, 115-35)) as saving Christians from "the polluting 'admixture' of the outside world" (Brown 1988, 48, 354). Women were figures for that which simultaneously exceeded and sanctified the early Church, an attitude reflected in the later portrayal of the anchoress in works like *Ancrene Wisse*. Specific female bodies such as those of enclosed female religious were thus the literal, physical ground of the metaphor on which the ideas of the flesh and salvation from it were based.

In its violent power and its "liability to death," the flesh, symbolised by "woman," has affinities with what goes by the name of the death drives in Freudian psychoanalytic theory: the potentially destructive, unsymbolised affects in individuals which can erupt in expressions of violence in society. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray describes women's association with death for men as that which assures men an adequate sublimation of the death drives necessary for a stable existence. Irigaray's account of women's alignment with death in the masculine economy sounds like the description of the role of the female flesh in medieval culture outlined above. Both death in psychoanalytic terms and the flesh in medieval terms are integral to masculine transcendence, that is, the projection of God as male and the concomitant construction of male subjectivity as godlike which exists in the history of "western" culture:

In this proliferating desire of the same, death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other. Woman will assume the function of representing death (of sex/organ), castration, and man will be sure as far as possible of achieving subjugation (Irigaray 1985b, 27, qtd. in Whitford 1991a, 115-6).

And Elisabeth Bronfen describes the association of "woman" with death in the following way:

Like the death drive, which articulates that death is not outside but rather inextricably inhabiting life, femininity also is not a reassuringly canny opposite to masculinity, but rather is inside the masculine, inhabiting it as "otherness, as its own disruption" (Felman 1981, 41). As manifestations of such a force of oscillation, both death and femininity not only call into question rigid categories, but also mark the absence of a fixed place within culture. They function as the foundation and condition of culture's representational systems, as *telos* and origin, yet themselves exist nowhere as reference for this representation (de Lauretis 1984, 13, cited in Bronfen 1992, 53).

While women are engaged in safeguarding the violent effects of the death drives for men, they are unable to sublimate their own, and this can have self-destructive results for them. As Whitford notes, these drives can become, for instance, "the traditional self-sacrifice of the woman" (Whitford 1991a, 115), or be expressed in masochistic behaviours. If death is, in Irigaray's terms, "the only representative of an outside," of something possibly other which would call into question the self-sufficiency of "man," then women are prevented from accessing and activating this "other/outside" by being made to stand in for it as well as by the

unsymbolised nature of their own destructive impulses.

In medieval terms this ambiguous "outside" is "woman" represented as the heterogeneous flesh which stands between man and God and mediates the tumultuous forces within the human (male-model) person. The Freudian death drives may be seen as a contemporary correlative of the downward pull of the postlapsarian body/self in medieval culture. Medieval women's experience of their own "fleshliness" would seem to be without the kind of mediation available to men, as represented in their portrayal as the "shield of salvation," the enclosed female body as symbol of the sanctification of the world. Perhaps this lack of representation for their specifically female fleshliness explains why so many more medieval women visionaries than men engage in acts of physical "masochism"⁴⁹ in devotion to their Saviour. But perhaps they also perceived in the figure of a man whose flesh was vulnerable like theirs, a mediator for their own fleshly weakness.

2. 2. 2 The sorrowing virgin and the feminised Christ

The new emphasis given to flesh in the late middle ages was reflected in Christ's bodily existence becoming the main focus of popular devotion. The Passion, Christ's suffering and death and the grief of his Mother, the Virgin Mary, increased in importance in the period so that, as Gail McMurray Gibson remarks: "The relevant central image of the late middle ages is a suffering, human body racked on a cross...its secrets red, fresh, and bleeding" (Gibson 1989, 6). And according to Jennifer Ash: "The Christianity of the later Middle Ages was a discourse constituted through a rhetoric (both visual and verbal) of violence and death, of pain and suffering: a discourse of the body and the bodily, revelling in the fleshliness of the Word" (Ash 1990, 76). These developments were of course an expression of values that had always inhered in Christianity, whose deity's gift of salvation involved the taking on of human flesh. They culminated in the period in a distinct emphasis on those moments in Christ's life when his humanity was most evident: his birth and death, or the Holy Nativity and Passion. His Mother's presence with and subjugation to her Son on these occasions led to an increase in devotion to her also.

Believers' emotional and affective responses to these events in Christ's life were channelled into the notion of *imitatio Christi*, as described in the Introduction (7). The imaginary identification of the individual Christian with the human Christ, his Mother and other saints was assisted through a wide range of media which interconnected within the cultures of particular regions of England (Atkinson 1983, 92-3; Gibson 1989, 1-18; Gray 1990). These included religious drama in the forms of liturgical processions and cycles of plays produced by town guilds; religious lyrics which formed interludes in popular sermons; paintings; church windows and murals; and books of devotion such as the immensely popular *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and its English version, Love's *Mirror* (Love 1992). As Lochrie observes, this kind of spirituality "perceive[d] a profound relationship between human cognition through the semiotics of the imagination and the life of Christ....[and] the key to both Christ's Incarnation and imaginative cognition is that spiritual intention becomes wedded to corporeal similitude" (Lochrie 1991a, 31). In other words, in acting out scenes from their Saviour's existence, believers were encouraged to engage in a physical remembering of Christ's Passion - not unlike the practice of eucharistic communion, itself the model for this sacramental spirituality - in which the body became the site of an experience of (inward and outward) spiritual transformation. The increase in devotion to Christ's humanity in the late middle ages meant that popular forms of piety were increasingly scripted onto the bodies of women and men, as the *Mirror* and the *Meditationes* reveal, so that "the tokens of suffering in the body commemorate what the memory, imagination and flesh know" (Lochrie 1991a, 36), and remember it afresh.

Although given little credence in the Church's official stories the Virgin was also presented as a model for believers in the devotion of the period. As Marina Warner notes, the Franciscan movement had, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, harnessed the image of the Virgin Mary to its ideals, so that Mary's quintessential lowliness was portrayed as the prime example of the imitation of Christ's humility in consenting to take on human flesh for the salvation of humankind: "The image of the Virgin of Humility compresses the new strain of poignant intimacy that men (sic) were then feeling about the highest mysteries of Christianity" (Warner 1985, 182). Grosz observes that, traditionally, "Mary is represented entirely in the light of, and as a complement to Christ," and "the son himself is the model on which the mother is based," so that "in a sense he is her mother and she, his daughter" (Grosz

1989, 83). By means of a symbolic reversal in which the Virgin's motherhood is wholly appropriated by her Son, the Virgin as Christ's first "follower" becomes the primary model for all Christian believers as well as for all women. Her desire is subsumed within that of her Son, and she emulates him in the most theologically important and highly charged moments of his earthly existence, as Christian believers must also seek to do (Miles 1986, 200-1).

In *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* Irigaray argues that Christ's death reflects the prior death of fertility in Mary, who becomes a sexless vessel for the Father's Word and foregoes her own desire: "To the Virgin who lives forever because she dies to her generation in order to become merely the vehicle for the Other, corresponds, in a sort of mimetic representation, the murder of the man she loves." And in her emulation of Christ, "she follows the man before whom she came" (Irigaray 1991d, 166, 168).⁵⁰ In Irigaray's terms it is the material nature of the Virgin's motherhood, that disturbing physical excess which threatens to escape and disrupt masculinist systems, that is appropriated and displaced onto the representation of Christ as feminine and, more specifically, Christ as mother to humanity in the religious devotion of the later middle ages (Ash 1990, 97).⁵¹

Caroline Bynum's work has demonstrated the extent to which medieval cultures perceived "an association of woman with the body or the humanity of Christ" (Bynum 1989, 175), and Ash outlines some of the specific features of this association:

The crucified body of Christ is constructed as the maternal body in its capacity to nurture and nourish the human soul...in the eucharistic capacity of Christ's corporeality to sustain also the body (usually a woman's body),⁵² to provide the basic requirements necessary for (physical) survival. The bleeding (side) wound as a source of nourishment is a lactating breast; but it is more than this, it is also a womb. The agonising pain of the crucifixion, the suffering of Christ in His passion, was the suffering, the "passion" of a woman giving birth (Ash 1990, 86. See also Bynum 1986, 262-3; 1989, 175-9; Petroff 1986, 17).

Women's affinity with Christ's physical being was endorsed through the development of the doctrines of the Virgin Birth, including the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, which posited Mary as the sole but passive contributor of Christ's bodiliness (Bynum 1989, 181). Such a notion was informed by medieval scientific understandings of female physicality and the female role in human generation, which held that the male contributes the soul or

substance of the human person while the female serves as the passive physical base (Bynum 1982, 133; Keller 1986, 48; Ash 1990, 90). Thus women were aligned with Mary (as well as with Christ) and were urged, most notably in popular representations of scenes of her Son's Passion and death, to emulate her as she himself emulated him.

In the *Meditationes* the Virgin is present in all the scenes from Christ's life (Gibson 1989, 49-50), and is set forth as a model of compassionate identification with his suffering through her unrestrained weeping (Love 1992, 176). Kempe's tears, then, are in the late medieval devotional tradition in which believers, by imitating Mary, sought to inscribe into their own bodily being the sufferings of Christ. In Kempe's envisioning of scenes from Christ's Crucifixion, the Virgin goes mad with grief, so that the mystic feels compelled to offer to bear her sorrow for her (Kempe 1988, 234).⁵³ The Virgin becomes "the primary reader at the Crucifixion and the model for all subsequent mystical readings of the Christic body," including Kempe's (Lochrie 1991a, 177. See also Miles 1986, 201n).

As the proto-mimic of her Son's suffering (which is also the source of her own), the Virgin is reduced to a position as hysterical spectator of the Passion drama, which is evidenced by the frenzied physical movements she displays in popular representations of her sorrow such as those in lyrics, plays, painting and sculpture of the late middle ages (Weissman 1982, 211-2; Lochrie 1991a, 181-91). While, as Lochrie notes, the physical excesses of shrieking and self-mutilation on Mary's part belong to the "eastern" tradition, they were obviously being taken up by medieval women in the "west" since they were condemned in "western" writings (Lochrie 1991a, 180, 184, 187). And even in England, the Virgin as portrayed in a wide range of devotional media is a creature whose entire physical being is racked with inarticulate grief (Lochrie 1991a, 180-92). The sorrow of the passive, mute body of her Son has been displaced onto her body and, like the hysteric, she mimics behaviour which provides an outlet for anguish she cannot otherwise voice, because there exist no channels for an articulation of female suffering or female desire.

2. 2. 3 The abject body

The female physical excess which, in the Virgin's (and in Kempe's) case, lacks symbolisation is what Grosz, commentating on Kristeva, describes as the "unrepresented residue in maternity which has not been adequately taken up in religious discourse, a residue that refuses to conform, as Christianity requires, to masculine, oedipal, phallic order." She adds that it is, however, "occasionally touched upon by discourses of the sacred and is experienced as religious ecstasy, in bliss, in surrender of a most corporeal kind" (Grosz 1989, 84). The corporeality of the surrender Kempe describes in her Passion visions is displayed in the extremes of uncontrollable weeping and physical paroxysm as she runs "continually to and fro" like "a woman without reason," and cries so violently that "[her] body fail[s]" and she falls to the ground (Kempe 1988, 234, 239).

The "unrepresented residue" of maternity in Kempe's text may be seen as the result of the denial of her maternal experience that she must enact in order to become a visionary. Here it provokes a situation in which the abject, defined by Kristeva as that which threatens the boundaries of the individual subject, the "clean and proper body" or self (Kristeva 1982, 91), is given tortured expression. As Grosz describes it, "abjection is a reaction to the recognition of the impossible transcendence of the subject's corporeality, and the impure, defiling elements of its uncontrollable materiality" (Grosz 1990b, 87-8), the materiality from which it originated and grew. In Irigaray's view, transcending one's corporeality is especially difficult - as yet impossible - for women, since women's bodies function in phallogocentric culture as unsymbolised agents of the transcendence of men.

The excess of female physicality which fails to achieve coherent expression in language is related to the state of abjection which, marking the border between the existence of the individual subject and the forces of its obliteration, is Kristeva's term for the disturbing awareness of the human subject's ambiguous, mortal position. In psychoanalytic terms, she claims that: "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of a pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 1982, 10). While the abject has obvious connections with women and with mothering, it is also intimately bound up with the sacred, being expressed through dietary

taboos or exclusions in monotheistic societies (such as in ancient Hebraic or Old Testament culture). These function as attempts to purify or maintain the boundaries of the self and of the society as a whole. Thus Kristeva asserts that "abjection accompanies all religious structurings," and that "the various means of *purifying* the abject...make up the history of religions" (Kristeva 1982, 17), an idea which corresponds with Irigaray's belief that "western" patriarchal religions such as Christianity are attempts to cover over and expiate the symbolic order's unrecognised debt to maternity.

Abjection also has a special relation to the Christian concept of the flesh. Kristeva argues that New Testament spirituality makes the abject part of the internal condition of the believer, and this divided inner state is ascribed to the flesh or "fallen" self. However:

maternal principle...is not for that matter revalorized, rehabilitated. Of its nourishing as much as threatening heterogeneity...theological posterity will keep only the idea of sinning flesh.... The brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation (Kristeva 1982, 117, 126).

Despite Christianity's negative cast on "woman"'s alignment with the heterogeneous flesh, abjection at least helps provide an outlet for the expression of a kind of bodily protest at this attempted recuperation.⁵⁴ As Grosz points out:

Abjection is the body's acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections - effects of desire, not nature. It testifies to the precarious grasp of the subject on its own identity, an assertion that the subject may slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed. It is, in other words, an avowal of the death drive, a movement of undoing identity (Grosz 1990b, 90).

As the force behind the excessive behaviours by which the body articulates what exists beyond or outside of its symbolic representation, the abject is implicated in the "hysterical" or disturbingly physical aspects of female mysticism, that which escapes the borders of patriarchal discourse. Kempe's Passion(ate) *imitatio*, following that of the Virgin, exploits the possibilities of subversion at the site of the intersection of female and maternal physical excess with the sacred. As Lochrie encouragingly asserts:

Abjection poses a continual threat to the human subject. Yet it also offers a radical notion of perfection. The excess of drives - those heaving powers of the flesh -

topples over into the love of God.... The mystic who insists on that which has been excluded in medieval Christianity - namely, the feminine, the pervious flesh, and defilement - takes abjection for the sublime (Lochrie 1991b, 128-9).

2. 2. 4 Mystical hysteria

To speak as a woman means to.... speak with meanings that resonate, that are tactile and corporeal as well as conceptual, that reverberate in their plurality and polyvocality (Grosz 1989, 132).

By articulating her pain and sorrow at Christ's death in the manner of the Virgin, Kempe gives expression to aspects of her female experience - sexual and maternal - otherwise denied representation: "in effect, she displaces the secret text of ecclesiastical culture with her own bodily reading of Christ's Passion" (Lochrie 1991a, 196). Her behaviour is "hysterical" in the sense of translating into culturally comprehensible terms the excess that is female sexuality in her culture (Grosz 1989, 134). While Kempe's mystical "hysteria" consists of orthodox devotional behaviour given an unusually dramatic form, it also caricatures, through excessive mimicry, the way in which the Virgin was held up to medieval women as a model of self-abnegation and submission to the Father's/her Son's desire. Mary was presented as a model of feminine virtue because her silence prevailed over the traditional female vice of evil speech, and her submissiveness in the face of the divine purpose for her body triumphed over "woman"'s sexual lusts (Maclean 1987, 61). But in Kempe's imitation of the Virgin's sorrow for her Son, following popular representations of the "hysterical Virgin" previously described, both women's absence of speech becomes an inarticulate and violent wailing which is more disturbing than speech itself, and their "chastity" explodes into ecstasies of passionate writhing in identification with Christ, whom they love, in his death throes. However transmuted into a recognisable form of worship, in such imitative activity the outlawed experience of maternity returns to Christian discourse in all its physicality and pain. Kempe's crying and shaking on the ground is unmistakably also the suffering of a woman in labour (Weissman 1982, 210-12; Lochrie 1991a, 192; Wilson 1992, 234).

In "La Mystérique," one of *Speculum's* central sections, Irigaray claims that the medieval woman mystic is enabled, through her intimate contact with the divine, to express bodily

variations of her female experience which empower and lead her beyond the castrating confines of patriarchal law. She writes, in a dialogue between the mystic and "that most female of men, the Son," of the mystic's recognition of her sex in the passive, gaping, and bleeding body of the Saviour she rapturously contemplates:

In this way, you see me and I see you, finally I see myself seeing you in this fathomless wound which is the source of our wondering comprehension and exhilaration. And to know myself I scarcely need a "soul," I have only to gaze upon the gaping space in your loving body.... Now I know it/myself and by knowing, I love it/myself and by loving, I desire it/myself. And if in the sight of the nails and the spear piercing the body of the Son I drink in a joy that no word can ever express, let no one conclude hastily that I take pleasure in his sufferings. But if the Word was made flesh in this way, and to this extent, it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance, which can at last be recognized (Irigaray 1985b, 199-200).

Kempe's identification with the suffering Christ who is both feminine and masculine, as previously described (Introduction, 8; Chapter 2, 77-8), enables her female physicality to be transformed by means of a divine "third term." The somatic convulsions she exhibits, similar to those which constitute hysterical expression, allow a movement "outside [of] herself" so that she is able to see herself imitating Christ (or at least to recall this experience in memory), even while out of her mind with sorrow, and to set it down in her *Book*. Irigaray's flamboyant version of the mystic's/hysteric's behaviour depicts the experience in the following way (an image I will take up in Chapter Three):

The "soul" escapes outside herself, opening up a crack in the cave (une antr'ouverture) so that she may penetrate herself once more. The walls of her prison are broken, the distinction between inside/outside transgressed. In such ex-stasies, she risks losing herself or at least seeing the assurance of her self-identity-as-same fade away (Irigaray 1985b, 192).

The alignment of medieval "woman" with the flesh, that heterogeneous site of disruption which exists *inside* the human person, threatening to breach the borders of the self by temptation from without, is exploited in the medieval woman mystic's inscription of her body into Christ's. As Lochrie asserts, this *imitatio* is "a semiotics of suffering," as is hysteria; "a complex system of signposts and tokens that do not always observe the boundaries of the physical, imaginary, and symbolic" (Lochrie 1991a, 36). The believer's sorrow "fares across the borders of mind, flesh, and spirit like an infusion or contagion," producing "its own

insignia in the body, thereby perpetuating a semiotic system of remembrance" (Lochrie 1991a, 37). Christ's Passion is remembered and re-membered in the mystic's corporeal sorrow. The divine is displayed, through imitation, to other believers, but the mystic who sees herself impersonating Christ/the Virgin is displaying herself as a female construct too - "woman" as pervious flesh, like Christ's/the Virgin's - and the seeds of her own bodily transformation lie in this double act of divine mimesis.

Irigaray's joyous celebration of the mystic as inspired mimic is, of course, itself a visionary and hysterical reading. It neglects to outline the factors circumscribing the lives and works of medieval women, concerning itself primarily, like the behaviours of female hysterics, with lodging a protest within phallogentric discourse which argues for a space for change. Irigaray's vision of the divine involves a passage from the self understood as a model of the self-as-same to a self which can incorporate the possibility of response to an other (Whitford 1991a, 143). And yet it does not seem to me too far-fetched to say that the medieval female mystic's *imitatio*, which represents Christ to the rest of the world so that they too might be transformed in his love, articulates this desire also.

While Irigaray's celebratory reading in *Speculum* does not explore how the changes allowed by her envisioning of the divine could be articulated, especially by medieval women, Margery Kempe's text does reveal how the spiritual changes which arise from her discovery of the love of Christ are put into practice. And these changes inevitably involve challenging aspects of the construction of female bodiliness in late medieval culture which leads to transformations at once disturbing and empowering. In the following chapter I will trace in greater depth how Kempe gives expression to the changes in her life which her conversion requires of her, producing a reading of her *Book* which teases out some of the implications of Irigaray's hysterical reading of the mystical text in *Speculum*.

1. In the Introduction to his translation of the *Book*, Barry Windeatt states that "[Kempe] could neither read nor write, as is indicated on a number of occasions in her *Book*" (Windeatt 1988, 9). However David Lawton produces some interesting and provocative qualifications on "the extent of Kempe's learning," as in whether she had knowledge of Latin as well as her considerable education in the lay practices and vernacular discourses of her faith. Lawton also discusses the commonplace notion of clerical mediation in the construction of Kempe's *Book*, and suggests that she may have been more learned than scholars have traditionally believed (Lawton 1992). William Provost, in turn, expresses the following view: "I have never been at ease with the common assumption that Margery Kempe was illiterate. She certainly would not have undertaken the huge task of writing her *Book* out herself, and so her references to having someone write for her can be seen as specifically referring to that task alone, or in some instances, perhaps, to the writing out of longish letters. And there is no doubt that many of her allusions to Scripture or to writings of her contemporaries could have come from preaching she had heard. But still, I think that such an energetic, strong-minded, curious and intelligent woman of her age would very likely have been able to read and probably to write as well, and I think that Margery Kempe indeed could" (Provost 1992, 15n).

My own view is that modern definitions of (il)literacy need to be qualified by a consideration of the meaning of "reading" and "writing" to a person of Kempe's time and place, before a definitive statement about her "illiteracy" can be made. Susan Noakes points out for instance that, in the middle ages, "silent reading was the exception rather than the rule," and that, because of the relative scarcity of books, reading was more often than not a shared activity, especially among lay readers. She writes: "It is clear that when reading normally employed the faculties of speech and hearing as well as sight, it was not only a slower but also a more active process than it is now, when silent reading is the norm" (Noakes 1988, 26). Thus the fact that Kempe mentions being read to by her scribe may not necessarily have meant, in medieval terms, that she could not read, since listening to and looking at words could not be so easily separated as now. See also Stock (1990, 19-24, 34-40). Furthermore, Church prohibitions on reading by literate lay people due to fears of Lollardy would have made reading a less suspect activity when done via a cleric than alone. The laity were forbidden to read the Bible privately as early as 1229 by the Synod of Toulouse and again in 1408 at the Synod of Oxford (Despres 1985, 15). They were also prohibited by decree from translating on their own (Hughes 1988, 230). I am prepared to concede that Kempe either could not write or felt it was not in her best interests to do so, since a show of clerical endorsement was certainly necessary to her life's endeavours, but I think that her reading ability must remain more of an open question.

2. Following her mystical marriage to the Godhead in Rome, Christ, appearing in a vision, tells Kempe: "'For it is appropriate for the wife to be on homely terms with her husband.... Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you.... You may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son'" (Kempe 1988, 126). In the same chapter in which Christ tells Kempe that she should take him into her bed, he states that he "will not be displeased with [her] whether [she] think[s], say[s] or

speak[s]" (Kempe 1988, 126). For further endorsements of Kempe's words from Christ see Kempe (1988, 61, 199).

3. There are no extant records of particular English women who lived as Kempe did; however, Eileen Power notes that, while a considerable number of widows in medieval England joined convents on the death of their husbands, there were probably more who took a "simple vow of chastity" and remained in the world (Power 1922, 38). Edith Ennen confirms this, observing that "there were many women living on their own in the middle ages: widows, maidservants," and so on (Ennen 1989, 281). It seems that medieval women who chose to live alone were tolerated provided they stayed in one place and were publicly silent, as the particular charges most often laid against Kempe's activities reveal.
4. However as a bourgeois wife Kempe was able to work and in fact began two business ventures before her radical conversion, although they were unsuccessful (Kempe 1988, 44). After her conversion Kempe represents these experiences as the result of excessive pride (Kempe 1988, 44-5). Deborah Ellis has written about the extent to which Kempe's life and spirituality may have been shaped by her family connections (Ellis 1992).
5. This is Kempe's usual appellation of herself in the narrative of her *Book*.
6. While, as Carolly Erickson observes, sexual relations between couples were outlawed by the Church on many days of the year by the fourteenth century, because "lovemaking made a couple unclean, and unworthy to take the sacrament" (Erickson 1976, 197), women's sexuality was certainly seen as passive in regard to men's when sexual activity did take place. As Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset comment: "As soon as a man and woman came together as a couple, the person of the woman was alienated and subjected to waiting for the male semen. It is clearly easy, as in the majority of cases, to draw a parallel between her dependency, her absence of any erotic existence and her situation within society" (Jacquart and Thomasset 1988, 154). Sheila Delany describes the years of compulsory sexual activity Kempe endured with her husband as "legal rape," and David Aers points out that "her gender demanded extreme self-subordination before [her] husband's desires" (Delany 1975, 88, cited in Aers 1988, 90).
7. Although specifically addressed to female virgins, these works, as Millett and Wogan-Browne point out, were adapted as spiritual guides for a much wider audience and were circulated in England until the early sixteenth century (Millett and Wogan-Browne 1990, xii).
8. Lochrie further notes that "it was no coincidence that female sanctity in the late Middle Ages was often manifested through miraculous closure of the body" (Bynum 1987; 1989, 165, cited in Lochrie 1991b, 126), since the literature of advice to virgins drew on arguments which placed women symbolically at the boundary-line between the Christian body and the outside world. As Bynum states, women who survived on nothing but the Host were "reputed neither to excrete nor to menstruate" (Bynum 1989, 165). See also Brown (1988, 153-4, 354).

9. As Windeatt notes, these are possibly the result of a legacy from the death of her influential father (Kempe 1988, 305n).
10. Christ, in fact, declares to Kempe in a revelation: "You have...great cause to love me because you have your will in the matter of chastity as if you were a widow, although your husband is still living and in good health" (Kempe 1988, 200). While the passivity fostered in a medieval woman in childhood was offset in marriage by the acquiring of necessary household and organisational abilities, widowhood, if a woman had financial means, offered her "the possibility of an exercise of personal power" and the making of important individual decisions, usually for the first time in her life (Labarge 1986, 27-8).
11. While Kempe does have to continue to care for her husband later in the *Book*, at Christ's command, when John Kempe is disabled as the result of a bad fall (Kempe 1988, 219-21), and the development of her relationship with Christ reflects a continuation rather than a rejection of her marriage relationship and role, in terms of vocational enablement her "buying back her body" frees her to offer it in service to Christ, an essential element in pursuing her new calling as a pilgrim-mystic.
12. The *exempla* used in sermons frequently contained images drawn from the lives of the listeners, which would have helped concretise the messages issuing from the pulpit. See Owst (1961, 149-209; 1965, 299-305); Berlioz and de Beaulieu (1990).
13. Brown cites Cyprian as an example of this tendency, and states: "Church and body alike were both presented in terms of ever-vigilant control, from which the relentless pressure of the *saeculum* gave no respite. It was a somber message, whose implications were not lost on Cyprian's successors in the Latin world, Ambrose and Augustine" (Brown 1988, 95).
14. This description of the human person as a "spiritual" being can not, of course, be divorced from a medical and scientific understanding of the nature of human bodiliness in the middle ages. Both medieval medical and theological views of women understood their bodies as "airy" and permeable and beyond women's control, as well as being an inferior model of men's. See Lemay (1978, 391-400); Maclean (1987, 10-11, 30); Jacquart and Thomasset (1988, 66-7).
15. The *Speculum Laicorum* is a thirteenth-century work believed to be of English origin which, as Owst states, frequently turns up in fifteenth-century manuscripts (Owst 1965, 217, 300-2).
16. This attitude is evidenced in the *Book* when Kempe is pursued by a crowd of townspeople at Leicester who perceive her as a disruptive civil influence (Chapter 48), as I will show in the next section.
17. In the *Speculum Laicorum*, the base qualities of women's speech are also figured in their being likened to dogs, however differentiated by class: "There are two kinds of dogs.... The well-bred...are silent and free from guile; the low-bred are ill-tempered and fond of barking. So it is with women: the daughters of nobles are artless, silent, and lovers of solitude...the ignoble to be sure are loud and roamers in

the streets" (Cap. XXI, *Speculum Laicorum* 1914, 33, qtd. in Owst 1961, 386-7). References to "loudness" and "roaming in the streets" connote (ignoble) women as physically excessive, speaking and moving in places where it is believed they should not be.

18. Windeatt observes that a marginal note in Kempe's text names the friar as "Melton" (Kempe 1988, 322n), and Atkinson identifies this preacher as William Melton, an Oxford doctor (Atkinson 1983, 143; Aston 1993, 123).
19. Tears were in fact considered a legitimate response to the pathos of Christ's Passion in the late middle ages (Beckwith 1993, 89; Glasscoe 1993, 278) and are even attested to as such in sermons (McEntire 1984, 88).
20. In "The Language of Man" Irigaray writes that, "without fluidity, [the philosophers'] thought would have no possible unity...fluid always subsists *between* solid substances to join them, to re-unite them. Without the intervention of fluids, no discourse would *hold together*. But the operation of fluids doesn't state itself as a condition of truth, of the coherence of the *logos*. To do that would be to reveal the instability of its edifice, the moving ground beneath it" (Irigaray 1989b, 199-200).
21. A similarly violent attitude is expressed in another sermon cited by Owst, concerning a wandering wife who would not obey her husband. The husband, desiring to "rid himself of a faithless wife," presented her with "two boxes of sweetmeats, one containing good and the other poisonous sweets. He had merely to bid her eat the good and avoid the bad to bring about her death at her own stubborn hands" (MS. Add. 18364, fol. 62, cited in Owst 1961, 390). The husband was presumably absolved of guilt for plotting murder by the greater sin of the wife's disobedience.
22. Chaucer's Wife of Bath is of course depicted as vain as well as apt to wander (Chaucer 1983b, 21). The connection of the two "weaknesses" in Chaucer's caricature of the bourgeois wife attests to both wandering and vanity as commonplaces in the medieval representation of womanhood.
23. The basis of this decrial was St Paul's injunction, supported by the church fathers' attacks, against women's alleged love of adornment and pride in physical beautification (1 Tim. 2: 9), cited in Lochrie (1986a, 40-1). See also MS. Harl. 45, fol. 113 et seq., qtd. in Owst (1965, 172).
24. In "Divine Women" Irigaray describes women's adornment-compulsion in terms of the need for a specifically feminine divine, a mediating term for female physicality in the symbolic. This account also has similarities with the medieval notion of "woman" as connoting "breaches in boundaries" and the dangers of the feminine flesh. Irigaray writes: "The impotence, the formlessness, the deformity associated with women, the way they are equated with something other than the human and split between the human and the inhuman (half-woman, half-animal), their duty to be adorned, masked, and made-up, etc., rather than being allowed *their own* physical, bodily beauty, their own skin, their own form(s), all this is symptomatic of the fact that women lack a female god who can open up the perspective in which *their* flesh can be transfigured" (Irigaray 1993a, 64).

25. Fears of Lollardy, medieval England's most popular heresy, which encouraged individual lay reading of the scriptures and independent spiritual enquiry, would also have informed negative responses to Kempe, as I will show in the following section.
26. The thirteenth-century sect known as the Guglielmites, based on what was believed to be a "female incarnation of the Holy Spirit" in Guglielma of Milan, proclaimed universal salvation through a woman (Wessley 1978, 289). On the Cathars and Waldensians see Leff (1967, 450-85); Lambert (1992, 62-77, 105-46).
27. The Norwich heresy trials of the 1430s reveal that Lollardy, or, at least, "Lollard-like individualism of religious conscience" (Gibson 1989, 30) was prevalent in East Anglia both before and at that time (Tanner 1977, 29; Cross 1978, 362), and the East Anglian Lollards also seem to have supported the more extreme forms of belief, involving a rejection of the sacraments of the Church along with the usual opposition to pilgrimage, relics and images (Thomson 1965, 127, 129), which would have increased antiheretical suspicion in the area. Gibson notes too that in fifteenth-century East Anglia Lollardy served as "a convenient label that was invoked for nearly any kind of religious nonconformity" (Gibson 1989, 30). Suspicion of religious eccentricity increased dramatically after the Oldcastle rebellion of 1414, prompted by the arrest for heresy and escape of John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham (Kempe 1988, 320n), and much of the opposition was expressed on the level of lay and civil rather than clerical authority, as Kempe's experiences show. See Thomson (1965, 5-6, 195, 221). While Kempe is no candidate for anti-sacramental beliefs - her *Book* shows her to be ardently devoted to pilgrimage and holy images - she does reveal considerable "individualism of conscience" on many occasions as well as a thorough education in popular methods of devotion prescribed by the Church for the laity, as seen for example by her use of sermon-like stories to answer back to angry priests. As Aston comments, the Lollard emphasis on private investigation into the truths and doctrines of the Church helped produce some well-educated women in the fifteenth century (Aston 1984a, 51), and Kempe, despite her avowed illiteracy, may be said to be one of these, although she seems to have received her education by more orthodox means. Lawton discusses Kempe's considerable learning in the methods of popular devotion (1992, 99-100), as does Gibson (1989, 47-65).
28. The most extreme outcome of this trend was, of course, the European witch hunts which lasted from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Heinsohn and Steiger 1982, 193). The discourses of the hunts were intimately connected with the appropriation of female sexual knowledge and female fertility by male doctors through the extermination of midwives as heretics (Heinsohn and Steiger 1982). Claudia Honegger also points out that the witch hunts and their literature were the result of an extension of prior attitudes to women and heresy on the part of the Church: "A...specific precondition to the craze was the systematic appropriation of demonology, sorcery, heresy, and popular religion by the Catholic clergy.... The most important precondition to the development of witchcraft seems to have been the linkage of heresy and sorcery.... The *Malleus* [*Maleficarum* (*The Hammer for Witches*, 1486)] sealed the identity of heresy and sorcery, tied together loose particles of subcultural traditions and limited the 'new heresy' to the female sex" (Honegger 1979, 796).

29. The structure of Kempe's *Book*, while not without its own kind(s) of logic, does not adhere to the conventional chronology of experience expected in modern autobiography. Hence the separation between Kempe and her husband recorded in Chapter 11 does not necessarily precede, in a narrative sense, the events she endures in Chapter 13, when her husband is absent. Kempe states in the proem which precedes the *Book* proper that the matters contained in the text were written down as she remembered them when the time came for writing (Kempe 1988, 36-7). Sue Ellen Holbrook has argued convincingly for two systems of understanding the structure of the *Book* in medieval terms (Holbrook 1985).
30. As I have noted, medieval medical and scientific views of women were constructed in conjunction with theological ideas so that, "according to the physiological model, woman [was] identified 'with breaches in boundaries'" of the human person and, in theological terms, with the feebleness of the flesh and fallen will (Bynum 1989, 186, qtd. in Lochrie 1991b, 124). See also Jacquart and Thomasset, who note that in the medieval treatise of Giles of Rome, "one cannot but be struck by...the irresponsibility of the woman. Her body lies outside her control; she is mere fertility" (Jacquart and Thomasset 1988, 66-70). "Woman"'s lack of control over her bodily boundaries (and indeed the fluidity of the boundaries themselves) was seen to be connected to her moral debility. Thus Eve was held up to medieval women as their foremother and described by Tertullian as "the door of the devil," a figure for women's believed propensity to loose morals and wayward speech (Maclean 1987, 15).
31. Kempe's absent husband is mentioned three times in this short episode, which suggests that his unavailability is the cause of some if not most of the trouble she encounters in the scene. In Chapter 52 the Archbishop of York makes clear the connection between Kempe's independent status and her association in the public mind with heresy when he asks her why she goes about in white clothes and whether she is a virgin. As Douglas Gray points out, white clothes were variously associated in the middle ages with "virginity, purity, persecuted innocence or martyrdom, penitence (...) and the remission of sins" (Gray 1990, 22n). Hope Emily Allen notes in addition that the sect known as Flagellants wore white clothes and were prohibited by decree from entering England in 1399 (Kempe 1940, 314-5n). However they had little in common with the path followed by Kempe, and the Archbishop's assumption that Kempe is a virgin because of her white clothes signifies that in his mind she cannot be an independent woman in public, a wife who dresses in white, for to him white garments are the sign of a virginal woman dedicated to God in enclosed circumstances. Therefore he claims that she is a heretic when she states that she is in fact a man's wife (Kempe 1988, 16).
32. The paradox of the anchoress' representation as "invisible frontier" is also described by Linda Georgianna: "Though apparently invisible or hidden, the anchoress is...told she is a visible model of sanctity to all Christians and a reliable and steady support for the whole Church" (Georgianna 1981, 51-2).
33. Of course Kempe also converses with women, but the specificities of these exchanges are seldom given and the conversations are reported in a more casual

manner (e.g., Kempe 1988, 163, 213, 243). Attitudes such as those reflected in the Mayor of Leicester's paranoid fear that Kempe will lead away the town's wives, voiced aggressively during a heresy interrogation, perhaps explain the absence of specific content of this kind. Women, however, do come to the mystic's aid when she has incurred the wrath of male authorities (Kempe 1988, 169), and given the absence of detail about her encounters with other lay women, the reader of her *Book* can only speculate about how much basis (if any) the Mayor's fears have in fact. See Aers (1988, 102-3).

34. Kempe's *Book* contains two prefaces (or a preface and a proem, as Windeatt labels them), the first of which begins by presenting the *Book* as "a short treatise and a comforting one for sinful wretches" (Kempe 1988, 33), and the second: "a short treatise of a creature set in great pomp and pride of the world" (Kempe 1988, 38).
35. Further similarities include physical mortifications; fainting on hearing people speak of Christ's Passion or beholding an image of his suffering; wearing white clothes and being informed by the Holy Spirit that her soul will be spared the pains of Purgatory. She also has a miraculous vision of the eucharistic Host and a vision of the Virgin at Candlemas, as does Kempe (Windeatt 1988, 19).
36. Windeatt notes that "*The Prick of Love*" is "perhaps a Middle English translation of the *Stimulus Amoris*; cf. *The Prickyng of Love*" (Kane 1983, ch 2, 20), and that the reference to Rolle denotes *The Fire of Love* (Rolle 1972, ch 34, cited in Kempe 1988, 323n). Windeatt follows Hope Emily Allen's view that the "Elizabeth" referred to in this chapter, who "cried with a loud voice, as is written in her treatise," is "St Elizabeth of Hungary (b. 1207), daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary and wife of Landgrave Ludwig IV of Thuringia" (Kempe 1940, 324n). Alexandra Barratt suggests another contender, the saint's great niece Elizabeth of Toess (c. 1294-1336), whose life was rewritten by Elsbet Stigel (c.1300-60) (Barratt 1992a, 1992b, 71). And there is a third text which exists in various versions and, as Allen notes, "is often ascribed to St Elizabeth of Hungary" (Kempe 1940, 324n). Both Barratt (1992a) and Roger Ellis (1990) examine in some detail the claims of the various texts. Barratt has also written an essay which deals exclusively with connections between Elizabeth of Hungary's *Revelations* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Barratt 1992c).
37. Bynum observes that the increase in the number of lay saints throughout the later middle ages correlates strikingly with a marked increase in the number of women saints so that "by the end of the middle ages the lay male saint had virtually disappeared" (Weinstein and Bell 1982, 220, cited in Bynum 1987, 21), and most lay women in the middle ages were or would once have been married. Blessed Angela of Foligno (1248-1309); St Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373); and Blessed Dorothea of Montau (1347-1394) were mystics who influenced Kempe and had been married and had borne children before turning to a religious life.
38. Caroline Bynum observes that "in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century hagiography women appear more and more isolated and male-oriented. Their stories are...usually told by their confessors.... Although holy women were, by the fourteenth and

fifteenth centuries, more likely to be lay and married, to reside in the world and to have opportunities for significant geographical mobility through pilgrimage, they were also more subject to male scrutiny and in greater danger of being accused of heresy and witchcraft. By the time of Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Joan of Arc the influence - even the survival - of pious women depended almost wholly on the success, in ecclesiastical and secular politics, of their male adherents" (Lerner 1972; Vauchez 1981; Weinstein and Bell 1982, 228-32, cited in Bynum 1987, 22-3).

39. Valerie Lagorio writes that: "As saintly *vitae* were the favored reading of the Middle Ages, the lives of the mystics, usually written by a close associate, also were sources of...ethical instruction and spiritual guidance. Such biographers as Jacques de Vitry and Thomas Cantimpré for the Lowland ecstasies, Fra'Arnaldo for Angela of Foligno, Raymond of Capua for Catherine of Siena, John of Marienwerder for Dorothy of Montau, and Alphonse de Pecha for Birgitta of Sweden wrote to publicize the sanctity of the *beata*, sometimes in the interests of canonization, but always to present a holy and heroic figure for the emulation of the faithful" (Lagorio 1983, 102).
40. These include "the Pauvres Catholiques in the Midi, the Papelards in the north of France, the Bizocche in northern Italy, and the Coquenunnen in western Germany" (Petroff 1986, 173).
41. In Chapter 20 of her *Book*, Kempe also cites St Bridget as a spiritual authority and places herself in the textual tradition of continental women saints. She reports firstly, after seeing a eucharistic vision, God's statement that even St Bridget was never granted this favour: "My daughter Bridget never saw me in this way" (Kempe 1988, 83). Next, after informing the mystic of an earthquake that will occur, God assures Kempe that he speaks to her just as he spoke to Bridget, and declares the truth of every word in Bridget's book. Lastly and most significantly, he affirms Kempe as a follower in the saint's footsteps by claiming that the truth of Bridget's *Revelations* shall become known through Kempe herself, presumably through her own life and *Book*.
42. In addition to the works already cited, Kempe mentions that "Hilton's book" was read to her by her scribe, along with "Bridget's book" and the Bible with commentaries upon it. "Hilton's book" is a work by an English writer, Walter Hilton (1923), but Windeatt lists several works by male writers on the continent which were available in England, including texts by Blessed Jan van Ruysbroeck and Henry Suso (Windeatt 1988, 17; Kempe 1988, 299n).
43. Kempe's son, referred to in the *Book*, marries in Germany and later returns to England (Kempe 1988, 266-7). A substantial number of Germans are also mentioned in the *Book*, including Kempe's first scribe (who wrote in an amalgam of bad English and German) and various hosts, confessors, and people she meets on her travels, many of whom she finds helpful. See Stargadt (1985, 305).

44. In her *Book of Divine Consolation* Angela states: "In that time and by God's will there died my mother, who was a great hindrance unto me in following the way of God; my husband died likewise, and in a short time there also died all my children. And because I had commenced to follow the aforesaid way and had prayed God that He would rid me of them, I had great consolation of their deaths, albeit I did also feel some grief" (Angela of Foligno 1966, 5).
45. Alexandra Barratt notes that St Elizabeth of Hungary, that is the Elizabeth to whom the late middle ages attributed the *Revelations*, "a popular figure throughout Europe, including England," had also been a wife and mother before becoming widowed and a visionary (Barratt 1992c, 199-200). Barratt argues for this Elizabeth as a model for Kempe insofar as she joined the third order of Franciscans who lived unenclosed while pursuing a life of poverty and performing charitable deeds (Barratt 1992c, 200). For Elizabeth, as for Dorothea and Kempe, this calling may well have represented an extension of as well as a kind of atonement for the lesser spiritual value associated with her prior married life.
46. Further likenesses to Kempe's spirituality include the Virgin Mary presenting the Christ child to her; frequent communion and ecstatic experiences on receiving the Host; and visions of Christ as her lover and bridegroom (Kieckhefer 1984, 29).
47. In a vision recorded in Chapter 22, for example, Kempe says: "Ah Lord, maidens are now dancing merrily in heaven. Shall I not do so? Because I am no virgin, lack of virginity is now great sorrow to me..." (Kempe 1988, 86). She expresses the wish that she had died as a child before losing her virginity, and continues in this vein until Christ reassures her of his love for wives. Barratt points out that Christ's response to Kempe is similar to that made to Elizabeth of Hungary who also reveals anxiety about her non-virginal status (Barratt 1992c, 196). See also Kempe (1988, 84).
48. Stephen Nichols draws attention to the fact that the middle ages "appeared as preoccupied with the matter as with the method[s] of representations," and reveals "something like an attempt to seek ways for extending the range of what was known of the material world and the world beyond through alchemy, through science, through physical and psychical voyages." He comments that boundaries of all kinds seem to be especially fluid in medieval symbolisation, and states that: "These boundaries may be spatial - as in the cases of heroes of lay and romance who cross over from the real world to the *irréel* of the Celtic other world; they may be ontological boundaries like the polymorphous corporality of heroes of some of Marie de France's *Lais*" - or of the body of Christ in popular piety - "or the dual identity as alternately Christian and Saracen of certain characters in epic and romance; they may be social boundaries, boundaries of orthodoxy in matters of faith, or boundaries of gender, as chronicles, accounts of heresy trials, and legal documents reveal. [And] all of these examples may be said to have correlates in the ever-changing political and religious boundaries that make medieval geopolitics so fascinating" (Nichols 1992, 2).

49. While almost no religious activity from the late middle ages would escape the charge of "masochism" from a late twentieth-century perspective, and modern notions of "self-abusive" behaviour are not to be found as such in medieval contexts, there is considerable evidence that women engaged in more consciously self-inflicting and physically self-destructive behaviours than men. See Bynum (1986, 259; 1987, 114, 209; 1989, 166-7); Petroff (1986, 7). Interestingly, Petroff notes that "the two central images for women's bodies in [female] devotional texts are virginity and illness," and the two are not readily separable (Petroff 1986, 37). It seems that women's close association with the body and the passions made physical pain a frequent marker of stages on the mystic path, whereas for male mystics more active experiences tended to serve this function (Petroff 1986, 37-44; Bynum 1986, 273-7).
50. In her essay "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva notes that Mary's rare appearances in the Gospels reveal that her relationship with her Son depends upon "the name" and not "the flesh." Thus "any possible matrilinearism is to be repudiated" and Mary's maternal role denied (Kristeva 1987, 237). See also Ochshorn (1981, 164-5).
51. The anchoress Julian of Norwich for example, claims that "our saviour is our true Mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come," and that the Virgin Mary is an inferior mother to Christ (Julian of Norwich 1978, 579-80, qtd. in Bynum 1991, 97). Bynum writes that "to Julian...Mary is our mother because her flesh is Christ's; but she is a shadow of the truer mother, Christ himself, who gives to us our humanness by taking it on" (Bynum 1987, 267). And St Bernard, writing two centuries earlier, but whose work helped form the basis of later developments in affective piety, makes a clear distinction between ordinary mothers and Christ's mothering in a letter of advice to monks: "He [Christ] will be your mother.... but a man's household are his own enemies [Matthew 10: 36].... Do not be moved by the tears of demented parents who weep because from being a child of wrath you have become a child of God" (Bernard of Clairvaux 1841-64, Letter 322, 182, col. 527c-d, trans. James, letter 378, 449, qtd. in Bynum 1982, 145-6).
52. Documentation of miracles in which saints and mystics (most of whom were women) survived without consuming anything but Christ's body in the form of the eucharistic Host increased from the thirteenth century onwards (Bynum 1989, 165).
53. The *Mirror* recommends that believers should comfort the Virgin in their imaginative recreation of the scene of Christ's death (Love 1992, 190), and this Kempe does, even going so far as to offer the Virgin a nourishing drink (Kempe 1988, 236).
54. As will be evident to anyone familiar with Karma Lochrie's work, I am indebted to her pinpointing of the connections between the idea of abjection and the female flesh in medieval mysticism. See Lochrie (1991b; 1991a, 37-47).

CHAPTER THREE

FLESH MADE WORD: KEMPE'S AND IRIGARAY'S HYSTERICAL TEXTS

How strange is the economy of this specula(riza)tion of woman, who in her mirror seems ever to refer back to a transcendence (Irigaray 1985b, 201).

There is trickery in the game mystical women play (David-Ménard 1989, 190).

We have seen that as a lay woman and would-be visionary, Margery Kempe's speech was considered suspect because female and therefore "bodily," a charge which was exacerbated by her pilgrim's mode of living, her refusal to allow her body to be enclosed in patriarchal spaces designated for women. Kempe's adherence to the concept of *imitatio Christi*, a culturally endorsed form of spirituality which privileged the body, allowed her to escape heresy charges and to have her life preserved in book form. To Kempe, imitating Christ was both salvation and empowerment. Her *imitatio* was to her the means of gaining holiness but also enabled her to transgress cultural norms regarding women in orthodox ways, an irony which is encapsulated in her text where the "proof" of her orthodoxy lies in the preservation of her life in written form, achieved through the aid of her scribe. And yet Kempe's extreme bodily behaviours form focal points in her text: they are sites where the "excess" of medieval female physicality is celebrated and performed. As such, these occasions display how the written record of Kempe's life proceeds from the physical in obvious ways: the clerically endorsed written text serves on some level to justify her somatic extremism, yet the written text is the result of experiences which were articulated primarily through the body, inscribed on the body through performances in which onlookers were intended to read the Passion and pain of Christ (Lochrie 1991a, 75, 195-6). With regard to Kempe, it is the tension between these two "texts" - the written and the bodily - that I want to explore specifically in this chapter.

In the preface to her *Book* Kempe introduces her *life* as a "short treatise of a creature set in great pomp and pride of the world" (Kempe 1988, 38), thereby deferring at the outset of her narrative to the "creator" whose example she must follow in her living, and on the basis of whose authority she presumes to speak. As Laurie Finke points out:

The female mystic of the Middle Ages did not claim to speak in her own voice. Because women could serve no ministerial or sacerdotal functions within the Church, they could claim no spiritual authority in and of themselves, nor could they claim it - as the clergy did - from the institutional Church. Rather the source of the mystic's inspiration was divine; she was merely the receptacle, the instrument of a divine will (Finke 1988, 448).

What the medieval woman was as "receptacle" was body, or, as we have seen, the unstable "flesh" which commonly made itself evident through "woman"'s vulnerable physical being. With this initial announcement of her text as the record of radical divine transformation in the life of a mere "creature," Kempe places herself at the intersection of the dynamics of body and language which, "speaking as a woman" in medieval terms, she problematises throughout her text.

Finke claims too that: "linguistic empowerment for women...was tied to certain attitudes about the body prevalent in the Middle Ages. The discourse of the female mystic was fashioned out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body and it is, paradoxically, through these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power" (Finke 1988, 441). Karma Lochrie also attests to the potential of mystical discourse for articulating otherwise inexpressible aspects of women's experience, claiming that, through Kempe's *Book*, we may "discover and describe...ways in which female spirituality reconfigures women's relationship to language" (Lochrie 1988, 15). Lochrie further contends that "the language of affective spirituality as it was used by female mystics needs to be examined for its...fundamentally different understanding [as opposed to that of traditional, "male" mystical discourse] of the relationship of the physical - the bodily - to language itself (Lochrie 1988, 15). Body and text, then, are inseparable for the medieval female mystic, particularly if she could not write, as seems to have been the case with Kempe (Chapter Two, 127n). Here I would like to return to a point made earlier which has inspired the present chapter's explorations of this theme.

The contention that human bodies themselves function as "texts" within cultures, and are "fictionalised and positioned within those myths that form a culture's social narratives and self-representations," in the words of Elizabeth Grosz (Grosz 1990c, 64), is of course seminal to this study. Grosz's further point that body-texts remain "site[s] of *resistance*" to social domination by means of "a materiality that is an active ingredient in the messages produced"

(Grosz 1990c, 64, 72) is of particular relevance to the mystical text, in which the mystic's body is the receiver of divine communication which s/he must in turn make known by her acts. Finke claims that, in effect:

any visionary experience made public is always, *ipso facto*, a revisioning of that experience, an attempt to represent the unrepresentable. Medieval women mystics claimed the power to shape the meaning and form of their experiences. Their words, and even their bodies when necessary [I would say: especially their bodies], became the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of female silence and powerlessness (Finke 1988, 448-9).

In this chapter I will continue my exploration of the active recalcitrance of the female body to sublimation within the female mystical text, and the radical potential of that text for re-envisioning the female body.

Lochrie's argument, cited above, that medieval female mystics articulate a relationship to language which "carnalizes" speech, "return[ing] language to the sensual" at the same time as they restor[e]...language to physical pleasure" (Lochrie 1988, 16), also applies to the writings of Irigaray. The French philosopher, like the medieval woman mystic, attempts to provide a language for female subjects (female bodies) in phallogocentric discourse, while at the same time pointing out how female bodies exist within language as the unrepresented substrate of the masculine symbolic. Although the circumstances of production of Kempe's and Irigaray's texts are markedly different, both writers present female bodies in their works as sites of excess, and in depicting these excessive bodies in writing they simultaneously draw upon and subvert received notions of female embodiment from their respective cultures. While, as I have argued, Irigaray self-consciously undertakes "hysterical" strategies in her writing, mimicking to a disturbing extreme the roles assigned to "the feminine" by phallic law, Kempe's *Book* too employs mimetic tactics through its representation of her life as imitating Christ's. While this method enables Kempe to attain orthodoxy there are aspects of her *imitatio*, notably its privileging of the female body, which have been read as unsettling, both in her own time and in the present.

I would like to reiterate at the outset of this chapter that I by no means wish to argue that Kempe can be claimed as a "hysteric" in the modern (or at least the nineteenth-century

psychoanalytic) sense of the word. Insofar as Kempe's *Book* is based on a physical *imitatio* which exceeds the written text, it may be read as figuratively hysterical: female hysteria commonly generates a physical surplus in the form of the unusual bodily behaviours which constitute its symptoms, a surplus which is based on a culturally-recognised form of physical expression. Anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder in which women exceed the late-twentieth-century obsession with dieting by starving themselves to a state of dangerous thinness, is a contemporary example. In a feminist reading female hysteria also represents the inadequacy of patriarchal discourse to articulate female sexuality and female desire. Prior to becoming a visionary Kempe had been a wife and mother, which experience set her outside the bounds of Church requirements for authentic female speech, that is, virginity. Her official "outlaw status" as a visionary who was not a virgin suggests that her wild weeping, her most notable form of public expression which was regarded even by her contemporaries as extreme, may be seen as a medieval correlative of hysterical behaviour; that is, as a return to religious discourse of repressed female sexuality. Kempe's intense physical responses to Christ's Passion can be read - like hysterical body-language - as articulating the pain of her exile from the dominant discourse as well as an attempt to communicate through the body in culturally recognised terms, an attempt which produces a language of outlawed female "excess." The following lines from Irigaray could be used to describe the behaviour of Kempe, whose tears and writhings highlight the inadequacy of language to convey her passion:

Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. *Rack it with radical convulsions*, carry back, reimport, those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her.... *Overthrow syntax* by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity (Irigaray 1985b, 142).

However, in this chapter I do not want to reduce Kempe's *Book* to an object to be viewed through a "French feminist" lens, to celebrate her "hysteria" unequivocally as empowered protest (even Irigaray sees hysteria as a mode of suffering as well as a challenge to phallogocentric speech (Irigaray 1985a, 136)). Rather, I read Kempe's text as "hysterical" in this part of the thesis as a means of exploring both its points of commonality with *and* points of divergence from the self-consciously hysterical texts of Irigaray, chiefly where the French

theorist writes about (medieval) female mysticism. In section 3. 2 I read Kempe and Irigaray both together and against each other, interrupting one text with the other (Spivak 1990b) in order to highlight specific aspects of the textuality of bodies and the physical origins of written texts in the work of each. I hope that this dialectical reading will be productive, and that reading Kempe with Irigaray and Irigaray with Kempe will help to "historicise" both writers while providing mutually revealing insights into the workings of their texts.

In what particular sense, then, do I read the works of two women so far apart in time and intention as "hysterical"? While Irigaray's deliberately hysterical stance has been outlined in the first chapter, and aspects of Kempe's Christic *imitatio* have been treated under the heading "mystical hysteria" in the second, this chapter is directly concerned with the textual processes out of which Kempe's *Book* was produced as they relate to the representation of her troublesome physicality within it, and with Irigaray's intentional troubling of masculinist discourse through her attempts to reinscribe "the female body" in contemporary "western" culture.

Whereas Kempe's bodily excesses serve in her *Book* as the means of her gaining orthodox status and having her text preserved for posterity, Irigaray's, as I have said, are designed to initiate changes which proceed beyond the written text(s). One could say that Kempe's and Irigaray's texts represent opposing dialectical explorations of the same theme: the excess constituted by female physicality in "western" discourse, a discourse which each writer recognises - in necessarily different ways - as the product of a transcendental subject, God. For Kempe, the task of transposing body into text requires a kind of apology for the excessive behaviour of her body: the written text marks the achievement of clerical endorsement of her life, yet it was a life which articulated a female physicality generally outlawed by Christian doctrine, hence a process of negotiation with clerical approval shaped the production of the text. The *Book* is "hysterical" in the sense that it is based on an already excessive female body whose actions challenge medieval versions of the acceptable (i.e., enclosed) female body-text.

We saw in the previous chapter how Kempe, through her mystical *imitatio*, re-presents her culture's version of female physicality by aligning herself with the distraught figure of the Virgin and the sexually ambiguous body of Christ. This imitative devotional activity, which

in its extremest forms I named "mystical hysteria," is presented throughout the *Book* as evidence of Kempe's saintliness and yet it is also disturbing in its effects, as the negative responses to her behaviour documented in the text make clear. The emphasis on physical acts of devotion to holy figures which I described in the first chapter as central to late medieval popular religion is the crux of Kempe's plea for sanctity through her own rather extreme kind of mystical practice. Moreover, Kempe's claim to be illiterate and her need to receive endorsement from clerics and, more particularly, her scribe, cause her text to be dependent upon the physical not only in terms of her devotional gifts (weeping, writhing, participatory visions and so on) but also in terms of her speaking voice. In this manner, too, she resembles the hysteric, whose conversations and bodily speech are reproduced in the printed text of her analyst, but whose symptoms form the volatile centre of the written text. Both female mystical and hysterical texts characteristically highlight the masculine inscription of female experience which is a general feature of phallogentric discourse.

Irigaray's writings, however, unlike Kempe's, express a self-consciously hysterical stance. In Irigaray the fact that the female body must exceed patriarchal discourse - including written texts which must be read within the terms of that discourse - is the starting point for a project which aims to make of this excessive aspect a point of re-entry into subjecthood. She specifically sets out to challenge "the female body" as a (sub)text of the phallogentric order - "woman" as object, as lack, as the other of the male same - so that women may themselves become subjects and agents of culture and so that the specificities of women's bodies may be symbolised. Both Kempe and Irigaray, however, engage in textual manoeuvres which may be read as figuratively hysterical insofar as they present female bodies in a theatrical fashion, playing up their respective cultures' constructions of "woman" as fleshly excess and affirming that female bodies may have other meanings, themselves in excess of this notion.

The main difference between the "hysterical" or excessively bodily qualities of the two texts lies in their different intentions, the result of the writers' respective cultures and those cultures' attitudes to women. Kempe's *Book* has a female literary community which contextualises it - the *vitae* of her mystical foremothers and contemporaries in England and abroad - but the transformation of body into written text is necessarily male-directed: she must maintain scribal and priestly support and present her story in terms of her understanding of

Christian orthodoxy, just as she lived her life. Irigaray's texts are also informed by a female context, that of the women's movement of the late twentieth century. Irigaray desires to communicate with an audience of female readers as part of her project to initiate social change. As well as celebrating and seeking to reinscribe the excessive qualities of female bodies in "western" culture in her texts, she insists on the political reality which both informs that culture historically and which must be confronted by women in the present.¹ Like Kempe's *Book*, Irigaray's writings reflect a tension between lived experience and written language: that which exceeds the written text - a legitimately female voice, "speaking as a woman" (which happens, "but not in meta-language" (Irigaray 1985a, 144)) - is what has not yet been culturally recognised concerning women's experience, although it has been lived. Correspondingly, if women's speech were to become expressible within patriarchal discourse, thus changing completely the nature of that discourse, then women would have greater opportunities to live in a more empowered fashion, to "embody" femaleness in new and alternative ways.

Irigaray's "excess," then, is strategic not just in an authorial sense but in the sense that her challenge to female readers is to take her ideas into the realms of living: to experiment with reading female bodies - starting perhaps with one's own - in different ways. Kempe's text of physical excess is also directed to readers who she assumes will want to articulate in their own fashion the pursuit of God or holiness (Kempe 1988, 33; Chapter Three, 147). These are very different cultural orientations but the engaging of the female speaking voice as a tool of "outlaw communication" - transcribing a message of (female) desire and infinite possibility within the boundaries of the text - is present in both Kempe and Irigaray. For myself it is inevitable that I will read Irigaray's texts more sympathetically than Kempe's, as the context of late twentieth-century "western" feminism in which Irigaray writes is my own. Yet both kinds of texts fascinate me with their desire to transcend the limitations on "speaking as a woman" that exist within patriarchal cultures. They engage the female body in their writings in such a way that the reader is forced to consider how language constructs and limits that body, and to consider also how that body which exceeds patriarchal language might be given compelling and regenerative expression.

In the first part of this chapter (3. 1), I explore the specific circumstances of production of

Kempe's text by focusing on the mimetic, physically excessive behaviours which are fundamental to it. My analysis of the *Book* by recourse to a discussion of female hysteria is an attempt to deal with the complexity of the relationship between body and written text in Kempe, and this means exploring her specific textual achievement in terms of the relationship she had with her scribe, without which the *Book* would not have been written. The extent to which the mystic's words (and indeed her sanctity) are her own has been the subject of considerable speculation among Kempe scholars (Hirsh 1975; Goodman 1978, 347-9; Provost 1984, 297; Erskine 1989; Gray 1990, 10-11; Lawton 1992). However, I hope to shed new light on the issue by treating not only the obvious dependence of Kempe upon her scribe (which is evident throughout the *Book*) but also the dependence of the scribe upon Kempe. The latter becomes clear when the mystic's strategies of "writing," the transcribing of unusual bodily experience into words, are seen to emphasise the irreducible physical basis of the text - and by extension all written texts - in the body.

This too is the point that Irigaray is so concerned to make, albeit in a broader context: that the unsymbolised activities of female bodies create pressure points in masculinist discourse which bring to the fore that which is disavowed in its construction. The example of Kempe, however, presents a challenge to Irigaray's utopian logic as the mystic's text is ultimately dependent upon the authoritative stamp of a male cleric, a fact which informs the *Book's* composition and the entire narrative. Within these textual constraints, how subversive can Kempe's "hysterical" discourse be?

Specifically in the chapter's first part, I examine three aspects of the interaction between Kempe and her scribe and/or other male figures which are central to the clerical authorisation of her text: the *Book's* dependence upon her body and voice (3. 1. 1); Kempe's own identification of her tears with God's Word (3. 1. 2); and the dramatic performance of her *imitatio Christi* through participatory visions of Christ's Passion (3. 1. 3). In each of these areas Kempe's *Book* presents the theatricality of her behaviour as bound up with her need to attain authorisation from clerics. And although her dramatic *imitatio* acquires an approving response on one level (shown by the fact of the *Book's* existence), it also produces an unassimilable physical excess which is troubling to authorities. It is this disturbing somatic quality to the *Book* which I then take up in the second section, where I read Kempe with and

against Irigaray's depiction of the female mystic in *Speculum*.

While the first section of the chapter (3. 1) examines *how* Kempe negotiates the relationship with her scribe and other members of the male audience before whom she performs her *imitatio*, the second (3. 2) focuses on *what* she inscribes in her text by this means. Here I read Kempe's *imitatio*, endorsed by Christ's institution of her as a "mirror among men," in conjunction with the subversive mirroring put forward by Irigaray in *Speculum*. I explore to what extent Kempe's imitation of Christ is subversive in the "hysterical" sense described by Irigaray and, in turn, how Irigaray's celebration of female mystical discourse serves her particular kind of visionary feminism. When Irigaray aligns the female mystic and hysteric in one of *Speculum*'s central sections (Irigaray 1985b, 191-202), she claims both as arch-strategists who challenge the symbolic system with an articulation of outlawed feminine desire. Her use of the mirror figure in the book is designed to show that the female physicality on which the symbolic order depends - "woman" as reflection of man, the unsymbolised substance of masculine transcendence - is disturbingly unstable and apt to escape or resist its function as "mere matter" *because* it is a phantasmatic construction (Irigaray 1985b, 134-5).

Irigaray makes the mirror mutable, moveable; specifically, she insists upon the unrepresented physical qualities of the mirror which women constitute for men in patriarchal culture; she thus puts the figure of the mirror to hysterical use. The female mystic/hysteric, present at the centre of *Speculum*, is Irigaray's subversive mirroring figure par excellence. She mirrors God in the form of Christ, the ultimate in masculine transcendence, through her physically excessive behaviour which in its immediacy abolishes the mirror set up by masculine subjectivity and calls into question transcendence itself. I will return to Irigaray's hysterical manoeuvrings in *Speculum* later in the chapter. Now, I will examine the "mysterical" (mystical/hysterical) activities in which Kempe engages, strategies she enacts as part of the process of recording her *life* and translating body into text.

3. 1 Body into text: Mystical strategies in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

3. 1. 1 Scribe, body and voice

Recognition of the centrality of voice in women's writing marks much recent feminist theorising. Hélène Cixous declares that she senses "femininity in writing" by:

a privileging of *voice*: *writing and voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries (Cixous and Clément 1986, 92).

According to Cixous, the dynamic, destabilising quality of the recognisably female text depends upon the material excess which constitutes the female body and voice. This might be seen as literally the case in Kempe's *Book*, where her voice dictates the content to another who writes, but the more unsettling qualities of the mystic's voice - such as her outbursts of tears - also inhere within it and may be read as markers of a femininity which is denied expression in the Church's official speech. The tears, for example, through which Kempe's narrative voice is momentarily silenced and her text rent with unsignifiable cries, can be seen to form points of eruption of her outlawed femininity within it and to function dramatically as signs of a body restively noncompliant with the dictates of phallic law. At least, an Irigarayan reading might view Kempe's devotion in this way. We saw this disruptive effect in the episode from Chapter 61 when Kempe's tears break into the preaching friar's sermon, causing him to demand her exclusion from the church and from the Word - that is, from Christ in the form of both Eucharist and Gospel.

Nonetheless, no modern reader and critic of the *Book* can ignore the fact that it is a clerically mediated work; given the anti-heretical climate of Kempe's time and place, it could not have been written and preserved otherwise. The proem which precedes the text outlines Kempe's search for a scribe willing to collaborate with her on her revelations, and the account is given further treatment in Chapter 89 of the *Book* itself. In the prologue (the proem in Windeatt's translation) we read that it was twenty years after the time of her first revelations that Kempe sought to have them set down, and that she only did so when commanded by God, although others had suggested it previously (Kempe 1988, 35). The first writer, we are told, worked

on the revelations until his death, upon which a second scribe found the text an indecipherable mix of "neither good English nor German." He stated that, in his view, "nobody would ever be able to read it, unless it were by special grace" (Kempe 1988, 35). Next this scribe went through a four-year period of avoiding Kempe, while there was "evil talk" about her and her tears. She took the project to a third man, who could not understand it, and eventually the second priest, troubled by his conscience, agreed to take up the task again.

It is clear from the prologue that at this point, the requisite "special grace" was achieved through Kempe's prayers (Kempe 1988, 36), and these also helped remedy the failure of the priest's sight which occurred once he started the task of writing in earnest, and is described as a hindrance from the devil. While as Lochrie notes, "this account of the writing of [Kempe's] *Book* is a literary convention, it perfectly illustrates the point of [her] prologue: the priest is like the reader who, through lack of charity or lack of courage, is unable to receive the profit of Kempe's narrative" (Kempe 1988, 33; Lochrie 1986a, 36). Kempe's scribe is depicted here at the outset of her story as the first reader of a text which claims to present "for our example and instruction" - that is, for that of all believers, the intended readership of the text - an account of the workings of divine grace. This work is to "our profit," in the words of the proem, as it was to the scribe, only on the condition that "lack of charity be not our hindrance" (Kempe 1988, 33).

The role of the priest as clerically authorised speaker - in his work as preacher of sermons and purveyor of official Church doctrine - is here reversed by Kempe in the same manner we observed in the previous chapter, specifically in the section on preaching. Kempe claims authority for her particular voice by restaging the story of the *Book's* transcription in terms of herself as medium of God's grace. If the scribe is the first reader, who exemplifies the most profitable reading approach to the *Book* (Lochrie 1986a, 36-7), then Kempe's own distinctive voice must carry the authority of the narrative. In fact David Lawton suggests that in reading Kempe's text:

we reverse the notion of editorial control. Here, the text constructs its editor, and it places him in the role of reader.... It is conventionally acceptable for a woman mystic not to write. Positively, it is a helpful generic attribute of a woman mystic to dictate. But there is a radical dislocation here between writing and speech. In the medieval vocabulary made newly familiar by Alastair Minnis, the most that the

second scribe claims to be is *compiler*, and that leaves Kempe - the illiterate of the book - in the role of author.² Generically, the editor is there as part of Kempe's story, the male cleric is subordinate to the laywoman. Authority thus passes from what is written to what is spoken: to voice (Lawton 1992, 102. See also Harding 1993, 178).

Windeatt, too, notes the import of Kempe's voice within her narrative. He writes that it is "human speech itself which continually catches and sharpens the attention" of the reader of the *Book*, and remarks that, "as an illiterate person, the role of human speech seems central to [Kempe's] remembering of past events, and happily central to her dictated account of that past" (Windeatt 1988, 22, 25). Speech and words are certainly a vital preoccupation of Kempe's throughout the *Book*, and she experiences profound anguish (resulting in behaviours which can also be seen as "hysterical" protests) whenever her access to sanctioned verbal discourse, in the form of sermon (Chapters 42, 62) or confession (Chapter 1) for example, is denied. Kempe frequently recounts in direct speech episodes in which she was required to defend herself verbally (Windeatt 1988, 25), recreating the drama of these situations with herself as central actor. Windeatt argues that "if we imagine ourselves with [Kempe's] unlettered awareness, her ability 'to answer every clerk' is clearly a reflection of the favour shown her and of her extraordinary vocation" (Windeatt 1988, 25). She effectively stages her life as a dramatic reenactment of her encounter with God's grace, in which the responses of others are seen to endorse her experience.

Kempe's manner of referring to herself in the third person in relation to her encounters with others in her *Book* also creates a narrative distancing by which she constructs herself as a character in her life's story, as more than one critic has noted (Mueller 1984, 129; Lochrie 1986b, 237; Erskine 1989, 81-3). This narrative method casts the mystic in a defensive, vocal and dramatic role in relation to other people, notably her immediate critics, so that she appears as principal actor in the depiction of her life as a series of scenes. Janel Mueller observes that Kempe's constant reference to herself in the third person as "this creature" and "she" instead of "I" is apparently a manoeuvre by which she "takes up and sustains an outside perspective on herself," which is "that of other persons and how they react, judge, and behave regarding her" (Mueller 1984, 129. See also Gray 1990, 12). The "hysterical" elements of this move are twofold. Firstly, depicting herself as the object of others' derision is a fundamental aspect of

Kempe's *imitatio* and the working out of her salvation - Christ tells her that she suffers shame and slander as he suffered (Kempe 1988, 34, 195); like the hysteric she performs according to a culturally acceptable model of behaviour. Secondly, the mystic's presentation of herself as the dramatic centre of her text, especially when onlookers are troubled by her tears, is similar to the physical performance occasioned by the hysteric's symptom(s). Like the hysteric, Kempe portrays herself - in devotion and dispute - as the unruly object of others' gaze.

In Chapter 12 for example, Kempe recounts an episode in which the actorly qualities of the third-person authorial voice, as described above, are to the fore. The scene emphasises the power of the spoken word, divine and human, to unsettle and to influence people's actions, but it also highlights the mystic's dependence on God and the unstable qualities of human speech. The text makes Kempe the focus of the narrative in such a way that her own body and voice defer to the authority of the divine; it is an example of the imitative rationale of the *Book*, Kempe's *life* as record of God's works in one of his creatures. On this specific occasion Kempe was forced to defend herself to a monk "who held great office" in his community, who despised her and "set no value on her at all" (Kempe 1988). Kempe tells how she had been seated next to the community's abbot at a meal at which the monk was also present, during which "she uttered many good words as God would put them into her mind" (Kempe 1988, 61).

The monk shows a strong interest in her speech and later when they are in church together, he accosts her with the words: "I hear it said that God speaks to you" (Kempe 1988, 61). He demands to know whether he will be saved and that Kempe describe to him his gravest sins, positing knowledge of the latter as evidence of the validity of her communications with God. Weeping in prayer, Kempe asks Christ for her answer, declaring, when it is given, that she fears being taken for a liar and that the words are "hard [for her] to say" (Kempe 1988, 61). Christ reassures her with the command to speak confidently in his name, assuring her that the monk will achieve salvation if he abandons his sinful ways and follows her advice. When Kempe tells the monk of his sins, he tests her by demanding to know whether he has sinned in lechery with single women or with wives (Kempe 1988, 62). Having proved her authority on the monk's terms, Kempe answers his question concerning his salvation with the answer

that he will achieve it only by following her advice, which she proceeds to give. The exchanges between Kempe and the monk, as well as those between Kempe and Christ in this scene are related in direct speech, and it is through her presentation of herself responding in spoken dialogue to others' questions and commands that the authority of Kempe's advice is reinforced and ultimately shown to be powerful and worthy of respect. The transcript of spoken language, however, reflects the dependence of Kempe's *Book* on her voice on two levels: firstly on her memory of the words spoken in the encounter but ultimately on the relationship with Christ in which God speaks to her and claims responsibility for the words which she herself must speak.

This episode recalls the account of the writing of the *Book* in which Kempe's depiction of herself and her scribe as characters in a textual drama in which she is the protagonist represents the text as dependent on her speaking voice. It also exemplifies the self-conscious, ironic stance that Kempe takes up within the narrative: she tells her own story, based on her experience of God, while presenting herself within it as one voice among others, a mere vehicle for divine communication. And yet in the act of dictating her narrative to the scribe she privileges her voice against those of her detractors.

Both Mueller and Sidonie Smith refer to Kempe's constant "self-consciousness of expression" (Mueller 1984, 129; Smith 1987, 50) which results from the *Book's* split point of view. Smith cites the "doubled ambivalence" of the text while Mueller goes on to state that the third-person trope "remains constant even in the subjective disclosures and probings where...it produces a simultaneous, double view - interior and exterior - of [Kempe] and her experiences" (Smith 1987, 83; Mueller 1984, 129). Lochrie also argues that the "good game" Kempe employs in her narrative, her playing up of the instability of language, "exploits this duality," as does the gap in time separating experience from recording (Lochrie 1986b, 237). The result is that we, the *Book's* readers, perceive Kempe as an enigmatic figure. Her presentation of herself as a speaking voice in contest with other voices renders the narrative voice itself more elusive, so that, like the hysterical body in the texts of psychoanalysis, it seems to escape or exceed the text. As Lawton holds: "Margery Kempe as historical subject recedes further from view, split between the writing and the voice, neither the writing nor the voice being stably or consistently hers" (Lawton 1992, 105).³

I contend that the elusive quality of Kempe's textual voice is the result of its issuing from a female body, a body which, having borne children, has forfeited the limited conditions available to a medieval woman for authentic visionary speech. While the unmistakable presence of a lively personal voice pervades Kempe's text and testifies to the fact of its origin in an unenclosed female body, the *Book's* third-person construction and distanced perspective is a sign of the process of the translation of this experience into text. The third-person narrative format works effectively as a strategy to distance Kempe as author or speaker from the unruly body represented in the text. Her staging within the narrative of the dialogic dynamics of the *Book's* construction - where her voice is in frequent contest with others - testifies to the cultural climate in which a woman's (and especially a wife's) speech was held suspect due to the contaminations of her physical being. Because the *Book* is constructed around the fault-line or space between the excessive female body/voice and the masculine authorisation of the narrative, its dialogic qualities are central. It reads as a destabilised narrative because Kempe's authority can rest neither solely on her own behaviour nor on priestly endorsement. With regard to the *Book's* dialogic aspect, Sarah Beckwith asserts that "Kempe's book provides a massive variety of different ways of incorporating the voices of others, from abasement before the authoritative word to a profaning and parodic decrowning of that same word." She claims that "it is in every sense double-voicedness which this book most deeply dramatizes" (Beckwith 1992, 189).

There is undoubtedly some clerical shaping of the narrative, specifically of the scenes in which Kempe defends herself from charges of heresy (Atkinson 1983, 107). Kempe's authorial voice with its origin in a female body connoting excess and danger is necessarily mediated through the relationship of the mystic and her scribe. Her *Book* is quintessentially "double-voiced." For Kempe it is not possible to "speak as a woman" specifically - she must speak in a clerically authorised mode - and yet her more extreme mimetic acts exploit the equation of the feminine with fleshly excess, as we have seen. Therefore there is inevitably a narrative distancing between Kempe's authorial (speaking) voice in the text and the disturbing physical behaviours portrayed in it, a product of the necessary representation of these experiences through the medium of clerical authority. However the paradoxical effect of this mediation is to highlight Kempe's physical acts of devotion as excessive performances when they are described, since they appear separated from her narrative voice by the requisite

intervention of male scribal authority, and yet male authority cannot wholly contain their disruptive effects.

This ironic emphasising of the female physical "excess" of the text within its masculinised frame also occurs in the psychoanalytic case studies of hysterics, which are likewise written representations of the female body mediated by men. In both kinds of texts the appropriate male authority (priest/analyst) mediates the speaking voice of the mystic/hysteric, thus displacing it or highlighting its separation from the strange actions of the female body which are central to the text. In this sense mystical texts and psychoanalytic texts on hysteria dramatise the production of the feminine in patriarchal discourse. The masculine-appropriated space between female body and voice, however, is an unstable one which cannot be completely recuperated, since both Kempe's scribe and the female hysteric's analyst depend upon female bodily performance to provide the material for their work of transcription/analysis. I will make a brief detour from Kempe's text at this point in order to explain in more depth the relevance of the connection between texts depicting hysteria and the female visionary's work.

The case studies of hysterics are based on dialogues between patient and analyst which, as in Kempe's *Book*, involve the documenting of an unusual physical performance or expression. However the performance is recorded as such through being classed *as* hysteria, interpreted by an analyst (usually male) in such a way that it achieves "authority" only through the endorsement of the masculinised written text. And yet, while hysterics outwardly aim to please their analysts (Evans 1991, 159), their bodily symptoms articulate another story, which, despite the analyst's attempts to encode it in narrative (the case history in Freud, or in the first instance the talking cure), tends to exceed the terms of the analytic situation. This is because the conversations between the hysteric and her analyst which form the basis of the "cure" and the written record of their encounter occur as a result of the activities of a necessarily twice-absent female body, as I will explain.

The hysteric's attacks can be seen as an attempt to stage a protest at the unrepresentability of female desire in phallic discourse; this is the first absence of the specifically female body in patriarchal representation that is suggested by hysterical behaviour. Such a protest is, however,

representable only in *symptoms* which indicate but cannot alter phallogocentric culture's blind spot regarding femininity. The hysterical symptom as impossible narrative of female desire challenges a patriarchal system in which, "to acknowledge the possibility of a satisfied sexual desire, [the female hysteric] would have to acknowledge as well the reality of castration, that is, the difference of the sexes based on a loss" (Evans 1991, 182), a loss which is inscribed on the body of "woman" herself. The female hysteric attempts to express a kind of plenitude (David-Ménard 1989, 130) which resists the signification of "woman" as lack through the excessiveness of the physical symptom, but the symptom exceeds representation and so is absent from the text. The analyst seeks to unravel and decipher the mysterious story articulated by the hysterical symptom, yet because the symptom characteristically overwhelms and obliterates language,⁴ it engages the analyst in a search which proceeds outside the text. The symptom's trace nonetheless pervades the record of the analytic encounter, a dialogue founded on its unsettling performance.

In psychoanalysis the narrative of inadmissible female desire which the hysteric struggles to express is made into another, authoritative narrative by the analyst: the case study. The case study is the tangible sign of that which cannot be represented and which the hysteric strives to express: female desire unconstrained by the phallic imperatives of the symbolic. There is a similarity between this process of textual transcription and what takes place with regard to Kempe, as the story of her life - including the most bizarre elements of her *imitatio* - exceeds the text; yet her account must be recast by the appropriate male authority in order to be accepted and made known. However unlike the hysteric Kempe consciously requires the support of her scribe; she willingly collaborates with him in the task of transforming excessive experience into written form. Her scribe, in turn, accepts that her mystical *imitatio* is spiritually valid. He seeks to understand the narrative of divine intervention she dictates and which her physical behaviours exemplify. He enables a textual representation of the mystical relationship, a relationship which, like the symptoms of female hysteria, must exceed ordinary discourse. However it is because Kempe's body is female that, like that of the hysteric, it forms the simultaneously excessive and absent central component of her text. Her bodily experience cannot appear in the text on its own terms since in medieval religious discourse representations of both Christ and "woman" must be authorised by male clerics. Hence the narrative produced from the encounter between Kempe's body and the body of Christ is

mediated by priestly authority. Like the case study of the hysteric, it is the sign of that which cannot appear in an unmediated form; the encounter between God and "woman" must be circumscribed by the Church. The scribe endeavours to translate the meaning of Kempe's excessive behaviours into a comprehensible narrative, a story from which readers will be able to receive spiritual edification.

Freud perceived that the hysteric had a story to tell through her body when he claimed that:

local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection (Freud 1955, 160-1, qtd. in Bernheimer 1985, 10).

Charles Bernheimer points out that Freud's hysterics caused him to become "implicated inextricably in the complexities of narrative creation. He tells the stories of the stories told him" (Bernheimer 1985, 10), and, in effect, Kempe's scribe must do the same thing. Mary Jacobus notes that, in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud expresses surprise that his case studies of female hysterics should read like literary texts, implying that their literary qualities are "imposed on him by the nature of his subject; almost as a form of hysterical utterance" (Jacobus 1986, 197). Jacobus continues:

The story of the patient's sufferings, [Freud] discovers, is intimately connected with the patient's symptoms. As hysteria produces symptoms, so symptoms produce stories. The body of the hysteric becomes her text: the body of Freud's text becomes a short story. The hysterical "conversion" from mind to body and from body to text - from hysteria, via symptom, to narrative - implicates the narrator himself in the "splitting of consciousness" or hysterical estrangement which (in Breuer's and Freud's own terms) characterizes the original illness. Hysteria, Freud seems to say, generates hysterical narrative, and hysterical narrative makes strange reading (Jacobus 1986, 197-8).

Kempe's scribe, like Freud, is also necessarily implicated in the "estranged" or split position that Kempe takes up as both speaker and performing body in her text; in fact, he is the link between them, the symbol of the estrangement that the patriarchal order produces in women who speak publicly and which, in the middle ages, was specifically prescribed by the Church and its priests. The scribe, as the necessary mediator between Kempe's relationship with

Christ and its public portrayal as a sanctified *life*, can be seen, like Freud, as constructed in part by the mystic's (hysteric's) unsettling performance, which he endorses as male authority but also responds positively to and seeks, as do others of her contemporaries, to understand.

While Bernheimer posits a connection between the narrative process and the construction and treatment of hysteria, I suggest that in Kempe's case, as in the cases Freud inscribed into text, we must read the *Book* as a double narrative, the "strange reading" which many critics have claimed it to be. Kempe's need to have her *life* preserved required that she "perform" verbally and/or physically before a vast audience of priests, scribes, and civil authorities, defending her right to a special relationship with Christ. These men effectively acted as "analysts" before whom she played her mimetic, desiring role. They, and particularly the scribe who eventually wrote down the mystic's *life*, represent the official side of the narrative, the "case history," we might say. But like Freud's narratives, the *Book*'s gaps, omissions and ambivalences invite us to read it in search of the "hysteric," Kempe herself, as a "symptomatic narrative" (Bernheimer 1985, 18) by which she tells a double story: that of the devoted visionary who is also a once-married (sexually experienced) woman. The latter aspect must be disavowed in her *Book* but reappears in the most intense moments of her Passion *imitatio*, where (female) bodily excess overwhelms both the distancing of the narrative voice and the (male) scribal authority which puts it in place.

In order to inscribe her voice into her text, Kempe must show that God speaks and works through her physical being, and this process itself must be set forth in terms of her interactions with God's representatives, male clerics. This makes Kempe's authorial voice seem evasive and dispersed - "Margery Kempe as historical subject" (Lawton 1992, 105) continually evades the reader's grasp - however the overwhelmingly physical actions of her body in imitation of Christ's Passion challenge this masculinised construction. Whereas the mystic's voice circulates evasively in the encounters with authoritative others documented in the *Book*, being presented as one voice among many and dramatising the conditions of the *Book*'s production, her body (re)appears dramatically in the centre-stage of her visions of Christ's Passion. Kempe's narrative voice, then, like that of the female hysteric in the classic texts of psychoanalysis, is present yet duplicitous (because mediated by a male scribe) in relation to the excessive activities of her body.

In her text the actions of Kempe's body in direct imitation of Christ are represented differently from the charged encounters with others documented in the *Book*; when Kempe imitates Christ's Passion she breaks through the clerical layers of the text suggested by her disputes with priests. She is totally consumed by her encounter with Christ, and onlookers - including clerics - are mystified by her behaviour (e.g., Kempe 1988, 105, 239). In her Passion visions the exorbitant actions of Kempe's body, then, belie the distanced quality of her narrative voice at the same time as they theatricalise - mime and caricature - the outlawed, unruly female body of medieval clerical discourse itself. Kempe's "mystical hysteria," her dramatic, imitative behaviours which can only be suggested in the *Book*, thus represent a kind of challenge to orthodox discourse, constituting the return of that which it seeks to repress or circumscribe.

In the opening scene of the *Book*, Kempe tells how she desired to confess a sin which had long been on her conscience, but the priest to whom she spoke cut her off before she could do so (Kempe 1988, 41). The repression of the undeclared sin drove the mystic mad and manifested itself in wild, destructive behaviour ranged against herself, her family and friends (Kempe 1988, 41-2). While this behaviour itself may be seen as "hysterical" - an extreme physical articulation of something which cannot be said⁵ - the rest of Kempe's *Book* may I think be read as a "hysterical," or displaced, confession too, the inevitable outcome of a taboo on female speech.⁶ The scribe, a cleric like the man to whom Kempe first desired to confess, is implicated in the "confession" of Kempe's sanctity through the transcribing of her revelations and is, along with the mystic herself, cast in an ambiguously dependent relationship with the narrative of her text.

As Dianne Hunter reminds us with regard to hysteria, analytic interventions into hysterical suffering "are considered 'translations' of the unconscious into the conscious. The 'talking cure' is the 'translation of affects into words,'" and "repression for Freud is a 'failure of translation'" (Freud 1953, 277, cited in Hunter 1983, 484-5). Insofar as the task of Kempe's scribe is to translate the mystic's *imitatio* into book form, he assists with her "talking cure"; he aids in the representation of a "confession" of Christ which could not be depicted so publicly without his assistance. And yet the body of the hysteric, like the body of the mystic, is resistant to masculine control. The production of Kempe's *Book* does not, of course,

produce a "cure" for her Passion/ate afflictions or her wandering style of living (itself also suggestive of the kind of familial disruption to which Freud's hysterics were prone). Transcribing her life into text may ensure her sanctity and survival but there is always something of female experience which cannot be adequately confessed in Church discourse.

Kempe's text may also be seen as a "hysterical" confession in the sense that it dramatises the derisive reactions of others to her tears and wandering as part of her own *imitatio Christi*. The excessive behaviour shown by the female hysteric generally provokes a response from others (usually family members), and this audience response is a necessary component of the outlawed feminine desire which she struggles to express through her symptoms. Likewise, in Kempe's text the responses of others to her spirituality are represented as integral to her justification of her *life* as the record of an imitation of Christ. Kempe's life in general - her public speech and her "vagrancy" as well as her wild tears - were seen as excessive because medieval women were generally expected to be silent and enclosed. Kempe exploits the outlaw component of her experience in the *Book* by portraying the inevitable - because she is a woman - negative responses to both her loud crying and her wandering as evidence of her holiness. They become part of the inscription of her life into Christ's through imitation: she suffers as he suffered.

This suffering is an ongoing aspect of her vocation and in this sense her confession of Christ is always incomplete. But this also means that her female experience continually disrupts the orthodox account of her life, since her suffering shame and slander is the result of her excessive female actions, albeit performed in the service of devotion. The "unconscious" of the text - the physical excess of female experience on which it is based - is translated into its conscious or outward form but the unconscious is never exhausted. The analyst can never fully translate the female hysteric's behaviour; an aspect of her protest will continually remain opaque to his discourse of mastery. Nor can Kempe's scribe represent her experience fully; it appears mediated through the responses of others to what they perceive as her excessive acts of imitation. These responses, especially when they are negative, serve as indications of her Christlikeness through longsuffering and as more material for the representation of a saintly life.

The *Book*, then, reproduces outlawed femininity as saintly narrative, a "confession" which Kempe articulates, with the help of her scribe, to a far wider audience than the priest who first refused her speech.⁷ The passage of the mystic's words from the place of clerical refusal, through clerical agency to sanctity refigures the original priestly refusal as part of her *imitatio*. Kempe's holiness, as articulated in her *Book*, derives from such negations; she suffers as her Saviour did. The first refusal becomes a model for the rest of the *Book* and at the same time a challenge to priestly discourse and its alienation of women. When Kempe is first refused confession and manifests her words in wild behaviour she challenges priestly authority in "demonic" mode (the *Book* states that she was "tormented with spirits" (Kempe 1988, 41)), but her later orthodox Passion imitations are also sometimes seen as a threat to clerical speech, as we saw with the preaching friar and his sermon. And yet, the difference between the two modes of expression is profound. The first leads to Kempe's being silenced and literally confined within her home (Kempe 1988, 42). The second leads to her gaining a public following and an audience for her actions and words.

The whole of Kempe's *Book* may be seen, like her first "hysterical" display of madness, as a spoken (dictated) confession mediated primarily through the body; the written *life* is a confession of Christic devotion which incorporates a physical supplement to speech. Even the scribe, after all, required a physical sign of God's favour - in the form of his healed sight - before he was convinced to write the revelations down. Kempe's Passion *imitatio*, constituted by that same physicality which formed the initially outlawed physical surplus of the text, becomes the generator of the narrative, as in the texts of hysterical women, and the means by which clerical authority is implicated in the showing forth of God's intervention in the mystic's life.

While the volatility of the relationship between scribe, body and authorial voice in Kempe's situation, described in the preceding pages, shows similarities with the case narratives of Freud's hysterics, it also exhibits significant differences from them. Like the ambiguous tales of female somatic symptoms penned by Freud, the medieval mystical text has specific destabilising qualities of its own. As the arguments put forward by Lawton previously about the construction of the *Book* make clear, the relationship between "author" and text in the middle ages was by no means seen to be a stable one. Generally speaking, the vagaries of

medieval methods of copying texts meant that "medieval textual production accepted many ambiguities which twentieth-century editing does not" (Allen 1989, 102), and as Edmund Reiss reminds us, "that language was implicitly deceptive and those who used it deceivers were common beliefs in the fourteenth century" (Reiss 1989, 115). While Kempe's narrative effectively dramatises the production of the female body in patriarchal discourse, it necessarily does so through a dramatisation of the conditions of medieval textual production which make her text a destabilised narrative. Both the body *in* and the body *of* Kempe's text testify to the source of representation outside the text - the body of the mystic herself - as a culturally mediated and mutable one. The deceptiveness of language which is shown in the dialogues in Kempe's text, frequently to her advantage, as we saw in her arguments with clerics described in Chapter Two (Chapter Two, 91-4; Lochrie 1986b, 231-2; 1988, 14-15), ultimately serves as a sign of the impossibility of representing truth in human words. In the middle ages this task is reserved for God alone, who speaks through physical means in the person of Christ the Incarnate Word.

Of course Christ's Incarnation is figured most directly in the *Book* through Kempe's imitative Passion visions, and the mutable nature of the relationship Kempe has with words and speech reflects the dynamic quality of her relationship with Christ which underwrites the text. This relationship is exemplified by the mystic's tears, her special sign from God that he is actively and publicly present in her life. The tears are like a hysterical symptom in that, while described in the *Book's* narrative, their disruptive properties gesture towards an unsignifiable somatic excess, the non-virginal body of the mystic herself which is traditionally denied specific representation in orthodox discourse. In the next section, I will trace some of the connections which are made in the *Book* between Kempe's tears and the authorisation of the words of her text, while continuing to address the implications of the "hysterical" or dramatically self-conscious qualities of her speech.

3. 1. 2 Tears and the Word

Frequently endorsed by Christ in her visions (Kempe 1988, 67, 197-8, 201, 216, 225, 245, 254), Kempe's tears represent her strongest claim to divine authority.⁸ They are also the

manifestation of her devotions most difficult to ignore and so form a central focus of the drama/s of clerical interaction portrayed within the *Book*. As shown in the first chapter (48), negative reactions to Kempe's voluble gift have not been confined to the fifteenth century but have surfaced in early- to mid-twentieth-century criticism of the *Book* as well, where the colloquial use of the word "hysteria" continues to represent the debate - begun and set forth in the text - about who can claim to speak with divine authority in terms of gender and, more specifically (the female) body.⁹

Kempe's visionary calling is plainly one that disturbs the conventional arrangements of her own family and society at large. And her gift of tears, as the central focus of her role as a pilgrim-mystic, serves as the holy sign which validates her assumption of this role, in contrast to the one she previously assumed at the dictates of patriarchal society, that of wife and mother. Her vocation requires that she become more or less a professional pilgrim, so that the unsettling, "hysterical" behaviour she exhibits through physical convulsions and tears when meditating on Christ's Passion is reflected on a broader scale through the physical movement which constitutes her travels. The itinerant way of life Kempe undertakes may be seen as "hysterical" too in that, while it imitates Christ's homelessness, it simultaneously gives voice to her own desire for freedom and physical independence, and effectively removes her from the culturally approved path of feminine development as wife and mother and thus from the circuits of phallic desire, as do female hysterical behaviours (Grosz 1989, 134).

However the central focus of the "hysterical" gift is Christ himself, who both grants it and is most often the object of its expression. Kempe's tears, as the most evident and unusual sign of God's favour to her, appear - as I will show - more than once in the *Book* specifically to validate the writing of her life as text while their excessive aspect inscribes her female voice within the words of that text, in a disturbing manner not unlike hysterical protest. The synergic relationship which exists between Kempe's tears and the Word of God in sermon and Eucharist, evidenced by the sermon episode discussed in Chapter Two, is extended elsewhere in the *Book* through this association between tears and the writing of the *Book* itself. In the sermon episode, Kempe's tears function polysemously as an expression of devotion; as a vociferous challenge to clerical authority; and as a protest at her marginalisation. In Chapters 88 and 89 tears and Word again interact on several levels to articulate her empowerment as

"author" of her text.

At the beginning of Chapter 88 Kempe describes her concern that, when the *Book* was in the first stages of transcription, she had less time to spend at her devotions because she often had to remain at home with her scribe. In response Christ declares that: "though you were in church and both wept together as bitterly as you ever did, you still would not please me more than you do with your writing, for, daughter, by this book many a man shall be turned to me and believe'" (Kempe 1988, 257). Kempe and her scribe are here depicted aligned in tearful devotion as in the common task of showing forth the workings of God in the mystic's life through the transcription of her revelations. Christ's statement that the writing of the *Book* is as pleasing to him as Kempe's tears confirms the *Book* as a divine project: Kempe and her scribe are, like the mystic's body through which tears function as the expression of divine favour, instruments of a higher will. The scribe receives authority here through his association with Kempe, whose prior claim to honour through the divine gift of tears is the point of alignment between the two in the cooperative task of transcription. Like the analyst's representation of the hysteric, the narrative which is recorded is depicted as a translation of the "hysterical" (mystical) symptom: the two are necessarily linked, and Kempe's legitimacy as "author" or the primary speaker of her text is reinforced by her bodily alignment with the Word through her tears.

In Chapter 89 this theme continues as we are told that both Kempe and her scribe experienced "many holy tears and much weeping" (Kempe 1988, 260) while the *Book* was being written. This is followed by Kempe's account of a vision she had at this time in which Christ, his Mother and many saints visited her in church and declared themselves "well pleased with the writing of [the] book" (Kempe 1988, 260). In the next sentence, Kempe tells how she was often physically ill during the transcription of the *Book*, but would become well whenever she set about work on her revelations. Finally, Kempe recounts how Christ, in response to her request, informs her in prayer that Master Aleyn, a priest known to her, will preach "a very holy sermon," and requires of her that she "believe steadfastly the words that he shall preach, as though I preached them myself, for they shall be words of great solace and comfort to you, for I shall speak in him'" (Kempe 1988, 260).

Kempe reports this message to her confessor and to two other priests "whom she greatly trusted," after which she is visited with fear that she may have been mistaken; as she says: "revelations are hard sometimes to understand." However, her feeling is proved "very truth, shown in experience" when the sermon is heard and this statement is followed by an account of the difficulty of recognising divine from deluded visitations (Kempe 1988, 261). Sue Ellen Holbrook claims that the episode serves as a demonstration of "the source and power of words - [the] priest's in delivering a sermon, [Kempe's] in composing a book. Through this source and power, the life of Margery Kempe and *The Book of Margery Kempe* are made one" (Holbrook 1985, 105). By foretelling the holiness of the already officially sanctioned words of a cleric, Kempe reverses the power which accrues to the preacher and uses it to endorse her own words of prophecy and, by extension, her *Book*.

This passage, which concludes the *Book's* first part and is explicitly concerned with its textuality and transcription, returns full circle to its opening. Kempe goes on to describe how she was

sometimes...greatly depressed about her feelings - when she did not know how they should be understood for many days together, because of the dread that she had of deceptions and delusions - so that she thought she wished her head had been struck from her body until God, of his goodness, explained them to her mind (Kempe 1988, 261).

The image of bodily dislocation in this extract recalls the *Book's* beginning and the torment from the devil Kempe suffers when her confession is cut short, which leads to its manifestation as a kind of "hysterical," uncontrolled rage:

Because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and [her confessor's] sharp reproving of her on the other, this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days (Kempe 1988, 41).

The congruence between the state of being "out of her mind...amazingly disturbed and tormented" in the *Book's* first pages, and dreading deceptions so that "she wished her head had been struck from her body until God...explained [her feelings] to her mind" in Chapter 89 is, however, belied by the clearly intentional nature of the latter, self-conscious image. Physical fragmentation is here associated with the healing power of the divine communication

to which Kempe lays claim. Between the *Book's* opening and the end of its substantial first part an immense growth in confidence is shown in Kempe evident in her visions of God, her dialogues with him and her defence of these as authorisation of her calling to contentious others. The image of deliberate bodily dislocation is presented, as so often throughout the *Book*, as the place/space where God performs his healing activity direct to the mystic's senses, without the mediation of a priest. The chapter reverses the *Book's* opening in which Kempe suffers painful self-division, more or less at the whim of a cleric, so that God's affirmation of the truth of her "feelings" heals her bodily torment and thereby sanctions the inscribing of body into text. To quote Holbrook again:

In the final scenes...[Kempe] is released from the suicidal frenzy that ensued from a blocked, an incomplete, creativity. From being bound on the bed of childbirth unable to make a priest hear her confession, she has from Christmas to Christmas increased in virtue, been made fertile by tears, until vision and the use of language are hers, full and potent, effective for herself and all others (Holbrook 1985, 105).

The transformation of Kempe's former "hysterical" suffering into a later source of authorial empowerment through her tears depends upon the development of her relationship with Christ which is charted in the *Book*, and through the imitation, also "hysterical" or excessively mimetic, which she enacts therein. Her tears serve throughout the *Book* as the variable middle ground between the Word which is Christ, the sanctioned words of clerics, and the words of the text; they initially express personal anguish and later also religious devotion, and they point to the extra-textual, mystical relationship between Kempe and Christ which, like tears, cannot be represented in words.

The exorbitant bodily behaviours which frequently accompany Kempe's tears also bear witness to the extra-textual - the essentially mystical - aspect of her relationship with Christ. Kempe's narrative portrays an audience within an audience as she frequently performs her *imitatio* in the presence of onlookers, later recording the entire episode in the *Book* for her readers' instruction. This theatrical, "hysterical" concern with the reception of her performance has the effect of seeming to displace the mystic's body from within the text itself. While the focus of the narrative is on audience reaction, the "truth" of Kempe's *imitatio* becomes a matter of reader response, and more particularly the charitable attitude described as necessary

for receiving the *Book's* value at its outset. The mystic's excessive physicality, simultaneously absent from and present in her text, appears self-consciously staged in a manner similar to what Cixous and Clément, describing hysteria, call "the theatre of the body" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 10-14). The "theatre of the body" is the term I will use to describe Kempe's wild and kinetic devotions as a spectacle for onlookers, which are then recorded or "staged" in the *Book* as scenes in which the reader might discern the sufferings of Christ.

3. 1. 3 The theatre of the body

The "theatricality" or self-consciousness of expression shown in Kempe's *Book* has been noted more generally in the field of women's autobiographical writing by feminist critics (Smith 1987, 176; Miller 1988, 49, 62n). This self-conscious authorial attitude would seem to be a consequence of the female autobiographer's difficult task of negotiating amongst socially validated female fictions of self while experimenting with alternative conceptions of selfhood from the norm. The wide variety of "roles" inhabited by female autobiographers signal the simultaneous self-awareness and dislocation which results from speaking within the textual economy formed by masculine desire, in which "speaking as a woman" is as yet an impossibility. The female autobiographer's task is, then, necessarily duplicit as well as theatrical (both perhaps inseparable features of much women's writing). As Sidonie Smith observes, women's autobiography characteristically reveals "a complex double-voicedness, a fragile hetero-glossia...which calls forth charged dramatic exchanges and narrative strategies" and "a kind of double helix of the imagination that leads to a double-voiced structuring of content and rhetoric" (Smith 1987, 50-1).

We find these qualities abundantly revealed in *The Book of Margery Kempe* through the text's mimetic rationale - expressed in forms of popular devotion which privilege the female in the sense of privileging the body and leading to devotional "excesses" such as weeping - and collaborative authorial stance - which privileges the male. This dual aspect of the text requires the mystic to represent herself acting out her devotion to Christ and to observe her behaviour at the same time. Kempe's *imitatio* authorises her *Book* but at the same time destabilises it by strategically refusing a final interpretation of her piety and deferring to the responses of

those who "read" her mimetic performance, both those figured within the text and those who encounter her body's activities through its pages.

As described in the first chapter, Irigaray claims that self-consciously "acting out" a cultural fiction of femininity can displace its terms and make way for an alternative, more autonomous version. This is what she claims is happening in the case of female hysteria:

Hysteria: *it speaks* in the mode of a paralyzed gestural faculty, of an impossible and also a forbidden speech. . . It speaks as *symptoms* of an "it can't speak to or about itself". . . And the drama of hysteria is that it is inserted schizotically between that gestural system, that desire paralyzed and enclosed within its body, and a language that it has learned in the family, in school, in society.... Hysteria is silent and at the same time it mimes. And - how could it be otherwise - miming/reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language, it caricatures and deforms that language: it "lies," it "deceives," as women have always been reputed to do (Irigaray 1985a, 136-7).

The theatrical qualities of female autobiographical writing may be seen as "hysterical" in that they are the result of the necessary split between female experience and the male speaking or writing position which the woman writing about her life must take up. This means she has to represent her body at a distance while simultaneously owning its experience. The body represented in the text "lies": it appears necessarily subordinate to (masculine) public discourse but its alien component makes of it a spectacle that unsettles the text. This process can be seen to happen in Kempe's *Book* where the depiction of her body's activities, at their most extreme, is made to seem distanced from the voice that speaks in the text. When Kempe's devotions are out of control she refuses to try and explain them later, representing them instead through the lens of others' variable reactions. Her Passion enactments stand as the opaque sign of God's grace which are the basis of her claim to holiness and the basis of her text. Her refusal to elaborate on them is part of her general contention that they symbolise the Christic or mystical relationship which exceeds normal discourse.

Chapter 28 of the *Book*, for example, records Kempe's experiences while on pilgrimage in the Holy Land, which includes the first account of her uncontrollable tears. Kempe tells how, while visiting places where Christ suffered, she "wept and sobbed as plenteously as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eyes suffering his Passion at that time" (Kempe 1988,

104); such immediacy is a characteristic feature of her material mysticism. Her tears occur so often that they make her "very weak in her bodily strength" (Kempe 1988, 104). Kempe tells how, because of the surprised reaction of others to her cryings, she would try and hold back her tears whenever she felt she was about to cry, so as not to annoy people. This statement is followed, as in the sermon episode in Chapter 61, by a list of others' speculations about the probable causes of the tears:

For some said it was a wicked spirit tormented her; some said it was an illness; some said she had drunk too much wine; some cursed her; some wished she was in the harbour; some wished she was on the sea in a bottomless boat; *and so each man as he thought* (Kempe 1988, 105. Emphasis added).

While "each man" offers his view of the cause of Kempe's crying in a catalogue which may be likened to diagnoses by doctors and analysts of women's hysterical symptoms, Kempe herself does not reiterate the origin of her tears at this point. She abstains from revealing her inner feelings and declares only that these men "knew very little what she felt" (Kempe 1988, 105). Kempe replaces her own absent verbal interpretation of her tears in the text with a further, graphic account of the bodily speech by which she mimics Christ, their source, and physically re-members his Passion. In this way she mimics not only Christ's suffering at Calvary but also his silence in the face of his tormentors (Matthew 27: 11-14), although she does so, paradoxically, through her own vociferous response. The *Book* continues the account of the mystic's behaviour thus:

And therefore, when she knew that she was going to cry, she held it in as long as she could, and did all that she could to withstand it or else to suppress it, until she turned the colour of lead, and all the time it would be seething more and more in her mind until such time as it burst out. And when the body might no longer endure the spiritual effort, but was overcome with the unspeakable love that worked so fervently in her soul, then she fell down and cried astonishingly loud. And the more that she laboured to keep it in or to suppress it, so much the more would she cry, and the louder (Kempe 1988, 105).

Kempe's tears, like hysterical symptoms, resist repression and break out in tortured bodily movements which speak a language indecipherable to most of her observers. The above description of the mystic's devotional "attacks" further confounds the prior explanations offered by onlookers and it is Christ himself, re-presented through Kempe's behaviour, who

must ultimately stand as the authenticator of her behaviour in the absence of any other defence.

In this scene Kempe's body performs a capricious function not unlike female hysteria, for as Cixous and Clément remark, historically "one must go through the audience of writers, psychiatrists, judges to reconstitute the mythical stage on which women played their ambiguous role" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 5). Female hysteria, like female mysticism, achieves public expression only through the mediation of masculine authorities. However, as Cixous and Clément go on to state, the hysteric has the last word on this "mythical stage": "the last figure, the hysteric, resumes and assumes the memories of others" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 5), she dramatises that which her male audience has forgotten or repressed.

Kempe's body enacts a "replaying" of the Crucifixion which also dramatises the repression of female physicality in her culture and its disturbing results (Cixous and Clément 1986, 5-6). Kempe depicts her Passion *imitatio* at the point in her narrative described above as a performance which is easily misread. In her text, as in the discourses of the medieval Church more generally, the significance of her physical behaviour is mediated by others, mainly by men. Kempe's non-committal portrayal of the import of her actions in this scene is similar to the plasticity of hysterical speech, the way in which hysterics are notoriously unreliable in the tales they tell their analysts with regard to their symptoms (Evans 1991, 158), and yet their symptoms themselves remain open to a variety of readings. The passage, with its account of the thoughts of "each man" observing Kempe's behaviour, along with the description of the *imitatio* itself, parodies the way in which the meanings of medieval women's physicality were thoroughly defined and transmitted by male voices. Like the female hysteric, Kempe makes her body bear the final authority of her text, yet it is impossible to fix that body in a definitive reading. It stands in for the suffering of Christ: Kempe's onlookers and the readers of her *Book* must respond to her body as an emblem of spiritual or mystical desire, as signifying a relationship which exceeds the text and which is available only to those who would follow the mystic's way.

The passage also dramatises, however, in its "hysterical" or excessively mimetic aspect, the cultural construction of "the feminine" in patriarchy as a speaking position without specificity,

without boundaries, both through Kempe's "seething" and "burst[ing]" cries and the variety of explanations conjured up by her watchers. As I explained in Chapter Two, the boundaryless feminine has a specific cultural representation in the late middle ages as the pervious flesh, held to be the cause and sign of all that was threatening to the medieval notion of self. Kempe's portrayal of her physical acts of devotion as out of her power re-presents this fleshly surplus as proceeding from within her soul, the heart of her encounter with Christ. Kempe's particular brand of (positive, affective) mysticism is marked by the union of inward and outward forms of devotion: she takes a path towards mystical awareness which proceeds inwardly through physical forms of remembrance. The meeting of the outward form and the inner experience of her piety is rapturously inscribed upon her body, specifically through the boundaries of that body breaking down and its manifesting the Christic encounter in the form of "seething" and "burst[ing]." The physical excess generated by Kempe's devotion signifies the rupturing of the symbolic female body in the form of cries which "burst out" when "the body might no longer endure the spiritual effort." It produces a redrawing of the boundaries of "the feminine" in medieval culture: the mystic's body, through Christ, becomes the site of a cryptic redefinition and endless deferral of what female physicality means.

By means of her imitation of the absent Christ, from whom she draws her authority and power, Kempe, like the hysteric, may be seen as struggling to manifest an/other body or bodies, unsymbolisable in patriarchal culture and propelled by her inadmissible feminine desire. While Kempe's prior sexual experiences diminish her capacity for mystical union in the dominant terms of her culture, the overwrought inscription of Christ's suffering in her body and the mystified reactions it produces suggest that her connection with Christ articulates a struggle to manifest another body, that is, a body not solely defined as dangerous feminine excess but instead as a source of spiritual power. However the essence of this drama must be performed offstage in regard to the mystic's transcribed *life*, since female desire cannot appear as such in the clerically endorsed text.

Yet Kempe makes this "offstage performance" a source of authorial empowerment. While the relationship between the female mystic's body and that of Christ cannot signify on its own terms in the *Book*, Kempe's representation of her Passion *imitatio* through the medium of others' responses has the effect of making the mystical relationship's excess appear in a

positive rather than a negative light. This occurs through the *Book's* suggestion that the source of Kempe's empowerment as a mystic is a relationship which by its nature resists encapsulation in words and so must be uniquely embodied by other believers in order to fully convey its effects to them. Thus Kempe defers the interpretation of her *imitatio* onto onlookers and, by implication, the readers of her *Book*, whose responses, as she states in the poem, are the final measure of the truth of her narrative: "what grace that [our Saviour] works in any creature is our profit, if lack of charity be not our hindrance" (Kempe 1988, 33). In this way the depiction of her mystical experience escapes recuperation within the text; its excess is attributed to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, according to which it may attain a wider range of meanings than those restrictively prescribed by the Church and its clerics with regard to the bodily activities of women.

According to feminist psychoanalytic readings of hysteria, the bodily theatre of hysterical performance also evokes an offstage, or outlawed, scene. The female hysteric's resistance to a process in which her body must signify lack in the symbolic occurs by means of her body, which is thus symbolically constrained and actively rebellious. The hysteric's "other body, her strange hysterogenic body," which manifests itself in motor symptoms, "constructs itself as a body of jouissance that prosthetically proclaims its will to pleasure and its lack of a physical body on which to experience that pleasure" (Lukacher 1989, xiv). It attempts to express the possibilities that are denied it in the symbolic order; it is a place of simultaneous lack and excess. Its excess dramatises the lack which the female body must bear in patriarchy and connotes the range of experiences which must remain unrepresented. As Irigaray puts it: "In hysteria there is...the possibility of another mode of 'production,' notably gestural and lingual; but this is maintained in latency. Perhaps as a cultural reserve yet to come. . .?" (Irigaray 1985a, 138).

Irigaray suggests that the meanings of female hysteria are contained within the language of its symptoms but that these must be read with attention to the possibility of "another mode of 'production,'" the speech of disallowed female desire (Irigaray 1985a, 138). Irigaray's statements on female hysteria thus also implicitly defer to the responses of her readers, as Kempe's interpretations of her mystical behaviours do. The effect of this deferral on Kempe's part, as I have said, is to mystify the terms on which "the feminine" is normally understood

in late medieval culture; the mystic's devotions challenge the medieval concept of fleshly excess with another kind of excess that resists clerical appropriation within her text through its alignment with the mysterious workings of divine grace. In this sense it is like hysterical behaviour which is also mystifying to observers and through which the hysteric "keeps her inner desires for herself" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 36), preserving the secret source of her pain as a kind of strategic symbolic excess and striving to make it reappear elsewhere, signifiable in non-phallic terms. Kempe ends the chapter in which this exhibition of her mystical "hysteria" has been depicted with a reproach to all who indulge in ordinary, human tears instead of weeping for the sorrows of Christ. She retains both her privileged status as visionary and her refusal to elaborate on the feelings which gave rise to the tears by defending herself as one to whom Christ has "entrusted...secrets" and "endued with love" (Kempe 1988, 107).

Karma Lochrie also describes Kempe's Jerusalem visions in terms of the mystic's embodying of divine secrets, which she claims are the basis of Kempe's challenge to clerical authority:

It is in these demonstrations - these spectacles of unspeakable love - that Kempe asserts and lays claim to what she calls "Pe secret thyngys of reuelacyonys" [the secret things of revelations] and God's "preuyteys" (secrets). In Christ's crucified body is inscribed the secret which Kempe reads and reinscribes in her own bodily revelations. She also becomes the secretary of Christ's body, a guardian of its secrets. The unspeakable love itself authorizes Kempe's access to divine secrets and separates her access from that of the Church and its clerics (Lochrie 1991a, 194).

The "divine secrets" to which Kempe's *imitatio* testifies are the basis of mystical knowledge which escapes clerical rule. But the secret of and in Christ's crucified body, reinscribed in Kempe's own account of her suffering, remains "unspeakable." Just as hysterical expression stands in for an articulation of female desire, an embodying of active female subjectivity which cannot signify in the phallogocentric symbolic, so the secret source of Kempe's own Passion is continually elusive and yet tantalisingly present beneath the surface of her text: "As God's secretary, Kempe's body preserves the text of his suffering without disclosing the secret knowledge that comes with the suffering" (Lochrie 1991a, 194).¹⁰ Her text contains an excess which is continually and strategically made to resist explanation and gestures towards the possibility of an empowered mode of female speech, suggesting that female desire can be sanctified through mystical experience and rearticulated in the mystical text.

In "La Mystérique," Irigaray dramatically figures the texts of medieval mystical women as a place of visionary transformation of the meaning of female physicality (Irigaray 1985b, 191-202). She claims that such works are called "mystic" "within a still theological onto-logical perspective" (Irigaray 1985b, 191) as a reflection of masculinist discourse's resistance to their insights concerning women. She thus takes "woman" as the unconscious of "western" culture and rewrites her through the figure of the mystic as hysteric; she asserts that female mysticism cryptically signifies the source of masculine subjectivity (transcendence) in the feminine. The "mysteria" articulated by Irigaray enacts a "return of the repressed," a subversive complement to masculine appropriation of the divine.

In describing female mysticism as "that other scene, offstage, that [this perspective] finds *cryptic*" (Irigaray 1985b, 191), Irigaray figures the female mystical experience as a theatrical endeavour; however she does so by herself hystericising - mimicking theatrically - the tropes of female mysticism. Irigaray self-consciously sets out to do herself what she claims medieval female mysticism does covertly; that is, to make evident in a deliberately opaque fashion (which cannot thus be easily recuperated) the way in which masculinist discourse makes itself godlike by reference to a male God, thereby suppressing the feminine. Her own representation of "the female mystic" is a figurative, deliberately mystifying gesture which aims to turn the tables on the phallic system with its basis in a male-magnified God (its "still theological onto-logical perspective"). "La Mystérique"'s imagery of fire and ice, "unbearable sweetness and bitterness...dizzy horror before the boundless void" (Irigaray 1985b, 194), represents a deliberate assumption of "the feminine role" on Irigaray's part as set forth in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Irigaray 1985a, 150-2). I think it is important to insist on the self-conscious playfulness of Irigaray's "mystical" rhetoric here, at the heart of *Speculum*, her self-described "fling with the philosophers" (Irigaray 1985a, 150; Chapter Four, 232), especially given her views on the potential value of hysterical mimesis as a reading and writing (and eventually a signifying) *strategy*.

Whereas Beckwith claims that Irigaray forms in this piece a "(mystificatory) association [between mystical selflessness and "woman"'s lack of self] which again places 'woman' beyond the pale" (Beckwith 1986, 41), and quotes Toril Moi's view that she must produce an image of woman which "is exactly the same as the specular constructions of femininity in

patriarchal logic" (Moi 1985a, 138, qtd. in Beckwith 1986, 41), I suggest that Irigaray's intention is indeed to "thwart subordination" (Irigaray 1985a, 76) by deliberately mystifying her deconstructive philosophical message at its heart. What does it mean for a twentieth-century feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher to speak in the terms of a medieval mystic? What does Irigaray thereby hope to achieve? And does this hysterical (mimetic) strategy work? I will go on to address some of these issues in the chapter's following section.

Irigaray argues in "La Mystérique" that it is the irreducibility of "the feminine" as mystical excess which causes the male scribes and confessors of female visionaries to pursue them. The medieval female mystic's performance thus becomes the model for Irigaray's own hysterical re-staging of the mystic's deeds. For Irigaray, female mysticism is "the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (Irigaray 1985b, 191), and:

What is more, it is for/by woman that man dares to enter the place, to descend into it, condescend to it, even if he gets burned in the attempt. It is in order to speak woman, write to women, act as preacher and confessor to women, that man usually has gone to such excesses. That he has accepted the need to take the detour through metaphors that can scarcely be called figures. That he has given up his knowledge in order to attend to woman's madresses (Irigaray 1985b, 191-2).

Irigaray's writings themselves self-consciously articulate this female "madness." They intentionally disturb the linear arrangements of conventional grammar and resist singular interpretation, as mystical texts do also. Her work theatricalises - mimes so as to thwart (Irigaray 1985a, 76) - the masculine construction of the feminine as mystery, as that which cannot know itself and is a mere agent of transmission of divine (for Irigaray traditionally male-centred) knowledge.

Whereas Irigaray appropriates the terms of medieval female mysticism for her own deliberately hysterical ends in *Speculum*, Kempe may be described as "hysterical" - exaggerated, self-reflexive - as a means of having her devotions accepted by her scribe as legitimately mystical, which is her chief intention. To this end she must defer or displace the conventional medieval understanding of her bodiliness as excessive and dangerous within her narrative (just as she defers a reading of her actions onto the conscience of her readers); hence her hysterical, evasive authorial moves, in which her suspect female body *as body* continues

to recede from view. Because the "truth" of Kempe's narrative is portrayed as depending on the right response to her actions, there is a licence within her text for her devotional activities to be presented cryptically. Depending on our willingness to receive divine grace, to read the Christic body in the mystic's acts, we can make of her performance what we will.

This same evasive quality is present in Irigaray but as a self-conscious strategy of "repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject" (Irigaray 1985a, 78), in order to displace the terms of this non-representation. This deconstructive work on language is described by Irigaray as attention to "the *specular make-up* of discourse" (Irigaray 1985a, 80), in which intelligibility is the property of the masculine by virtue of its self-reflection in the feminine-as-body. In the remaining pages of this chapter I will explore the subversive function of reflection or "mirroring" in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and in the "Plato's *Hystera*" and "Mystérique" sections of Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*. While Kempe's *imitatio* explicitly mirrors Christ's Passion, Irigaray subversively mirrors the workings of malestream philosophical discourse, and both writers make conscious use of the mirror metaphor. In both texts the act of mirroring the divine is figured as actively and self-consciously (hysterically) performed by a female body in a process which shifts the conventional basis of authoritative speech in phallic discourse and revises the status and reflective function of "the feminine."

3.2 "A mirror among men": Authority and re-vision in Irigaray and Kempe

In the pages of the prologue to her *Book* Kempe introduces the theme - fundamental to her "treatise" - of Christ as her role model and the harbinger of dramatic change in her life. This motif is bound up, in the *Book's* early pages as throughout those to follow, with the theme of suffering shame and slander in this world (Kempe 1988, 33-5), a fundamental aspect of her *imitatio*. Kempe's *Book* exemplifies her culture's trend towards physically imitative piety as at all moments of heightened realisation of the divine presence she records a concrete manifestation of the experience: from the more mundane accounts of journeying and speaking with others about God to the extremes of uncontrollable roarings, which arise from visions

of Christ that are as clear to her as if she had seen them with her "bodily eye" (Kempe 1988, 104, 179, 207, 225). As the author of Kempe's new life as a visionary and pilgrim, then, Christ is naturally the central figure in her narrative. Kempe's own status as "author" depends upon her successful mirroring of him.

In Chapter 78 of the *Book*, Kempe describes a vision of Christ she had often on Palm Sunday, which caused her to weep and cry aloud (Kempe 1988, 225). She then recounts how Christ would prophesy events to her and assure her that those who refused to acknowledge the workings of divine grace in her life while living would be forced to do so after their deaths. Kempe and Christ are here depicted as aligned in their desire that all people should be saved, and Kempe's devotions are further sanctioned by Christ's remark that the most common point of failure among believers is their refusal to actively embody the divine love they profess:

"But you may well observe that they do not want themselves to be saved, for they will all sometimes hear the word of God, but they will not always act according to it, and they will not sorrow for their sins themselves, nor will they allow others to suffer for them" (Kempe 1988, 226).

This speech is followed with a statement of specific endorsement of Kempe and one which is central to her mission and recorded *life*. Christ declares: "Nevertheless, daughter, I have ordained you to be a mirror amongst them, to have great sorrow, so that they should take example from you to have some little sorrow in their hearts for their sins, so that they might through that be saved'" (Kempe 1988, 226).

In the entire passage several aspects of Kempe's mystical vocation conjoin to be approved by Christ's authorisation of her as a "mirror among men" (the *Book*'s original word for "people"). The mystic's prophetic abilities, her spiritual influence on the state of others' souls, and especially her weeping and praying over the sorrows of Christ are all sanctioned through the image of her life as a mirror. The most explicit connection made is that between sorrow and the mirror, which is brought home by Christ's final words: "your tears and your prayers are very sweet and acceptable to me'" (Kempe 1988, 226). Kempe's vocation as a mirror among men thus has a dual role: her sorrows over the suffering of Christ serve mimetically to recall to others the pain their Saviour endured on their behalf, while at the same time they are a lament at the sins which separate the believer from Christ. They serve as a devotional emblem

through which sinners can discern both their need for redemption and the act of this redemption which the Passion of Christ has achieved for them. The mystic as mirror, then, is depicted in the terms in which the image was used throughout medieval literary, theological and scientific writings, as a double-sided symbol "both positive and negative...showing us what we should be and what we are" (Torti 1991, 1. See also Beckwith 1986, 41-2; Régnier-Bohler 1988, 391-2).

As Anna Torti observes, the extensive use of the mirror metaphor in medieval literature rests on a notion of authority which figures religious books themselves as "mirror[s] to justify the rewriting of the Scriptures" (Torti 1991, 12), the mirror par excellence in which sinful human beings might see their lamentable state imaged along with the means of their salvation:

The Scriptures are therefore a corrective mirror: they show man [sic] what he should be - pure in heart - but also what he in fact is - a sinner capable of reforming himself. Just as the Bible, *the Book*, is the compendium of God's teachings for man, so in the Middle Ages books acted as corrective mirrors for man's moral improvement.... Medieval authors, even though they do not give their works the title of *Speculum*, feel themselves part of the universal divine design, in which their books are written for their didactic function (Torti 1991, 12-13).

Christ's institution of Kempe as a "mirror," serving chiefly as an endorsement of her sorrows over his Passion, authorises her to express outwardly the devotion she feels within. But in the process of this devotional lamentation, as we have seen, the mystic's sorrow evokes a "secret" (the heart of her encounter with Christ) knowable only in personal terms by those seeking grace, and is represented in bodily signs which mystify her observers. Kempe's body is thus an opaque mirror; its activities resist sublimation and interpretation in her text. I will examine in the next chapter the terms on which mystics as mirrors of the divine have been classified and judged (and Kempe's "opaqueness," her ubiquitous physicality, found offensive by traditional scholarship), but in the following pages on Kempe I want to explore some of the immediate textual effects and consequences of Kempe's intensely physical, "hysterical" mirroring of Christ.

A number of Kempe's mirroring, weeping visions involve the Virgin, the exemplar of sorrowful identification with Christ. Kempe's acts of physical mirroring through emulating and making public the Virgin's sorrow may be seen, in an Irigarayan reading, to express

female physicality in a subversive fashion, since, in Irigaray's terms, "woman" as the reflection of man in patriarchal culture depends upon the symbolic invisibility of the maternal/material substance of the mirror (Irigaray 1985a, 77), which invisibility the Virgin traditionally represents (Irigaray 1993b, 68). Kempe's vociferous and physical imitation of the Virgin excessively dramatises Mary's role in Church doctrine as the inarticulate contributor of Christ's physicality. In the chapter which follows Kempe's account of her first loud weepings in Jerusalem, she has a mystical encounter with the Virgin. It takes place when she and her companions, still in Jerusalem, visit the grave where Christ was buried. On entering "that holy place," Kempe falls down "as if she would have died for sorrow" (Kempe 1988, 107). She weeps inconsolably, imagining Christ in his tomb, and this sight is followed by a vision of "our Lady in her soul," in which Mary also weeps and mourns. Kempe identifies so strongly with Mary's grief at this point that she claims later that "then was our Lady's sorrow her sorrow" (Kempe 1988, 107).

In Irigaray's analysis of Christian myth in particular, as described in Chapter Two (120), Christ appropriates the physicality of Mary which remains unrepresented in official doctrine (Irigaray 1991d, 165-90). In Irigaray's view, the walls of Christ's tomb symbolise the womb of Mary (Irigaray 1991d, 166-7); thus Mary enacts the quintessential feminine (and maternal) function: she forms the passive body matter which mirrors Christ to mankind (I use the term advisedly) while disappearing from the scene of representation herself. Mary is the mirror which cannot be seen because Christ's bodiliness overwhelms and erases her own in formal and popular representation, and after Christ's birth, in the Church's official stories, she more or less disappears from view.

Kempe's sorrowing for/with the Virgin in Jerusalem dramatically reinscribes Mary's birth-giving experience into the scene of Christ's death. The mystic's own "contaminated" status as a wife and mother represents the Virgin's sorrow in an insistently corporeal manner; Kempe's maternally-inflected sorrow (echoing the postpartum madness described in the early pages of her *Book*) gives graphic expression to Irigaray's claim. A page or two later, Kempe records Mary's affirmation of the mystic's public sorrowing for Christ. The Virgin presents herself as a model for Kempe of one who was not "ashamed...to cry and to weep" for Christ's suffering (Kempe 1988, 109). Kempe claims the Virgin's status as a self-acknowledged mirror

of Christ's suffering as a model for her own somatic mirroring behaviour.

Elsewhere in her *Book* Kempe has further visionary encounters with the Virgin. In Chapter 82 she recounts an experience she had on Purification Day, which celebrates Mary's ritual purification after having borne the child Jesus. Kempe has a striking vision in which "her mind was ravished into beholding our Lady offering her blessed son...to the priest Simeon in the Temple," after which "our Lady was purified" (Kempe 1988, 239). Kempe claims that she envisaged the scene "as if she had been there in her bodily presence to offer with our Lady herself" (Kempe 1988, 239). In response to seeing the Christ child offered up to Simeon, Kempe describes how she was physically overcome so that she could hardly carry her candle to the priest:

but went reeling about on all sides as if she were a drunk woman, weeping and sobbing so intensely that she could hardly stand on her feet, for the fervour of love and devotion that God put into her soul through high contemplation. And sometimes she could not stand, but fell down amongst people and cried very loudly, so that many men wondered at her, and marvelled at what was the matter with her, for the fervour of the spirit was so great that *the body failed*, and could not endure it (Kempe 1988, 239. Emphasis added).

The passage depicts an experience not unlike Kempe's first spiritual-corporeal attacks in Jerusalem. Again her inner feeling traverses the boundaries of her physical body, manifesting itself in movements and cries which make of her body a spectacle that defies comprehension. Her excessive actions cause "many men" to "wonder at her" and speculate as to the likely causes of her "madness" but no definitive explanations are provided.

Kempe follows this description of wild weeping with the claim that she often had such "holy thoughts" when she witnessed actual women being purified after childbirth (Kempe 1988, 239), a medieval practice which Kempe herself would have undergone many times. She also describes seeing the Virgin among these women: "She thought in her soul that she saw our Lady being purified, and had high contemplation in beholding the women who came to make offerings together with the women that were being purified" (Kempe 1988, 239). Here, through recollection, Kempe stages a miniature drama within her text in which *she*, instead of "many men," is the observer who comments on the predominantly female action she witnesses. The Virgin appears in her vision amongst a group of ordinary women who have

forfeited the virginal purity that Mary herself is miraculously said to retain. They are women, in fact, like Kempe herself, and there is no distinction made in the vision between the status of those who make offerings to the Blessed Virgin and those who are purified themselves.

The effect of this representation of Mary in Kempe's text is to make her an ambiguous figure. She is seen as the object of ordinary women's offerings but she also appears among the other women; she is both Virgin and mother. In Kempe's construction the Virgin is (re)carnalised through her identification with birth-giving women; Kempe (re)inscribes female maternal experience into the Church's official stories about Mary, of which the feast of Purification is a ritual outcome. But this re-presentation of the figure of Mary does not take place only on the level of the written text, however: Kempe states that her own extreme bodily responses such as the ones described above were regularly set off by such visions. When Kempe enacts her devotion to Mary in this way she corporealises the Virgin's act of birth: a mirroring representation occurs in both the text of the mystic's body and her written text.

In recording in her visionary text the alliance of female worshippers, the worshipped and those undergoing the rite of purification, Kempe indirectly validates her own childbirth experiences. Her violent bodily response to the vision - endorsed elsewhere in her *Book* as an expression of her sorrow for Christ through an imitation of the sorrowing of Mary (Kempe 1988, 109) - "hystericises" the Virgin through her imitative bodily acts. That is, it is a mimetic performance which displaces the culturally accepted view of Mary as virginal through the excessiveness of its physical response. So Kempe's mirroring behaviour challenges the conventional representation of medieval women/mothers but it does so *through* a challenge to the patriarchal version of Mary, her model of imitation. On one level this is similar to the way in which female hysterics rewrite cultural fictions of femininity by exceeding the terms of the model. Kempe's narrative account of her visions of "ordinary women" and her accompanying violent behaviour is also "hysterical" in its split point-of-view, which enables her to be both actor and observer in the scene, to orchestrate the action in effect so that her own enigmatic performance is not fixed in a singular meaning.

As explained in Chapter Two (122-3), Christianity's "unrepresented residue" of maternity can be connected to abjection, the response of the human subject to the realisation of the physical

limits of the self (Gross 1990b, 87-8), itself a recognition of its maternal/material origin. Abjection, in Julia Kristeva's elaboration of the concept, is expressed through religious taboo, which serves a purifying symbolic function whereby that which is experienced as threatening within and to the boundaries of the self is given a form of symbolisation (Kristeva 1982, 17). The medieval practice of "churching" or purifying women after childbirth, a state in which they were considered to be radically unclean (Erickson 1976, 196; Barstow 1986, 18), is an obvious example of the expression of the abject, but Kempe's version of the ritual revises the orthodox view. Mary's virginal status as the model for all women indicates how the Church represses maternity and places a taboo on the physical experience of motherhood. However Kempe's imaging Mary as an ordinary woman, combined with her own mimetic performance of Christ's and the Virgin's sorrow (the imitative rationale that authorises the *Book*), reinstates maternity within her own clerically ratified text, and by extension within Christian narrative. As Lochrie states: "While medieval theology and canon law attempt to ward off abjection by placing boundaries on the feminine and by restrictions against impurity, the female mystic lodges her speech and her revelations squarely within the taboo. And hence, within abjection itself" (Lochrie 1991b, 133), as Kempe may be seen to do in the above scene.

In performing her grief-stricken *imitatio* while envisaging Mary in this way, Kempe challenges the Church's official masculinised, "God's eye" view. In Irigaray's terms, phallogocentric culture depends upon an alliance between male subjects and a God in their image, a bond itself built upon and enabling the disavowal of materiality (figured by "the feminine" and maternal) which guarantees transcendence. Kempe's "hysterical" act of devotion which both envisions and embodies Mary's maternity refuses the "view from above" which would make the Virgin the passive ground of male self-reflection. Like the hysteric, Kempe stages a drama of corporeal suffering which is played out on her body, and thereby articulates a disturbingly mobile difference from her culturally recognised model of imitation, representing the Virgin as an active and excessive female figure.

While Kempe was surrounded by dramatic directives to imitate Christ and the Virgin, medieval drama may have presented the most compelling versions of *imitatio Christi* to her eye.¹¹ Medieval cycle drama - so-called because plays were performed in series which exemplified the cycles of God's involvement in human history according to the Church - arose

from the Church's feast of Corpus Christi. As the name suggests, the feast celebrated the body of Christ, not only Christ's specific body in the form of the Eucharist (on Corpus Christi day a procession took place in which the Host was carried through towns and cities) but also his mystical body on earth, the Church. The performance of scenes, taken mainly from the Old and New Testaments, by members of urban communities responsible for putting on the plays, then, graphically embodied the notion of Corpus Christi while simultaneously celebrating it.¹²

While it is Christ's body that is, naturally, the central symbol in the plays of the Corpus Christi cycles, the Virgin assumed increasing importance in the plays of the fifteenth century as the body which represents and makes possible the fleshliness of Christ in Christian doctrine.¹³ The plays depicting the bodily Assumption of the Virgin, a feast over which there was substantial controversy in the late middle ages,¹⁴ express this focus most clearly. As Gail McMurray Gibson puts it, these plays

daringly stage the annihilation of distance between body and spirit, in which the carnal mother who is Mary - more approachable and less problematic a figure than the Son of God - receives her glorious triumph and coronation in exchange for what is, no matter how transcendently purified, an act of human creation (Gibson 1989, 168).

In the N. Town Assumption play in particular, which came from Kempe's own region, "the elaborate music and the liturgical pageantry frame a drama that self-consciously recapitulates Christian history in the life of Mary" (Gibson 1989, 168).

Kempe's Purification vision, in which she is both director and performer, is her own dramatic version of Mary representing Christ. Just as Mary's physicality intrudes, theatrically replacing and representing Christ's to onlookers in the plays of late medieval Corpus Christi cycles, an image which sparked and sustained debate among clerics, Kempe's body replaces Mary's and thereby Christ's through her vision and its excessive physical response. As she watches in her mind the Virgin undergo an orthodox ritual of maternal cleansing, Kempe subverts the Church's official stories about motherhood with the unfettered activity of her own maternal body, just as in plays Mary's presence comes "daringly" close to excessively humanising and feminising the figure of Christ.

It is Kempe's presentation of herself as a mirror, and her *Book*, in turn, as a reflective account of God's works in a mere "creature"'s life, which rationalises her doubled authorial stance. In telling simultaneously the story of her visions and her unplanned, dramatic responses to them, she strikes a pose which both refuses an authorial overview (the "God's eye" masculine, transcendent perspective) and resists total encapsulation within the text (the silent immanence of female flesh). This playful, evasive authorial posture testifies to the *Book's* "double-voicedness" (Smith 1987, 50) and its theatrical cast. However, despite its "hysterical" malleability, Kempe's staging of the subversive drama of her devotions within the larger drama of God's intervention in her life enables her to speak from a self-consciously situated space which puts back into discursive circulation the irreducible fact of maternal flesh.

The above analysis of Kempe's dramatic *imitatio* bears a number of similarities with the mimetic textual practices exhibited by Irigaray. However I do not wish to argue simply that Kempe's *Book* "exemplifies" Irigaray's contentions about the status of "the feminine" in discourse, but rather, in the chapter's final pages, to read Irigaray as a self-conscious, contemporary reviser of some of the tendencies she sees in the medieval mystical text. The deliberately mystifying, grammatically disjunctive writing Irigaray produces in *Speculum of the Other Woman* illustrates her view that the only way to challenge phallocentrism in culture and language is to beat or exceed it at its own game. As argued in the previous section, she deconstructs the tropes of conventional philosophical discourse while subjecting them to a reading in which duplicities abound. In "Plato's *Hystera*," for example (the book's third part, which follows "Speculum"), she playfully transforms the speculum "as mirror and tool for probing the secrets of female sexuality" into "a political tool: mimetic submission becomes destabilizing mimicry" (Diamond 1993, 369).

The articulation of an excessive component of maternity by Kempe in a number of the visions recounted in her *Book* is also present in *Speculum*. Irigaray's transformation of the speculum image involves using it to explore and refigure the "secrets" of female sexuality that have been covered over by the construction of masculinist Reason as a philosophical system privileging an allegedly neutral or disembodied kind of vision. Generally speaking, in *Speculum* Irigaray contends that Reason has been constructed as natural by virtue of its appropriation of the substance of the female-maternal. Reason is thus a mirror in which the

male subject sees himself reflected as singular and stable in all forms of knowledge but this Reason is built upon a disavowed material (maternal) base. It is the nature of a mirror to reflect back to the viewer an image which bounces off its unseen backing: "A thing whose very nature is to be lodged in something else cannot exist where the base is lacking - and it is the character of a reflection to appear in something not itself" (Irigaray 1985b, 175):

Every utterance, every statement, will thus be developed and affirmed by covering over the fact that being's unseverable relation to mother-matter has been buried.... And a philosophical discourse that will (claim to) take matter as such into consideration deserves to be attended to with special care. Somewhere it forgets or denies that its subject has already been disguised and travestied by a certain speculation. And the less we see and recognize the additional part played in the *physis* by the mirror, the more powerful and insidious is the fiction at work (Irigaray 1985b, 162).

Irigaray's rereading of Plato's "myth of the cavern" in *Speculum* both challenges this system of thought and performs a deliberately mystifying kind of mimicry or hysterical response to it at the same time. The traditional Platonic notion of the womb-cave of human illusion is, she argues, paradigmatic of "western" metaphysics in that it articulates the escape of men from the maternal container in a series of events which effectively obliterate the maternal presence. Irigaray traces the process in Plato's *Hystera* according to which the "material support" of Ideas/the Truth is made to disappear from view (Whitford 1991a, 108). Eventually, the split between "intelligible and sensible" is well accomplished (Irigaray 1985b, 340) as the men emerge from the womb-cave into the light of divine Reason. Irigaray focuses on what gets left out of the Platonic scenario; she claims that the *passage between* the sensible (maternal) and intelligible (paternal) is erased and forgotten in the projection forward towards Truth. More broadly in Irigaray's reading, this amounts to the unconscious incorporation of maternal origin within the male subject who is oriented towards his God (Irigaray 1985b, 294).

Irigaray's reading, like Plato's, has a theatrical component. In Plato the prisoners in the cave see a puppet show in the form of shadows reflected onto the wall of the cave. They proceed from the world of illusion upward into the light of Truth (Plato 1985, VII, 209). But Irigaray plays up the dramatic aspect hysterically in her deconstruction of the text. In fact, she claims that the entire Platonic scenario is just that, a staging of the masculine economy of Truth

which is itself an illusion in that it appears to move beyond the physical to a purely objective mode of perception. Irigaray insists on the role of the physical/maternal at each stage of the Platonic progression towards Truth. As Elin Diamond observes, in this way her deconstructive restaging of Plato

gives us a "mimetic system" that completely belies the model-copy, for to the prisoners no origin of the image projections is imaginable; or, to put it another way, what they experience as origin is always already mimicry, a representation of repetition. Hence, mimesis without a true referent - mimesis without truth. With this reconfigured "womb-theater" Irigaray wittily retrieves and confirms Plato's worst fears about theater, female duplicity and, by implication, maternity. Platonic philosophy wants to place man's origins, not in the dark, uncertain cave but, instead, in his recognition of the (Father's) light. The philosopher wants to forget - wants to prove illusory - his female origins. But the anarchic effect of that proof, in Irigaray's playfully serious rereading, is the discovery that his mother is a theater (Diamond 1993, 370).

Irigaray's theatrical "mirroring" of Plato has multiple unsettling effects which simultaneously displace both the notion of specular, phallogentric Truth and that of the mother as unsymbolised physical source. Irigaray's mirroring is not only, like Kempe's, highly theatrical, it is also completely implicated in the physical fact of maternity/the female body, while it simultaneously works - by means of its subversive effects - to displace the notion of that body as "mere matter." Irigaray resists the assignation of "woman" to the realm of false copy of masculine Truth by her representation of the maternal body as the heart of the illusion which constitutes that Truth; that is, the illusion that it is self-constituting.

Irigaray does not simply point up the unconscious role of the feminine in Plato's text but mimes excessively - hysterically - its status in Plato as false representation, an inferior copy of Truth. By this means she demonstrates that the Platonic notion of Truth is itself a delusion which cannot escape its origins:

It seems to have been resolved that the mother's relation to the specular is an issue that cannot be raised.... If the "subject" of discourse is the father, he is the resource of all specula(riza)tions. The crucial thing is not to know that, one day, the subject *came into being*. That is relied upon a *copulative conjunction* in order to (begin to) be. As a result, you will never see the Father appear, come into life, into existence. The father is, always has been, pure speculation. That which escapes the eyes of a body. That is, of course, still mortal (Irigaray 1985b, 308).

As I have argued, Irigaray's mimetic interventions into traditional philosophical discourse have, like Kempe's mystical mimicry, an integral visionary aspect. As Kathryn Bond Stockton notes, Irigaray "elaborately mystifies the female body, using blatantly mystical terms to bolster it against mystifications that are far more alienating than her own" (Stockton 1992, 136). Irigaray's reading of Plato posits that conventionally understood "sensible" and "transcendental" elements interact in the production of ideas, although only one side of this process currently achieves symbolisation. This is the notion of productive difference elsewhere named the sensible transcendental or the divine (Irigaray 1993b, 68-9; 129), which focuses on the forgotten, constitutive spaces in "western" discourse. In her reading of Plato in *Speculum* Irigaray reinscribes materiality/maternity into philosophical discourse; the mirror formed by the female body is portrayed in her version as active and present, not passive and invisible. Like Kempe's reinscription of maternity into Christianity's figuring of the Virgin, Irigaray's intervention is woman-centred and its insistent physicality challenges the masculine function of God as disembodied Truth.

Irigaray's mirror is like Kempe's in that it is profoundly embodied but insists on the benefits of transcendence. Of course, it is also unlike Kempe's in its intent to recast the masculine mode of transcendence (the progression towards divine vision) completely. However both Kempe's and Irigaray's texts do call into question the notion of transcendence as divorced from the physical since they both highlight physical excess as part of their respective claims to authority: Kempe as a mystic in the affective tradition who articulates in physical terms her encounters with Christ, Irigaray as a feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher concerned with the representation of the female body. The hysterical representation of Plato's cave in *Speculum* reworks masculine transcendence by calling into question objective Truth in order that alternative conceptions of vision and "the good" might be articulated, ones which take into account the contribution of the feminine. While more direct references to the sensible transcendental occur in Irigaray's work after *Speculum*, the earlier project should be seen, I think, as expressing the same general concern with creating a possible space for a female contribution to culture and ideas. Irigaray's consistent focus on the "forgotten spaces" which make up masculinist discourse and her figuring of them in deliberately excessive, hysterical terms is the project which, already put to work in *Speculum*, she will later represent more insistently as "divine."

Irigaray's mimeticism, then, seeks to transform the God of Christianity beyond recognition; her divine, as articulated in more depth after *Speculum* (notably in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and in the essays in *Sexes and Genealogies* and *Je, tu, nous*) is figured as a mirror for both sexes which mediates their interaction on the symbolic plane while partaking of the physicality of both. As we have seen, it is always embodied, never claiming to be uniquely "transcendental"; but in representing female and male to each other in the symbolic realm, it retains a "transcendent" or mediating function (Irigaray 1993b, 86). It is this kind of interrelationship of elements traditionally attributed to the feminine and the masculine which Irigaray figures as a type of "third term" that would transform the present masculinist philosophical paradigm into a model of two-way communication or exchange. In *Speculum* this idea is implicitly suggested through the forcing of phallogocentric representation's "blind spot" in the maternal body, a blind spot which is concrete if not visible and which remains irreducibly present to the masculine subject - and to God - in the form of an internalised but undeniable excess:

Mystery surrounding him on all sides, diagonals or diameters of his circle that cannot be calculated, forms-ideas that keep his seeds of truth within their ideal closure...which is not to say that He doesn't retain something - something infinite, immeasurable, invisible - of an Other that will not easily be reached in the depthless separation of its jouissance. Except, so rarely and so unpredictably, in ex-stasy. Or else - they tell us - in an "other" life. An "other" world (Irigaray 1985b, 361).

While Irigaray's later representation of the divine as an always materialised, but moveable and productive site of exchange and interaction between the sexes can be seen as "mystical," her most blatant example of deliberately mystifying speech probably occurs in "La Mystérique," where she reproduces the medieval female mystic's performance of corporeal/spiritual excess. This essay is one of ten relatively short pieces that occur under the heading "Speculum," itself the central section of the *Speculum* volume. It is thus situated at the heart of Irigaray's large-scale deconstruction of "woman"-as-mirror as set up by the masculine imaginary, a mirror that she transforms by insisting on both its "sensible" properties and its "transcendental" or reflective purpose, for female and male, at one and the same time.

In "La Mystérique" in particular, the interaction of sensible and transcendental elements in the

history and production of "western" philosophical discourse is figured through the relationship of the female mystic and her divine lover, Christ. This relationship has obvious sensible/transcendental overtones as the mystic is human and, because female, closely associated with the corporeal, while Christ is divine in the traditional sense; he is "transcendent" as well as having the body of an ordinary man. The mirror also has conventional significance in the relationship between the mystic and Christ. As we have seen, in "western" mysticism the mirror image serves a dual function of suggesting "both identity and difference," a human likeness and unlikeness to the Christic model of imitation (Beckwith 1986, 42).

The history of the mirror image in "western" mysticism owes much to the Platonic tradition which elsewhere in *Speculum* Irigaray so cunningly deconstructs. As Sarah Beckwith notes:

The mirror-image was a crucial one in medieval theological writings. Its enormous suggestive power comes partly as a result of the ambivalences it was able to represent within a Platonic philosophical framework which viewed the whole created world itself as a reflection, a shadow of an ideal form. Christian Platonism (combined most influentially in the works of St Augustine) viewed the world as a reflection of God's glory.... But it is the human soul itself which must become aware of its resemblance to its maker, must make its mirror mind clear and polished, transparent and receptive to allow and participate in resemblance to its divine origin (Beckwith 1986, 42-3).

However in "La Mystérique" Irigaray stages an alternative production of the path to mystical union or communion as fruitful interaction *with* the divine. In Irigaray's rereading of the discourse of medieval female mysticism, the mystic does not strive to make herself "clear and polished" in order to resemble "divine origin"; rather she welcomes God/Christ into her soul in an ecstasy of longing which is manifested in wildly physical outpourings and demands.

Irigaray's hysterical celebration of female mysticism clearly privileges the affective, "positive" mysticism of the later middle ages with its physical excesses, the female-dominated piety in which Margery Kempe engaged. Just as, in Kempe, "the fire of love" caused by Christ refused to remain "within her breast" so that "what was enclosed within would insist on appearing outwardly" when she was racked with wild, mimetic tears (Kempe 1988, 225), in Irigaray, the mystic's "'soul' escapes outside herself.... the walls of her prison are broken, the distinction

between inside/outside transgressed" (Irigaray 1985b, 192). Irigaray figures the mystic's entering the "darkness," unknowingness, of mystical encounter as a subversion of conventional Reason (a "blind breaching of the philosopher's closed chamber" (Irigaray 1985b, 192)), articulated in her physically excessive responses to the divine. Irigaray's reading is also hysterical in that it mimes the function of "woman" in phallocentrism so as to reserve a space for the articulation of the feminine elsewhere ("in hysteria there is...the possibility of another mode of 'production'..." (Irigaray 1985a, 138)). Here that space is figured through the mystic's union with the divine, in which both are transformed.

Irigaray rereads the traditional notion of mysticism - as a journey towards divine likeness - as a process in which the female mystic gains access to a kind of reconfiguration of "the feminine" by means of her pursuit of the God-man, Christ, and their eventual union. The female mystic must enter her soul's "dark night," which has itself always been represented as feminine: "She is cut to the quick within this shimmering underground fabric that she had always been herself, though she did not know it" (Irigaray 1985b, 193). The path to God in "western" mysticism has traditionally been figured as feminised, as a way through "unconsciousness"; hence the female mystic enters the "essence" imputed to her in phallocentrism. In entering her soul's "dark night" she enters the mirror that she herself signifies for men, and, encountering "that most female of men, the Son" (Irigaray 1985b, 199), finds there a lover both similar to and different from herself. The female mystic's passage to divine union is thus figured as "mystery, me-hysteria" (Irigaray 1985b, 201), since it subversively dramatises through the excessive imitation of a model her own status in the phallogentric economy:

What if matter had always, already, had a part but was yet invisible, beyond the senses, moving in ways alien to any fixed reflection.... Thus I have become your image in this nothingness that I am, and you gaze upon mine in your absence of being.... A living mirror, thus, am I (to) your resemblance as you are mine (Irigaray 1985b, 197).

Irigaray's construction of the soul of the female mystic as mirror, "a burning glass...who in her cave joins with the source of light to set everything ablaze that approaches her hearth" (Irigaray 1985b, 197), like Kempe's mimetic mirroring, radically implicates the traditional

divine in the material, here the "fire" (passion, jouissance, desire) of the female body. But whereas Kempe must guard by deferring and mystifying her *imitatio*'s transgressive effect - the "hysterical" body ever-receding within her text, pursuable only by those who would seek God themselves with a charitable heart - Irigaray's mimesis is unashamedly blasphemous. She rewrites the female mystic and Christ ("sensible" and "transcendental") by figuring their union as an exchange in which each is equally implicated. Thus the mystic passes through her "dark night" to a place where "her divine companion never tires of praising her and encouraging her (auto)eroticism that has so miraculously been rediscovered" (Irigaray 1985b, 202) in their union.

The mystic's encounter with the divine is not, however, merely a narcissistic meeting with herself but an exchange in which she is able to act as a "subject" because Christ is her recognisable "other." The divine can be seen to take on its more radical Irigarayan meaning in this piece as third term or agent of mediation (the sensible transcendental) where Christ, who has masculine and Godlike characteristics, is at the same time feminised and mirrors the mystic back to herself, but differently. He performs the function that "woman" regularly performs for man in phallogocentric culture, while women currently lack anyone to mirror themselves back to themselves as subjects of the symbolic. Women's positions as female in the phallogocentric symbolic, their status as excess and other to man is hystericised through Christ in Irigaray's mercurial reading of the already excessive figure of the medieval female mystic.

In Irigaray's version of mystical process the conventional masculinist stance of authority - philosophical speculation based on the body of "woman" - is revised. "*How strange is the economy of this specula(riza)tion of woman, who in her mirror seems ever to refer back to a transcendence*" (Irigaray 1985b, 201), she writes, positing an insuperable connection between the conventional divine - the prime transcendental subject - and the female body. Irigaray argues that "woman" is a mirror capable of finding her reflection elsewhere, not in a specular logic which presupposes denial and fragmentation of the body but in a process of intersubjective exchange with an other in which likeness and unlikeness is for each subject a physical and a self-affirming (in this sense transcendent) matter.

And yet this kind of exchange is not possible in the phallogocentric specular economy as it currently exists. Here is where Irigaray's mystic mimicry becomes itself highly mystical and visionary. While "'God' will prove to have been [the mystic's] best lover since he separates her from herself only by that space of her jouissance where she finds Him/herself," giving back to her a sense of "identity" "in the serenity of the spacing that is thus projected by/in her pleasure," nonetheless, "at present that pleasure is still hemmed in by representations - however metaphysical - and by prescriptions - still ethically onto-theological - which determined it (and her) and thus limit their extension" (Irigaray 1985b, 201).

Irigaray's rereading of the figure of Christ in "La Mystérique" *points toward* the new kind of transcendence which elsewhere she figures as a "horizon" that changes constantly as one moves towards it (Irigaray 1993a, 67). It is a "*mode of becoming*" (Grosz 1989, 180) which simultaneously suggests multiple, open-ended means of signifying female bodily experience and the siting of those significations within the body itself. It is the nature of a horizon to shift, but it shifts only as a human subject physically stands in its place, embodying that which was projected forward by the eye; its ever-receding status means that it both escapes the eye (the subject's physicality) and is part of it, intimately connected with it. Vision in Irigaray is then always embodied but always also visionary: vision becomes a matter of transformations in the signification of embodiment, the result of allowing the mirror which is traditionally formed by the female body to shift in representation, and to imagine further shifts as a result.

Movement, then, is a fundamental aspect of Irigaray's visionary rethinking of the divine, and for Irigaray this movement has a kind of suggestive correlative in the bodily activity of the female mystic and hysteric.¹⁵ Kempe may be seen to move towards a transmutation of herself and the divine through her mystical engagement with Christ's body and that of his Mother, in which she has visions and embodies them simultaneously; for example in the scenes depicted in Chapter 28 of her *Book* or the Purification episode in Chapter 82. Where Kempe acts "hysterically" in this way her "other" body, which seeks to constitute itself as other than the treacherous flesh through convulsive, mimetic movements, is intimately connected with the divine. Consequently, as Jennifer Ash observes: "the crucified body [becomes] the object of worship, but it is also the object of desire" (Ash 1990, 82). Kempe's expression of her

desire for union with this "beloved other" causes her feminine "excess" to become "ecstatic, an ex-stasy [or movement], a being beyond herself where she might meet with the Divine" (Ash 1990, 82, 96). This statement recalls Irigaray's description of the residue of maternity/femininity ("of an Other") that is retained in God and may be "rarely and unpredictably" expressed in "ex-stasy" or else in "an 'other' life," Christianity's eternal beyond (Irigaray 1985b, 361). In an Irigarayan reading Kempe's *imitatio* could be seen as enabling her to embody, if only briefly, an/other configuration of selfhood ("something... immeasurable...of an Other") beyond the masculine economy of the same.

And yet this, too, would be a highly visionary reading. Ultimately, Kempe's "mystical hysteria" and Irigaray's "hysterical mysticism" or visionary feminism are presented in terms which exploit the female body as excessive in patriarchal discourses to very different immediate ends. In hystericising the mysticism of visionaries like Kempe in *Speculum*, Irigaray highlights the most unsettling aspects of female mystical discourse and uses them as the starting point for her own destabilising, visionary performance. But although she thus articulates what a medieval mystic like Kempe, plainly, cannot, this is not to deny that Kempe's *Book* also incorporates its own kind of disturbing maternal trace which constitutes a resistance to totalising interpretations of both mysticism and her own life.

The divine Irigaray imagines has in common with Kempe's "mystical hysteria" the qualities of fluidity, movement, agency, and re-vision. While the existence of the "other" empowered female body to which Kempe strives to give expression is signalled in the destabilising moves of her text and will appear in her terms only in the afterlife in which she will achieve union with the Christ of her longing, there are strong elements of the "not-yet" in Irigaray too. In "La Mystérique" the experience to which the medieval woman mystic looks forward informs the developing horizon of Irigaray's utopian vision, and the mysticism of both the feminist and the mystic suggests the cryptic "offstage" of the bodily theatre that constitutes hysterical performance.

1. It is worth remembering that, in Meaghan Morris' words, for Irigaray "the importance of discourse *is* its imbrication in the social," and, to quote Rosi Braidotti (as Morris goes on to do): "Irigaray is thus in solidarity with the current of feminist thought according to which the oppression of women is simultaneously real, and symbolic - that is, that it rests as much on material structures of repression as it does on philosophical pre-suppositions" (Braidotti 1981, 361-2, qtd. in Morris 1990, 46).
2. According to medieval literary theory as described by A. J. Minnis, the *auctor* (author) of a work is the one who contributes the most material of her/his own to it, while the *scriptor* (scribe) writes the materials of others and the *compilator* (compiler) may add to the materials of others but nothing of her/his own (Minnis 1984, 94).
3. Mueller writes that, "as author, [Kempe] works deftly to shape and sustain...blocks of narrative which convey the notion that she had no selfhood, no existence worthy of naming, before her protracted struggle to clarify and confirm her religious calling both to herself and others. Thus she introduces herself in the most minimal terms at the opening of her *Book* by leaving anonymous the two male figures, father and then husband, whose dependent she successively was. Her husband is cited only as 'a worschepful burgeys' [a worshipful burgess] and her father as 'sum-tyme meyr of the town N. and sythyn...alderman of the hey Gylde of the Trinyte in N. [sometime Mayor of the town N. and since...alderman of the high Guild of the Trinity in N.] (Kempe 1940, 6, 9), while she consistently styles herself, here and throughout, as 'this creatur' - a locution which encapsulates her sense of radical dependency on God for her ongoing creation" (Mueller 1986, 159-60).
4. Monique David-Ménard describes the overwhelming quality of hysterical body-speech thus: "In hysterical symptoms and attacks, the subject uses plastic and figurative thought to try to achieve a jouissance in which nothing will have to be represented - that is, acknowledged as absent" (David-Ménard 1989, 111). The symptom marks an attempt to bypass a linguistic system founded on an acknowledgement of specific lack. For the hysteric to enter this system as a speaking subject, she would have to accept her own castration and allow part of her body to signify this lack (Evans 1991, 187). The symptom reflects "her inability to map out her body in a defined symbolic system" (David-Ménard 1989, cited in Evans 1991, 213), and the lack of a symbolic system in which her body can be represented as other than the lack of phallic attributes.
5. It is also, clearly, an expression of the retention of guilt which confession would have released. There is a parallel here with hysterical behaviour too, since, as Freud notes on occasion, guilt plays a part in the construction of the hysterical symptom (Freud 1955, 65, 164, 178-9). In the Lacanian formulation of hysteria, the hysteric's behaviour is an expression of guilt since she believes herself, counter-logically, to be both the cause of castration and "responsible...for the impossibility of sexual relations resulting from her denial of it" at the same time (Evans 1991, 188).
6. This idea was first suggested to me by Mary Cain, during a discussion of the *Book* as hysterical narrative.

7. In reference to the delay between Kempe's spiritual experiences and the transcription of her narrative, Wendy Harding notes that, "from [Kempe's] point of view...the refusal of writing implies a reluctance to terminate the exchange between herself and Christ. The making of the book implies an end to private communication and to the special relationship this entails. It takes Christ's assurance to convince [Kempe] to persevere with the book. He insists that writing pleases him as much as tears, since it reaches a wider audience" (Kempe 1940, 216, cited in Harding 1993, 178-9).
8. Kempe's tears are also approved by St Jerome (1988, 136) and the Virgin Mary (1988, 109, 201).
9. Adverse reactions to Kempe's tears in twentieth-century criticism of her *Book* are perhaps better understood in view of the fact that the manuscript was lost for centuries prior to its discovery in 1934, although it had been in the possession of the Butler-Bowdons, an old Catholic family, for many years. Prior to its discovery parts of Kempe's text were already familiar to modern readers because extracts, consisting of some of the *Book's* more devotional material, had been included in a pamphlet printed by Wynkyn de Worde in c.1501. When these extracts were reprinted twenty years later, the printer, Henry Pepwell, described Kempe quite misleadingly as a "devout anchoress." Hence there was a context for expectations on the part of scholars of mysticism in the 1930s and beyond that the *Book* would contain work of a nature similar to that of a mystic like Julian of Norwich, expectations which were disappointed. See Windeatt (1988, 9); Lochrie (1991a, 220-6).
10. Cixous and Clément note that while the hysteric's pains are necessarily made public, there is also a sense in which she "keeps her tears for herself and seems to be unfeeling and untouched, closed for use.... 'Retention of huge amounts of excitation,' Freud says. The hysteric keeps the secretion of jouissance for herself" (Cixous and Clément 1986, 36). In the Lacanian account of hysteria, the source of the hysteric's suffering is also a secret to herself, insofar as "her identification with the lack in things points to a structure in knowledge that is itself an enigma" (Ragland-Sullivan 1992, 165). In Lacan's view the hysteric manifests the inability of every speaking subject to fulfil the requirements of the symbolic with regard to masculine and feminine identifications, and thus the "inadequacy of gender identity" to represent the difference between the sexes" (Ragland-Sullivan 1992, 163-4). The hysteric's apparent lack of awareness of the subversive import of her behaviour (insofar as she is usually entirely taken up with the need to express her symptoms, that is with the hysterical behaviour itself) presents a kind of correlative with mystical or intense spiritual devotion, which may also have disturbing social impact while the mystic's focus remains inwardly directed.
11. While Kempe does not mention having seen any performances of plays, there is evidence of much dramatic activity in the East Anglian region, and Douglas Gray states that in his view it seems "most unlikely that she did not see one" (Gray 1990, 27). See also Meredith (1987, 9) and Gibson, who claims that surviving manuscript evidence qualifies the area as "the most important dramatic center in fifteenth-century England" (Gibson 1989, 31-2). There was a Corpus Christi guild (responsible for performing cycles of plays) at Lynn in the fifteenth century, and

references to plays being performed there at this time (Chambers 1903, II, 373, cited in Gray 1990, 27n). Stanley J. Kahrl refers to a nativity play being taken from Lynn to be performed in Middleton at Christmas 1445, and a Corpus Christi play performed in the market square in 1448 (Kahrl 1985, 89). Clarissa Atkinson notes that at least twelve [plays] were regularly performed by various guilds in Norwich in the late fourteenth century (Atkinson 1983, 95) and more specifically, Jonathan Hughes points out that Kempe was in York for the performance of the Corpus Christi plays in the summer of 1413 (Hughes 1988, 238). Windeatt, too, observes similarities between Kempe's vision of Christ's Crucifixion and scenes from various mystery plays (Kempe 1988, 326n).

12. Mervyn James argues that "the theme of corpus Christi is society seen in terms of body; and that the concept of body provided urban societies with a mythology and ritual in terms of which the opposites of social wholeness and social differentiation could be both affirmed, and also brought into a creative tension, one with the other" (James 1983, 4). See also Beckwith (1993, 33-7); Evans (1994).
13. Gibson writes for example that "in the N.Town cycle combination, the play called corpus Christi is also the play of salvation history heralded by the body of Mary" (Gibson 1989, 168).
14. The tensions generated by Christianity's outlawing of the physical aspect of maternity is reflected in these debates, which centre around the Virgin's physical body, the basis of Christ's humanity, where it becomes wholly spiritual and is assumed into heaven. Gibson claims that the Virgin's Assumption "is the apotheosis of the incarnational preoccupations" of late medieval English culture and thus her bodily feasts were "the most insistent and most debated element of conflict between medieval and Reformation sensibilities" (Gibson 1989, 167-8). She also contends that the censorship of plays depicting the Virgin's Assumption which prevailed in Reformation England "is to an important degree a history of furious debate over the Virgin's bodily feasts" (Gibson 1989, 168). See also Coletti (1993); Evans (1994, 112).
15. Beckwith notes that in Kempe's "'theatre of devotion,' God as the Second Person forces an imagination of the range of social roles he could play. Kempe...*is* Christ, but she also exists in a series of fluid, interchangeable relationships which license for her an extraordinary mobility and flexibility of identity" (Beckwith 1993, 84).

CHAPTER FOUR

DIVINE IMAGININGS: BEYOND POSITIVE MYSTICISM

In the previous chapter I explored themes of mystical encounter and bodily (hysterical) performance, particularly in relation to the notion of mysticism and hysteria as giving rise to the possibility of an/other kind of female embodiment. This chapter continues the focus on dialogue and exchange specifically in relation to a visionary feminism. Like the previous chapter, this one has a utopian or visionary cast: it attempts to look beyond the construction of mystical discourse by academic and Church authorities to consider more fully the implications of a productively utopian philosophy like Irigaray's. While Church discourse tends to restrict and outlaw the female body and its conditions for articulation, Irigaray focuses her view of the divine on female bodies and the conditions of their authentic speech. The chapter begins with traditional, commentative discourse on mysticism and ends with a meditation on my own dancing body as a response to Irigaray. The chapter as a whole is an attempt to (re)imagine divinity in the simultaneously open-ended, yet physically situated terms suggested by Irigaray's writing; "beyond dualities," but reserving an exchange-oriented future space for female subjectivity.

Michel de Certeau's proposition that mystical discourse begins in a linguistic encounter with another (de Certeau 1986, 88; Lochrie 1991a, 62) testifies simultaneously to the dialogical component of mystical texts and the irreducibility of the mystical subject. In the mystical text the mystic herself becomes the unstable locus of the claim to divine authority which exists simultaneously inside and outside the bounds of Church orthodoxy. Hence, as I argued specifically in the previous chapter, the body is central to the articulation of (women's) mystical experience, and the related prohibitions against female speaking of the divine in the Christian tradition have required female mystics to maintain the support of male overseers and scribes.

"All women's teaching is to be held suspect.... because they are easily seduced and are determined seducers, and because it is not proved that they are witnesses to divine grace," proclaims Jean Gerson (qtd. in Julian of Norwich 1978, 151, qtd. in Beckwith 1986, 49). In medieval terms, women's propensity to seduction sexualises their speech by engaging their

female bodies in discourse in ways they cannot control or which occur beyond their understanding. It was for men to colonise this destructive female fleshliness, in the middle ages, by enclosing women's virginal bodies in convents or anchorholds as the condition of authentic speech. Medieval lay women mystics, therefore, had to negotiate intensively with conventional strictures on female speaking. While their unenclosed vocations allowed them abundant opportunities to dialogue with others and share the fruits of their dialogues with Christ, they were more inclined to be suspected of heresy or contaminated speech because of their intermingling with people in the world. As was shown in the second chapter, Margery Kempe was the object of heretical suspicion as a result of her pilgrim's way of life and forthright speech. Her living and travelling alone was unusual in her time; since she had once been married she was expected to remain under her husband's jurisdiction. When Kempe was questioned for heresy, her body was seen as a site of transgression which menaced society and so became the object of physical threats from clerics and lay people alike. It is this insistent focus on the challenge constituted by Kempe's physical activities, evident in the responses of authority figures depicted in her text, which is reproduced in a substantial amount of criticism of the *Book* published in this century.

The initial aim of this chapter is to interrogate some assumptions about mysticism and female bodies which lie behind much of this work, in order to situate Kempe in the tradition of affective devotion and "positive" mysticism in which her "dalliance" or dialogues with Christ are best understood. Positive mysticism favours the emotions and the senses as means of perceiving God and was associated in the late middle ages with visionary women, whose devotion to Christ's Passion was frequently enacted through excessive physical behaviours, as we have already seen. Kempe clearly belongs in this tradition. Negative mysticism, by contrast, understands God as being beyond mortal means of knowledge, and aims at the transcendence of earthly symbols and sense perceptions in the approach to the divine. Negative mysticism would outlaw the body (and especially the female body) through its description of the mystical experience as ultimately mystifying in human terms. As the more intellectual (and masculinised) approach to visionary experience, negative mysticism has informed the work of scholars of mysticism for most of this century, and it clearly informs the response of early criticism to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The chapter's first section (4.

1) will, then, address this response and its key assumptions concerning mysticism and female sexuality.

The second aim of the chapter is to explore Irigaray's "mystical" or visionary project of rearticulating the Christian divine with women's bodies and their specific representation as a central focus. The chapter's second section (4. 2) aims to move beyond the dualities described in the first (namely the positive and negative mystical traditions in which Kempe and her earlier twentieth-century critics are respectively placed) by setting up a series of dialogues between Irigaray and other writers with whom she is concerned - or who are concerned with her, in my own case - on the subject of the divine and female bodiliness. The dialogues, like those Kempe has with Christ, are "seductive" or pseudo-sexual in that they are designed to provoke an exchange of ideas which might work towards a re-production (or re-presentation) of female bodies. They are inspired by Irigaray's visions of carnal exchange between different subjects who are subjects in their own right, for whom the divine is an agent of mediation and contact, of dialogue between irreducible others and selves.

Both terms, "seduction" and "dialogue," are intended to convey the sense of mutual dependence and interaction which Irigaray articulates through the notion of the sensible transcendental. The second half-chapter's sections are clearly not dialogues in a strict sense; for one thing, the first three are based on Irigaray's responses to male thinkers and the last on mine to Irigaray. I use the term dialogue to paradoxically fix my focus on the teasing out of movement between opposites which constitutes the Irigarayan divine or "threshold." That is, I want to suggest movement and extension, to work at articulating "spaces between" subjects, following the lead of Irigaray's concept of the divine as fruitful mediation, but in specific contexts. As well as highlighting difference or the space between subjects, the notion of dialogue is intended to connote the way in which each subject always needs an other to respond to, an idea which also suggests seduction or fascination.¹ Irigaray needs her male philosophers to "have a fling with" (Irigaray 1985a, 150); she is formed by them as much as Lacan, Nietzsche and Levinas need to construct "woman" as a silent partner in their search for a particular kind of (masculinised) "truth." I need to find ways of responding to Irigaray too and, as Whitford states, "Irigaray *needs* her readers and interpreters and...this need is inherent in her theory" (Whitford 1991a, 5); she writes to initiate productive exchanges among

women. The phrase "carnal exchange(s)" conveys a similar meaning, and it implies that bodies as cultural artefacts are constructed and read in the social domain where negotiations between subjects take place. Carnal exchange is also Irigaray's ultimate figure for the divine leading to an age of sexual difference in which women's contribution to culture will achieve equal recognition with men's (Irigaray 1991b).

Irigaray argues that this kind of exchange is outlawed in the Christian tradition as it has developed, largely because of a recuperation of the material contribution of the arch-maternal figure, the Virgin Mary, into the figure of Christ (Irigaray 1991d, 164-90). Irigaray's views on the radical possibilities of the interpretation of Christ as a figure who celebrates fleshliness, suggested in her book *Marine Lover* make her, in a sense, a visionary in the positive tradition like Kempe. Irigaray desires to return the considerations of the flesh to discourse on the divine and thus her own discourse has affinities with the positive mystical text, in which the mystic's body is transformed in the process of mediating divine speech.

While I will be using Irigaray initially in this chapter to facilitate an engagement with Kempe's critics and the ubiquitous physicality of her *Book*, my dealings with Irigaray's writings in the second section will address more broadly issues that have arisen in the discussion of Kempe. It is Irigaray's contention that female sexuality, constructed as "mere matter" and the underside of masculine rationality, is simultaneously excluded from and represented as excessive to phallogocentric discourses (Butler 1993, 37), and so needs to attain a space of representation which does not require its erasure, in which it might appear differently. Conversely, it is Kempe's ability to largely suppress her sexuality in her text (evidenced, for example, by Christ's assurances to her that she is as good as a virgin) which enables her to speak in a forum of public expression guarded by men. In exploring Irigaray's writings on the divine and female sexuality further, it will become clear that her positing the divine as that which enables female sexuality to become expressible shows points of continuity with as well as inevitable differences from Kempe's medieval, "positive mystical" text.

Kempe makes the divine the means of her speaking and writing her text, while Irigaray's version of the divine, in allowing female sexuality a place and position of its own in

discourse, aims to transform the terms of normal communication. Kempe's "carnal exchanges" with Christ - too carnal for her (clerical) critics - thus presage Irigaray's view of the divine as agent of genuinely fruitful exchange between different sorts of selves (female/male, in her paradigm). But Kempe's relationship with Christ and the text which arises from it, because they must be mediated by a male scribe, also necessarily reveal the limitations of the order of speaking and representation which Irigaray desires so passionately to change. The dialogues and exchanges in the second section of this chapter are intended to produce questions and provoke crises in both the discourses of scholarship on mysticism and of Irigaray's feminism. It is out of such crisis and questioning that identifiable and so possibly workable outcomes of Irigaray's visions of female subjectivity might emerge.

4. 1 **Contaminating Women: Positive and Negative Mysticism and *The Book of Margery Kempe***

4. 1. 1 **Margery Kempe and the critics: Disempowerment and deconstruction**

Describing twentieth-century criticism of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, David Lawton notes the "overwhelming sense" among critics that Kempe was "excluded from both the literary and ecclesiastical canons" as an unsuccessful writer and mystic, and that this "failure and...exclusion require explaining" (Lawton 1992, 94). Indeed most critical "explanations" of Kempe's text centre on the mystic's physical behaviour where this is felt to be unorthodox and, often, unspiritual. The insistent presence of Kempe's voice, body and personality in her *Book* also seems to have contributed to its "being demoted out of religious writing and promoted into literature, into the critic's field of expertise," as Lawton observes (1992, 95). Too much physical detail about the mystic in a mystical text evidently renders the text suspect as an account of spiritual truths and opens it up to being read as a story where the task of judging the "characters" lies with the reader.

The effect of this trend in response to Kempe's *Book* since its discovery in 1934 is not so different from that of the reactions the mystic evoked in her own lifetime among her critics. While the pervasive concern with the physical in the *Book* makes Kempe into a colourful

literary character for modern scholarship, her persistence as a vocal and physical presence in her own time, as a wife who lived apart from her husband and yet moved about the countryside with relative freedom unsettled religious and civil authorities. Her speaking of God and exhibitions of weeping in devotion to him were seen to be excessive and unorthodox as a result.² Kempe's treatment by Church and town officials while she lived and by a number of scholars after her death involves the passing of judgements against her which, as Lawton has noted, often find her wanting. A number of modern critical responses to the *Book*,³ like those of the authorities before whom Kempe was called to defend herself, can be seen to refuse a dialogic encounter with her text/voice in their autocratic desire to displace her from categories of orthodoxy. Charges of eccentricity have come largely from male critics, some of them in religious orders (Lawton 1992, 94), who replicate the attitudes of clerics in the *Book* in decrying Kempe's anomalous status.

By highlighting the specific foci of their judgements, this section aims to deconstruct the discourse of clerical authority in its modern and medieval forms, pinpointing the places at which the two discourses find women's voices threatening. Both (clerical) critics and critical clerics respond severely to Kempe's relatively independent mode of living - her role as a "wandering wife" - and are apt to pass sentence on her voluble gift of tears. These aspects of Kempe's vocation involve bodily activities which extend beyond those recommended for her by the Church. As we saw in Chapter Two, strictures on women's speech and physical freedom were an integral part of the medieval Church's work in imaging itself as the sole agent of purity and truth. Male priests outlawed and appropriated women's speech and sexuality as part of defining holiness in the tradition of a masculine God. Early critics of Kempe's *Book*, working with the assumptions of negative mysticism by which they separate "true" mystics from "false," are likewise led to exclude consideration of female sexuality and bodiliness from their texts. Their version of negative truth is a masculine one, founded on the silencing of female bodies, and this is made evident by some strong reactions to Kempe's vociferousness and related physical "excesses."

My examination of the critical discourses of scholarship on mysticism follows Irigaray's concern with deconstructing the terms of women's simultaneous production within and exclusion from "western" metaphysics, their position as both lack and excess - but not

independent subjects - in relation to the masculine norm. Her strategies involve, on one level, uncovering and highlighting what patriarchal discourses try to ignore, perceiving that what is marginalised, that is, frequently elements of "female eroticism and corporeality" (Grosz 1989, 109), is potentially threatening to the alleged self-constitution of phallocentrism's male representative. Irigaray seeks to make evident the constitutive conditions of masculine rationality, i.e., the positing of "the feminine" as both outlawed excess and the recuperated (internalised) material ground of phallogentric discourse. Her ultimate intention is to shift the terrain of the phallogentric symbolic system so that "woman" as both unrepresented inside and outside of that order might take up a(n other) subject position. If this were to happen it would mean that masculine subjectivity would have to be differently defined; instead of positing the feminine as its unrepresented other, intersubjective exchange - mutual recognition - would be necessary.

The construction of "western" medieval mysticism by twentieth-century scholarship in the field effectively celebrates the reign of the masculine, self-sufficient subject. It "concerns the unmediated inner self and its relationship to the unmediated transcendent God," in Sarah Beckwith's words (Beckwith 1993, 12); the physical mediation of the mystical subject and that subject's God is largely disavowed. This disavowal is frequently expressed through a marginalisation of female corporeality, a process that was endorsed in medieval theology and orthodox religious practice of the middle ages. In a sense, then, twentieth-century scholarship on "western" mysticism maintains the position of the medieval Church with regard to the excessiveness of women's bodies, and it does so through its specific (if disavowed) construction of medieval mystical discourse and that discourse's transcendent God. Hence, in examining the reaction of some twentieth-century scholars of mysticism to *The Book of Margery Kempe* with the aim of extending the discussion in the direction of Irigaray's broader philosophical concerns, I will attend to critical reactions to the prominence of physicality in Kempe's *Book*.

Responses to Kempe which focus on this aspect of her text have not been lacking. There has been a simultaneous desire to exclude and to focus on female physicality and the female voice - an ambivalent fascination - in (modern) critical and (medieval) clerical responses to Kempe. It most often takes the form of either an expressed wish or evident assumption that she should

(have) live(d) an enclosed life, either as virgins did - in convents or anchorholds - or wives and mothers - in the home. I will treat firstly some examples of this sort of reaction to the mystic's life from her contemporaries and then proceed to a discussion of similar responses in the work of modern critics.

That the marginalisation of female sexuality is integral to *The Book of Margery Kempe* has been established in previous chapters, and several reasons for this have been discussed. The production of the *Book* itself shows that Kempe was able to prove to a degree that she had escaped the alleged contaminations of her sex: "To the extent that she establishes her chastity within the text, to the extent that she reaffirms through the text, as well as in the text, her subordination to all fathers, she is allowed the voice of authority," as Sidonie Smith puts it (Smith 1987, 55). Kempe's *Book* exemplifies the way in which phallogocentric discourse appropriates the feminine as fundamentally lacking in order to preserve its presence to itself and its own power: her life-text is contained within a clerically-endorsed format without which no record of her story could exist. Her book is a microcosm of the Irigarayan view of "western" culture as that which produces the otherwise excluded (i.e., the feminine) as an element of its own inner life. It is not surprising then that "the fathers" of religious discourse - the priests with whom Kempe had to interact continually - should betray concern with the aspects of her calling which exceed the base requirement of submission to clerical authority and make possible a subversion of her "chaste subordination."

Soon after achieving separation from her husband and at the outset of her visionary "career," Kempe is commanded by God to dress only in white clothes (Kempe 1988, 67). Traditionally these represent purity and virginity, among other things, and the mystic uses them to signify that her life is now dedicated to the service of God (Kempe 1988, 273n). Kempe's white clothes, like her tears, are seen by her immediate critics, the priests and urban authorities from whom she encounters hostility, as disruptive in that they are a sign of strategic movement between sexual categories into which medieval patriarchal society classifies women (Kempe 1988, 162). Normally only women in religious orders - that is, virgins - wore such garments. More specifically, Kempe's white clothes symbolise her rejection of her immediate family through the resumption of her public role, and her turning from the life of domesticity which she is expected to maintain with them. The clothes represent a challenge to the organisation

of her nascent capitalist culture in which women were becoming increasingly important as a domestic asset in the home, as discussed in Chapter Two (76-7; Howell 1986, 181; Aers 1988, 87). As with her tears, Kempe persistently claims divine authority for her singular dress and the public speaking role it advertises. Her prophetic role grows out of her daily communings with Christ and other members of the Holy Family and extends to include counselling, chastising, and mediating between Christ and other lay people.

In Chapter 48 of the *Book*, attention is drawn to Kempe's white clothes by the Mayor of Leicester, when he says: "I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you" (Kempe 1988, 153). While this response may demonstrate concern about the popular sect known as Flagellants, who also wore white clothes, it more directly dramatises the way in which Kempe refuses the fixed categories associated with these garments, for example enclosed religious orders such as the Carthusians. Kempe's clothes carry symbolic protest value at the circumscribed roles available to medieval women, and the fact that male authorities find her vocation threatening and fear her influence on other women may reflect the unhappy position of medieval wives, particularly those of Kempe's social group, the merchant class. In regard to women of Kempe's class David Aers notes that in the middle ages merchant wives may well have been in a "far more passivized and domestically powerless position than those of lower-class urban and rural families," because in Kempe's class "wives' work, and the relative increase in autonomy and domestic power this could bring, was *not* an economic necessity" (Aers 1988, 87).

The material reality which is both central to but not mentioned explicitly within the record of the encounter between Kempe and the Mayor of Leicester is the conditions in which most medieval women lived as wives. As an officially unrepresented group in medieval Christianity - they could not become priests or, in the main, professional religious - many wives might well have desired more freedom than they were granted. Kempe is, in fact, assured of this by Christ, who says: "Daughter, if you knew how many wives there are in this world who would love me and serve me well and duly, if they might be as free from their husbands as you are from yours..." (Kempe 1988, 253), but in sections of the text where men of authority interrogate Kempe, female desire is hidden from view. Instead, the need to control female

sexuality and curtail female independence which is integral to the patriarchal social arrangements of Kempe's pre-capitalist society (Atkinson 1983, 109-11; Aers 1988, 100-2) is reflected in the Mayor's paranoid fear.

This response echoes that of the old monk at Canterbury who says: "I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you" (Kempe 1988, 63), and is again echoed by the men of Beverley when they tell her to engage herself in domestic tasks "as other women do" (Kempe 1988, 168), and thereby escape suffering. Both responses express the desire to negate Kempe's physical excessiveness - her travelling alone without the sovereignty of a specific man such as her husband - by relegating her to the circumscribed spaces of acceptable role-divisions for women in medieval society: the cloister or the nuclear family. Through their insistent focus on Kempe's escaping body, male civil and especially clerical authorities reveal the need to contain that female body in a male-controlled space.

In Chapter 52 of the *Book*, the Archbishop of York also questions Kempe about her white clothes, interrogating her about her sexual status:

At last the said Archbishop came into the chapel with his clerics, and he said to her abruptly, "Why do you go about in white clothes? Are you a virgin?" She, kneeling before him, said, "No, sir, I am no virgin; I am a married woman" (Kempe 1988, 162).

The Archbishop finds Kempe's independent action and speech in wearing white clothes while claiming to be a wife threatening and has her fettered, calling her a heretic. In the chapter-house at Beverley she is again brought before the Archbishop and many other powerful clerics and authorities by a priest who declares:

"Sirs, I had this woman before me at Cawood, and there I with my clerics examined her in her faith and found no fault in her. Furthermore, sirs, I have since that time spoken with good men who hold her to be a perfect woman and a good woman. Notwithstanding all this, I gave one of my men five shillings to lead her out of this part of the country, in order to quieten the people down. And as they were going on their journey they were taken and arrested, my man put in prison because of her; also her gold and her silver was taken away from her, together with her beads and her ring, and she is brought before me again here. Is there any man here who can say anything against her?" (Kempe 1988, 170)

In the above account and in the discussion that follows, the central focus of the text is clearly upon men of influence as agents of exchange, and the effect is to represent Kempe as an object to be transported and judged. Her troublesome physical presence is the focus of the passage, as reflected in the description of her transportation and the implicit question "what is to be done with her?", and yet the fate of her body is seen to depend entirely upon the opinions and good will of powerful men. Despite "good men" having declared Kempe a "good woman," the Archbishop has paid a man to take her from his diocese, a gesture which challenges her often evidenced mobility and independence. When the Archbishop finds Kempe in his presence again, he objectifies her by enquiring if any of the men have new charges to bring against her. In response a friar claims that Kempe "disparaged all men of Holy Church" and two more men who had previously arrested Kempe accuse her of Lollardy with the phrase "Cobham's daughter" so that even the charge of heresy focuses on a man.⁴

In the following interchange, Kempe continues to remain absent as a speaking subject while the claims of the men concerned are central: how Kempe is perceived as a threat to men by men forms the gist of the dialogue. Unable to convict her of heresy, the friar passes authority over her to another man, saying: "my lord of Bedford is angry with her, and he will have her'" (Kempe 1988, 171). The friar, however, refuses the Archbishop's command to escort Kempe to the Duke, stating that it is not a friar's job to escort a woman, and the Archbishop in turn declares that he will not have the Duke angry with him on her behalf. Kempe's singular mode of living represents a threat to a patriarchal society based on the exchange of women among men, and the response by these men of power is to attempt to recuperate her once more into that economy. In this scene she is all but absent as a human being and exists as a body to be taken charge of and a problem to be solved. The text displays a feverish and almost comical attempt on the part of male authorities to dispose of the excess which is Kempe's body, her problem-causing physical presence, by passing responsibility over her from one to the other. The simultaneous absence and excessiveness of the mystic's physical being appears as the unrecuperable point of contention, the focus both present and absent among the arbiters of clerical rule.

Kempe's physical being is likewise the central but disavowed term in several contemporary critics' articulations of anxiety over her rejection of sexual categories. John Hirsh, in a

relatively recent book which claims to place Kempe in her cultural context, produces a discourse which focuses on the mystic's excessiveness - of voice and physical presence - in such a way that she is more or less rendered invisible within the analysis. Hirsh effectively presents Kempe as an object, a mere reflection or phenomenon of medieval popular culture and its devotional traditions (Hirsh 1989, 87); her personality is effectively explained away so that Kempe is treated in a fashion similar to that of the clerics described in Chapter 54 of the *Book*, above.

Hirsh describes Kempe's position without offering the kind of socioeconomic detail which, for example, Aers provides in his 1988 book with regard to Kempe, indicating previously neglected factors that help to reveal the kind of experience she may have had (Aers 1988, 73-116). Consequently Hirsh's statements often depend on what appear to be blatant misreadings of the *Book*. His persistent use of the conditional tense reinforces the wishful quality of a historically unsupported reading. Discussing the burning of Oldcastle in 1417, the year in which Kempe was herself suspected of heresy and labelled "Cobham's daughter," he maintains:

It seems to me easy to overstate the degree of peril which Margery faced.... Never recalcitrant in the face of ecclesiastical challenge, a brief conversation *would have assured any competent authority of her essential orthodoxy*, and certain of her mannerisms - her unconventional clothing, her tenor of address - would have had the effect of showing her without harm, or at least dispelled the idea that she was a subversive.... There is no shortage of conflict in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, but...very little real danger (Hirsh 1989, 6-7. Emphasis added).

The critic can only make these claims by ignoring the occasions in the *Book* on which Kempe was physically threatened (Chapter Two, 98-100), at least according to her version of events, indeed by ignoring the centrality in her text of her body itself as a site of contestation. While Hirsh reserves the right to produce a modern version of Kempe's historical scene ("there is...very little real danger [in *The Book of Margery Kempe*]"), he does so by denying Kempe's own account of events, insofar as that account is intricately bound up with her need to have the excessiveness of her body - and her speech - authenticated by clerical discourse. In the *Book's* versions of the mystic's wrangles with priests, her body is frequently the central focus

of an authoritative (disembodied) clerical speech, whether that body is emitting screams and wails or is simply present in its symbolically unsettling white clothes and singular status.

Although all scholastic discourse tends to exclude "the feminine" along with physical matters to an extent, criticism of works in the mystical tradition (including texts like Kempe's, sometimes demoted out of the category "mystical") is particularly prone to do so. Hirsh describes Kempe's revelations as "like, but not the same as, mystical awareness" (Hirsh 1989, 87), although "mystical awareness" is not specifically defined in his book on Kempe. Hirsh's intention, though, seems to be less to posit a mystical tradition in which female physicality has no place than to attempt to dislodge Kempe as a historical subject from the time and place represented in her *Book*, with its manifest clerical anxieties about the extent of ecclesiastical power in the face of increasing lay literacy and religious individualism (Beckwith 1993, 20; 1992, 185-7).

Within the narrative of Kempe's *Book* her body and voice, perceived as disruptive and unsettling by clerics, serve as outlaw figures for male-orchestrated Church doctrine which depends - symbolically and literally - upon the submission of women. And the perception of her physical behaviour as excessive is played out in the specific historical context of Lollard-ridden, fifteenth-century England, in which clerical control over lay people's speech was manifestly eroding and so had to be continually (and symptomatically) reasserted (Beckwith 1993, 91). Hirsh, however, refuses the social context of Kempe's vocational endeavour and, like other (more clerically-oriented) critics blames Kempe for the "stressful" life she led. He applies to her a definition of "psychosomatic disorder" which holds that:

stress itself is not the cause of the illness, for healthy life consists of surmounting, adjusting to, or avoiding difficulties in one's path. In psychosomatic disorder... the patient's handicap...lies in the possession of a combination of personality traits usually found in obsessional and hysterical personality types (Pollitt 1973, 76-7, qtd. in Hirsh 1989, 85).

Hirsh then remarks of Kempe that "often she seems to have created her own stressful situation, either by reprimanding another, particularly a social superior, or by her dress, or by her outbursts - her loud cries and boistrous weeping" (Hirsh 1989, 85-6). The mystic's forthright manner and disturbing tears are their own explanation for her "difficulties." Hirsh,

at least, is prepared to accept at face value the word of Kempe's superiors as to the excessive nature of her behaviour.

In wishing away the elements in Kempe's text which signal the challenge to conventional female roles enacted by her independent status and public, prophetic speech, Hirsh reveals his desire to banish the woman from her text and to silence the emergent possibilities of the female voice, as the monk at Canterbury would do in having her enclosed in stone so that no one may hear her speak. In an earlier essay on Kempe's *Book*, Hirsh actualises this desire through a constant focus on Kempe's male scribes, along with a complete disregard for the politics of her situation and the way in which her life and *Book* depended upon gaining the favour of male authorities:

She shows a tendency to attach herself to - perhaps even to batten on - her spiritual confessors, and though this dependency was doubtless edifying, her attachment to her confessor-priests played a marked role in her spiritual life, and the relationship should qualify the degree of independence with which, in spite of her travels, she is to be credited.... The saintly aspirations that Margery undoubtedly entertained did not prevent her from injecting her own extraordinary narrative into the pattern the scribe set down (Hirsh 1984, 112).

Elsewhere he asserts, in a similar vein:

The second scribe...took a part in forming the basic structure of the *Book* if only by putting Margery's random thoughts into a larger context, and by giving them direction. Because of him, the reader is not overwhelmed by detail, and is shown the spiritual growth of a temperamentally static human being (Hirsh 1975, 149).

In the first extract, Hirsh portrays Kempe's "attachment to her confessor-priests" as an unusual phenomenon in the life of a late medieval, lay woman mystic, and not as the means of physical survival it evidently was (Chapter Two, 97-100). And in both extracts he clearly regards Kempe's life as the mere material basis for the more important, creative and learned work of her scribes. This was also the view of the preaching friar, whose debate with Kempe was discussed in Chapter Two (81-3). The friar's chief concern was that Kempe's vociferous devotions should not rival his own authoritative speech; she was to be the passive recipient of his learning, the silent female body at the heart of traditional Christian doctrine.

In his early review of the *Book* Father Herbert Thurston paraphrases the old monk at Canterbury in an implicit comparison of Kempe with the anchoress Julian of Norwich, Kempe's contemporary, which occurs in later critical writings. He contends, as though assuming Kempe's thwarted desire to live an enclosed life: "If she had really been an anchoress, living secluded in her cell, [her] peculiarities would not have mattered. But she insisted on going everywhere, following, as she believed, the special call of God" (Thurston 1936, 570, qtd. in Atkinson 1983, 201). Thurston displays a desire to annul Kempe's insistent physical presence in the narrative of her *Book*, which results in the pejorative comparison with Julian of Norwich, whose physical enclosure was more readily endorsed by the Church. For Thurston, a medieval woman's desire could evidently lead her to only one of two patriarchally constructed categories for its expression and containment.

R. W. Chambers provides another example of this censorious attitude, implicitly blaming Kempe for the difficulties she encountered during her life, in observing that "things might have been better for Margery if she had been a recluse.... But that she should wander about, rehearsing tales of scripture, was felt to be irregular" (Chambers 1944, 7). David Knowles, in *The English Mystical Tradition*, also compares Kempe unfavourably with Julian of Norwich and reinforces fifteenth-century clerical attitudes to women who define themselves outside of traditional gender roles in applauding the renunciation of her contemplative vocation to return to her role as a wife:

The readiness with which she abandoned for the time her life of retirement to nurse and serve her ageing husband, after he had been disabled by a serious fall and had been reduced in his last years to helplessness, must weigh heavily in her favour in the final reckoning (Knowles 1964, 149-50).⁵

The appropriation of god-language in the final clause of this summary of Knowles' judgement of the *Book* effects the denial of Kempe's desire for a life dedicated primarily to God by calling in her own highest authority against her. Knowles (a cleric) speaks - literally and figuratively - in the place of the transcendent God, miming his ultimate godlike act, the judgement of the choices made by individual sinners at "the final reckoning." Knowles presents an obvious example of a clerical criticism which reinforces the attitudes of the medieval Church toward female physicality (as that which must be contained by male rule and

excluded from orthodox discourse) by approving Kempe, the wandering mystic, once she is back under the jurisdiction of her husband and in her family home.

In the second chapter I described how the preaching friar whose sermon is disrupted by Kempe's tears renames her gift as sickness, and how in the diplomatic assays which her allies undertake on her behalf the mystic's voice remains strangely silent. A number of the *Book's* modern critics, likewise troubled by Kempe's bizarre bodily speech in the form of wild weeping, reclassify her gift of tears as the medieval authorities do. Like the friar, modern critics are quick to provide explanations for her "deviant" behaviour. In the 1930s Thurston used the phrase "terrible hysteria" of Kempe and said he found it "impossible to forget the hysterical temperament revealed in every page of the narrative portions" of the *Book* (Thurston 1936, 570, qtd. in Atkinson 1983, 201), a reaction telling in its focus on the mystic's physical "excess." Edmund Colledge, in 1965, went further, classifying her as "a hysteric, if not an epileptic" (Colledge 1965, 222). Even in 1980, Kempe's mysticism was described as the reflection of her unhealthy state of mind. She was seen to be "quite mad - an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend" (Howard 1980, 34-5). More recently, Hirsh's critical speculations about Kempe's "psychosomatic disturbances" have been similarly used to avoid further investigation of the process of her empowerment through her gift of tears (Hirsh 1989, 85).⁶

What all of these judgements have in common is a tendency to replicate the tenets of orthodox Christian discourse insofar as physical excess is seen to be a specific problem associated with women. Why, for instance, is Kempe described in such individualistic terms (and certainly post-medieval ones, without explanatory qualification), and why is the official discourse of the late medieval Church and its more mutable, popular manifestations, not analysed in tandem with her *Book* and its devotional extremes? Such an analysis proves that physicality, especially female physicality, was privileged in the wider devotional climate of Kempe's culture (Bynum 1987, 262-3; 1989; Gibson 1989, 1-18; Harding 1993, 182). Hence her behavioural excesses, however extreme, have a specific historical context.

Part of an answer as to why some of the *Book's* earlier critics have isolated Kempe and produced such emotive judgements as "paranoia," "hysteria," and "madness" lies in the nature

of the scholarly discourse out of which most writing on mystical texts, at least earlier in the century, proceeded. Sarah Beckwith points out that, although mystical theology has a long history in "western" Christendom, the notion of "mysticism" as a recognisable experience and, indeed, the word itself, is a distinctively Protestant (i.e., post-reformation) idea (Beckwith 1993, 11).⁷ "Conceptualized as radically individualistic," and at the same time as the "essence...of religion" (Beckwith 1993, 12, 8), "western" mysticism has been characterised by early to mid-twentieth-century scholars as a discourse of personal and institutional "truth." Kempe's physical devotions, which frequently attend or are bound up with her visions, can be read variously, as the positive and negative reactions to them documented in her *Book* indicate. The textual instability produced by the *Book's* account of her behaviours is a challenge to the notion of mysticism as unmediated truth, while the behaviours themselves have sometimes apparently aroused an older belief that women speak falsely because they cannot escape a certain suspect "bodily speech."

Knowles, for example, refuses to trust Kempe's word on anything, and focuses his analysis of her text on the credentials of others - implicitly and explicitly men - in a manner which echoes the preaching friar's sermon episode in the *Book*, where Kempe is defended by a number of authoritative men to another. Knowles lists views of Kempe held by "writers of repute" and then notes that "in her favour it must be noted that editors and most readers agree that her story gives an impression of basic sincerity," that she "never abuses her opponents and even suppresses their names" (in other words she is kind to men), and that "she had among her advisers and supporters many whom we know from other sources to have been theologians and preachers of repute." He even states that: "when she can be checked, she is found accurate and truthful[!]" (Knowles 1964, 143) as though such an outcome would normally be in doubt.

In discussing Kempe's tears Knowles further observes that "a majority, which included some of the most influential friars, were only too ready to accept her at her own valuation." He continues: "Even the various prelates into whose presence she came treated her with considerable respect, particularly two who are not usually represented as spiritual men: Philip Repingdon of Lincoln and William Courtenay of Canterbury" (Knowles 1964, 148). While this may be read as a backhanded half-compliment to Kempe for attracting the attention of

some worthy men, the focus, like that of Hirsh, is clearly male-centred, in such a way that Kempe is rendered absent in the analysis. Lastly Knowles, like others described above, uses the charge of "hysteria" to foreclose Kempe's text and diminish its importance for the student of mystical writing. In this way "hysteria" operates as an unexamined, emotively deployed term in his summary, the unconscious heart of his dismissal:

There existed quite clearly from the beginning of her adult life, a large hysterical element in Margery's personality.... In general, we may perhaps say that there is nothing in the words themselves that suggests any other origin than the vivid imagination and retentive memory of a sincere and devout, but very hysterical woman (Knowles 1964, 146-7. See also Underhill 1936, 642).

As I have shown in earlier chapters, the term "hysteria" is telling when applied to Kempe, given that (female) hysteria can be seen - from a feminist perspective - as a means of symbolic protest at women's relegation to passivity. The regular use of the term by the *Book's* early (and even some more recent) critics attests to the impossibility of banishing the outlawed female body in the masculinist discourse of orthodox scholarship on mysticism. The use of the term in this context is in fact a hysterical response to the *Book* on the part of male critics: its recurrence betrays insistent and deeply held anxieties about female speech and sexuality which are evident but remain unaddressed in the work of the critics in question (Evans 1991, 178).

In other words, their fears remain unconscious and surface in critical moves to outlaw the bodies and words of women in mystical discourse. Knowles' charge: "there is nothing in [Kempe's] words themselves that suggest any other origin than...vivid imagination and retentive memory" may indeed apply to hysteria, but it also places Kempe in the positive tradition of affective mysticism, in which memory and imagination play an active part. Knowles' denigration of these aspects of Kempe's mysticism reveals his unacknowledged bias towards the tenets of the negative mystical way, and his own "hysterical" (symptomatic) fear of female speech. Positive mysticism makes the physicality of the mystic an integral component of the visionary experience, and Kempe's (clerical) critics' dismissal of this form of devotion is in fact a response to her mysticism as privileging her own non-virginal flesh.

4. 1. 2 Outlawing the body: Traditional approaches to mystical writing

According to Irigaray's deconstructive readings of the central Christian myths, it is the appropriation and denial of the female body which allows Christian discourses to be figured as immutable, beyond time and change. Her argument that this understanding of the Christian God replicates the male morphology of the body that underlies "western" intellectual traditions, helps explain why the female body must be repeatedly banished from mystical thought-systems. Beckwith also makes this point convincingly in an article on Kempe's "material mysticism" and its cultural contexts:

It is clear...that the exclusion of women saints of positive piety is instrumental in the very construction of a "pure spirituality." The one is excluded so that the other can come into being. But it is also clear that even in the very attempt at this shutting off, this closing down, the forbidden body returns in the latent image of mysticism as a body open to contamination (Beckwith 1986, 55-6n).

As I argued in the first chapter, the encounter between the divine and the mystic in the Christian tradition may be seen as taking place according to a model of "the feminine" by which divine communication fills a lack in the subject (39; de Certeau 1986, 88). Traditionally, the mystical subject is figured as "feminine" insofar as s/he consents to remain receptive and "open" and passively await the gifts of divine grace. In St Bernard the soul seeking God is like the bride in the Song of Songs who opens herself up to her lover (Bernard of Clairvaux 1987, 238, 253; Leclercq 1987, 47-52). Given that mystical discourse is necessarily situated on the borders of Church orthodoxy, as explained in Chapter One, its representation as feminine is inevitable. This is because Christianity, in proclaiming a masculine God, has historically figured that which defiles its borders as female, whether through Eve's deceitful speech which precipitated the "Fall" into mortality, images of witchcraft or the heterogeneous flesh, to name some examples. However, as Chapter Two explained, that which threatens the borders of Christianity is also relentlessly present at its heart. The feminised, postlapsarian concept of the "flesh" in the middle ages is an intrinsic part of the human person and yet is constantly figured as an influx of dangerous (and womanly) passions (Chapter Two, 76-7, 115-8).

The Church has consistently sought to control female bodies in their symbolic position at the boundaries of orthodoxy, and in general scholarship on mysticism reflects this trend. Traditional, male-dominated commentary on mysticism manifests a desire to "outlaw" the female body from its field of expertise by downplaying (female) mystical excesses. It aims to return mystical discourse to the realm of the pure, beyond the influence of the physical and the senses. However I argue in this section that because mysticism is a "feminised" encounter and because its discourses centre around a relationship of excess (or in excess of the physical, in negative mystical terms), attempts to banish (female) bodiliness from versions of mystical orthodoxy are ultimately doomed to fail. In conventional scholarship on mysticism this attempt takes the form of privileging the negative way as the standard of mystical encounter, but as Beckwith has shown, "the forbidden body" in this context insistently returns. The question, then, becomes how best to rethink the binary which has shaped readings of many "positive mystical" texts by women. The following pages present a move towards this rethinking through a deeper examination of the attitudes governing critical assumption of "negative mystical" values.

As Beckwith notes, it is negative mysticism which has been constructed by scholars and commentators in the field as "the superior mystical mode" (Beckwith 1986, 39), while positive mysticism, which connotes a less learned, more immediate and materially-focused attitude to the quest for God, has been regarded as inferior. Positive mysticism's association with medieval women is largely due to the fact that they had less access to clerical education and were in general more influenced by popular piety than male mystics. Lay women were in the main uneducated in Latin, the language of scholastic learning, and the media of popular devotion prescribed for them by the Church fostered affective devotion. Negative mysticism, transmitted to the middle ages through the work of the Greek writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987; Bischoff 1976; Louth 1981, 159-78),⁸ is, by contrast, in the Neoplatonic tradition. The "negative way" (*via negativa*) refers to the negation of images which occurs as the mystic proceeds through "divine darkness" in pursuit of God (Cousins 1983, 165). According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the only experience of God available to human beings is that which "is known ineffably...[and] which can be linguistically expressed only in...metaphors of paradox or pure negation" (Bischoff 1976, 20). While the positive way (*via affirmativa*) "systematically asserts and relates the meaningfulness of symbols," the negative

method "destroys, step-by-step, all symbols - first the corporeal ones, next the emotional ones, then the conceptual ones, and finally the intuitive ones" (Bischoff 1976, 30).

The positive tradition has its roots in the profound influence of St Francis and the Franciscans on medieval religious devotion.⁹ As Marina Warner notes, "*humilitas*, lowliness in the image of the bare ground's lowliness, was the core of the Franciscan revolution"¹⁰ (Warner 1985, 180), which led to increasing emphasis on Christ's physicality (and concomitantly that of Mary) in late medieval Europe. Medieval women, more lowly than men and more closely linked with material things, responded readily to this trend in devotion. Ewert Cousins notes that in Francis "what is most innovative is the content of his visionary material," that is, "the figure of Christ crucified" which inaugurated the devotion to Christ's suffering and death in the later middle ages (Cousins 1983, 165):

Francis represents a watershed in the history of Western Christianity. After him Western religious experience flows in two currents: speculative Neoplatonic mysticism gains vigour, reaching a culmination in the Rhineland mystics. But the devotional current flowing from Francis - with its focus on the humanity and passion of Christ - spreads throughout the people at large and becomes the characteristic form of Western religious sensibility for centuries to come (Cousins 1983, 165).

Critical discourse on mysticism in this century has usually been ill-disposed towards the emphasis on the physical in late medieval Christianity. As Gail McMurray Gibson has shown, this tendency has been exhibited by scholarly attitudes to the fifteenth century in general (Gibson 1989, 2-4). The trend has now begun to be displaced with the advent of feminist and poststructuralist theories into medieval scholarship, since at its heart existed a discomfort with what may be seen as the "feminisation" - and the fragmentation - of religion in the late middle ages (Jardine 1985, 93-5; Ash 1990, 85-92). The figuring of the dying Christ as female and the increasing popularity of affective, physically-focused devotion among believers were aspects of this process. As Gibson points out, negative attitudes to the period have centred on perceptions of it as a time of conflicts and "corruption" frequently associated with women and evidenced by the importance of physicality in its discourses (Gibson 1989, 2-3).

Scholars in the field of Christian mysticism have for most of this century tended to regard as orthodox or "true" mystics those in the negative tradition, while manifesting the general distaste for affective or popular spirituality that Gibson observes. Traditional scholarship has been theologically conservative and, following the tenets of the negative path, has constructed mystical discourse as numinous and so timeless and beyond change.¹¹ As Beckwith puts it, "[negative] mysticism has been taken at its Word and the dominant assumption about the discourse of mysticism seems to be imbued with the transcendental trajectory that is mysticism's goal" (Beckwith 1986, 40-1. See also Partner 1991).

In de-emphasising the specificities of mystical experience (and of mystical subjects), the language of this scholarship inevitably mystifies its objects. As Hans Penner observes of the work of such early to mid-twentieth-century commentators as Evelyn Underhill, W. Stace, R. C. Zaehner, and Rudolf Otto,¹² "the emphasis is on mystical experience as expressed by mystical language. The experience is described as an ultimate experience, an experience of the absolute, numinous in quality, transcending self and world" (Penner 1983, 90). And Beckwith elaborates on this contention:

The point...is that in the *representation* of mysticism the polarisation of negative and positive mysticism and their accompanying sexual polarisation is a mystification. Negative mysticism, by insisting on the unrepresentability of the Other (God) refuses the return to the social sphere. Indeed, this is the source of its transcendence: a God outside time and language and history is inviolable to change, the perfect legitimation of the system of which He is the transcendental centre and support (Beckwith 1986, 39-40).

In most critical commentaries God's inaccessibility is rendered in terms which mystify his relation to the dominant order, and the emphasis on "true" and "false" mystics serves to reify this conservative view of the divine. Thus, like the universal, allegedly neutral subject of "western" thinking in Irigaray's analysis, God is neutralised by the mystifying timbre of mystical scholarship. In this context it is not surprising that Margery Kempe should have been frequently judged as not making the grade as a "true" mystic (Underhill 1936, 642; Knowles 1964, 146-7; Medcalf 1981, 112; Hussey 1989, 117-8; Lawton 1992, 94) because her attitude to the divine is too physical, too firmly situated in her social sphere.

Knowles provides a striking example of the outlawing of the body enacted in mystical commentary prior to the 1980s, in his 1955 discussion of medieval mystical traditions in England. He cites Walter Hilton and the fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (who also translated the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius (Louth 1981, 159)) as "the two greatest" writers of the period from 1350 to 1500, because they exhibit "an intellectual and emotional austerity, and a sense of the transcendence of supernatural reality...derived from some of the purest sources of theological and ascetical tradition" (Knowles 1955, 222). He claims however that this stream of pure spirituality was, from the beginning of the fifteenth century,

contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion, manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behaviour, deriving...partly from the influence of some of the women saints of the fourteenth century, such as Angela of Foligno, Dorothea of Prussia, and Bridget of Sweden. The most familiar example of this type in England is Margery Kempe... (Knowles 1955, 223).

The "austerity" and "transcendence" which comprises this "pure spirituality" is plainly constructed through the exclusion of emotions, idiosyncrasies and deviations from rigid norms. Late medieval spirituality, centred in the concrete and the everyday, was open to the contaminations of women whose involvement as lay mystics in its media of devotion transformed the discourses of mysticism accordingly. Operating in Knowles' statements is a clear demarcation between "true" and "false" mystics, notions of purity and impurity, intellectual austerity and emotions, and the viewpoint which informs these attitudes is clearly the product of that other polarisation, between the negative and positive mystical paths.

The "contaminating" physicality of Kempe's relation to Christ, condemned by Knowles, is most clearly manifested in her *Book* by her mystical marriage to the Godhead in Rome (Chapter 35) and its outcome, her received command to take Christ into her bed as lover and bridegroom (Kempe 1988, 126-7). As Lawton observes, the passage recording this injunction, and, I would add, others like it, have "determined many responses to the *Book*" (Lawton 1992, 94). Critics like Knowles, working with the assumptions of the negative way, are shocked by such fleshing out of the notion of mystical or divine union, which, in the negative tradition, is expressed in the most ineffable and absolutist terms. Wolfgang Riehle, for example,

inveighs against Kempe for drawing "a much too forceful analogy between her mystical love and her earlier married sexuality" (Riehle 1981, 38). After conceding that such "drastic bluntness...is by no means unique in mysticism," and citing Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-82) as a continental example, Riehle pronounces Kempe's "crude realism" "embarrassing," and refers specifically to the physical details included in Christ's description of the relationship between himself and Kempe in her *Book*:

"I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you.... You may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want" (Kempe 1988, 126-7).

These words from Christ endorse Kempe in the female roles she has known and practised before her conversion and which have caused her much remorse: those of wife and mother. But the transformation of her former familial roles into spiritual ones is the mark of her passing from a position of subservience to God to a kind of equality through her intimate devotion to Christ (see also Kempe 1988, 67, 122, 196, 215, 254-5).

It is both aspects of this relationship which cause anxiety in Kempe's theologically conservative critics, since Christ and Kempe appear as "equals" in the above scenario through the emphasis on the physical characteristics and responses of each. As Beckwith points out, this attitude

sees Kempe as failing the test of the mystic, for she doesn't so much show forth the glory of God as compete with him for divinity. For this strand of criticism her personality is a barrier to her function as transparent and empty vessel of God (Beckwith 1992, 178).

In Riehle's case, it is also Kempe's former life as a wife and mother which is at fault, since she has proved herself incapable of "transcending" these sullyng (to him, "embarrassing") experiences. That the negative mystical way was most commonly practised by women and men in anchorholds, monasteries or convents who were usually virgins, and positive mysticism by those in the world - often not virgins - isn't stated in Riehle's discussion. But this fact forms the basis of his judgement of Kempe's "forceful analogy" between married life

and her love for Christ, since Mechthild, with whom he unfavourably compares her, was a virgin and met with traditional requirements to be a bride of Christ. Without her forceful analogy Kempe would have no means of reconciling her sexually active past with her later redemption and public role.

Ute Stargadt expresses similar regrets about Kempe's mothering of the infant Christ, in language which insists on a clear distinction between "spiritual" and "physical" that is foreign to Kempe:

In contrast to devout men for whom imitation of the Virgin Mary always remained the spiritual exercise it was meant to be, the women mystics, perhaps because of their sex, frequently lost sight of the spiritual nature of their *imitatio*, *translating spiritual concepts into purely physical sensations and experiences*. Their visions of Christ's infancy are generally accompanied by their own efforts to provide motherly care to the Christ child (Stargadt 1985, 292-3. Emphasis added).

Stargadt is forced by her allegiance to a code of "spiritual" versus physical concerns to see Kempe's active devotion to the Christ child (which included helping Mary with the business of mothering and dressing the infant Christ (Kempe 1988, 53-4)) as "purely physical" and not as the spiritual exercise for women it was scripted as in works such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (Love 1992, 190; Gibson 1989, 15, 49-53). While such a clear distinction has little bearing on the devotions fostered in Kempe's culture, it has played an integral part in the construction of a critical discourse of mysticism in this century in which disembodiment is a sign of spiritual truth. This dualist position is, however, as Beckwith has said, "itself a mystification" and ultimately unsustainable in relation to mystical speech.

While the intactness of the body is already undermined in the Christian view of the subject - since no one is immune from the breaching of physical boundaries by the "fissured flesh" - in the mystical encounter the flesh becomes the site of divine communication perceived by the mystic through its effects in the body and the senses. The means of mystical communication tend towards physical excesses: mystics experience sensations of burning or freezing, strange sights, sounds and smells. Lochrie observes that in mystical texts, the mark of transgression of the body's integrity is "the breakdown of a construct which otherwise rests securely on [its] external/internal demarcation.... the distinction between literal and figurative

language" (Lochrie 1991a, 70). She describes the works of Richard Rolle, a contemporary of Margery Kempe whose writings are, like hers, "emotional and enthusiastic" (Atkinson 1983, 145), in which an account of mystical love as "'fire,' 'sweetness,' and 'song,' eludes the distinctions between spiritual and physical, and hence, figurative and literal semantic fields" (Lochrie 1991a, 70).¹³

While critics such as Stargadt and Riehle persist in claiming for these images the status of metaphor, the experience thus described seems to resist such a neat separation. Mystical speech aims to transmit that which exceeds common (theological) knowledge; situating itself at the boundaries of what can be comprehended by the human, it is "always located in (or straying into) abjection" (Lochrie 1991a, 71), in(to) the subject's sense of the borders of its corporeality. As a result, conventional representations of the body are frequently destabilised and brought into question in mystical texts. But this is especially likely to occur in the writings of a mystic like Kempe, who is situated in the tradition of devotion which clearly privileges the physical. The embarrassed responses of critics in the negative tradition to positive mystical texts like Kempe's reflects the precarious situation of the body in mysticism and the futility of attempts to get beyond the social sphere in its portrayal.

The Neoplatonic assumptions of the negative way are directly opposed to the feminine and maternal aspects of experience on which Kempe's mysticism insists, as was suggested in Chapter Three in my discussion of Irigaray's rereading of Plato:

For Plato, the highest truth - Being, the Good, the Idea - is that which has never been born (Irigaray 1985b, 319), never been mortal, never been subjected to the vagaries of time and change, never been incarnate, never been *indebted* to an act of intercourse (Irigaray 1985b, 312) or to a period of dependence on the maternal body (Whitford 1991a, 112).¹⁴

Likewise, in the negative tradition the "divinization of intelligence" (the ascent to God) is a process of consecutive negation of each of these essential components of existence (Roques 1987, 5-7). The first to be renounced is the corporeality of the subject and its maternal origin (Bischoff 1976, 30). If, from the negative viewpoint, spiritual truth depends upon the outlawing of the body, then the clarity of distinction between literal and figurative language

in mystical texts becomes a sign of the truth or falsity of the experience there described. Thus Stargadt claims that Kempe's

consistent inability to differentiate between metaphor and actual experience appears with most embarrassing clarity in her descriptions of her soul's marriage to the Godhead. [Kempe] perceives the *unio mystica* as the human sex act; accordingly, Jesus behaves like a fleshly husband eager to enjoy his conjugal rights (Stargadt 1985, 300).

And Riehle, again comparing Kempe with Mechthild of Magdeburg, states that Kempe "comes off very badly" in descriptions of her touching God. While Mechthild's imagery is "powerful," Kempe's "shows the unpleasant side of medieval female mysticism" (Riehle 1981, 114). Riehle cites a passage from Kempe's *Book* in which Christ thanks the mystic for having often bathed him in her soul, and another where Kempe takes Christ's toes in her hand when he appears to her in a vision (Kempe 1988, 255; 249). According to Riehle, "this is certainly an expression of the theme of man (sic) touching God, but the 'detour' via the incarnation of God becomes almost an end in itself for [Kempe]" (Riehle 1981, 114). As described in previous chapters, the emphasis on Christ's Incarnation in Kempe's culture was profound, and the physical acting out of Christic devotion was encouraged in spiritual literature for lay people. But until quite recently mystical scholars have regarded this popular aspect of medieval piety - which influenced medieval mysticism through the activities of women - as the degeneration of mysticism proper.

Kempe's blurring of the boundaries between herself and Christ, and her figuring mystical union with him as a physical affair not only brings Christ down to her level but raises her up to his. The mystic recognises in the image of her suffering Saviour her own vulnerable physicality. The breakdown between literal and figurative language in the expression of this recognition is deplored by some of her more conservatively minded critics, but it is the sign - as Lochrie holds - of the transgression of bodily boundaries which has always already occurred through the mystical subject's situation in the realm of the fissured flesh (Lochrie 1991a, 70).

Kempe's identification with Christ in a pseudo-sexual relationship of physical touching means that he is represented in her *Book* as different from and yet similar to herself. Both figures

partake of a pervious physicality in which they are alike, and yet, in the bedroom vision, their bodies act out the (hetero)sexual script belonging to husband and wife. Kempe's insistence on a relationship of sexual difference between herself and Christ speaks of the necessity of exchanges with others in the defining of a singular self, and the relationship shows, in the (mis)recognitions of its physical encounters, that the individual subject as a self-sufficient entity is a fantasy dependent on the responses of other, equally dispersed and fragile selves. Thus Beckwith states:

I would like to argue that the hybridity which is everywhere locatable in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is less a function of Kempe's personality, less her own idiosyncratic attribute, than the condition of subjectivity itself. *The Book of Margery Kempe* foregrounds the very conditions of subjectivity by articulating the possibilities of its dialogic function. Kempe's account of herself is inevitably partial, because any self is hollowed out by its relation to others. But Kempe's text doesn't cover over the traces of that relation (Beckwith 1992, 179).

Because she is not a prime candidate for the category of female saintliness - because she is not a virgin - Kempe's self-presentation is interactive and dialogical, as Beckwith claims, everywhere throughout her *Book*, as she seeks to prove herself a holy woman in relation to other sinners and saints. Christ is the most important "other" through whom the mystic shapes her version of herself, although other people's responses to Kempe and hers to them are also important, as was seen in previous chapters. But it is the *Book's* portrayal of Kempe's relationship with Christ that has constituted the strongest challenge to a scholarly discourse which holds that both the Christian God and the human subject are self-created and self-sufficient: are, in fact, male-model subjects constituted by a disavowal of the body, of women and of sexual difference.

If, to quote Beckwith again, "by returning to and insisting on grating domestic hierarchies against the transcendent, Margery Kempe's positive mysticism embarrasses the myth of God's neutral transcendence" (Beckwith 1986, 54), then her mysticism disturbs myths of scholarly neutrality as well. Kempe's "embarrassing foregrounding of the insistently physical emphasises the contradictions rather than the miraculous resolution of flesh and spirit in the Passion" (Beckwith 1986, 54), but it also - in that very physical insistence - plays on the contradictions of the exchanges by which human subjects understand themselves as such. Across the very

considerable gap of five centuries, I will now turn to a dialogic exploration of some such exchanges with Irigaray as one of the speakers in each case.

In the text of my analysis, Irigaray can no more speak for herself than Kempe can, but her visionary philosophical texts, like Kempe's book of visions, are works which consistently seek after the response of an other (Irigaray 1991i, 149). And in both Irigaray's and Kempe's texts differences - primarily but, I want to argue, not necessarily uniquely sexual differences - come into play. Irigaray's writings speak of the profound difficulty of recognising that the constitution of a particular self is always dependent upon its interactions with others. The self which constructs itself by appropriating the voice and body of another (as male subjects do to female in Irigaray's analysis) is an essentially vulnerable creation, and the ethics of its self-constitutive process cannot be rethought apart from a recognition of the fragility of its state.

Thus it won't be sufficient to have Irigaray answer her questioners, even in my artificial setting up of an interlocutive scene, with arguments for a new kind of subjectivity which privileges the female (Irigaray 1985a, 78); rather it is the dialogic, exchange-oriented, *ethical* aspect of her discourse which I next want to address. This chapter's title, "Divine Imaginings," refers to the licence to construct a self Margery Kempe takes with the divine who is held up to her as a model, a process which is bound up with her envisioning encounters like, but also unlike, those she has known. The title also refers, of course, to Irigaray, for whom the divine is an agent of imagining relationships and exchanges between different kinds of selves.

Kempe and her Christ are physically vulnerable figures, and each suffers out of a kind of love and desire for the other. The divine in Irigaray seems to serve too as the visionary middle ground between human subjects, providing space for a range of affects and issues for which, in conventional subject-formation, there is no space. While Kempe pictures an afterlife in which her exchanges with Christ will transform her totally, including or especially her physical being, Irigaray's philosophical utopianism must be fleshed out in the present, between selves, in order to test the value of her visions. The following dialogues are an attempt to themselves envision, at times question the validity of, and explore how this complex and difficult process might take place.

4. 2 Beyond Dualities: Seductive Dialogues and Carnal Exchange(s)

4. 2. 1 Dialogue #1: Irigaray and Lacan

What gives some likelihood to what I am arguing, that is, that the woman knows nothing of this *jouissance*, is that ever since we've been begging them on our knees to try to tell us about it, well, not a word! We have never managed to get anything out of them (Lacan 1987b, 146).

The question whether, in his logic, they can articulate anything at all, whether they can be heard, is not even raised. For raising it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own. That is, a logic that challenges mastery (Irigaray 1985a, 90).

Elizabeth Berg has stated that, in her view, "all of Irigaray's work is in some sense to be understood as a dialogue with Lacan, although his name is spectacularly missing from her books" (Berg 1982, 16). This is certainly true insofar as Lacan has been a structural influence on Irigaray's involvement with psychoanalysis (Whitford 1991b, 6),¹⁵ and her involvement with psychoanalysis colours her entire oeuvre. But the spectacular absence (or lack) of the name of her father-mentor in Irigaray's work is her own kind of response to and reversal of what she describes as Lacan's inability to hear the speech of women (Irigaray 1985a, 112-3, cited in Grosz 1990a, 175-6). In her writings Irigaray engages with Lacan as a rebellious daughter: he is the father whose law she rejects although she has suffered a rejection in return.¹⁶ And yet, as Berg points out, her readings are not only attacks on "the father of psychoanalysis" but also "demands for love" (Berg 1982, 16).

Irigaray challenges the terms on which Lacan claims that there can be no relation between the sexes by her insistent demand to be recognised as an "other woman," as a woman who speaks from a position other than the place of fantasy in excess of the phallic term (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 60; Mitchell and Rose, introductory remarks to Lacan 1987b, 137). This is the situation ascribed to women in Lacan's account of the differentiation between the sexes which occurs in the symbolic order of language. For Lacan "woman" functions as the symptom of the lack inherent in the passage to subjectivity of all speaking beings, which achievement takes place

with reference to fundamental loss or castration (Rose 1987, 31, 40; Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 56). Jacqueline Rose articulates the Lacanian view:

Symbolisation starts...when the child gets its first sense that something could be missing; words stand for objects, because they only have to be spoken at the moment when the first object is lost. For Lacan, the subject can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and irreducible division. The subject is therefore constituted in language *as* this division or splitting (Rose 1987, 31).¹⁷

Because of the different positions that women and men are required to take up in the symbolic order - with regard to the fantasy of being/having the phallus - "woman" becomes the site of the fantasy of a possibility of relation between the sexes. That is, both language and sexuality are played out in the social domain where each subject believes that there is another who will satisfy its lack or desire. According to Lacan this belief is a fantasy and the site of its projection is the Other which is assumed by the speaking subject (Lacan 1977c, 172; Rose 1987, 32-3). The fantasy of wholeness which the Other of the speaking subject would complete is a phallic fantasy, in that the phallus symbolically stands in for the loss all subjects experience at their entry into the symbolic order. "Woman," existing on the side of this Other, functions then as the symptom of lack in the fantasy (Lacan 1987b, 151; Rose 1987, 50; Brennan 1994, 66). Thus Lacan's claim that there can be no relation between the sexes depends upon the premise that women and men must take their places as speaking subjects on one side or another of the phallic term.

Irigaray takes issue with Lacan's articulation of "woman" as existing in a position in excess of - and of excess within - the symbolic order, as a "category within language" and "the fantasy of her definition" (Rose 1987, 47) insofar as this view makes it impossible to posit women as desiring subjects. In the essay "Così fan tutti," published in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray undertakes a reading of Lacan that challenges the terms on which his view of "woman" "beyond the phallus" rests, as part of her wider project of beginning to articulate the conditions under which women might speak as women, so as to be able to be heard and understood as such. The essay was written in direct response to Lacan's *Le Séminaire XX*,

Encore (Rose 1987, 54n), in which he presents the figure of the female mystic as an *exemplar* of the female position in discourse.

In the essay "God and the Jouissance of The Woman" (Chapter Six of *Le Séminaire XX, Encore*), Lacan explores "woman"'s relation to jouissance, his name for that which exceeds the phallic term by which sexual identity is marked. He describes the mystic - man or woman - as the figure who seeks access to this excess or jouissance (Lacan 1987b, 147), and cites Bernini's statue of the ecstatic-agonised St Theresa in Rome as a model of a woman experiencing such an excess of desire:

There is a *jouissance* proper to her [woman], to this "her" which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it - that much she does know.... You only have to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it (Lacan 1987b, 145, 147).

Thus Lacan "essentially" mystifies female sexuality as the site of an unsignifiable excess, and the speech of the (female) mystic is the nearest woman "comes" to speaking her desire.

Jacqueline Rose suggests that:

Lacan's reference to woman as Other needs...to be seen as an attempt to hold apart two moments which are in constant danger of collapsing into each other - that which assigns woman to the negative place of its own (phallic) system, and that which asks the question as to whether women might, as a very effect of that assignation, break against and beyond that system itself (Rose 1987, 51-2).

However because, "for Lacan, that break is always within language" (Rose 1987, 52) as it is constructed with reference to the phallus, the question of women's breaking or speaking against the system is, in Irigaray's view, always recuperated again within it. She scathingly points to Lacan's citation of St Theresa as a specific example of this appropriative process. In "Così fan tutti" she states her view that "psychoanalytic discourse about female sexuality is the discourse of truth" and the logic of that truth is "that *the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*" (Irigaray 1985a, 86). Irigaray claims that "the question" of what women can say of their own sexuality/desire (or of what women want, to

put it in Freudian terms) cannot be articulated within the system of Lacan's psychoanalytic logic:

And to make sure this [question] does not come up, the right to experience pleasure is awarded to a statue. "Just go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome, you'll see right away that St Theresa is coming, there's no doubt about it."

In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculpted by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? For where the pleasure of the Theresa in question is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling (Irigaray 1985a, 90-1).

Irigaray's own relentless questions articulate what Lacan's discourse is forced to leave out, what he claims women cannot say for themselves, as she reads his reading of St Theresa as a symptom of his own desire to speak on behalf of women and appropriate their pleasure to his seductive speech. Lacan's reference to a statue in Rome of a woman "coming," sculpted by a man, indicates for Irigaray his investment in female sexuality as it is enclosed and defined within masculine parameters. She asks how we can know whose pleasure is being expressed through a man's artistic representation of a woman in ecstasy, insofar as the traditions and requirements surrounding such a representation dictate what is able to be expressed. The citing by Lacan of a statue of a woman created by a man not only fixes the saint's desire in the frame of masculine referentiality, but sets her up as an object in a specular logic of phallic desire: "You only have to go and *look at* Bernini's statue in Rome *to understand* immediately that she's coming" (Lacan 1987b, 147. Emphasis added). Thus in Lacan's terms the articulation of feminine pleasure can only be read from the perspective of the visible, that is, the phallic, as evidenced by his citing a statue made of stone as an example, with the obvious phallic connotations that such an image conveys.

In fact, as Grosz points out, Lacan's specularisation of St Theresa, his glorifying of her *jouissance* as unsignifiable or "beyond the phallus," affirms the phallus as:

the fixed reference point, the only given signifier for symbolic and sexual representation. Irigaray instead makes clear that if this *jouissance* is "beyond the phallus" it is not, for that matter, unsignifiable. This is not a *jouissance* that woman cannot know or say; rather, it is a *jouissance* that Lacan cannot *hear* for he does not know how, or even where, to listen. The valorization of certain modes of

representation.... woman as the incoherent or silent counterpart of man - and the disavowal of his own position as listener makes the male interlocutor unable to hear other than what he wishes to hear (Grosz 1990a, 175. See also Evans 1991, 242).

Like the critics of the traditional schools of Christian mystical scholarship, Lacan takes the part of the speaker on the side of negative mysticism, that is, a discourse in which what is said (often by women) remains essentially inexpressible and resists the return to the earthly sphere. David Tracy holds the view that an analogy to Lacan can be found in "the Western monotheistic traditions" where "a peculiar kind of apophatic mysticism" emerges. He maintains that "all - literally all - that interests Lacan in Teresa (sic) of Avila is her *jouissance* and the excess and *radical negations* it discloses" (Tracy 1988, 269. Emphasis added).¹⁸ Lacan identifies the mystification of "woman" in "western" culture with the idea of God, as Irigaray also does, but he maintains that this connection depends upon "woman"'s essential lack of knowledge concerning her desire: "It is in so far as her *jouissance* is radically Other that the woman has a relation to God greater than all that has been stated in ancient speculation..." (Lacan 1987b, 153. See also 147; Rose 1987, 50; Brennan 1994, 74-5). Irigaray, on the other hand, seeks to exploit the association formed in phallogentrism between "woman" and God by insistently and strategically concretising the divine in the female body.

As we saw in section 4. 1, an adherence to the tenets of negative mysticism hides, by means of that system's Platonic aspect, the appropriation of the physical - normally signified by "woman" - which it in turn disavows. Just as scholars of mysticism who defend the negative way outlaw the female body and female sexuality from their texts, so Lacan presents St Theresa as a figure experiencing a physical excess she knows nothing of and cannot activate, an excess in effect beyond or outlawed from within his discourse.¹⁹ The discourse of negative mysticism, too, in its Platonist tendencies, privileges the visual, which is constructed so as to deny the physical location of the mystical seeker/speaker (Irigaray 1985b, 243-364; Chapter Three, 181-3).

An example from Knowles highlights the similarities of this position with the Lacanian view of the mystic/female subject. Describing what he sees as the achievement of the fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich at the conclusion of his study of "the English mystical

tradition," Knowles states that (and the differences from his previously quoted comments on Margery Kempe are striking):

Her strength lies in the impression she gives of having pondered the mysteries of the faith with *spiritual eyes* illuminated by contemplative grace; her effect upon us is to bear us away with her into a world that is *wholly spiritual*. She tells of what she has *seen*, and though she may give counsel and direction, she is not addressing a particular individual or class, but is putting into words, for all who have ears to hear, the *inexpressible truth* she has experienced.... The substance of her message comes from within, and from what she has *seen in her soul* (Knowles 1964, 190. Emphasis added).

While "the substance of [Julian's] message comes from within," its outward expression is subject to a rigid code of articulation. The mystic's strength - for Knowles - lies in the impression she conveys of a world that is untainted by the physical and the female, in contrast to Kempe, for instance, whose excesses "contaminate" the discourse of mysticism (Knowles 1955, 222). Julian's physical/mystical responses to the divine are not evident or foremost in her text and this commends her to Knowles, just as St Theresa's excesses are only endorsed in Lacan through the work of Bernini, encased in stone. In fact, in this form their specificity is annulled, they are not really "excessive" at all.

In relation to Lacan's "apophatic mysticism" Irigaray may be seen to take the part of the woman visionary in the positive tradition. Whereas Lacan's version of Theresa privileges sight, Irigaray's writings privilege touch as the means by which women articulate their sexuality in the absence of visual representation(s) of their own. Irigaray's famous representation of female sexuality in the image of the female genital lips is a primary example of this tendency in her work. The lips are figured as "neither one nor two" (Irigaray 1985a, 26), that is, as situated somewhere beyond, because unrepresentable within, the phallic economy of singular forms. She presents their contiguous relationship of ceaseless touching (or exchange) as a possible female model of bodily and social experience.²⁰ This figuration of touching and of female physicality is an attempt to challenge psychoanalytic theory's designation of "woman" as (the symptom of) lack. Reinterpreting female sexuality through an image of excess in this way is Irigaray's means of positing or envisioning alternative terms of understanding female bodies and pointing up the arbitrariness of the rule of the phallic signifier, at the same time as highlighting the disavowed material aspects of phallogocentric law.

Touching is also a figure in Irigaray's work which suggests the desirability of genuine sexual exchange or a relation between the sexes (Irigaray 1986c; 1991d, 178, 181-3; 1993b, 110-11, 167).²¹ The two lips may be read as expressing this possibility through their figuring a model of potentially active subjectivity for women (Irigaray 1985a, 25-6, 205-18). If there were different modes of autonomous selfhood (i.e., of sexual representation) for male and female subjects, according to Irigaray, then productive sexual and cultural exchange could occur. However male-female exchange on a symbolic level is also necessary in order for women to accede to subjectivity. In other words, unless men accept that the conditions of their subjectivity involve the non-representation of women as specific subjects, neither recognised sexual difference nor legitimate female subjectivity seem likely. In Irigaray's view, Lacan's claim that there can be no sexual relation in the symbolic order is based on a fundamental unwillingness to shift his ground and examine the construction of his own position as listener/speaker, his own place in the phallic system of bodily representation. His speaking on behalf of a representation of St Theresa in the form of a statue is a symptom for Irigaray of the distance he takes from his own physical situation (the specific place from which he speaks), and the way in which the disavowal of his physical position is projected onto a woman/women.

In the quotations which form the epigraphs to this section, Lacan and Irigaray speak across each other because the terms of their discourses are fundamentally opposed. Irigaray contends that Lacan's inability to hear women speak arises from his manifest desire to appropriate female speech into his argument as to the construction of language ("What gives some likelihood to what I am arguing...is that we have never managed to get anything out of them").²² The *primary* focus of Irigaray's challenge to Lacan in her essay is not, I would argue, as some Lacanian critics assume, the positing of a completely "other logic" in which women might be heard (Rose 1987, 55; Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 54),²³ but the raising of the question of Lacan's own position and the terms on which he speaks. For her both of these moves are in a sense necessary in order for (sexual/linguistic) exchange to occur, but the first cannot take place without the second. It is true that for Irigaray, this question is intimately connected with what she sees as the outlawing of female speech and bodiliness in conventional discourse, but her aim is to activate an exchange between female and male subjects which would transform the symbolic order and would reflect the appropriated-yet-

excessive (present yet unsymbolised) nature of femininity within that order, rather than to set up an alternative to it. For her the new must be wrought from the transformations of the old, that is from the shifting of the terms of binaries currently operative in phallogentric culture, and from nowhere else.

Positive mysticism, too, argues for the importance of the here and now and of a physically representable relation between the mystic and the divine. Its texts clearly display the bodily involvement of its practitioners, usually women, with and in the version of the divine they portray. It is also a discourse of movement rather than stasis, fluidity rather than firmness: positive mystical texts abound in imagery of blood, tears, wounds, bodies without boundaries, wailings and ecstatic convulsions. Female mystics in the positive tradition demonstrate their love for God "hysterically," re-presenting the physical sufferings and convulsions of their Saviour through their own bodies' seizures and uncontrolled excess. They refuse the disavowal of their physical being on which negative mystical discourse is based, and their bodies are present in their mystical texts as the site of their seductive and excessive encounters with the divine.

Both Lacan's and Irigaray's texts are "seductive," both claim to undercut the "mastery" of their own discourse by the deliberate vagaries and slippage of their speech. And both simultaneously succeed and fail in this task, as their efforts to destabilise their own speaking positions necessarily form part of their ultimately comprehensible if complex texts (Rose 1987, 50n; Holmlund 1991, 303). However their seductive "dialogue" leads to no exchange, and the figure of St Theresa in Bernini's incarnation of her may be seen to stand between them representing, in the medium of stone, their impassable differences from each other. Both Irigaray and Lacan read the mystic's excesses and their representation differently and in doing so, each takes the place of the mystic her/himself in their desire to speak of the social order from a strategically marginal place.

Irigaray, in what may be termed her alignment with positive mysticism, aims, like Kempe, to bring the (female) body back into phallogentric discourse and thereby to "embarrass" its claims to neutrality, transcendence and the masculine ability to speak on behalf of women. It is her intention to demystify the basis of Lacan's claim that women exist as symptoms of

the "lack in being" (Rose 1987, 40) of the human condition. Thus, in "Così fan tutti," she insistently returns to the question of the representation of female physicality in the phallogocentric order, and the connection between this lack and the construction of the symbolic order (and the non-relation between the sexes) as Lacan describes it. In appropriating female bodiliness to itself, in failing to address the matricide at its origin, phallogocentric discourse and psychoanalytic theory cause "woman" to occupy the place of God as invisible and silent support to the male speaking subject (Irigaray 1985a, 97).

While Lacan claims that "woman"'s excessive pleasure (her *jouissance*) is the result of her position beyond the phallus, Irigaray asserts that female sexuality is produced and rendered inarticulable within such a system of representation:

Sexual pleasure is engulfed then in the body of the Other. It is "produced" because the Other, in part, escapes the grasp of discourse.

Phallicism compensates for this discursive crisis, sustaining itself upon the Other, nourishing itself with the Other, desiring itself through the Other, even without ever relating to it as such. A barrier, a break, a fantasmatic cutting-out, a signifying economy, an order, a law, govern the enjoyment of the body of the Other. Henceforth subject to enumeration: one by one (Irigaray 1985a, 97-8).

The figure of St Theresa, arrested in motion, is, then, for Irigaray, a symbol of the invisibility of female desire in masculinist culture. In her reading, the statue signifies the construction and appropriation of female bodiliness as excess on which the symbolic order is founded, whereas for Lacan, the saint's excess remains - on his terms - visible ("you only have to go and look...to understand that she's coming").

Irigaray advances an articulation of the female "excess" outlawed in phallogocentric discourse in the next "seductive" work I will examine, a section of *Marine Lover*, her overtly amorous dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche. In this dialogic text Irigaray sets out to seduce the philosopher by playing the part of the "marine lover" or outlawed woman she discovers in his texts. While in several ways her project is fundamentally opposed to that of Nietzsche, she nonetheless seeks to articulate the terms of an exchange - specifically in the section of the work I will examine - by means of a revisioning of the figures of Christ and his Mother. In this dialogue, exploring the conditions of a possible representation of female bodiliness in the

symbolic is an important focus. Irigaray's version of Christ challenges both traditional Christianity and the Nietzschean interpretation, and envisions a culture not based on the phallogocentric repetition of the same. In this sense it moves toward - more so than the dialogue with Lacan - a representation of carnal exchange.

4. 2. 2 Dialogue #2: Irigaray and Nietzsche

But when Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: "Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead!*" (Nietzsche 1968, 41)

Does the "death of God" not mean, therefore, the end of the security lodged with, of the credit accorded to, those who thus suspend meaning in the letter? Those who immobilize life in something that is merely the trace of life? The preachers of death who paralyze the becoming of peoples? Those who indefinitely repeat the identical, because they are unable to discover difference? (Irigaray 1991d, 169)

Irigaray's 1980 book on Nietzsche marks a new departure in her work, which Carolyn Burke describes as an attempt "to initiate a sideways dialogue with the masters of philosophy whom she tried to approach head-on in her earlier writing" (Burke 1989, 227). The methods of this oblique conversation were, however, present - if less dominant - in her earlier texts. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, originally published in 1977, she describes her intention in engaging with the works of Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, and Marx in *Speculum* and *This Sex* as part of a project of "destroying [masculinist philosophical artifice] with nuptial tools," and "hav[ing] a fling with the philosophers" (Irigaray 1985a, 150; Holmlund 1991, 292). In the seminar in which these comments occur Irigaray describes conventional philosophical and theoretical discourse as having played a role - in regard to women - which is normally ascribed to women themselves, that of seduction. She states that philosophy's claims to universality have led women astray from a path toward achieving cultural specificity (Irigaray 1985a, 150). With reference to the production-as-appropriation of female concerns within philosophical thought-systems, Irigaray claims to be deliberately engaged upon a strategic mimicry of the role of "woman" as seductress. This mimetic process has the dual effect of mocking that misogynistic trope at the same time as it aims to reappropriate

phallogocentric discourse, to find a way to speak (as a woman?) from within it without being captured there.²⁴

But although this seductive method is employed in *Speculum* and *This Sex, Marine Lover* marks the beginning of Irigaray's focus upon the figure of the heterosexual female lover, as Christine Holmlund points out (Holmlund 1991, 293), and her taking on this role more emphatically in her dialogues with male philosophers. While this new emphasis in Irigaray's work is evident throughout *Marine Lover* and cannot be ignored, I will address the issue specifically in the following section, where I put questions of my own to Irigaray in relation to her - for me, problematic - turn toward focusing almost solely on the refiguration of heterosexual relations. In this section, I am primarily concerned with a necessarily selective aspect of Irigaray's interrogation of Nietzsche, and will focus upon the final part of *Marine Lover*, entitled "The Crucified One" (Irigaray 1991d, 164-90) and subtitled "Epistle to the last Christians," which occurs in the book's third section, "When the Gods are Born."

The whole of *Marine Lover* is, as Irigaray has said, intended as an amorous dialogue with Nietzsche: "*Amante marine*...is not a book *on* Nietzsche but *with* Nietzsche who for me is a partner in a love relationship" (Irigaray 1981a, 44, qtd. in Holmlund 1991, 295). Thus Irigaray's dialogue with Nietzsche is more artful, playful and overtly seductive than her dialogue with Lacan, in the sense that in *Marine Lover* she attempts to act out what she sees as the cultural conditions for the transformation of a same-sex economy into a productive or carnal (in her terms heterosexual) exchange. As Frances Opper notes: *Marine Lover* is "responsive to the rhetorical polyvalence" of Nietzsche's writing, and its narrative voices "take up positions not so much of opposition and antagonism towards Nietzsche's texts as of contiguity and comradeship-at-arms" (Opper 1993, 88). At the outset of the book Irigaray says to Nietzsche:

How I should love you, if to speak to you were possible.

And yet I still love you too well in my silences to remember the movement of my own becoming. Perpetually am I troubled, stirred, frozen, or smothered by the noise of your death (Irigaray 1991d, 3).

She then proceeds to dismantle the philosopher's arguments - seductively - by insinuating her own voice into his texts, questioning the ways in which he appropriates the figure of "woman" and introducing the terms on which she believes women's desire may be able to be heard.²⁵

The book is one of a projected tetralogy (three of which have been published to date²⁶) consisting of amorous dialogues with male philosophers. In these texts Irigaray evokes the pre-Socratic scheme of the four elements (air, earth, fire, and water)²⁷ as a means of insisting upon that which she claims is excluded from masculinist philosophical texts: female bodies, constructed as passive materiality and as the "natural" substrata of (masculine) cultural achievements (Grosz 1989, 168), as well as an adequate formulation of the passions and the experience of the senses. It seems that in these works Irigaray is attempting to suggest an alternative understanding of "the natural" and women's association with it as a means of rearticulating the terms of the nature/culture binary and its role in the construction of discourse. In *Marine Lover* she personifies the element of water in order to challenge Nietzsche's appropriation of "woman"; she figures a female "marine" lover to evoke the amniotic fluids of maternal origin and female sexual pleasure or *jouissance* (Irigaray 1981a, 48-9). Irigaray considers that Nietzsche appropriates these aspects of women's experience in the development of his ideas. Hence her dialogue with him is an attempt to deconstruct the philosopher's works while playing a teasing game which enacts the return of the repressed feminine element within them.²⁸

Nietzsche has been described as initiating a strain in the history of "western" philosophy which destabilises the primacy of consciousness by focusing on the body as the site of social inscription (Grosz 1993; 1994, 115; Diprose 1993, 3; Vasseleu 1993, 71). Irigaray shares this view and, as Frances Opperl claims, *Marine Lover's* method of a "corps-à-corps" or performative writing is based on her perception of Nietzsche's use of language as "embodying" its own concerns:

The book does not argue a hypothesis, as theory does, but more in the manner of fiction or poetry it demonstrates or enacts its effects through the use of a battery of rhetorical strategies: repetition, polyvocality, allusion, ambiguity and contradiction; a sensuous diction, mimicry, parody and irony; open-endedness; a linguistic duplicity much like Nietzsche's (Opperl 1993, 92).

In this sense *Marine Lover* articulates a language like that of positive mysticism, and yet, despite its obvious debt to Nietzsche, the text challenges the male philosopher on terms which align him with the same self-distancing qualities portrayed in the negative mystical tradition. *Marine Lover*'s subject-matter and organisation reflect a focus on the Nietzschean concept of eternal return, just as the earlier *Speculum* "fixed the eternal return as a metaphor for the phallogocentric economy of the Same, in which women are trapped as men's mirrors, prolonging the work of death" (Oppel 1993, 93).

In Nietzsche the "eternal return" signifies the impossibility of escape from the work of human self-creation, an escape which is frequently sought, he argues, through the concept of the Christian God, according to which the self professes obedience to an other (Nietzsche 1968, 109-11).²⁹ The notion of the eternal return is elaborated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but its import can be seen to pervade the body of Nietzsche's work, since essentially it articulates the belief that there is no ultimate purpose or (divine) end to the events of the universe, and as a result the passionate, self-willed actions of individuals are all-important; they constitute the substance and meaning of human life. *Marine Lover* however is an attempt to produce the "eternal return" differently, to recast Nietzsche's notion of "becoming" in terms of the Irigarayan divine (the sensible transcendental), which recognises and celebrates its debt to the female and maternal (Oppel 1993, 94) and seeks to elaborate the concept of a "horizon" for the development of female subjectivity.³⁰ In the process, the text portrays Nietzsche's conception of "creative self-fabrication" (Diprose 1993, 9) - his view of a self-generated humanity unbound by moral rules - as a masculine projection which relies on the disavowed substance of "woman."

The second section of the book, "Veiled Lips," points out that women do indeed - as the philosopher says - function as mere appearance or falsehood in "western" metaphysics and modern culture (Nietzsche 1973, 13, cited in Vasseleu 1993, 80; Diprose 1993, 16). But Irigaray claims that they are reduced to this role by their representation within an economy of truth that simultaneously incorporates and excludes their physical being (Whitford 1991a, 114),³¹ to which Nietzsche's discourse is not immune. In this economy, "woman" belongs to "the world of appearances which is supposed to be transcended in the final vision of truth" (Whitford 1991a, 114), a description of the workings of malestream philosophising which also

describes the negative mystical approach to the divine. In Irigaray's manifest desire "to reconsider the material bases that underlie the demand for coherence and system in Western metaphysics" (Burke 1989, 231), she plays the part of the positive mystic, however her challenge to Nietzsche in *Marine Lover* is enacted on the philosopher's own terms. Irigaray mimes "woman"'s changeability according to Nietzsche's views, but in order to highlight what she sees as the inescapably masculine terms of his idea of self-creation (Vasseleu 1993, 80-1).

In "The Crucified One" Irigaray takes on Nietzsche's frequently expressed and often contradictory views on Christ and Christianity as it has developed in the history of the "western" world. Like the rest of the book, this section is as concerned with formulating the terms of cultural transformation, of moving beyond dualities in a visionary, even prophetic manner, as it is with challenging the assumptions of masculinist philosophical texts. For both Nietzsche and Irigaray, Christ is a figure separable from the Christian traditions which grew up after his death and have informed the organisation of "western" culture. For Nietzsche, he was the "only...Christian" (Nietzsche 1981b, 612) and the religion which followed in his wake was nothing but the degeneration of a noble ideal (Stern 1978, 99). Irigaray also sees Christ as representing a potential cultural transformation of a kind which did *not* occur in the centuries following his death, through what she depicts as his validation and celebration of the body and the sexual (Irigaray 1989a, 65; 1991d, 181-4). Irigaray's playful answer to Nietzsche on Christ, like *Marine Lover* as a whole, both celebrates and challenges the philosopher's views. What she mostly seems to be about is a picking up and teasing out of ideas which, in Nietzsche, are provocative but not for her put to sufficiently radical use; that is, while Irigaray's view of the divine as an "incentive for...becoming" (Irigaray 1993a, 68) is in some ways similar to Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity, she is critical of his tendency to recuperate the feminine.

The idea expressed by Nietzsche, for instance, that "the death of God" signals a necessary and productive rethinking of what constitutes meaning in human life is echoed and expanded in *Marine Lover*. As Georg Stauth and Bryan Turner point out: "The death of God for Nietzsche was an intellectual and moral challenge which, in bringing to an end the false authority of a previous set of institutions, liberated moral agents for a new and dangerous adventure" (Stauth and Turner 1988, 138). This view is repeated by Irigaray in the epigraph at the head of this

section, but she takes it further, recasting the notion of eternal return by asserting that "those who suspend meaning in the letter" - those who have been responsible for male-led, institutionalised Christianity - are condemned to "indefinitely repeat the identical, because they are unable to discover difference" (Irigaray 1991d, 169).³² For Irigaray, the real death is the annulment of the notion of sexual difference in conventional Christianity through its appropriation of the maternal element and its concomitant production of "woman" as mere matter. She calls for the "death of God" which Nietzsche proclaimed as heralding the "modern" era (Stauth and Turner 1988, 33) to be radicalised so that what she calls the death of fertility in Mary (Irigaray 1991d, 167) may be uncovered and a complete rethinking of the place of the female in the Christian tradition and "western" culture can begin.

Because in Irigaray's view the cultural representation of the Christian God is bound up with the construction-as-appropriation of the female and maternal (the Christian God serving as a model for masculine subjects of "neutrality" achieved via the transcendence of the body and the female) she begins and ends her "Epistle to the Last Christians" in *Marine Lover* with reference to the person of Christ's mother Mary. She argues that the repudiation of Mary's birth-giving flesh in the Christian tradition enables Christ to mimic the prior but unsymbolised position of the female, signified on his body at the Crucifixion in the form of the side wound which resembles the female genitals:

The threshold that in her crosses the boundaries of the body and gives access to the infinite becomes in him a violent, yet already bloodless, penetration, marking the passage into Eternity... She, a dumb virgin with lips closed, occasionally receives the favor of a word, which she must bring into the world in the shape of a child of God. Mediatrix between Word and flesh, she is the means by which the (male) One passes into the other (Irigaray 1991d, 166).

Irigaray figures Mary as the arch-maternal figure buried beneath "western" phallogocentric discourse(s), whose silent body and blood fuels its/their speculations: "This is her cross in life, this double closure of her lips, upon which is implanted the visible erection of his passion" (Irigaray 1991d, 166). Mary's sexual pleasure and her speech, figured in the image of her closed genital and speaking lips, are outlawed in the traditional myths surrounding her Son's life.

For Nietzsche, Christianity (and particularly the Protestant Christianity in which he was raised), in its legalism and ascetic tendencies was regressive and binding of a life fuelled by (the) passion(s). In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* he railed against "the despisers of the body" (Nietzsche 1968, 61-3) and in *Twilight of the Idols* he claimed that the Church has mounted "an attack on the roots of passion [which] means an attack on the roots of life." Thus: "the practice of the church is *hostile to life*" (Nietzsche 1981c, 487). In *Marine Lover* Irigaray echoes this attitude but her diagnosis again focuses specifically on the female figure of Mary. She concurs with Nietzsche that Christianity is indeed a religion of negativity in relation to the body and the passions, but points out that it is such because it has negated the affirmative response of Mary at the Annunciation which, if accepted or answered to, if symbolised, would have transformed its rigid monotheism. Irigaray's representation of Mary is itself a challenge to Nietzsche's conception of "the great yes" (Staten 1990, 23), his endorsement of an approach to experience which affirms the willed response of the individual to life in the moment.³³ Irigaray figures the Annunciation as symbolic of a possible encounter with the female, one which was not taken up in Christian doctrine and is moreover not addressed by Nietzsche. She says of the Virgin at this point in time that:

as soon as she says, "yes," and without the slightest prophecy or herald, she also is "crucified." Before her "son" endures that destiny, and also afterward.... Her "yes" subtends Christian culture, which would not exist without her. And if the nature of this *fiat* were questioned, perhaps the basis of centuries of Christianity would need to be reevaluated. Because, according to the traditional interpretation, her "yes" is equally a "no": a no to her own life. To her conception, her birth, her generation, her flowering. No to everything, except the Word of the Father (Irigaray 1991d, 166-7).

The Church's refusal to countenance Mary's "yes" as the willed response of an actual person leads to the antifeminist, anti-flesh theology it in the main espouses: "No man accompanies her: she knows no men. Physical embrace will be banned from this religion of love. Its only unions are celebrated between mouth to ear, sometimes with the gaze, always through symbolic mediations. Spiritual unions" (Irigaray 1991d, 168). Irigaray finds an alternative explanation to that given by Nietzsche for Christianity's limitations regarding a life lived in productive alignment with human passions. Nietzsche claims that Christ was a "symbolist par excellence [who stood] outside all religion" (Nietzsche 1981b, 605), and he argues that

Christianity as a religion has refused Christ's meaning, the display of a "deep instinct for how one *must* live" according to the depths of feeling (Nietzsche 1981b, 607). But he does not consider the essential contribution of Mary to Christ's earthly existence, which his "integrity" of "instinct and passion" celebrates (Nietzsche 1981b, 609).

For Irigaray, the appropriation and sacrifice of the maternal sets the terms for a religion and a morality in which genuine exchange between the sexes - on equal terms - is outlawed. Irigaray argues that for such exchange to occur it would be necessary to rethink the birth-giving process and the symbolic colonisation by man of his first "home" (the womb), which is reflected in Christ's rebirth after death from the walls of his tomb in Gethsemane.³⁴ Thus the Christian myth of Christ's Resurrection is a version of the process which takes place as subjects are birthed into the patriarchal symbolic order in which the maternal is subsumed within the masculine. In this part of *Marine Lover* Irigaray asserts her view that religious symbolisations are deeply complicit with dominant sociocultural formations and understandings of the body.

However it is equally true that for her the divine is an agent of subversive possibility which can be rethought and refigured in excess of its hegemonic representations. She concurs with Nietzsche's view of Christianity as stultifying the creative possibilities or "becoming" of the human; however like the mystic in the positive tradition who alters the terms of the man-God exchange by her participation with God-in-the-flesh (her own as well as his), Irigaray seeks to rewrite Christianity in terms of a response to the substance of female flesh:

According to Christianity, God is found only in Distance.... And what if, for Mary, the divine occurred only near at hand? So near that it thereby becomes unnameable. Which is not to say that it is nothing. But rather the coming of a reality that is alien to any already-existing identity. Relationship within a more mystical place than any proximity that can be localized. An effusion that goes beyond and stops short of any skin that has been closed back on itself. The deepest depths of the flesh, touched, birthed, and without a wound (Irigaray 1991d, 171).

Here Irigaray can be seen as critiquing the Nietzschean notion of the distancing of the self which is bound up with the concept of the eternal return. In Nietzsche's view of self-creation the eternal return frees the self from attempts to escape the past through a positive recognition that no one lived moment is the same as another. But Irigaray argues that the self the

philosopher imagines is a male-model self; as Rosalyn Diprose observes: "Nietzsche often speaks as if the distance within the self effected by making the moment one's own is generated by the self alone," whereas in fact it is always mediated through relationships with others (Diprose 1993, 9). Irigaray reads Mary in the final section of *Marine Lover* as the quintessential - but unrecognised - other or mediator of the social relations endorsed by Christianity, a figure whose profound embodiment of the divine (transcendence) would provoke, if recognised, a challenge to Nietzsche's view of Christianity as well as the Nietzschean notion of (self-)creativity as an isolated, individual act.

In a broad sense Irigaray's desire for a view of the divine which would help validate and extend the representational possibilities of human bodies is in accord with Nietzsche's call for a celebration of life and "an antidote to nihilism" (Stauth and Turner 1988, 137).³⁵ Ultimately, however, she depicts Nietzsche as a proponent of the death-dealing philosophising which is based on an unrecognised disavowal of the feminine. In this respect she can be seen to repudiate Nietzsche as bound to the same distancing procedures which are endorsed in the negative mystical way. She states that he has perhaps:

experienced and shown what is the result of infinite distance reabsorbed into the (male) same, shown the difference that remains without a face or countenance... There is no other that might allow him to continue to make himself flesh. No other to set the limits of his corporeal identity with and for him, putting his latest thought into the background so a new one can be born (Irigaray 1991d, 187).

For Irigaray, the philosopher fails to open himself to exchange with a female other (with herself perhaps, the "marine lover" who is speaking) and so, "by wishing to overcome everything, he plunges into the shadows...with no perspective" (Irigaray 1991d, 187). Despite the scope of Nietzsche's philosophy and the grand assertions expressed within it, he is unable to produce ideas which are genuinely fruitful and transformative of culture because he insists on speaking "universal," not specifically situated anywhere. Admitting no "limits [to] his corporeal identity" is the result of denying female bodiliness in his speech, of setting himself up as the one who speaks for all. Thus in Irigaray's reading his thoughts are doomed to be sterile: "The sacrifice he makes to the Idea is inscribed in this - that he preferred the Idea to an ever provisional openness to a female other" (Irigaray 1991d, 187).³⁶

Like the critics influenced by negative mysticism, Nietzsche - in Irigaray's view - paradoxically speaks from the position of the masculine God because he insists on universal speech, thus repeating the matricidal act which she holds responsible for the sterility of the Christian tradition. Hence Nietzsche is unable to produce a philosophy of "becoming" sufficient to counter Christianity's paralysing dogma. In Irigaray the concept of "becoming" is connected with her reworking of the divine as a genre-category for women; it appears to refer to a process of cultural transformation which would follow from a genuine recognition of female contributions to cultural life (Irigaray 1991a; 1993a, 68-9). It also refers, in turn, to the conditions of emergent female subjectivity (Irigaray 1991d, 190), that is, a culture of genuine sexual difference and intersexual symbolic exchange.

In contrast to her view of Nietzsche, Irigaray plays the positive mystic to Christ, reenvisioning him as a figure open to human contact and symbolically enabling the expression of sexual difference.³⁷ In this way she answers Nietzsche's objections to Christianity by introducing the question of sexual difference into its origins, suggesting that its neglect of the feminine is an explanation for its denial of bodily passion as celebration of the divine and its lack of cultural productivity. She asks: "Must the Christic redemption mean that the advent of the divine has never taken place in the incarnation of a loving relation with the other?" and "why could [Christ's] presence in the flesh not be perceived as divine?" (Irigaray 1991d, 177). Like Kempe, Irigaray (re)introduces touch as the primary trope in her reading of Christ, positing it as a symbol of engagement and exchange between different selves which reduces neither. Again she asks:

Was he really untouchable? His miracles are usually based on touch. Even his words aim to touch rather than to prove or convince. His teaching is almost always contradictory, and converts or heals by touching. A touch that is.... respectful of bodily space, of sensual space, of openings in the skin. Each remains [herself or] himself, these and those get close, meet, touch one another. Sometimes by a miracle in the moment, sometimes by a parable. So that history may be understood without understanding - may sprout where no one hears. Achieved from the depths of a flesh that sometimes needs time. Does not bear rape. But remains impassive to the letter enveloping or masking the message. The letter does not touch.... It remains outside the body. Is not, is no longer, made flesh (Irigaray 1991d, 181).

Finally, Irigaray returns in her own "letter" to the question of Mary's "yes." She contends that male subjects, like Nietzsche and like the Christian God, need to learn to say "yes" to female subjects, to play the part of responsive others to women who may then be subjects and not just objects of desire. She argues for a philosophy of affirmation which "goes beyond" the male-centred one suggested by Nietzsche (Irigaray 1991d, 190), and ends her dialogue with him with a series of questions. These concern the reinterpreting of Christ and his legacy in "western" culture as a means of rethinking the relationships between "word and nature.... *logos* and *cosmos*," conventional understandings of the workings of the ("natural" and in turn the cultural) world. She suggests that "the spirit," instead of being "the product of the love between Father and son" - an endorsement of the homosexual economy³⁸ - might signify "the universe already made flesh or capable of becoming flesh, and remaining in excess to the existing world" (Irigaray 1991d, 190). That is, the possibilities for cultural production and renewal which arise from a recognition of the female - as flesh, as life-giving, as excessive to or other than the male.

"Grace that speaks silently through and beyond the word?" These are the final words of *Marine Lover*. In the next dialogue I will take up this equivocation, this readiness to engage in dialogue which Irigaray's texts purport to express, by articulating some - no more nor less equivocal - questions of my own. The section will also explore the dialogue Irigaray has in several of her works with the Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar, Emmanuel Levinas,³⁹ a dialogue specifically focused on the possibilities of non-appropriative exchange between uniquely different selves. In this dialogue I challenge Irigaray on some of the more overt exclusions from her work as well as introducing questions which reflect my own particular concerns. As well as being a dialogic exploration, the section will serve as a "bridge passage" to the fourth dialogue, where I give myself over to a personal response to Irigaray, specifically the dramatic and performative qualities of her reconfigurations of the female body through her idiosyncratic notion of the divine.

4. 2. 3 Dialogue #3: Irigaray and Levinas

"The true life is absent." But we are in the world (Levinas 1979, 33).

The most intimate perception of the flesh escapes every sacrificial substitution, every resumption in a discourse, every surrender to God. Flair or premonition between myself and the other, this memory of the flesh as the place of approach is ethical fidelity to incarnation. To destroy it risks suppressing alterity, both God's and the other's. Thus dissolving all possibility of access to transcendence (Irigaray 1986c, 256).

The dialogue Irigaray has with Levinas in her work is in my view especially pervasive, particularly of the texts published since 1980 (beginning with *Marine Lover*), in which she begins to explore a more overtly dialogic style of writing. Although she has written two essays directly in response to the Jewish philosopher's work (Irigaray 1986c; 1991j), I will not be focusing entirely on these texts in this section. What I am interested in taking up here are some of the connections between Levinas' and Irigaray's ideas so as to explore how I read Irigaray's visionary reformulation of notions of the divine - God and the infinite - for strategic purposes. At the same time, I ask Irigaray some questions not unlike those she specifically asks Levinas, but this is related to my aim of producing a reading of my own of Irigaray's reworkings of the philosopher's ideas.

Irigaray's dialogic engagements with Levinas are not in the consciously seductive mode of *Marine Lover* and the other "elemental" texts of that group, and this, it seems to me, signals a more "serious" and less playfully mimetic attitude on her part to his ideas. The theme of love as an encounter between a self and an other in which neither is subsumed into the other's desire is a central concept in Irigaray's work in the 1980s,⁴⁰ and in the articulation of this idea she aligns herself with Levinas, even when not addressing him directly. But this engagement is not one in which she "teases" the philosopher so much as confronts him with a serious face.⁴¹ Her textual relationship with Levinas is an ongoing one, reflecting, I think, a greater conscious commitment to his *basic ethical ideas* on her part than to those of Nietzsche and Lacan. The emphasis is on talking about love rather than engaging in flirtation in Irigaray's dialogues with Levinas. Levinas' formulation of ethical responsibility and self-other relations is clearly important to Irigaray, and while she is critical of his work at times (specifically in

"The Fecundity of the Caress" (1986c) and "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" (1991j)), I think it can be argued that she has taken his concerns seriously enough to incorporate them into her own work quite consistently since 1980.

Among the ideas in Levinas which have become important to Irigaray is the foundational one of his positing of human subjectivity as that which is always already destabilised by the irreducible alterity of an other. "Language is born in responsibility," he claims (Levinas 1989a, 82), and "the I... is a hostage for the other, obeying a command before having heard it" (Levinas 1989b, 178). As Cathryn Vasseleu explains: "The starting point of his ethics is a prioritization of the other who is acknowledged as being Other, that is, autonomous, independent and irreducibly different from the self" (Vasseleu 1991, 143), and Grosz observes that in Levinas: "the other necessarily implicates the subject from the outside. In being chosen by the other, the subject is positioned as an identity, located as a being in space and time. The otherness of the other is, for Levinas, the precondition of the sameness of the self" (Grosz 1989, 142).

In terms of Irigaray's interest in pursuing the conditions of sexual difference, of autonomous female subjectivity, Levinas' work is useful in that he approaches the issue of social relations from an unusual angle. His avowed refusal to theorise about cultural and social totalities (Chanter 1988, 34) by locating the individual subject's humanity in relation to a specific - and specifically different - other (here, ethics precedes or is the basis of metaphysics) is taken up by Irigaray's interventions into the domain of philosophy as a totalising reflection of the masculine self-as-same. Her challenges to the self-containedness of the masculine subject are in a sense enabled by Levinas' disruption of the notion of a singular self through positing the prior debt of that self to an other. In Irigaray's tactical rereadings of mainstream philosophical works, this other is the female as heterosexual lover and/or the sacrificed maternal presence.

In Levinas, the other is "encountered neither as a phenomenon nor as a being (something to be mastered or possessed), the other is encountered as a face. It is in the encounter with the face of the other [*le visage d'Autrui*] that the other's infinite alterity is revealed" (Robbins 1991, 136). Levinas writes: "the Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the

face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (Levinas 1989a, 83). Thus, as Tina Chanter observes:

To follow Levinas' account of the otherness of the Other, an entirely different conception of society is called for - starting not with equality, but with the asymmetry of the face-to-face relation. In order to think about the relation of self to Other, within the face-to-face relation we are required to re-think traditional ideas of subject, freedom and consciousness (Chanter 1988, 34).

For Levinas, the face of the other transforms the gaze of the self, so that looking, understood as a violent form of interaction with an other, is converted into a concrete, physical response, signifying generosity and openness (Grosz 1987, 34).⁴² This response is enjoined on the subject; for Levinas the other's need is the basis of linguistic exchange: "To face someone is both to perceive him (sic) and to answer to him" (Lingis 1987, qtd. in Robbins 1991, 138).

There is a strong sense in which the face of the other is also the face of God, an idea which, in its ethical requirement, is extended in Irigaray's notion of the divine as that which would mediate between irreducible selves and allow them each an autonomous subject position. Levinas claims that:

The sense of the human is not to be measured by presence, not even by self-presence. The meaning of proximity exceeds the limits of ontology, of the human essence, and of the world. It signifies by way of transcendence and the relationship-to-God-in-me [*l'à-Dieu-en-moi*] which is the putting of myself into question. The face signifies in the fact of summoning, of *summoning me*⁴³ - in its nudity or its destitution, in everything that is precarious in questioning, in all the hazards of mortality - to the unresolved alternative between Being and Nothingness, a questioning which, *ipso facto*, *summons me*.

The Infinite in its absolute difference withholds itself from presence in me.... It is in calling me to other men (sic) that transcendence concerns me. In this unique intrigue of transcendence, the non-absence of the Infinite is neither presence, nor representation. Instead, the idea of the Infinite is to be found in my responsibility for the Other (Levinas 1983, 112-3, qtd. in Hand 1989, 5).

Irigaray has taken up this notion of the divine as mediator in her writings on sexual difference. She argues that a concept of the divine or a divine function is required by women in order for them to mediate exchanges among themselves, and between themselves and men,

since in a phallogocentric economy they function as objects and not subjects of exchange (Irigaray 1993a, 62). The divine for her is a reversal of this sacrifice of female bodies (and a reversal of the same sacrifice which occurs in the representation of the Christian God) in that it both enables and compels women and men to face each other as distinctive subjects. It signals a mode of interaction between subjects which it is at present almost impossible to practise, one in which female and male subjects operate in a recognition of being equally in the other's debt. Thus Irigaray's divine, operating both within and in excess of the self, is a way of reimagining current modes of intersexual relations, transfiguring the boundaries between the insides and outsides of male and female bodies.⁴⁴

The body is integral in Levinas' account of consciousness; however, his assumption of "a constitutionally identical sensibility between one body and another" (Vasseleu 1991, 150), his effacement of the feminine in the relation of other to self, is a point of contention in Irigaray. The centrality of the body as active agent in Levinas' thought is evident in his claim that, "to take [the body] as an event is to say that it is not an instrument, symbol or symptom of position, but is position itself, that in it is effected the very transformation of an event into being" (Levinas 1978, 73, qtd. in Vasseleu 1991, 146). Likewise bodily contact with another in erotic intimacy is "not an attempt to assimilate an irreducible other, but an obsessive delight in contacting the alien, and losing it and one's own perspective simultaneously" (Vasseleu 1991, 147). But Levinas characterises the other's evasive presence in love as feminine - thereby assuming that men only may be subjects of desire (Irigaray 1991j, 185) - and, moreover, as that which "modestly" shuns or slips away from the light (Levinas 1987, 79, qtd. in Irigaray 1991j, 178).⁴⁵ Thus the disruption of the solipsism of the self by the encounter with an other depends upon the effacement or "non-signifyingness," as Vasseleu terms it (Vasseleu 1991, 148), of the feminine.⁴⁶ Hence Irigaray claims that in Levinas:

the feminine appears as the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration towards the light, as its negative. The feminine is apprehended not in relation to itself, but from the point of view of man, and through a purely erotic strategy, a strategy moreover which is dictated by masculine pleasure [*jouissance*] (Irigaray 1991j, 178).

She contends that in Levinas "the monopoly of divine power" is still held by men and that the divine, by default, remains male (Irigaray 1991j, 178, 184-5). For her this leads to "female sexuality, in so far as it is visible at all, being kept from the light and left without

representation in terms of the divine" (Irigaray 1991j, 178), and thus without possibility of change.

Irigaray's challenge, which asserts that the feminine is subsumed in the orientation of male subjects to the light (as metaphor for enlightenment, knowledge, and truth), would seem to place Levinas on the side of Platonic, negative theology, which outlaws female physicality in the soul's "dark night" in order that knowledge in the form of enlightenment might be reached.⁴⁷ On the other hand, as I have argued, Irigaray herself can be seen to side with mystics in the positive tradition in her persistent concern with the representation of the female body and her privileging of physical agency in the (re)figuration of the divine. However, Levinas himself is critical of the Platonic tradition of thought,⁴⁸ and light is described in his work as that which implicates the subject in the act of perception (of an object): "Light [is] a mode of seeing that, like touching, puts one in contact with the other" and "subverts the subject's identity and self-containment" by mediating between subject and other (Grosz 1987, 36-7). His phenomenological approach to knowledge does not assume the existence of a substance apart from a subject's intention.⁴⁹ Thus he states that: "due to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours on the horizon which precedes it; it comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom" (Levinas 1978, 48, qtd. in Vasseleu 1991, 146).

In a sense then, Levinas' philosophy proceeds "beyond dualities" in its description of the relation between self and other which is commanded by the divine. Touching, as a metaphor of the self's irresistible engagement with the other, signifies a contact which is ever more elusive: "the other recedes in the moment of touch" (Vasseleu 1991, 147).⁵⁰ The irreducible presence of the body which operates in positive mysticism, and the inexpressibility of the encounter with the infinite which is central to negative mysticism, both occur in Levinas' account of self-other relations:⁵¹ "The other's materiality is an exorbitant presence which is unrecuperable, unidentifiable; a materiality which exhibits its inexpressibility.... The caress is a hunger which suffers from an inability to tell it" (Vasseleu 1991, 147).

But if Levinas' thought moves beyond dualities in one sense, Irigaray argues that it doesn't proceed far enough, and the seduction of the encounter between selves, because it occurs only

with the female as passive beloved, leads to no real exchange (Irigaray 1986c, 23-40). She argues that the feminine is in fact recuperated into the projection forward into eternity performed by the masculine philosophical subject, with its teleological mindset: "To caress, for Levinas, consists...not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other's body to the elaboration of a future for himself" (Irigaray 1991j, 179). Levinas returns to human flesh as the site of infinity in relation to the subject; in this sense he may be seen endorsing a relation to the divine like that of the positive mystic in the Christian tradition.⁵² But the caress produces an "intentionality of pleasure directed purely and simply toward the future itself" (Levinas 1987, 89, qtd. in Irigaray 1991j, 179), and thus resists the return to flesh wherein the female body is undeniably present. For Irigaray,

the only function of the feminine other is to satisfy the hungers of the philosopher [Levinas], to renourish the intentionality of his pleasure in the direction of a "future event," a future where no day is named for the encounter with the other in an embodied love (Irigaray 1991j, 179).

Thus as in negative mysticism, Levinas' denial of female flesh nourishes the inexpressibility - the impossibility in phallic discourse - of the self-other relation.

In contrast to what she sees as Levinas' annulment of the feminine in his articulation of intersubjective ethics and in line with her project to introduce sexual difference into the symbolic order, Irigaray has been increasingly concerned since the early 1980s with rethinking the heterosexual couple as the basic unit of "western" culture. Her focus on what she calls the "amorous economy" (Irigaray 1992a, 3) of this patriarchal society has led her to argue that women need a means of representing themselves as creators of culture (not just as aligned with "nature" through childbearing), as men have through the legacy of Christianity and its creator God. It is her view that the amorous economy which underlies "western" capitalism is a sterile one which is still based on the exchange of daughters between men. As a result, she contends, heterosexual couples find it hard to proceed beyond "mother-son relationships," in which women's availability, nurturing skills and fertility are taken for granted by men and go unrewarded, unrepresented in the wider culture (Irigaray 1992a, 2). The work of men in the cultural (as opposed to the domestic) sphere appropriates and is dependent upon this contribution, yet women remain without recognisable identities apart from men, and if they

enter the sphere of culture it is on male terms. For Irigaray this is the result of the fact that "woman" has no history (herstory) of her own, no gods which would enable her to articulate a specific identity as a woman; any traces of such a tradition have all been erased (Irigaray 1986a; 1993g; 1993h). Women lack a "divine identity which could be perfected in love," a means of ameliorating the entrapment of heterosexual relationships, and this lack of identity "turns love into a duty, a pathology, an alienation for [them]" (Irigaray 1992a, 2).

Irigaray is not alone in this analysis of the contemporary social relations which dominate in the "western" world; a number of feminists have described the predicament of heterosexual women (as most if not all women are expected to be in patriarchal culture) in somewhat similar terms (Dinnerstein 1977; Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Keller 1986). However Irigaray's focus on the divine as enabling symbolic identity is unusual, as is her persistent focus of late on the heterosexual couple as the primary example of the cultural sterility she identifies in "western" culture as a whole.⁵³ This sterility, for her, is a result of the lack of the means of a specific female identity in the social networks of "western" capitalism.

Irigaray's more recent writings on the heterosexual couple are extremely complex, as they articulate a history of heterosexual relations in contemporary culture in very dense philosophical terms. As in much of her previous work, she confronts and, in a subtle, mimetic fashion, re-presents the work of male philosophers whose ideas have shaped dominant forms of sexual and social relations in the "western" cultural past. Fascinating as it would be to address some of this work in detail, I have no space to do that here. I have given this very brief gloss on Irigaray's work on the woman/man couple in order to shortly raise some questions which trouble me about her (re)figuration of the divine as a form of exchange between women and men in love relationships together.

While the heterosexual couple has been a consistent focus in her recent work, Irigaray's earlier writings - and the first to be translated into English - emphasised the necessity to think through the conditions of relationships of exchange, including sexual exchange, among women. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray depicts the lesbian as the figure who shows up the "blind spot(s)" of Freud's dream of symmetry⁵⁴ or same-sex, masculine (homosexual) economy by her disruption of the phallogocentric system

consisting of the exchange of women among men (Irigaray 1985a, 65, 192-7; 1985b, 99-104). Christine Holmlund also argues that in *Speculum* Irigaray portrays the lesbian as mimicking and thereby exposing the feminine and masculine roles articulated in psychoanalytic discourse as ideologically motivated constructions (Irigaray 1974, 103, 112, cited in Holmlund 1991, 288. See also Grosz 1988, 38-9).

In her early work Irigaray describes the current cultural conditions under which it is more or less impossible for women to have relationships with each other that are representable in the public sphere (Irigaray 1985a, 170-97). Her writings on the difficulties women experience in relation to their mothers, and as mothers in relation to daughters, are part of this analysis of the need for women to achieve the conditions of active subjectivity (Irigaray 1981b; 1985a, 205-18). While as Holmlund points out, for Irigaray at this stage of her work, "lesbian relationships...figure not only the possibility but also the actual existence of another kind of exchange, another kind of desire" (Holmlund 1991, 288), her attention in the 1980s shifts to heterosexual relationships in the formulation of an other desire, beyond the relations conventionally enjoined on women and men. That is, she focuses on reimagining the heterosexual relations which dominate in "western" patriarchal cultures, and part of her method in this endeavour is her (re)figuring of the divine.

I don't have the space here to describe the specifics of this move in Irigaray, which consists of several layers of philosophical and psychoanalytic deconstruction and reworking. However broadly speaking, her use of the divine in this context - articulated at times as the sensible transcendental which partakes of both matter and transcendence (or the attributes of active subjectivity) functions as a third term enabling conventional sexual roles to be rethought, as described in previous chapters. The sensible transcendental as formulation of the divine as mediator between human subjects re-presents the conventionally appointed characteristics of both women and men. Irigaray makes the traditional, Christian divine serve as a means of symbolic redistribution of qualities which are traditionally understood only through a binary, a binary by means of which women are situated on the side of the immanent (sheer physical) and unrepresentable.

For example, in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" Irigaray describes a sexual relationship which does not occur according to the model of one sex and its opposite, by emphasising that which is traditionally unsymbolised in phallogocentric representations, the mucous membranes or fluids of the body. Normally it is the body's shape or form which signifies according to a phallic model, as in the male=active/female=passive (sex as penetration and not engulfment) representation of conventional heterosexual encounter. She writes that:

For Levinas, the distance is always maintained with the other in the experience of love. The other is "close" to him in "duality." This autistic, egological, solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body's solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons [*de la dualité*] becomes indistinct, and above all, acceding to another energy, neither that of the one nor that of the other, but an energy produced together and as a result of the irreducible difference of sex. Pleasure between the same sex does not result in that im-mediate ecstasy between the other and myself. It may be more or less intense, quantitatively and qualitatively different, it does not produce in us that ecstasy which is our child, prior to any child [*enfant avant tout enfant*]. In this relation, we are at least three, each of which is irreducible to any of the others: you, me and our work [*oeuvre*], that ecstasy of ourself in us [*de nous en nous*], that transcendence of the flesh of one to that of the other become ourself in us [*devenue nous en nous*], at any rate "in me" as a woman, prior to any child (Irigaray 1991j, 180).

The divine here is the third term which partakes of the physical being of both partners and redefines the boundaries between them. As a result, what is typically seen as women's "fluidity" (metaphorically as well as literally (Keller 1986, 11-15)) becomes part of the reformulation of both figures through their encounter across a fluid threshold which is symbolised for each as "transcendence," something other than themselves which alters that perception of self. Just as in Levinas, the divine confronts the subject in the other's irresistible presence, so here, "each is a 'subject' in love; each is transcendent to the other (each is divine for the other); each can confront the other with *admiration*" (Irigaray 1984, 75-84, cited in Whitford 1991a, 167; Irigaray 1993b, 72-82).⁵⁵

As Whitford observes, Irigaray on the "amorous exchange"⁵⁶ (her revisioning of the sterility of the currently operative "amorous economy") is "at her most visionary and her most

utopian" (Whitford 1991a, 165). Furthermore, "the amorous exchange represents in the most corporeal and the most intimate terms Irigaray's vision of the new world, deploying the erotico-transcendental vocabulary of mysticism and the language of the imaginary body" (Whitford 1991a, 168). While the above passage from "Questions" represents Irigaray at her most visionary and "mystical," I find myself reluctant at this point to interpret the piece in positive mystical terms. I have deliberately not described the piece as re-presenting a heterosexual encounter, because in one sense I am aware that Irigaray is describing changes in the cultural understanding of feminine and masculine roles which she sees as necessarily occurring on a broad-based symbolic level, before individual experience can be symbolised differently.

However despite this and like the positive mystic, Irigaray's use of "corporeal" and "intimate" terms insists on the return to the flesh of heterosexual engagement, however altered. Irigaray's refiguration of a heterosexual connection to argue for broader cultural changes and symbolic redistributions leaves me unable to claim in this case that the "return to flesh" is particularly subversive, since to me it implies that heterosexual coupling is the paradigm for reworking conventional subject positions and so for social change.⁵⁷ If this is Irigaray at her most visionary and utopian, then I want to alter the terms of my understanding of her "mysticism."

Although Irigaray describes the heterosexual encounter in the passage in mystical terms through which conventional understandings of female sexuality are transformed (thus far I can align her with a mystic like Margery Kempe or Angela of Foligno, in their seductive encounters with Christ and their merging with his boundaryless, wounded body), this very transformation would presumably make lesbian relationships more visible and more readily seen as "productive." However, Irigaray does not state this, and her focus on the heterosexual couple (which occurs not only in this singular instance, but in entire volumes of work) seems to me to be limiting for efforts to think beyond current modes of heterosexual relations and the heterosexist culture that gives rise to them.

I am aware that my response to the imagery of the heterosexual encounter in Irigaray may be likened to the negative responses of some of her critics (mostly in the Anglo-American academic scene, as described in Chapter One) to her provocative attempts to refigure female

sexuality through the metaphor of the two (genital) lips, women's fluid sexual economy, and so on. To recap, several feminists have stated their belief that these reworkings of images of female sexuality are an attempt on Irigaray's part to posit a "true" femininity, a reading which is obviously limiting in its view of the linguistic and symbolic understanding of the body as signifying its unalterable "truth" (Chapter One, 36). And perhaps Irigaray's latest turn towards symbolising heterosexual relations is a sign of her perverse and persistent desire to work over representations of female sexuality that are contentious for feminists and overdetermined in culture, in strategic fashion, so as to move beyond them. "Woman" as excessive in a phallogentric sexual economy (and so figured via the lips which are "neither one nor two" (Irigaray 1985a, 26)) and heterosexual relations as a site where women repeatedly "lose themselves" as definable subjects are obvious examples of such overdetermined representations.

But whether my response is too "literal" or not, I want to state that, as a lover of women and men, I find Irigaray's repeated use of the heterosexual couple as an example in her arguments for cultural change disconcerting. This is especially so when, in line with her earlier work, such change would presumably lead to all sexual relationships being radically altered, perhaps beyond recognition. In *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray describes lesbian sexual relations, for instance, as "impossible" to represent as yet in the phallogentric economy (Irigaray 1985a, 205-18; 1985b, 98-104). In her work since *Elemental Passions* ((1982) 1992) she focuses on heterosexual relationships but again, argues for changes which would make new kinds of heterosexual relations possible and would completely transfigure current realities (i.e., women and men could encounter each other on equal terms). Thus the recent emphasis on heterosexual relationships would appear to suggest that these must change first in order that lesbian relationships might become visible; otherwise, why move towards a consistent focus on heterosexual relationships specifically? I don't think this in particular is a strategically bold but rather a conservative move from a feminist perspective, and it conflicts with the way(s) in which I generally find it most helpful to read Irigaray, that is, as a visionary strategist who continually engages with female "realities" that are without cultural representation, in order to alter the terms of discourse and force it to recognise the specific experience(s) of women.

Irigaray questions Levinas about allowing only one kind of "otherness" (i.e., the other of ethical subjects presumed to be masculine) and excluding sexual difference. But I question Irigaray's persistent focus on sexual difference between women and men as the ultimate cultural marker of ethical relationships, as others have also done. Holmlund writes that, although Irigaray

argues against "making woman *the subject or the object* of a theory" and against "subsuming the feminine under some *generic term* such as 'woman,'" and although she urges that women's liberation movements should be recognized as *many* and not one, saying "there are multiple groups and tendencies in women's struggles today" (Irigaray 1977b, 156, 164), only rarely does Irigaray herself refer to or enter into dialogue with other women. Her collusion in the silencing of women's voices is a conscious choice, resulting from her desire to clear a space for "le féminin," a female symbolic, a new form of knowledge, by tackling and engaging with patriarchal discourses (Holmlund 1991, 300).⁵⁸

As a result of Irigaray's preference for engaging in dialogue with white male thinkers, and the broad cast of her concerns in terms of issues of sex/gender, she does not address issues of race and class specifically in her analysis of women's oppression. Consequently, as Holmlund charges, "for all her emphasis on the need for a genealogy and a history of women, she may be in danger of 'ignoring who the other woman is'" (Spivak 1987, 150, cited in Holmlund 1991, 300-1).⁵⁹ I would like to see the concept of the sensible transcendental put to wider use in the quest for new articulations of cultural difference, of which the sexual is but one.⁶⁰ On one level I see my desire to engage with Irigaray's reworking of the divine as the sensible transcendental in this study as a preliminary personal move towards such future work.

On the subject of sexual difference as envisioned through refigured heterosexual encounter, I want to read Irigaray as combining positive *and* negative mystical tendencies, like Levinas, but differently. That is, I read her phantas(ma)tic⁶¹ descriptions of heterosexual coupling as returning to flesh in a tactical move in order to posit cultural changes, even as Margery Kempe's much less conscious return to flesh in her relationship with Christ makes her body signify excessively and differently from the status quo. But in order to do this I must read the centrality of the heterosexual couple (and its "real," physical referent) in this move as provisional, as "matter" which is all too present in its conventional cultural incarnation and

which, if Irigaray's visions were to be enacted, would be transfigured into a different kind of exchange. This is not to argue for the avoidance of heterosexual relationships, but to try and find a way around their persistent return as paradigm, as a norm which goes unquestioned in "western" patriarchal culture as a whole, and a way around this problem as I encounter it in Irigaray's recent writing.

If the divine could be rethought so as to symbolise previously unsymbolised aspects of women's sexuality, as Irigaray would have it, then sexual relationships between women would also accede to cultural representation on a broader scale. Bearing that in mind, I want to read Irigaray's visions of the woman-man couple as only provisionally situated in the flesh as "we" know it, as oriented towards a future in which the exchanges that might occur remain as yet inexpressible.⁶² In this sense then, I read Irigaray as a negative mystic in order to read her as moving beyond dualities. I want to situate my own visions for feminist theory in the flesh but in order to have this flesh transformed, and this is what I tend to read Irigaray as doing. However, this reading is of course bound up with my desire to see Irigaray as articulating ideas of value, however mystifying, and/or to argue for the possibility of value in mystifying/mystical texts.⁶³

In Levinas, "the only function of the feminine other is to satisfy the hungers of the philosopher, to renourish the intentionality of his pleasure in the direction of a 'future event,'" says Irigaray (Irigaray 1991j, 179). But I read in Irigaray's re-presentation of the heterosexual couple another deferral towards a future not yet tangible, and I find in this reading material for both "positive" and "negative" interpretation: frustration at what I see as the recuperation of alternatives to heterosexual relations and, despite this, a kind of inspiration from Irigaray's daring recasting of heterosexual coupling as transformed ethical event.

In the first epigraph to this section Levinas, in the opening to *Totality and Infinity*, posits the inescapable tension of metaphysics, that of the subject who looks elsewhere or "beyond," seeking explanation of the world in which s/he finds her/himself. For Levinas this move occurs only in relation to an other. The second epigraph, the final lines of Irigaray's reading of Levinas (*Totality and Infinity* section IV, B) state the radical nonsubstitutability of that other: each subject approaches each other subject in love as though for the first time,

relearning the possibility of transcendence (in Irigaray itself a metaphor for (infinite) possibility (Irigaray 1992b, 28-9)) through attention to touch. At the close of her article on Irigaray quoted previously, Christine Holmlund suggests that for feminists "who want to adapt Irigaray's provocative 'detour[s] into strategy, tactics and practice' to [their] own present political and theoretical needs, the best solution is to engage in dialogue with her.... It is, after all," she states, "unfair to expect Irigaray, or anyone, to have all the answers" (Holmlund 1991, 303).⁶⁴ I would like to take up the provisional, explorative tone of this injunction, as Irigaray's version of "ethical fidelity to incarnation" is also of necessity provisional, in this chapter's final dialogue. This is one I am having with Irigaray as I respond to her tactics in and through the moment-to-moment, physically attentive and, for me, always provisional practice of dance.

4. 2. 4 Dialogue #4: Reading Irigaray, dancing

But is the body always the same? Can we fix it in one self-same form? Does it not wither when it has to keep to one appearance? Is not mobility its life? (Irigaray 1992b, 33).

Dance requires its own close watching.... Literacy in dance, from which a political reading proceeds, must begin with attention to the body and to the gravity, levity, spatiality and rhythms of its movement. When the object speaks, when the body dances, perhaps it is not a watching but a listening which is required. Or if it is watching, it is watching with an eye that glides under the surface of skin and rests there, listening without expectation (Dempster 1988, 52).

Moving through the world, across the universe, or dancing, I construct more of a dwelling for myself than through vision (Irigaray 1993b, 175).

Dancing, as Jane Desmond observes, is "the most ephemeral of all the arts" (Desmond 1991, 29). This is ironic, since the fleeting presence of the dancer in performance depends upon a process of training more physically arduous and ineradicable in its effects than any other. The dancer's quotidian body is the mute, largely effaced ground of the dancing arts, for while irreducibly present in performance, it has traditionally not been granted agency as such (Dempster 1988, 38-9). "The dancer's body is her instrument," it is commonly said, and if this is so then the dancer "herself" must be in some sense without body, lacking, or at least distanced from the instrumental body which performs. In this sense dance is feminised,

signifying both body and lack, and indeed it has been and continues to be primarily associated with women in the capitalist "west." As Elizabeth Dempster writes:

[Dance] has traditionally been defined in relationship to the male-identified art forms of music and drama, and its communicative potential, force and action is commonly misrepresented as being dependent upon those relationships. In this (false) representation, the body is dispossessed of its capacity for mindful action. The "male" arts of music and drama commandeer the space of mind and spirit; the female-identified art of dance is relegated to the nether regions of an unthought and unthinking body. Dance may be the mother of all manner of things but she cannot know or speak of herself (Dempster 1988, 38-9).

Dancing is the mobile place in which I ground a number of my engagements with Irigaray and her writings about the representation of "the female body." It is also the chief means by which I experiment bodily with her provocative ideas. In this section, I want to bring "speaking as a woman" and "dancing (signifying bodily) as a woman" into dialogue together, since each has traditionally been an impossible achievement in phallogentric culture and since each is inseparable from the other for me.

One is not born a dancer any more than one is born a woman, to ring a change on de Beauvoir's famous assertion, and the process of "becoming" a dancer is never finished, as every young ballet student learns. Irigaray's unusual formulation of the divine as the sensible transcendental which serves as agent of or horizon for women's future "becoming" implicates the female body profoundly in the search to discover the means of its specific representation. The sensible transcendental is situated in the present moment, in female physicality as it is experienced and conventionally understood. But it is above all a visionary notion and thus is connected with movement, with change which takes place as self meets other across a threshold re-envisioned as enabling the impossible (contact between unrecuperable selves), as, in fact, divine. Irigaray's writings move across and around and inside bodies; they are playful, flighty, they "perform." Her divine enables new connections to be thought between bodies, but how, one might well ask, might these *be* embodied; must one search for a partner who, as well as possessing compelling physical attributes, has also read Irigaray? Reading Irigaray I aim to make new connections between the dancer I was yesterday and the dancer I might be tomorrow, and to rethink the threshold, itself site of transcendence and the accession of women to active subjectivity, as the moveable site of this continued practice.

As my exchange with Irigaray, this section records an attempt to "think through the body" women's (this particular woman's) alienation from transcendence in the sense in which Irigaray means it: the inability to speak/dance as a woman, to signify specifically as female. "Dance may be the mother of all manner of things but she cannot know or speak of herself" (Dempster 1988, 39). For me, this disembodied "dance" must be repeatedly but differently read in my own movements, repeatedly but differently "embodied," in order to discover what can be known, what can be said; in order to grant "dance" - myself as female dancer - the agency and "becoming" previously unknown.

In my experience the self and other (woman/man) of Irigarayan exchange can also be understood as the two selves that the classically trained dancer learns to hold in tension: the self she sees from a distance in the studio mirror - body as instrument, as object of her labours - and the self she is while dancing, from which the impulse to dance itself arises. The perception of the self in the mirror as separate, distant from the working, dancing self, is an idealised self, a creature of the mind ("that looks terrible, I know how the movement *ought* to look") as well as a reflection of the working body. The relationship between the two is tyrannous, but, like man and woman, each exists only by repressing elements of the other. They are of course not really separate at all, but these two selves must shift in their relation to each other if I (a classically trained dancer) am to achieve a sense of dancing integrity.

The (classical) dancing self is usually experienced as irrecoverably split between the present experience of movement and an imagined (impossible) ideal. If "dance" cannot speak of herself it is because dancers effectively learn to operate in its discourses as nonsignifying, absent selves. If what I see in the mirror now is "not good enough" but tomorrow it may be (I must have believed this yesterday to be trying again today), where, in the present moment, am "I" as dancer to be found? Where can I situate myself? Reading Irigaray, I try to re-experience the self and other in this exchange (one self and yet two) differently: myself as the ("selfless") dancer I have been (and was trained to be); myself as the dancer I am moving towards being, working with body as irreducible self, realising that I am more than a docile body.

Classical ballet training, like negative mysticism, "denies the female dancer her own agency" (Dempster 1988, 39). Dempster describes the female ballet dancer as "an icon of femininity," and Ann Daly states that ballet is "one of our culture's most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony"⁶⁵ (Daly 1987, qtd. in Dempster 1988, 39). This terminology, of icons and ceremonies, is, to me, inescapably religious. The famous American choreographer George Balanchine's description of ballet as quintessentially "woman, a garden of beautiful flowers," aligns ballet with "woman" with nature, the "mere matter" of male cultivation (qtd. in Copeland 1982, 48, qtd. in Dempster 1988, 38).⁶⁶

This image fits well with Irigaray's analysis of Christianity as erected on the outlawed substance of "woman," which it thereby also helps to produce as such. As Dempster points out, "if dance is the space of 'the feminine' and 'the maternal,' it follows within the logic of a patriarchal social order that its power and the power of the body must be controlled, constrained, disguised or denied" (Dempster 1988, 38). Ballet training may in fact be likened to mysticism in its elitism and its role as a discourse which produces icons of the female role in patriarchy. It is a discourse which both elevates and debases or seeks to control its initiates. Like mystics, young ballet dancers learn to see themselves as "special" (even "chosen"; unusual talent is often described as a gift of God) while being taught simultaneously to deny themselves the pleasures of the flesh. These may be in the form of food (it almost always is in any case, since dancers are generally encouraged to be hyper-thin), friends, social activity, sexual relationships and other interests outside ballet (Adair 1992, 15-19, 115).

But ballet training is specifically akin to negative mysticism in the particular kind of physical alienation it produces, the result of a phallogentric visual aesthetic inscribed onto the body: "The classical dancer's body is defined by achievement of the greatest degree of frontal legibility as established in the 'turn-out,' by a commitment to the vertical, to lightness and speed" (Dempster 1988, 41). "In ballet the human passions are expressed by the gradual uncontroverted curves and straight lines of the extended human body. There is no residuum, no veil. The human body is purged of atmosphere. All is shown" (Stokes 1983, 247, qtd. in Dempster 1988, 41). The dancer monitors progress towards the physical ideal of "frontal legibility" by working before a mirror and/or the corrective presence of the teacher. In such a process it is clear that "all" is *not* shown; rather, all that is not interpretable according to an

economy of singular, upright forms is banished from the scene. The result is that the dancer's perception of herself becomes governed by the impossibility of imposing on the mirror image of her body "pure" movements, "purged of atmosphere." There is always an excess, since the body which is the dancer's instrument is also the dancer's unruly "self" (if the dancer were no *more* than object or instrument there could be, after all, no drive nor desire to dance, no discipline nor "artistry").⁶⁷

Dancer Shona Innes has described the training process that occurs in ballet as one which "prepares and conditions the young female dancer to fail" (Innes 1988, 41, cited in Dempster 1988, 49), and Dempster claims that this "conditioning to failure" underlies what she terms "an economy of shame" (Dempster 1987, cited in Dempster 1988, 49). The dancer experiences a double alienation in learning to relate to her performing body as though from outside herself (monitoring its frontal legibility as in the mirror) and dealing with its excess, that which does not yet conform to the required rigorous, formal standards, but is nonetheless part of her dancing self (this excess of physical being which escapes the formal standard is almost always translated by the female dancer into excess weight as well as excess weakness, no matter how thin the dancer is. Incidence of anorexia among female ballet dancers is, not surprisingly, extremely high (Druss and Silverman 1979; Vincent 1979, 54, both cited in Adair 1992, 60)).

And yet there is a further alienation still, for somewhere in amongst the tortured components of the dancer's self-image there is her sense of her own talent, purpose, presumably enjoyment of and in dance. I say "presumably" because in my experience, this quality can become all but lost amidst the physical and psychic suffering involved in a bodily training which "conditions" one "to fail." "Talent" likewise becomes something the dancer, even the professional dancer, finds it difficult to realise herself as having, and purpose is often inseparable from the necessity of performing repetitive exercises in daily class in order to maintain technique, a situation which imposes its own ungainsayable rhythm.

What I am trying to indicate in all of this is that for female ballet dancers, the experience of dancing "well" involves taking a path and undergoing a process which results in an absence of "self," but also an absence of body, in the sense of the body as flesh with all its foibles, and as agent of the individual dancer's being, personality, desire:

In the classical dance the spectator is invited to gaze upon a distanced, ideal world where the female dancer is traced as sylph and cipher, a necessary absence. The perception of the body as a natural, physical entity is obstructed and suppressed by distance: the mundane body has no place here. The classical ballet thus creates conditions conducive to self-forgetfulness (Dempster 1988, 49).

Christy Adair notes that in ballet, "the hard work, repetition and structure of the daily class frequently results in 'unthinking' dancers, trained to accept unquestioningly the professional requirements." She adds that "for women this structure mirrors women's expected role as passive rather than active in [patriarchal] society" (Adair 1992, 15).

But if ballet excludes "the body" as agent, treating it as machine, inert matter, there are certain sorts of bodies it excludes altogether. As one of "our culture's most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony" ballet pays homage to and endorses the dominant cultural hierarchies of class and race. My own training as a ballet student was a training in normative patriarchal femininity: in the docility, modesty and meekness expected of women; at the same time I unconsciously learned that "women" were white women, those who looked like me.⁶⁸ In ballet one learns the desire to be part of an elite group; if one fits the general terms of that group (usually this means if one is white and middle-class) one doesn't learn to critique or even acknowledge the conditions on which that elitism is posited, the exclusion of bodies that don't fit the dominant culture's image of itself. Hence black dance (a term the need for which signals all too clearly the covert racism of ballet, in which whiteness is the norm, the standard) has developed prolifically since the 1960s in traditions outside of ballet.⁶⁹ A large number of postmodern companies and (female and feminist) choreographers work with untrained dancers and dancers whose bodies don't fit the classical norm.⁷⁰

My own gradual recognition of ballet's multiple exclusions has helped me to recognise my dancing body as a specific cultural as well as physiological construct, part of a system of social regulation in which I am placed relative to other dancing bodies. This, in turn, has provoked my desire to explore what kind of dancer "I" might conceivably be, in relation to other dancers as well as to the system of training which has formed me. The world of ballet is extremely competitive, its phallogentric methodology encourages the young dancer to see other dancers as better or worse versions of herself, never just "different." For difference, as

Irigaray is so fond of pointing out, requires that there be at least two models of legitimate selfhood and identity, and when there are at least two, there may be more.

My desire to continually define and redefine a dancing "self" through my dancing practice means that I am forced to reconsider not only my strained perception of myself but also my perception of other dancers. I am thinking here also of Spivak's injunction in the context of "doing" feminist theory and of what she portrays as the latent monoculturalism of some French feminist theoretical work: "However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman?" (Spivak 1987, 150). And Elspeth Probyn, writing about the problematic of "speaking the self" and building on Spivak's insight, states that:

Because of the material conditions of our selves we can not indulge in the fantasy of dialogism wherein "you" can be "me," and "I" can be "you." "I" am not "she" but articulating a working image of the self may allow for a movement of empathy between us. Working within the tensions of a doubled question of "who is she? and who am I?" forces us to recognize distinction and requires that we work over relations of alterity (Probyn 1993, 171).⁷¹

Indeed, attempting to unlearn, in specific situations, my view of female dancers as ideally uniform creatures helps me recreate the space between the dancer in the mirror "failing" and the (successful) dancer I "am" but cannot always feel myself to be. I need to learn to move into this space in the realisation that, however normative a physical training is, specific female bodies have the potential to disrupt those norms with physical excesses uniquely their own, and that these excesses can become part of the redefinition of the dancing "self."

This insight is extremely difficult for me to admit as a classically trained dancer, let alone to work with. I am helped in this endeavour by thinking through the example of the "positive" mystic, whose body is the site of a transformation in her perception of it through her contact with the divine - her mirror or mediator with whom she identifies and who reflects herself back to herself, but differently - and yet her body as medium of devotion is also the site of a certain amount of fleshly denial, suffering, and pain. It is a body despised by her medieval culture as well as by herself. It becomes transfigured only through her visions of an other in whom she sees herself mirrored, with a difference. Her divine other provides her with the

possibility of eventually (in eternity) becoming an "other" self. And this other self is prefigured in the present through her body's excessive transformations.

In Irigaray's version of the divine (in her "mysticism") the other is likewise both other to the subject *and a mediator*, part of the space between them which is figured as divine, that which enables exchange. In the interaction she envisages taking place between self and other through the aid of the divine, the self's physicality is also part of the mediatory "space between." Both self and other contribute to the sensible/transcendent place of exchange which separates and unites them at the same time:

'Not in me but in our difference lies the abyss. We can never be sure of bridging the gap between us. But that is our adventure. Without this peril there is no us. If you turn it into a guarantee, you separate us.

And it is the same when you turn God into difference extrapolated to infinity (Irigaray 1992b, 28).

But the divine in Irigaray, as well as articulating the interactive space between unique subjects, also enables female self-constitution, and both aspects are interconnected in her view. Irigaray refigures God as that which would enable women to mediate the disjunction they commonly experience between signifying as a phallic object (the other of men) and a specifically female embodiment which they might desire but cannot achieve in phallogentric culture. This in-between space in which female desire is articulated, suggesting the possibility of achieving a specifically female embodiment in the future, is like that which the positive female mystic inhabits when her interaction with the divine alters the representation of her suspect physicality and renders it a means of authorial empowerment and public speech.

Irigaray's divinely enabled intersubjective exchange also refigures the mirroring structures of conventional subjectivity. Like the visions of the positive mystic, the divine enables a self-reflexive "gazing" on oneself which signals and makes possible a new kind of embodiment: being a woman for oneself, a notion which has hitherto been meaningless in phallogentric culture. Irigaray's divine would abolish the conventional mirror of phallic subjectivity, in which women experience themselves as always mediated through a totalising gaze, but it

would do so by reenvisioning the mirror itself as threshold, as facilitative (transcendent) materiality, that which partakes of the feminine and returns it to itself:

We look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming. The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority - of a very particular kind. It functions as a possible way to constitute screens between the other and myself.... The mirror signifies the constitution of a fabricated (female) other that I shall put forward as an instrument of seduction in my place. I seek to be seductive and to be content with images of which I theoretically remain the artisan, the artist. I have yet to unveil, unmask, or veil myself *for me* - to veil myself so as to achieve self-contemplation, for example, to let my gaze travel over myself so as to limit my exposure to the other and repossess my own gestures and garments, thus nestling back into my vision and contemplation of myself (Irigaray 1993a, 65).

In this extract Irigaray mimes to excess the way in which women are doubly alienated by the phallic mirroring structures of "western" culture: they are not only split subjects of language as male subjects are but must put forward "a fabricated (female) other...as an instrument of seduction in [their] place." For women, being "the phallus" for men allows no possibility to represent oneself (for oneself) as specifically female. This is what Irigaray seeks to make possible through recasting female sexuality as a moveable space of exchange, as sensible transcendental or divine. She hysterically (re)figures the space of women's double alienation (their lack) within language as the excessive space of divine encounter and engagement. By means of the divine the (female) self may represent itself to itself, both independently and in relation to others. The space before the mirror in which women conventionally put forward an "other...in [their] place," becomes a space of representation of the specific experience of femaleness. By means of this process the mirror-image self - the formerly "(fabricated) female other" - and the female self who looks at herself in the mirror become one.

To return to the analogy of negative mysticism, the practice of ballet simultaneously engages and suppresses, is in fact an agent of sublimation of, enormous passion on the part of the dancer. Dancing requires so much energy, self-motivation, drive and persistence that it would be impossible to pursue without such intensity of desire. Through the practice of ballet the dancer identifies with an ideal self ("without residuum," "purged of atmosphere") who exists somewhere beyond present suffering. Of course, this ideal is never attained, but the experience

of striving to achieve it is often cathartic and sometimes enough to produce the phantom possibility of connection between present and future (ideal) selves. The point of continuing, though, is not that this ideal self should ever be attained but that, in the effort to reach it, the female ballet dancer is transformed beyond mundane realms. In performance she grants to other, lesser mortals the chance to partake of her efforts, to view the results of her "absence of self."⁷²

According to the model of positive mysticism, however, the focus of the dancer's attention would shift. The ideal dancing image (the self's other, the equivalent of God for the mystic) comes closer, it has to be recognisable to the dancer (mystic) as herself in some way(s); as well as transcendent, it has to be immediately sensible. This act of recognition is an act of (re)embodiment which alters the status of the mirror; self and other interact across a divine threshold in which both partake. For me this is a concrete experience enacted through gradually altering the way I gaze at and perceive my dancing mirror image in relation to the self which moves in space. Moreover, according to this model, the dancer freely expresses rather than represses emotions, her Passion, in the interchange between the image of herself and the self who is dancing. By this means the space between these two selves (representing relationship in Irigaray and made possible by the divine third term) becomes altered, alive with feeling, open to change. In effect, the dancer's ideal image is envisaged through her current experience and understanding of herself, which is of course constantly changing, and is in turn affected by the ideal. She does not thereby escape cultural definition and placement, of course, but her movement between the two selves enacts a challenge to the rigidity of standard definitions. If I read this ongoing personal process through the work of Irigaray I am enabled to see it as significant when the impulse of my training is to dismiss my altering self-perception, since dancers if they are successful do not need to think. In this way reading Irigaray helps me to construct a threshold for present and future changes in my (bodily) experience; perhaps Irigaray herself is my mediator (perhaps this is inevitable in some way because she is the central topic of my thesis; in engaging with her work I produce my own).

Dempster writes optimistically that, despite the hazards of conventional training, "dance can be thoughtful action, a movement of embodied mind. It offers the possibility of...a mode of

action embracing a concept of the body which is not shadowed by habits of thought based on Cartesian dualism" (Dempster 1988, 39):

In moments of dancing the edges of things blur and terms such as mind/body, flesh/spirit, carnal/divine, male/female become labile and unmoored, breaking loose from the fixity of their pairings. This vision of dance is not utopian but a felt experience, occurring fleetingly, elusively, in many styles and occasions of dance. It is a potential not so much unrealized as unrepresented (Dempster 1988, 52).

And, I would add, untheorised. However, Carolyn Burke's description of Irigaray's simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive interventions into philosophical discourse charts a similar process of transmutation. What Burke calls "the oxymoronic figure of 'destroying with nuptial tools,'" described by Irigaray in *This Sex* as her rationale of intellectual seduction, "suggests the meeting place of opposites (masculine/feminine, mind/body, subject/object, philosophy/poetry) in a general "entre-deux" [pas de deux?] of thought" (Burke 1989, 236). Burke writes that "like Derrida, Irigaray refuses the demand for fixed philosophical positions in what can only be described as a highly performative kind of writing" (Burke 1989, 236).

In encountering this performative writing, audience response matters: "readers may respond with fascination, bafflement, or anger, depending upon their willingness to be led astray" (Burke 1989, 236). Reading Irigaray's dancing prose, I find I am continually being led astray from patterns of thought I had learned to take for granted, and this is a mostly pleasurable process in which I willingly collaborate. But reading Irigaray also draws me back again and again to the subject of body (the body of this subject) and the themes of movement, transcendence, threshold, change. Thinking about, thinking through, these ideas, I find myself wanting to return to a more fleshly (but probably no less intellectual) medium in order to translate my mind's wanderings into workable, liveable projects. Trying to get beyond dualities (mind/body) requires quite a lot of moving around between them.

For me, dancing is the most fundamental fact of my "embodiment"; it is the place where I work out "answers" to questions provoked by reading Irigaray, which in turn provoke more questions, different kinds of "reading" my dancer's body, and so on. "Literacy in dance," as Dempster says in this section's second epigraph, begins with attention to the body and its

processes of movement. And the "political reading" which proceeds from learning to read one's own dancing body is a visionary operation; it involves re-memembering what has been (dealing step-by-step with the effects of one's training) and imagining what may come to be; but it must be situated in devoted attention to one's own flesh in which dancing movement, bodily change, begin.

In the past, dancing for me has been made more painful and more difficult by efforts at analysing, trying to "read" my dancing body. This is not surprising, since (classical) dancers are taught not to think but to listen, and to listen not to themselves but to their teachers. And they are taught to separate the activity of thinking from the movement of the body in obedience to limited thought. Dempster, citing Irigaray, talks about another kind of listening that can be cultivated in relation to reading dance. Using Irigaray's analysis of women as objects in a phallogocentric economy, Dempster suggests that when the body dances, as when women who, as objects, cannot speak "as wom[e]n," do speak, perhaps we need to learn to listen for a different body-speech than that we are accustomed to hear or not to hear.

As with "reading" female hysteria, which operates as a symptom of desires the hysteric - as a necessarily passive subject in patriarchal discourse - cannot coherently express, learning to read oneself dancing in an empowering way requires being alert to changes in the threshold between the ideal image and the dancing self. As well as working to introduce passion into this encounter, there is also a sense in which I seek to "listen without expectation." As Irigaray says, making this time a point which is Buddhist in origin: "it is...a question not of renouncing the sensible, of sacrificing it to the universal, but rather of cultivating it until it becomes spiritual energy" (Irigaray 1991k, 171). In other words, learning to read the body in new ways, learning to hear/see/experience or create a willing space for its unique and individual speech.

For Irigaray the spiritual is always becoming flesh, it is never static. The movement she describes by means of the sensible transcendental is visionary, mystical, and proceeds beyond dualities. Learning to listen to my dancing body "speak" can result in a subversion of the specular economy in which I learned to separate my two selves and disallow commerce between them. It can lead to a new kind of watching, in which I see my body dancing as a

subject (myself) not an object, in which the angle of my vision continually shifts, because it starts from where I (dancing) am.

In many ways learning to dance involves the same processes all women undergo in patriarchal culture: learning to see oneself as an object through a masculinised gaze, experiencing a physical and psychical alienation from one's body as active agent, inseparable from a sense of "self." This experience is reenacted theatrically in the bodily convulsions and other eccentricities of hysteria, and ballet, dedicated to producing "icons of femininity" destined to perform, may be seen as producing hysterical women too.⁷³ As Martha Noel Evans puts it:

While hysterics have...become a kind of bellwether for both the acknowledged and unacknowledged expectations that shape women's lives, they embody precisely what is pathological in the scripts written for them.... Their reliance on physical symptoms demonstrates the impossibility for them of speaking authoritatively.... Hysteria therefore calls into question many basic assumptions about our social organization and the power structures that support it (Evans 1991, 241).

Female hysteria, like ballet dancing, is an extreme manifestation of women in patriarchy's doubly split selves. In the following chapter I will take my re-envisioning attempts further to address three different representations of mothering and/or "madness" by women. In these portrayals of female experience, the women's bodily speech is seen to be symptomatic of that psychic splitting and its associated pain. But there is also a "divine" element in each text and the birth/pain each represents. I argue that because of the women's attempts to incorporate this excessive component, their movements can be read with eyes attentive to what conventional patriarchal scripts for women repress, what hysterical body-speech may "really" be saying, and what visions for the future lie behind their own reports.

1. Writing about the mutual fascination between psychoanalysis and feminism or the discourse of women, Elizabeth Grosz defines the term as including the meanings: "to attract, irresistibly enchant, charm"; or 'to deprive victim of the powers of escape or resistance by look or by presence' (*OED*). To fascinate is to entice *and* trap, seduce *and* contain, a relation similar to that between the snake and the snake-charmer, in which each charms, and traps, the other. Mutual fascination is always a risky business. Lacan suggests that it is the consequence of an imaginary identification in which the self strives to incorporate the other in an act as aggressive as it is loving. It is never clear who, snake or snake-charmer, is mesmerized by whom" (Grosz 1990a, 6-7).
2. Of course, as was shown in Chapter Two (96), Kempe was never convicted of heresy, and so charges of her unorthodoxy could not be officially maintained. The number of times she underwent clerical interrogation and was threatened with death by townspeople, however, are evidence that she was perceived by society at large as dangerously anomalous.
3. I am describing here what has been a noticeable trend in scholarship on Kempe's *Book*, which has been remarked by several other more recent writers as well. See Atkinson (1983, 100-5, 197); Beckwith (1986, 37); Aers (1988, 74-5); Lawton (1992, 94-5). Since about the mid- to late eighties critical work has been appearing which is more sympathetic to and illuminating of the subject of Kempe and her cultural milieu. See the authors already cited, as well as Dickman (1984); Holbrook (1985; 1987); Mueller (1986); Lochrie (1986a; 1986b; 1991a); Smith (1987); Fienberg (1989); Gibson (1989); Gray (1990); Harding (1992, 1993); Johnson (1992); and the essays in McEntire (1992).
4. The charge is a reference to John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, who was accused of heresy in 1413 and hanged and burnt in 1417 before the Duke of Bedford (Kempe 1988, 320n).
5. Another critic, T. W. Coleman, similarly applauds Kempe's decision to nurse her infantilised husband, calling it a "splendid act of self-sacrifice" (Coleman 1938, 158).
6. In a discussion of the *Book* Stephen Medcalf includes "a modern diagnosis" of Kempe's "psyche" by Dr Anthony Ryle who states that "I don't think that there is any evidence of a continuing psychotic process at work.... The most satisfactory description would be of a hysterical personality organization" (Medcalf 1981, 115).
7. Beckwith notes that the word "mysticism" was first used in 1736 (*OED*, cited in Beckwith 1993, 11).
8. Guntram Bischoff provides the following brief biographical summary: "Dionysius (Denis: fl. c. 500) is the name given an anonymous author long reputed to be Dionysius, an Athenian converted by St Paul. His works synthesized Christianity and Neo-Platonism, the religious philosophy which profoundly influenced Augustine. The works of Dionysius, written in Greek, became known in the West through the ninth-century translation of John Scotus Eriugena, an orientophile scholar at the court of the Frankish king, Charles the Bald" (Bischoff 1976, 13).

9. Clarisssa Atkinson charts the beginnings of affective piety from the circle of St Anselm of Canterbury in the late eleventh century, and goes on to discuss Franciscan developments (Atkinson 1983, 131-44). See also Sargent (1992, ix-xiii).
10. Gibson describes the effects of the "Franciscan revolution" thus: "What began for the Franciscan preachers as an incarnational aesthetic sustaining their spiritual vision of the world, had by the fifteenth century turned itself outward and transformed that world. It matters not that by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many friars had betrayed the apostolic fervor of those early years or that 'friar' had often become a word charged with hypocrisy and deception. The mental revolution which the Franciscans brought, however it was accomplished, most certainly was accomplished" (Gibson 1989, 8).
11. David Aers observes this trend at work in traditional medieval scholarship more generally, exhibited in a tendency to hark back to the middle ages as a time of unified order under Christian doctrine. He notes that this attitude relies on information transmitted by the partial viewpoint of those engaged in enforcing Christian orthodoxy, on "the projections of particular dominant groups seeking to control reality and shape the views of people on whose labour-power, forced services, and tithes their own privileged status depended" (Aers 1988, 7).
12. These writers are treated by Katz (1978) and Beckwith (1993, 8-9).
13. Atkinson makes some specific textual comparisons between passages in Rolle and Kempe which describe spiritual warmth or fire, "sweetness and song" (Atkinson 1983, 145-6).
14. As explained in the previous chapter, the entire third section of Irigaray's *Speculum* is devoted to a deconstruction and symptomatic reading of Plato's myth of the cavern as set out in Book VII of *The Republic*. In Irigaray's reading the Platonic move to replace (female) physical origin with (masculine) divine, disembodied vision is representative of the workings of the phallogentric symbolic. The same move is evidenced by the desire of scholars of mysticism to banish the corporeal elements associated with feminine piety from the mystical field in favour of visionary experience which denies physical location.
15. Whitford writes that, prior to Irigaray's break with Lacan, he "was one of [her] mentors; she had attended his seminars at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, she was a member of the Ecole freudienne de Paris, and he was effectively in charge of the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes," where she taught until 1974 (Whitford 1991b, 5-6).
16. Irigaray was expelled by Lacan in 1974 from her position in the Department of Psychoanalysis in the University of Vincennes following the publication of her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, which contains a radical critique of psychoanalysis (Whitford 1991b, 5; 1992). Martha Noel Evans states that Irigaray proposed a seminar in the department based on her book, which resulted in Lacan's action (Evans 1991, 194, 219).

17. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains further: "In this view of Lacan, the catch-22 for men and women alike appears as an irresolution that inhabits language, marking it with desire as a deficit in being and knowing which is ever present, but not fully spoken. Thus man fails to 'colonize' the unconscious by controlling the feminine or women. He also fails to pin down his own masculinity as a fixed, permanent, natural fact. Instead Woman becomes his symptom" (Ragland-Sullivan 1991, 56).

18. Tracy takes the analogy between Lacan and the mystic in the apophatic (negative) tradition further, stating that: "The orthodox psychoanalytic institutions may expel Lacan as firmly as the papal commission at Avignon condemned certain propositions of Eckhart. Yet both would continue to insist on their higher orthodoxy: for them, only the mystic understands what the prophet really meant for only the mystic knows both the basic structure of the whole and its radically de-structuring actuality. But even the mystic may eventually find it necessary to adopt a prophetic rhetoric and proclaim the word of the Other. Otherwise, the others in their secure institutions will trivialize and reify the words of the Other once again. If necessary, prophetic actions may follow: leave the official institution, open a new one, close it, and start again is an all too familiar prophetic activity. The careers of Eckhart and Lacan are often as uncannily parallel as their apophatic rhetorics" (Tracy 1988, 271). Irigaray, of course, may also be read as a mystic in this sense of desiring to speak from a position on the margins of dominant discourses. Her career also includes movement between institutions, and, like Lacan, she functions as something of an "outlaw" (specifically in relation to Lacan himself and his school) and this resistant stance is a fundamental quality of her work.

19. St Theresa is commonly thought of as adhering to the negative way of mysticism as opposed to the more popular spirituality of a mystic like Kempe.

20. This attempt at representing female sexuality is also connected to Irigaray's interest in reinterpreting what she sees as the disavowal of fluidity by a phallic economy privileging stable and singular forms, as briefly discussed in Chapter Two (83-4). She argues that women are displaced into the realm of the fluid which is unsymbolised in phallogocentric culture. Thus her refigurings of female sexuality are attempts to address this aspect of female bodiliness and elaborate a "mechanics of fluids" (the title of a chapter from *This Sex Which Is Not One* on this topic) by which specific symbolisation of female sexuality might ultimately be achieved. See Irigaray (1985a, 106-18; 1989b, 199-201); Gallop (1982, 39-41).

21. In *Marine Lover* Irigaray describes touch as "that mediatory sense par excellence. That sense that, most darkly, overcomes the distances between, the enclosure within distinct forms, the borders dividing up territories and private estates" (Irigaray 1991d, 178).

22. Elizabeth Grosz observes that Lacan's researches relied "on the fascinating discourse of 'madwomen' - psychotics, paranoiacs, hysterics, mystics," and quotes Catherine Clément on the subject: "The whole cast of characters in his early work consists of women.... Not a single man is present. [He was a] man who never stopped talking about women" (Clément 1983, 61, qtd. in Grosz 1990a, 6). Similarly, Martha Noel Evans points out that Lacan was called a hysteric (Scruton 1978, cited in Evans

1991, 177) and was "credited with 'hystericizing' psychoanalysis." In his use of counter-logical language and his tendency to disrupt the desire for clarity in conscious thought, deferring always to the reader's/listener's response, as well as his specific claim that hysterics embody the mystery that is femininity in the symbolic (Evans 1991, 177-9), Lacan may be seen as appropriating the language of female hysterics.

23. Whitford discusses Rose's objections specifically (Whitford 1986, 7).
24. As Burke states: "the purpose of [Irigaray's] newly amorous language is to begin 'speaking (as) woman' - the project elaborated in her earlier books - and to do so not theoretically but seductively: to beguile her philosophical partners into a recognition of sexual difference" (Burke 1989, 229).
25. As this project has articulated, it is Irigaray's view that women may not yet speak as subjects of desire, and part of her aim is to set out the conditions necessary for this to become possible. As Holmlund writes: "Within phallogocentric discourse, neither female self-love nor an active female desire of the other can be envisaged. The female lover is positioned as object, as the beloved, in French, 'l'aimée.' The consequences of such a restriction, Irigaray charges, are disastrous for women: 'To define the couple in love as lover and *beloved* signifies, already, an assignation to a polarity which deprives the female lover of her love'" (Irigaray 1984, 189, qtd. in Holmlund 1991, 294).
26. *Marine Lover* is the first book in the series. The others are *Elemental Passions* (1992b), which focuses on the element of earth "in what is simultaneously a prebiblical evocation of desire as the substratum of existence and a new Genesis" (Burke 1989, 232); and *L'oubli de l'air* (1983), a dialogue with Heidegger exploring his appropriation of the element of air. The fourth book was never completed, but was to have been "a dialogue with Marx in terms of fire" (Irigaray 1981a, 44; Burke 1989, 239n).
27. In "Divine Women" Irigaray states: "Writing *Marine Lover*, *Passions élémentaires*, and *L'oubli de l'air*, I had thought of doing a study of our relations to the elements: water, earth, fire, air. I was anxious to go back to those natural matters that constitute the origin of our bodies, of our life, of our environment, the flesh of our passions.... We still pass our daily lives in a universe that is composed and is known to be composed of four elements: air, water, fire, and earth. We are made up of these elements and we live in them. They determine, more or less freely, our attractions, our affects, our passions, our limits, our aspirations" (Irigaray 1993a, 57). She has also explicitly said: "I wanted to do a kind of tetralogy which would have tackled the problem of the elements...applied to philosophers nearer our own time, and also to put into question the philosophical tradition, particularly from the point of view of the feminine" (Irigaray 1981a, 43, qtd. in Whitford 1991a, 200n). Elizabeth Grosz remarks that "this elementary language has the dual advantage of providing a corporeal model of sexual difference, as well as using a terminology, repressed or latent within our history, to describe the powerful relations that constitute love, exchange and social organization" (Gross 1986, 10, qtd. in Burke 1989, 231). See also Irigaray (1989a, 199).

28. The element of water evokes the imagery of the "fluid economy" that Irigaray employs in her attempts to reinscribe female physicality in terms other than those of phallogocentric discourse. It also has important connections in this context to her refiguring of the body's mucous membranes as a symbol for the "threshold" of exchange between subjects (Irigaray 1993b, 109-11; 1992b, 15-16). I discuss this move further in the third section of this chapter.
29. Cathryn Vasseleu provides the following helpful gloss on the idea of the eternal return in Nietzsche: "The test of the eternal return is the ability to recognize that every moment of one's life is the same moment which returns, in an infinite circle of becoming, to the will which created it and is inseparable from it. The reinterpretation of self is meant in an historical and cultural sense. Acceptance of the doctrine of eternal return implies an affirmation of the inevitable "logic" of the will to power in all its creations. For Nietzsche, the operation of interpretation can be construed either as a loss of confidence in any values in the face of a multitude of possibilities or, alternatively, the open-ended anticipation of another reinterpretation of self with every recurring moment" (Vasseleu 1993, 83-4). See also Hollingdale (1968, 23-4).
30. The notion of a horizon is important in Nietzsche in that he understands the present moment as fundamental in its simultaneous resumption of the past and reworking of the future. The "death of God," for instance, opens up for Nietzsche the possibility for humans to imagine their own "divinity"; to live as though their every act is all that remains through which to (re)construct a system of meaning and a way of understanding the world, as in fact he believes it is. In *The Gay Science* he writes that: "We philosophers and 'free spirits' feel as if a new dawn were shining on us when we receive the tidings that 'the old god is dead'; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, anticipation, expectation. At last the horizon appears free again to us..." (Nietzsche 1981a, 448). And in *The Use and Abuse of History*, he claims that: "A living thing can only be healthy, strong, and productive within a certain horizon; if it is incapable of drawing one round itself, or too selfish to lose its own view in another's, it will come to an untimely end" (Nietzsche 1957, 7-8). This idea is echoed by Irigaray when she writes in "Divine Women" that women need "some shadowy perception of achievement; not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the passage between past and future" (Irigaray 1993a, 67. See also 1993b, 69).
31. Whitford cites some passages from Nietzsche to which this claim on Irigaray's part is a response (Nietzsche 1966a, 232; 1974, 361, both cited in Whitford 1991a, 114).
32. Irigaray also refers to Nietzsche's statement about "the death of God" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, where she connects the idea with the possibility of an era in which sexual difference might be articulated: "The cries and words of the last philosophers, of Nietzsche and Heidegger, about the 'death of God' are a summons for the divine to return as festival, grace, love, thought. Contrary to the usual interpretation made of them, these philosophers are not talking about the disappearance of the gods but about the approach or the annunciation of another parousia of the divine. Which involves the remolding of the world, of discourse:

another morning, a new era in history, in the universe. The end of times, and the access to a new time, to one space-time, that are different. Could this be a time when a meeting between the sexes becomes possible?" (Irigaray 1993b, 140).

33. The philosophy of affirmation is evident throughout Nietzsche's writings. In *Ecce Homo*, for example, Nietzsche states that: "I was the first to see the real opposition: the degenerating instinct that turns against life with subterranean vengefulness (Christianity, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, in a certain sense already the philosophy of Plato, and all of idealism as typical forms) versus a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence" (Nietzsche 1966b, 728, qtd. in Love 1986, 40).
34. In the essay "Sexual Difference" Irigaray discusses symbolic "envelopes" by which women and men differently mediate their relationship to time and space. This is a consequence of their different relation (for women it is a non-relation, symbolically speaking) to the maternal container (Irigaray 1991a. See also 1989c; 1993b, 83-94).
35. As Allan Megill points out, Nietzsche's philosophy is intended to counter the kind of nihilism which "views the devaluation of all present values as oppressive and burdensome" (Megill 1985, 33). Instead, Nietzsche posits that "the conviction of crisis" and shifting values in the modern world should cause human beings to "dance upon the void" created by cultural change. Megill describes this view as recommending a "divine - that is, a creative - way of thinking" and responding to crisis (Megill 1985, 34). Similarities with Irigaray's claims and intentions are evident here.
36. Henry Staten observes of Nietzsche's elaboration of "the economics of love" in *The Gay Science* for example, that "what has to be avoided because it violates the essence of maleness and femaleness is a reciprocal human love in which the male would flow so to speak *horizontally* (rather than upward), without reserve, toward the female, as she toward him, because this would be *nothingness*, there would be nothing left, no one to preserve being as each spilled toward the other, both would cease to exist: *horror vacui*, the nausea of spilling into a void" (Staten 1990, 166). This economy of the singular (male) subject as the condition of existence is precisely what Irigaray is attempting to rework through her introduction of the feminine as speaking voice in her dialogue with Nietzsche in *Marine Lover*. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* she describes as a "horizontal perspective" a possible economy of female desire, different from the current system which privileges the visible (erection) and which "does not lead toward another threshold, another texture of gaze, of world, of meaning" sufficient to include the female as active participant and pole of enunciation (Irigaray 1993b, 70. See also 108-9).
37. Throughout the last section of *Marine Lover*, Irigaray moves back and forth reading Christ in this way and in the "orthodox" way in order to challenge the assumptions behind the traditional view of his role and suggest an alternative understanding. With this method she touches on some of Nietzsche's objections to Christianity including

his view of Christ as an "anti-Christian" who displayed a self-willed mode of living which Christianity ignored.

38. Irigaray describes "the reign of hom(m)o-sexuality" as the law of "the exclusive valorization of men's needs, desires, of exchanges among men" (Irigaray 1985a, 171), according to which "man begets man as his own likeness" through the appropriation of the bodies of women (Irigaray 1985a, 172-3). Grosz observes that the term refers to the patriarchal culture of exchange among men and is distinguished from any kind of legitimate homosexuality which might take place "beyond patriarchy" (Grosz 1988, 40).
39. Grosz also points out that, as a philosopher of ethics, Levinas "theorises interhuman, interpersonal dynamics in the wake of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of metaphysics" (Grosz 1987, 37), thus reworking the debt to the Greek logocentric tradition which Nietzsche, despite himself, displays.
40. In a succinct description of the development of Irigaray's work, Frances Opper claims that Irigaray's "pessimism about the possibilities for an enactment of the copula, a discourse of sexual difference, changes, during the 1980s, to cautious optimism," when her writings begin to "signal an intuition that a turning-point in western culture may have been reached on account of what appears to be - she is tentative - the beginnings of the unrepression of the feminine" (Opper 1993, 91).
41. The face (of the other) is, as I will explain, an important image in Levinas' account of intersubjective ethics.
42. As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: "For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity of the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship, established over the things hereafter possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation [*discours*]. The way in which the other presents himself (sic), exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face [*nous l'appelons, en effet, visage*]" (Levinas 1979, 50, qtd. with modifications in Robbins 1991, 136). And Grosz, quoting Levinas, writes that: "It is the act of facing the other that expresses for the subject its incarnation: 'To approach the face is to assume the most basic responsibility.... The face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if that would make him become an accomplice in his own death. Thus, facing says to me: you shall not kill. In a relation to the face, I am exposed as usurper of the other's place'" (Levinas 1981, 23-4, qtd. with modifications in Grosz 1987, 36).
43. In the Judaic tradition, of course, "God is not revealed. He does not manifest Himself directly or indirectly; He is not made present by an imagination or through a corporeal representative. Rather, He speaks, He commands, He calls on the subject.... The Jew does not choose faith; he is chosen, called on..." (Grosz 1989, 156). Hence "summoning" has particularly strong overtones in the Jewish context; it signifies the heart of the faith, the unavoidable debt the believer owes to Yahweh as deliverer and creator of the Law.

44. Spivak describes Irigaray's project as set forth in "The Fecundity of the Caress" (1986c) as aiming "to provide ingredients for an ethical base to rewrite gendering in the social sphere" (Spivak 1992b, 76).
45. Spivak writes scathingly of Levinas' portrayal of "the feminine": "I intend no disrespect to the grandeur of Levinas's thought when I say that the empirical scene of sexual congress behind Levinas's 'Phenomenology of Eros' is almost comically patriarchal, so generally so that the bourgeois male colonial subject from various parts of the world can be fitted into the slot of 'the lover.' The 'forever inviolate virginity of the feminine,' 'frail and animal-like,' is completely excluded from the public sphere: 'It excludes the third party...[and is] the supremely non-public' (Levinas 1979, 258, 263, 265)... 'The face, all straightforwardness and frankness, in its feminine epiphany dissimulates allusions, innuendos. It laughs under the cloak of its own expression, without leading to any specific meaning, alluding to it in empty space [*en faisant allusion dans le vide*], signalling the less than nothing' (Levinas 1979, 264). Just as I find it difficult to believe that Hegel's virulent racism is written off (not by Derrida) when we worship at the shrine of the dialectic; so do I find it difficult to take this prurient heterosexist, male-identified ethics seriously. Irigaray is more generous" (Spivak 1992b, 76-7).
46. There are evident similarities with Lacan on this point, however fundamentally opposed the two writers' respective accounts of coming to subjectivity may be.
47. I am not suggesting here that Irigaray misreads Levinas as writing in the Greek logocentric tradition, in which this concept belongs. Rather, I am persisting with exploring the theme of the "duality" of negative and positive mysticism in terms of the wider context and aims of this chapter.
48. As Grosz points out, Levinas' work "is one of the few mainstream twentieth-century textual philosophies to be located outside the logocentric tradition of Greek thought" (Grosz 1987, 32. See also 1989, 156-8).
49. A useful definition of phenomenology (the study of things-in-themselves) may be found in Levinas' earliest book, a study of Husserl, an extract from which is reproduced as "The Phenomenology of Being" in *The Levinas Reader*. In this piece Levinas writes that "the origin of the very idea of 'an object' is to be found in the concrete life of a subject...a subject is not a substance in need of a bridge, namely, knowledge, in order to reach an object, but...the secret of its subjectivity is in being present in front of objects. The modes of appearing of things are not, therefore, characters which are superimposed on existing things by the process of consciousness; they make up the very existence of things" (Levinas 1989c, 17).
50. Thus Levinas writes: "In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there, as though the skin were a trace of its own withdrawal, a languor still seeking, like an absence which, however, could not be more there" (Levinas 1981, 90, qtd. in Grosz 1987, 35n).

51. In relation to the centrality of the body (which also occurs in positive mysticism) in Levinas' philosophy, Grosz observes that "for the Judaic system of thought...works of art do not picture the divine by their capacity for verisimilitude, but through their corporeal effects on the subject, in the form of alterity. Art, as the other, touches (upon) the subject, brings about an encounter with the subject and may even transform the subject" (Grosz 1987, 39). This description of the Judaic attitude to art is remarkably close to the definition of positive mysticism which interprets human likeness to the divine in terms of the corporeal response of the mystical subject. However, the view of the inexpressibility of divine encounter (which occurs in negative mysticism) is also exhibited in Levinas' work, paradoxically, through the notion of touch or the caress. As Cathryn Vasseleu puts it: "The caress signals both contact and withdrawal.... In soliciting what ceaselessly escapes it, the caress is a sensibility that parts with sense.... Erotic intimacy is not an attempt to assimilate an irreducible other, but an obsessive delight in contacting the alien, and losing it and one's own perspective simultaneously" (Vasseleu 1991, 147).
52. I am conscious, again, of the absurdity of placing Levinas, so clearly in the Judaic tradition which is opposed to Hellenic systems of thought, on either side of the divide which has persisted in Christian mystical scholarship. However I intend this description only as a rhetorical device in the exploration of Irigaray's visionary moves as regards the divine and female flesh.
53. Irigaray describes "a dialectic of the couple" in "The Universal as Mediation," an essay on Hegel (Irigaray 1993e, 144) and has more recently elaborated the concept in the essays in *J'aime à toi* (Irigaray 1992c).
54. "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry" is the title of the first section of *Speculum*, a deconstructive reading of Freud.
55. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray articulates the simultaneous representative and expansive function of her refigured divine as mediator between the sexes: "Within sexual difference, there would, it seems, be at once *finiteness and limit*, as a result of the meeting of two *bodies*, and two thoughts, and also infiniteness and unlimitedness if 'God' intervenes" (Irigaray 1993b, 85).
56. Whitford describes the amorous exchange in Irigaray as "not the exchange of commodities but a mode of ethical being" (Whitford 1991a, 165), i.e., a type of exchange that would transform the current (patriarchal) order of exchange by actively recognising and symbolising the material cultural contributions of women. As Whitford states: "It is not just a question of inventing some new terms, but of a total symbolic redistribution" (Whitford 1991a, 165) in the order of discourse.
57. Whitford states that in her opinion the passage from Irigaray on Levinas quoted above "does not...imply that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality as a practice, since the fertility Irigaray is describing is symbolic, 'of the spirit'; women or men together could merge in this creative way" (Whitford 1991a, 167). While I can accept this interpretation up to a point, it seems to me that the terms used to describe this merging can only be interpreted as applying to homosexual encounter if one somehow displaces them from all fleshly connotation. In other words, are we

not then back to arguing that Irigaray's attention to the "morphology" of bodies has no relation to bodies as they currently exist? (Kirby 1991, 91). If this is so, I am left wondering how these radical changes will ever be begun. I think they *must* begin at the site of rethinking concrete social (and sexual) relations, but not in such a way that the experience of the relations themselves is exempted from analysis.

58. In a similar vein, Judith Butler observes that "[Irigaray's] terms tend to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores" (Butler 1993, 36).
59. Holmlund continues this charge in a footnote, saying that "Irigaray on the whole fails to raise questions about differences among women even where Western women are concerned." She quotes Naomi Schor, who claims that: "Irigaray has, like other bourgeois white feminists, only managed to relocate universality, to institute a new hegemony" (Schor 1989, 56n, qtd. in Holmlund 1991, 308n).
60. My own project is no doubt open to the same charge I make here against Irigaray, since the aim of speaking "as a woman" would appear to assume that for all women the conditions of achieving speech as female subjects would be the same. I hope that the following section will counter this tendency somewhat, although the problem needs to be consistently brought to bear on the normalising modes of psychoanalytic theory.
61. Whitford writes that, in Irigaray, "the language of amorous exchange is the language of phantasy; it offers an imaginary account of a different unconscious 'scene.' It should no doubt be seen as an ideal, a touchstone or horizon" (Whitford 1991a, 166) for future possibilities of female "becoming" or specific embodiment. Irigaray's "phantastical" language of amorous exchange is an attempt to challenge the phantasmatic constructions of the masculine cultural imaginary.
62. This is the line taken by Elizabeth Grosz, who states that, in her view: "if Irigaray's most recent texts advocate the creative, mysterious interchange between women and men, this does not imply her work's irrelevance to gay, and especially lesbian, politics. These texts problematize our culture's understanding of *both* homosexuality *and* heterosexuality in their present forms. Sexual relations between women or between men are both implicated in the phallogentrism involved in all discourse, representation and desire" (Grosz 1988, 43).
63. On the other hand, it could just be a desire not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater," so to speak, since I can remember a day only a few years ago when I gave a group discussion paper on French feminism to a novice reading group in feminist theory of which I was a member, claiming that Irigaray's ideas were of little use to feminists in Aotearoa because they represented female bodies in a limiting (not an expansive or utopian) fashion. See also Whitford's comments, quoted in my Chapter One (57-8), about what she calls the necessary "*time of understanding*" involved in reading Irigaray, and the possibility of changing one's thinking as a result of engaging in the creative thought processes reading her work often entails (Whitford 1991a, 5).

64. Holmlund cites Whitford on the interlocutive tone of Irigaray's work, as I do in the Introduction (3). Whitford claims that "Irigaray's work requires an interlocutor more than most, since 'speaking as a woman,' if we accept the definition of it given by her work, *necessitates* a dialogue: the meaning of what women are saying only becomes accessible in an active exchange between speaker and hearer" (Whitford 1986, 3).
65. Dempster continues: "If...the ballet is a cultural institution which ceremoniously inscribes patriarchal ideology, then this training process is the female dancer's initiation into a patriarchal symbolic order, that is, into the language of the father" (Dempster 1988, 41).
66. The full quotation is depressingly specific: "The ballet is a purely female thing; it is a woman, a garden of beautiful flowers, and the man is the gardener" (qtd. in Copeland 1982, 48, qtd. in Dempster 1988, 53n). Balanchine also said that "woman is naturally inferior in matters requiring action and imagination. Woman oblingingly accepts her lowly place. Woman is an object of beauty and desire. Woman is first in ballet by default, because she is more beautiful than the opposite gender" (qtd. in Daly 1986, 8, qtd. in Adair 1992, 116).
67. The construction of balletic discourse in (negative) mystical terms is evident in the following quote from Lincoln Kirstein, a notorious defender of classical ballet against what he perceives as the degeneration of modern dance: "The classic dance is not merely a department of theatrical-dancing as opposed to the 'romantic,' but rather a central line, or governing attitude which links the *purest* developments in traditional stage practice, whatever the epoch... In the vocabulary of step and gesture over the last five hundred years, there have been many 'impure' influences, affecting the idiom from individual personalities, from exotic or national dances, from circus, music-hall and ballroom" (Kirstein 1983, 364). There are obvious similarities between this attitude and the description of mystical discourse produced by Knowles and quoted earlier in the chapter, in which positive mysticism is described as an impure development of mysticism proper.
68. Another factor governing who gets to be a ballet dancer is, of course, one's social status, since normally only middle-class and higher income bracket families can afford to pay for ballet classes for their children, and to be successful ballet training must (in most cases, especially for girls) be embarked upon while very young.
69. There have also been black ballet companies but these tend to (have) be(en) the exception rather than the rule. The Dance Theatre of Harlem, established in the early 1970s, is the most well known example, although Adair discusses its predecessors from the 1930s onwards (Adair 1992, 168-9). She also provides a concise survey of the wide-ranging developments in black dance in Britain, Europe and America outside of ballet (Adair 1992, 160-81). In Aotearoa the work of the Dance Pacific (now defunct), Manawa Nui and Kahurangi Dance Theatre companies (have) provide(d) examples of work which explores indigenous and postcolonial themes.

70. There are many examples of such work in the "western" world and they are increasing all the time. Adair includes two relevant chapters in her book, one on "new" dance and early postmodern projects which arose in the 1970s (Adair 1992, 182-98), and one entitled "The Subversives - Women's Dance Practice," which charts developments in dance in the 1980s (199-238). See also Dempster (1988, 46-9); Foster (1986, 169-72, 209).
71. In the conclusion to Probyn's original and engaging study of the autobiographical turn in recent (feminist and) cultural theory, she writes of possibilities of speaking the self in terms which apply to dancing. Dancing frequently seems to serve as an image for visionary hopes such as those Probyn articulates, and this in turn helps me to feel hopeful about possibilities of transforming dancing practice into a site of personal (and eventually cultural?) transformation. Probyn states her view that, "against and in the midst of speaking a tired self, we need to use our imaginations, strike a pose for other positions and instil feminisms with attitude. We need to keep moving and to keep speaking our selves in ways that will encourage other movements, that will recreate alternative positions. I hear another self, I hear myself, she speaks and in the movement of other images of selves, alternative speaking positions appear as possible. I am drawn to them and re-find them in the motions of selves. As Barthes writes of the 'grain,' it is 'the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs'" (Barthes 1977, 188, qtd. in Probyn 1993, 172). Similarly, Drucilla Cornell writes that: "We cannot know for sure, 'Yes this is definitely different. Now we are affirming Woman as other than the signifier of their [masculine] desire.' But the possibility that we might be approaching a new choreography of sexual difference with every new step we take can also not be wiped out.... This is what Irigaray seeks to protect: the possibility that feminine difference performs against phallogocentrism in the name of the Other.... This performance is affirmed as performance, not as a mere description of what woman is. But as performance, its evocation is explicitly utopian" (Cornell 1991, 205).
72. Paul Valéry's philosophical musing on dance includes the following description of the dancer's "selflessness": "This detachment from the environment, this absence of aim, this negation of explicable movement, these full turns (which no circumstance of ordinary life demands of our body), even this impersonal smile - all these features are radically opposed to those that characterize our action in the practical world and our relations with it" (Valéry 1983, 61-2).
73. I have argued elsewhere that anorexia, from which so many female dancers suffer, is a hysterical disease. See Bremner (1993); Celermajer (1987).

CHAPTER FIVE

MYSTERIA/HYSTERIA: MOTHERING AND MADNESS

The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the "dark continent" *par excellence*. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell. But men can no more, or rather no less, do without it than can women. And if there is now such a polarization over the questions of abortion and contraception, isn't that one more way of avoiding the question: what of the imaginary and symbolic relationship with the mother, with the woman-mother? What of that woman outside her social and material role as reproducer of children, as nurse, as reproducer of labour power? (Irigaray 1991e, 35)

There is a revolutionary potential in hysteria. Even in her paralysis, the hysteric exhibits a potential for gestures and desires.... A movement of revolt and refusal, a desire for/of the living mother who would be more than a reproductive body in the pay of the polis, a living, loving woman (Irigaray 1991f, 47-8).

The disavowed role of the maternal in the social systems of "western" capitalist culture is, as we have seen, one of Irigaray's primary concerns, and it informs the shape of most of her arguments about the oppression of women. "In the present system," she writes:

It is a fact that women maintains (sic) the productive forces of society. By producing children, by reproducing the labour force, they continue to mediate the exchange between men. In other words, women's bodies constitute the infrastructure of our society: they reproduce the forces of production without being recognized as a force of production (Irigaray 1977a, 73).

The non-representation of women's contributions to culture in Irigaray's view is the result of a prohibition of maternal desire in the myths by which "western" culture has come to understand itself. Irigaray identifies the Oedipal myth which forms the cornerstone of psychoanalysis as an exemplar of this pattern. She argues that the relationship between Oedipus and his father is projected retroactively onto the body of the mother so that the whole question of the mother's situation and relationship with her child is "fantasized post-Oedipally" (Irigaray 1991e, 38). Psychoanalysis has not been concerned to explore the life of mother and child prior to the child's birth into the world because it has always been primarily child-focused, a fact which other feminist writers have observed (Rich 1977, 17; Suleiman 1985; Hirsch 1989, 12).¹

Irigaray writes of the unsymbolised relation between mother and child before the child is born:

Psychoanalysis takes a dim view of this first moment - and, besides, it is invisible. A foetal situation or foetal regression, they say, and there is not a lot to be said about that. A taboo is in the air. If the father did not sever this over-intimate bond with the primal womb, there might be the danger of fusion, of death, of the sleep of death. But the exclusivity of his law forecloses this first body, this first home, this first love. It sacrifices them so as to make them material for the rule of a language [*langue*] which privileges the masculine genre [*le genre masculin*] to such an extent as to confuse it with the human genre [*le genre humain*] (Irigaray 1991e, 39).

Language itself is an attempt to annul the primal fear of engulfment by the mother, therefore language operates on a model of the masculine. For Irigaray, as we have seen, the function of language (and culture, the realm of the symbolic) as mediating the unsymbolised maternal needs to be radically rethought to make way for a model of social and linguistic exchange in which women are participants on a level with men.

In the published account of a speech at a meeting entitled "Women and Madness," part of a colloquium on mental health, Irigaray states that in the current cultural system women's desire is madness. While she claims that "all desire is connected to madness².... one desire [the masculine] has chosen to see itself as wisdom, moderation, truth, and has left the other [the feminine] to bear the burden of the madness it did not want to...recognize in itself" (Irigaray 1991e, 35). The relation of desire to madness, she says, is most evident in the relationship with the mother, the first object of the human subject's desire. But while men can express this desire in language, albeit an expression which incompletely mediates their loss, women cannot. For Irigaray this is the source of normative patriarchal femininity as pathology:

When analytic theory says that the little girl must give up her love of and for her mother, her desire of and for her mother so as to enter into the desire of/for the father, it subordinates woman to a normative hetero-sexuality, normal in our societies, but completely pathogenic and pathological. Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity (Irigaray 1991e, 44).

And in an earlier piece she states that in phallogentric culture:

everything happens as if there were a necessary break between the earliest

investments, the earliest desires, the first narcissism of a little girl and those of a "normal" adult woman. In the place of those who (sic) would be in a position of continuity with her "pre-history," she has, imposed on her, a language, fantasies, a desire which does not "belong" to her and which establishes a break with her auto-eroticism. That kind of *schizo* which every woman experiences, in our socio-cultural system, only leaves her with nothing more than somatisations, corporal pains, mutism, or mimetism with which to express herself (Irigaray 1977a, 75).

Irigaray's early research into schizophrenia and the language of madness (Irigaray 1965; 1966; 1967a; 1967b; 1973) revealed that, although schizophrenia, for example, is considered a disturbance whose symptoms are universal or sexually neutral, this is not in fact the case. She claims that, according to her experiments, men suffering from this condition "have an ability for syntactic modification, for 'metalanguage' which women do not have" (Irigaray 1977a, 74). For women, "madness" is most often articulated directly through the body without linguistic mediation:

A woman in a state of madness does not have...the means for elaborating a delirium. Instead of language being the means of expression of the delirium, the latter remains within the body itself. The dominant element in feminine schizophrenia is corporal pain, the feeling of deformation or transformation of organs, etc. Thus...women do not manage to articulate their madness: they suffer it directly in their body, without being able to transpose it in some different mode (Irigaray 1977a, 74).³

The non-representation of the mother in "western" culture and the fact that all women must sacrifice their first relationship, without symbolic mediation, mean that women are fundamentally alienated from language. As a result, Irigaray believes:

Nearly all women are in some state of madness: shut up in their bodies, in their silence and their "home." This kind of imprisonment means that they live their madness without it being noticed. This is perhaps why feminine madness is less explicit [than masculine] and, above all, less socially disruptive (Irigaray 1977a, 74).

At the outset of the text of the talk on "Women and Madness" Irigaray notes the fact that the audience consists almost entirely of women. She claims that this is an unfortunate sign of the attitude among medical and mental health practitioners, most of whom are men, to women speaking about their madness: "What women say appears to be of little importance to them"

(Irigaray 1991e, 34). She states that the men's absence from the meeting is in itself, then, "an explanation for the madness of women: their words [*leur parole*] are not heard" (Irigaray 1991e, 35). Given that women are alienated from the allegedly "neutral" structures and operations of language and their "madness" often articulates itself in different terms from men's, the origins of their disturbance could be assumed to be different as well. Hence what is needed is specific attention to women's attempts to speak (about) their suffering which, according to Irigaray's argument, would be prepared to concede that the language of madness, like other kinds of language, is not sexually neutral.

Of course the modern archetype of female "madness" expressed through the body is hysteria. As we have seen, (female) hysterics act out their imprisonment in a body culturally understood as passive and for which there exists no symbolic means of specific, empowering representation. Frequently this occurs through their miming current fashions of femininity to a disturbing extreme, as with the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. Hysterics have been seen by many feminists as rebels who reveal "the hidden fault lines in women's social and private roles" and "the malady of femininity" in patriarchal societies (Evans 1991, 242. See also 200-22; Cixous and Clément 1986; Clément 1989, 176-9).

Hysterical activity also attests to the disastrous effects for women of the necessary but unsymbolised sacrifice of their relationship with the maternal. As Danielle Celermajer notes:

When the boy renounces the Oedipal, imaginary dyad, he gains access to culture as a speaking subject, and attains a type of subjectivity, and ego and a set of possible relations which permit substitute satisfaction and re-expression of his desires. Yet [the girl] is excluded from that relation for different reasons and with different consequences: the mother/daughter relation is made impossible or unlivable because both parties are dependent on the phallus. In renouncing that relation she is offered no substitute, either in the form of positive self-representation, or in relation to others (mother-substitutes), for she must henceforth function as the mother for the lost Oedipus, estranged (unlike the boy), without compensation. It is this lack of compensation and adequate representation in the case of the girl which is the basis of hysteria (Celermajer 1987, 62-3).

Hysterical behaviours in women reflect the loss - or non-signification in the symbolic order - of a body which was experienced as other than passive and lacking in the preoedipal or imaginary stage, prior to entry into the symbolic: "The body inscribed as castrated stifles all

possible positive representations of [the girl's] pre-Oedipal body-ego. It is a deadened corporeality through which her experiences and maternal prehistory are muffled and which is unable to represent or reinvest pre-Oedipal impulses" (Celermajer 1987, 64). As Irigaray writes:

For us, the daughters, if our relationship with our mothers is a relationship with need, with no possible identity, and if we enter into desire by becoming objects of the desire of/for the father, what do we know about our identity and our desires? Nothing. That manifests itself in somatic pain, in screams and demands... (Irigaray 1991f, 52).

Hysteria, then, is a sterile response to the situation in which a woman (or a child about to become a woman) finds herself; it is a protest against the conditions under which she attains selfhood and understands her own body. But as a "negative or reactive strategy," it "works by demolishing the body as her 'prison,' limitation or more generally, the corporeality inappropriate to the wide range of experiences which, she feels, require embodiment" (Celermajer 1987, 64). Hysteria enacts a protest against the specific (non-)symbolisation of the female body which operates against the body itself. And the female hysteric as rebel insistently returns to the dual question of the non-symbolisation of both the mother and of herself as active agent (Irigaray 1985a, 136-9; 1991f, 47-8).⁴

According to Irigaray's claim that the notion of God in the "west" is a primary means by which current social relations have been mythologised and are perpetuated, the Christian myths play a large part in annulling the relationship between mothers and daughters. "Without divine power," she writes, "men would not have been able to supplant the relationship between mother and daughter, and its consequences in nature and society. But man becomes God by giving himself an invisible father, a father tongue" (Irigaray 1991b, 65). Correspondingly, the figure of the Virgin Mary symbolises the patriarchally defined role of women/mothers as mere matter without specific identity:

God is father; he begets a son, and for this purpose he uses a woman who is reduced to maternity. This has been the most abiding structure in our religious and civic traditions for centuries: a relation *between* men, or *in* man...through a woman. In such a culture the woman remains at home, and is the object of use and exchange between men. She is used for reproduction and for the material maintenance of life (Irigaray 1991b, 64).

The Virgin, "reduced to maternity," symbolises the fact that, in "western" culture, mothers are reduced - through maternity - to a condition without identity: the Virgin Mary represents the buried mother at the heart of "western" civilisation.

The three texts treated in the rest of this chapter all deal with the madness of mothering in "western" culture to some extent. All three texts are by women in the sense that it is women's words and experiences which form their basis, although men have transcribed two of them. They all feature the Virgin Mary too, and it is the representations of the women's experiences in relation to the Virgin that I am most interested to explore. In the following three sections I produce a reading of the hysterical "labourings" in imitation of Christ performed by Margery Kempe and depicted in her *Book* (5. 1); of the representation of the hysterical or phantom pregnancy of Freud's patient Dora in Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" (5. 2); and of Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," her essay on the role of the Virgin Mary in "western" culture, which incorporates an autobiographical account of her own experience of motherhood (5. 3).

While the texts are widely separated from each other in time, place, authorial mediation and intention, my reading brings them together to explore the ways in which they produce an emulation of and engagement with the Virgin that takes up but also challenges her status as the archetypal model for women in the Christian tradition. I read the three texts as "hysterical" in terms of their mimetic, yet excessive qualities. The figure of the Virgin, differently engaged in each text, provides a point of departure for my (re)reading female hysteria, mothering and madness through each. The fact that these diverse texts involve a figure who is traditionally portrayed as a model for all women, in all times and places, is intended to help me ascertain whether there are in fact common aspects to different women's reflections on the figure of Mary and if so, what these may be.

This focus on my part is problematised by the fact that one of these texts is authored by a man - Freud's - one by a woman - Kristeva's - and the other - Kempe's - is a collaborative effort. However I think this mix of conditions of production is relevant to a consideration of the portrayal of the Virgin since she is a hybrid figure who has served a range of different symbolic functions for women and men in "western" history. As we saw in Chapters Two and

Three, Margery Kempe's identification with the Virgin in her Passion visions may be seen as a "hysterical" response to a figure who is herself hystericised. In a great many popular medieval portrayals of the Virgin she goes literally mad with grief at the death of her Son, and this madness articulates itself through bodily convulsions and self-mutilations which, mimicking her Son's suffering, can be read as "hysterical" (Lochrie 1991a, 180-92). Kempe's dependence on her priestly scribe is qualified by her divine gifts, especially her excessive weeping, performed at its most intense when she imitates Mary. Kempe's tears function as signs of God's grace that impress those clerics who support her, particularly the scribe who collaborates with her on the production of her *Book*.

Freud's "Dora" case has been the focus of much interest on the part of feminists working with psychoanalytic theory, and several writers have pointed out that it reveals as much about Freud himself as it does about his patient (Bernheimer 1985, 18; Hertz 1985; Kahane 1985, 19; Marcus 1985; Moi 1985b; Evans 1989, 81-2). Thus it is particularly suited to an enquiry into the construction of the category of female hysteria by psychoanalysis, one of my intentions in section 5. 2. In fact, I do not think that a consideration of whether female hysteria can be empowering on any level (through a reading of three women's "hysterical" responses to the Virgin) can afford to neglect Freud. It was Freud's work which, like that of Margery Kempe's scribe, both appropriated and attempted to make public the "secret" language of these tormented women, a double bind that feminists writing about the Dora case have consistently had to confront. Most agree that Dora's resistance to Freud's interpretations of her illness shows up the defects in traditional psychoanalytic theory's attitudes to women, however the case is frustrating in the sense that it provides us with information about Dora only insofar as it escapes Freud's consciousness, forming an inconclusive trail of "clues" regarding the possibility of female empowerment in the text.

Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" is, too, thoroughly informed by her involvement with psychoanalysis (Smith 1993); and although it is a woman-authored text it is fundamentally concerned with the necessity of articulating oneself in two modes when one is a woman and a mother: the "objective" language of the symbolic order which is necessarily paramount, and the more fragmentary, "poetic" underside of this discourse which arises from maternal experience. The second is destined to remain unexpressed *as such* in the symbolic order in

Kristeva's view, however its power to disrupt and displace (public) language remains constant and needs to be continually explored. The Virgin may be seen as the locus of this contradiction between "outlaw femininity" (maternal excess) and phallic recuperation of it in all three of the texts considered here. What happens when particular women, themselves "outlaws" or women who speak of their own desires, focus on this ambiguous figure who mediates maternity for men? Can they turn masculinist discourse (including the psychoanalytic theory which frames the female hysteric) "hysterically" on its head? Can they exploit the contradictions inherent in the figure of the Virgin and suggest a specifically female mode of speech? These are some of the questions to which I seek answers in the final chapter of my study.

In all three of the texts I examine in my search for empowering articulations of the Virgin, then, there is a tension between the expression of an "outlaw femininity" ordinarily annulled by the symbolic - such as occurs in female hysteria - and the maintenance of patriarchal order which requires that female "madness" be understood as just that. In the Freudian text, of course, the latter mode is most explicit and to the fore. Consequently I want to use Freud's text of Dora's case as a kind of touchstone or point of departure for the ideas I am exploring in the chapter as a whole. While I call Kempe's *Book* and Kristeva's essay "hysterical" with some reservations, I want to reserve judgement on Freud's version of female hysteria in the Dora case as well; to try and retain the notion that hysteria as Freud described it can be open to alternative interpretations, that the "symptomatic narrative" (Bernheimer 1985, 18) he constructs may be read so as to further destabilise the production of "the female hysteric" and the Virgin within its frame. I also use Freud's text on Dora as a point of departure for the work of Irigaray in the chapter since, while her ideas inform my treatment of all three texts, they are considered more closely against the Freud/Dora and Kristeva pieces (5. 2 and 5. 3). Irigaray's work has produced challenges to Freud which also express an obvious debt to traditional psychoanalysis and its concern with "mad" or hysterical women. I will pursue this challenge further while exploring the specific contradictions surrounding the Virgin and female/male attitudes to her role.

Hysteria, as we have seen, "unsettles the [dominant] system by throwing back to it what it cannot accept about its own operations" (Grosz 1989, 138), what it has repressed in order to

function as it does, and Irigaray, who has been described as a hysteric (Grosz 1989, 136-8), provides a clear example of this move in her work. I have suggested throughout this study that Irigaray's view of "western" culture as deeply informed by Christianity, and as having a great deal invested in the concept of a masculine God which outlaws the substance of the maternal, nonetheless implies that women can challenge this scenario and access for themselves the seeds of symbolic transformation. Whether these women are mystics in the traditional sense or feminist visionaries like Irigaray herself, in her view they may produce symbolic "excess" by hysterically mimicking the figures who serve as models for them - such as Christ and the Virgin Mary - to an extreme degree, thereby questioning the symbolic parameters these figures are erected to guard. Visionary women effectively highlight what lies beyond the contested symbolic model, for example the outlawed mother whose threatening physicality the Virgin Mary masks. I suggest that where maternity and "madness" are connected in the work of female visionaries, hysterics and feminists, the potential for subversion of patriarchal expectations of women is greatest, since both conditions (and often they are effectively one and the same) are the repository of patriarchal culture's outlawed excesses, that which it abjures in instituting the rule of masculine Reason.

In the following pages I take up the idea that, however debased and without symbolisation maternal experience is in "western" culture, the (hysterical) re-presentations of the Virgin in the texts of Kempe, Freud/Dora and Kristeva produce and highlight an unassimilable (female/maternal) physical excess. This excess is the product of the women's engagements with the Virgin in which points of connection and disparity between their experience and those ascribed to her emerge, the result of her contradictory status as a model for women's lives. In the situations of Freud/Dora and Kempe, for example, the excess of female physicality associated with the female protagonists is the appropriated basis of the masculine construction of the text, yet it continually disrupts the writing's surface meaning with an other kind of language. It is this excessive female language, articulated in connection with the Virgin, that I want to try and develop a way to read.

My analysis of the relationship between the three female figures (Kempe, Dora, Kristeva) and the Virgin will draw on the arguments put forward by Irigaray about the female mystic and hysteric, the Virgin, and the divine in "La Mystérique," *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*,

and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* respectively. In the third section of *Marine Lover*, as we have seen, Irigaray suggests a reformulation of divinity in the Christian tradition which would take account of the irreducible contribution of Mary to its basic doctrines (Irigaray 1991d, 166-90). This work in general, while on one level a celebratory response to Nietzsche, also contributes to Irigaray's project of transforming and redeploying conventional religious categories so as to set up conditions of specific female embodiment and representation. Following Irigaray, I argue that the three depictions of mothering and/or "madness" considered here, by incorporating "the divine" through the figure of the Virgin, suggest ways of reading maternal and hysterical experience other than according to conventional models of femininity.

While the chapter's title refers to the congruence between certain kinds of female mysticism and hysteria that Irigaray posits in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (and which she names "mysteria"), the section titles are echoes of Kristeva and allude to the three "privileged" moments of "rupture, renovation and revolution" that she figures through the discourses of "madness, holiness and poetry" (Kristeva 1976, 64; Grosz 1989, 97) in "western" culture. For Kristeva these individual and cultural occasions represent the eruption of semiotic energies, associated with the maternal body, into the symbolic order. As Grosz outlines, commenting on Kristeva: "neuroses and psychoses signal [the] eruption [of the semiotic] in the subject's psychological economy; religious ecstasy [sic] and jouissance indicate its expression in religious discourses; and avant-garde experimentation in all of the arts point to its disruption of the rules of signifying practice" (Grosz 1989, 97-8). However the semiotic is, in Kristeva's writings, always present within and dependent upon the function of the symbolic (Kristeva 1986b, 93-6). Rose remarks that the Kristevan semiotic "has to work through the order of language it defies" and that the relationship between semiotic and symbolic is "one of a 'dynamic'" (Rose 1991a, 147) in which neither is expendable. This chapter investigates the shifting relationship between semiotic and symbolic in the texts it explores, as part of its attempt to isolate moments of hysterical subversion in the representation of the Virgin by women.

Like Irigaray, Kristeva has shown a fundamental concern with motherhood, the Christian religion and connections between the two in her writings, and I have discussed some of her work on these issues in previous chapters. However, Kristeva's interest in the "darker side"

of maternal experience and psychic life seems more directly relevant to this chapter on mothering and madness than to earlier ones. In the chapter generally I have sought to bring the two writers into a kind of dialogue together or at least to produce an undercurrent of creative tension between their ideas about Christianity and women. As Jacqueline Rose points out, Kristeva's work has continually focused on:

the psychic pain and violence which...characterises the early interaction between the mother and child. This is why [she] is able at one and the same time to lay out the horrors of the fantasmatic structure which underpins the writings of an author like Céline, while at the same time praising that writing for exposing a psychic drama which - with massive social repercussions - is constantly denied, projected onto the other, and then played out by the culture at large (Kristeva 1982, cited in Rose 1991a, 154-5).

The general subject matter I am considering here, the difficulties of mother-daughter relations in patriarchal society and their connection with madness, presents perhaps the greatest challenge to Irigaray's utopian vision. The chapter engages with some key themes of her writings - hysteria, mothering, mysticism and divinity - at times alongside and at times in tension with Kristeva's rather different perspectives. The Kristevan/Irigarayan dialectic is the means by which I hope to establish what women's (maternal) self-figurations involving the Virgin might be attempting to symbolise; thus the overall focus remains the investigation into the potential for women of reinscribing religious concepts for physical ends.

5.1 Embodying holiness: Margery Kempe's "gostly labowr"

As Sidonie Smith observes, *The Book of Margery Kempe* begins with a description of the mystic's "descent into madness and her diabolic invective against all those forces supporting the patriarchal order" (Smith 1987, 83). It is also an account of the beginning of Kempe's married and mothering life. The *Book's* first chapter describes how, at around the age of twenty, Kempe was married to her husband John and shortly found herself pregnant. Because of the sickness she experienced during her pregnancy and the pain of her labour when giving birth, she despaired of her life and called for her confessor to make her final confession. As described in Chapter Three (156), the *Book* records how Kempe had a particular sin on her conscience, which she had never previously confessed to anyone, but doesn't specify what it

was. When she began to describe this sin, her confessor cut her off, which caused her to go "out of her mind and [be] amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days" (Kempe 1988, 41).

During this time Kempe was troubled by demonic visions and a great desire for "wickedness"; she slandered herself, friends, and family and physically mutilated her body, so that she had to be tied up to prevent this behaviour (Kempe 1988, 42). Smith suggests that Kempe's "witchlike collusion with the devil" at this point serves "both to support the patriarchal order and to disrupt it" (Smith 1987, 83). The disruption is evidenced in her wild railing against all the authorities of her life - Church, family, God, good works, the saints (Kempe 1988, 42) - but the support comes later, as Kempe is healed of her madness by a second birth in which she is not the birth-giver but the product of another's labour.⁵ This is a spiritual (re)birth engineered by Christ and is the source of Kempe's embarking on her visionary path. The story of this new life, transcribed into her *Book*, effectively replaces and erases the other (thirteen) childbirth experiences she undergoes, which with one brief exception (Kempe 1988, 73), are not recorded in the text. The spiritual narrative of the *Book* transforms the maternal narrative of Kempe's life into the pre-text of a story about divine grace.

The allegiance to the patriarchal order which Kempe enacts following her final conversion (a second, more lasting conversion experience occurs in middle age, following a relapse into pride after the first (Chapter 2)) is in the form of her seeking and following the counsel of priests as she strives to continue in "the way of everlasting life" on which she has begun (Kempe 1988, 45). But as we have seen, this allegiance is continually troubled, as Kempe's narrative records, by events which may be traced to her maternal experience insofar as her former wifely status makes her a less-than-perfect vehicle for divine inspiration. As Smith points out:

In opening her *Book* with a description of the birth of her first child, Kempe announces her contaminated relationship to the spiritual life, for, with her child, she bears/bares the ineradicable mark of physical corruption: The moment of childbirth refers backward to an earlier moment when, her womb pierced and unsealed, she is irreversibly severed from the wholeness and integrity of the virgin's state (Smith 1987, 64).

It is Kempe's status as a non-virgin (i.e., her lack of acceptable status in the eyes of the Church) which makes her efforts to proceed along the path of complete devotion to Christ so fraught with danger and so requiring of articulate defence. Her desperate confession gone awry at the *Book's* opening, the rest of Kempe's narrative - the story of her renewed, spiritual life - can be seen as the displaced attempt to seek absolution from past sexual sins. It is, as its beginning asserts, a mother's story, but after this description of the first childbirth and madness there is no more direct or detailed reference to mothering experience within it. In this respect it conforms to the works of other women visionaries of Kempe's time who had been mothers (e.g., St Bridget of Sweden and Blessed Dorothea of Montau. Chapter Two 110, 111-2). Instead, there are accounts of Kempe's maternal devotions to Christ (Kempe 1988, 53-4, 113, 251); of God's and the Virgin's maternal devotions to her (Kempe 1988, 66-7, 215); and Kempe's own interactions with the Virgin, in which Kempe aids and emulates and, on one occasion, explicitly takes her place at Christ's request (Kempe 1988, 229).

Kempe's *Book* as a whole, then, may be read as an attempt to mediate the voicelessness and extreme passivity enjoined on her through childbearing. One interpretation of her thwarted confession is that mothers are not taken seriously by priests, a notion endorsed by the Church's belief that after giving birth a woman was especially unclean and unworthy of clerical attention; she was refused the sacrament until the Purification ceremony had taken place (Erickson 1976, 196). Kempe's initial "hysterical" madness, in which she takes on and dramatises the negative qualities associated with her fallen foremother, Eve, does not lead to freedom from what is in her mind but only to her literal confinement. But when Christ mediates a second (spiritual) birth she is enabled to practise a more empowering kind of mimicry, no less expressive of suffering, but part of the working out of her salvation and so more acceptable to the patriarchal authorities of her world.

Thus, somewhere between her fervid emulations of Eve and the Virgin Mary - the madonna and the whore, those twin poles that are an attempt to annul the threat of maternal power for men (Sprengnether 1990, 40) - is born Kempe's own story, that of a mother who is not a mother, who seeks to be remembered for acts of spiritual and not carnal birth-giving, divine and not demonic acts of madness. The description of Kempe's major imitations of the Virgin Mary (which are also, as Chapter Three showed, imitations of Christ's suffering) occur near

the end of her narrative (Chapters 79-82). They show how the spiritual and physical pilgrimages of her life have led to a kind of participatory redemption from her sinful past. But they also reflect the unresolved tensions and trauma which are the result of Kempe's desire to pursue an active life despite the passivity and public silence normally required of mothers. If we read *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a confession of Christ, a transcription into book form of the mystic's *imitatio*, the excessiveness of Kempe's response to her Passion visions may be seen to evoke the earlier clerical refusal and resultant demonic madness. Both orthodox and unorthodox forms of madness present a challenging response to Kempe's initial silencing by priestly discourse.

Kempe's postpartum madness which opens the narrative of her *Book* also exemplifies Irigaray's view that "an explanation for the madness of women" lies in men refusing to hear their words (Irigaray 1991e, 35), and her related observation that women's alienation from language leads to their expressing psychical suffering directly through their bodies (Irigaray 1977a, 74), for example through disorders such as hysteria. As Grosz explains the situation of the hysteric, her original suffering stems from an invasive imposition of another's desire:

The traumatic event lies dormant until it is re-evoked through a similar event, an event which provokes the onset of the hysterical symptom. The symptom is an act of (unconscious) defiance. It is provoked, not directly by the repetition of a precipitating event, although the symptoms only appear after a second event, but in an earlier "seduction" to which the child was passively subjected. This earliest seduction is not simply a chance event but is seen by the child as an anticipation of her position as a feminine subject in a patriarchal culture, an omen of what is to come. Her symptom is a strategy to ward off the violations with which she is expected to comply (Grosz 1989, 137).

Kempe's initial confessor may be likened to the (male) figure who first imposes his desire on the hysteric, so that this imposition is felt as a portent of the way things will henceforth be for the female subject in (phallogentric) culture. Kempe's confessor "seduces" her into silence with his official words of absolution, ending the confession ritual prematurely. In responding with reproof to the mystic before she could tell of a sin long on her conscience, effectively stopping her speech, he may be seen to have contributed to a narrative in which maternal experience (and maternal guilt) is largely repressed yet erupts in physical behaviours that are figured through miming current devotional fashions.

The madness Kempe describes at the beginning of her *Book* follows directly on her first experience of childbearing, that condition in which women become, according to a feminist psychoanalytic reading, an unsymbolised liminal space between culturally comprehensible notions. Kempe's double alienation, her occupying the place of the unsymbolised maternal origin of language itself, coupled with her thwarted desire to be heard by the appropriate male authority, can be seen to lead to a "hysterical" response when normal speech fails. But as Smith observes, this "contaminated moment" and the madness that follows is cast "in an eschatological framework: Childbearing [Kempe] presents as a moment of total disorientation, vulnerability, and sinfulness, a time that brings her to the brink of physical and spiritual death" (Smith 1987, 64). And after this death, spiritual regeneration follows.

Hope Weissman argues for a self-healing aspect to Kempe's mimetic tears, which assimilate her maternal suffering into "a sanctioned form of grief" (Weissman 1982, 207). Describing Kempe's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where her first outbreaks of weeping occur, she suggests that:

in technique as well as in aim, [Kempe's] journey is a recreative one; the narrative appropriates and reworks traditional paradigms in serving its heroine's concerns. Regarded in this light, the narrative technique itself can be recognized as an instrument of healing. It is used by [Kempe] to articulate a complex new relationship to authority, one which mediates between her desire for formal validation and her awareness that such validation might finally be withheld (Weissman 1982, 208).⁶

The representation of Kempe's "hysterical" or disturbingly mimetic tears in her *Book*, then, works as a kind of "talking cure," as was argued in Chapter Three (156), part of her achievement of validation by formal, orthodox means which yet remains equivocal due to its excessive basis in a non-virginal female body. Both the clerically sanctioned and the clerically disturbing aspects of Kempe's behaviour are integral components of the text. While Kempe's tears can be seen as "hysterical" in their extreme expression of culturally endorsed behaviour, itself mimetic, beneath the Passion formula which makes her devotions acceptable to clerical authorities lies her own unresolved and unexpressed maternal pain.

Kempe's "hysterical" madness in Jerusalem (Chapter 28) is echoed by the visions described near the end of Book I (Chapters 79-82), in which she twists and turns like a woman giving

birth (Kempe 1988, 106). Weissman writes of this part of Kempe's text that "its departure from the main-line tradition of compassion narratives is marked by the phrase 'wondyrfully turnyng & wrestyng.'" She observes that while the phrase, "indeed the entire iconographic complex, has obvious erotic overtones which it shares with many other late-medieval Passion meditations.... [it] also is highly suggestive of a woman laboring with child" (Weissman 1982, 212).

While I have described how Kempe's self-presentation as an ardent follower of Christ involves her following conventional models of behaviour in order to speak with recognised authority, specific connections between her "hysterical," holy "madness" and her representation of childbirth in mimicking Christ have only been touched upon so far. It is this aspect of Kempe's imitative behaviour which I believe has most to say to contemporary women, for whom motherhood is still a "vocation" or an activity culturally aligned with muteness, with sheer materiality and so with a particular kind of inarticulateness or madness. Of course, the archetype of this condition in "western" culture is the Virgin, whom Kempe emulates closely in several of her meditations on the Passion. For Irigaray, as I have explained, the muteness which is still enjoined on mothers in "western" culture in the late twentieth century is bound up with Christian traditions in which the only mother to be recognised is silent and whose physicality is all but erased. For Kristeva, too, the myth of the Virgin Mary is of significance for an understanding of the cultural meaning of motherhood in the twentieth-century "west." Kristeva describes the Virgin as a visible cultural site where the heterogeneous, crisis-ridden discourse of motherhood is papered over, recuperated within the workings of the symbolic order (Kristeva 1980a, 237; Oliver 1993, 49; Weir 1993, 81-4). At this point I will outline in more detail Kristeva's views on the Virgin before returning to Kempe and relating them to her "hysterical" *imitatio*.

According to Kristeva the Virgin represents an attempt to contain and neutralise the effect of the semiotic in language. Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* has more than one meaning, but is related to the Lacanian symbolic as a kind of constant traversal of language, attesting to the subject's prior relationship with its mother (Kristeva 1986b, 93-4). It is "always a bodily presence disruptive to the sublimated symbolic order" (Gallop 1982, 124).⁷ For Kristeva, maternity is a discourse in which concepts of identity operative in the symbolic are

called into question. She claims that "the maternal body is the place of a splitting, which...remains a constant factor of social reality" (Kristeva 1980a, 238), and that "the act of giving birth" consists of a "strange form of split symbolization" at the "threshold of language and instinctual drive, of the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic'" (Kristeva 1980a, 240). Kristeva's interest in moments of psychical and cultural crisis makes maternity a central focus of her investigations (Grosz 1989, 78).

Kristeva sees religion as one of the few "western" discourses which represent maternity as such, but its orthodox symbolisations have the effect of denying the mother's *jouissance* and pain (Kristeva 1987, 259-61; 1988a, 42). In her view, the cult of the Virgin contributes to "the madness of motherhood" for ordinary women by its representation of a woman, "alone of all her sex," who exhibits an extreme masochism through which the semiotic drives are violently but non-productively engaged (Kristeva 1987, 258; Oliver 1993, 50-1). The crisis component of maternal experience, which Kristeva describes as "a strange fold" on the borderline between "nature" and "culture," "speaking" and "biology," makes "woman" effectively a "catastrophe of being that the dialectics of the trinity and its supplements would be unable to subsume" (Kristeva 1987, 259-60). Thus the experience of maternity enacts a continual challenge to Christian doctrine, which its myths and images attempt to annul. "The Mother and her attributes, evoking sorrowful humanity...become representatives of a 'return of the repressed' in monotheism. They reestablish what is nonverbal and show up as the receptacle of a signifying disposition that is closer to so-called primary processes" (Kristeva 1987, 249-50). As Kelly Oliver elaborates:

Although the myth of the Virgin can control the maternal semiotic, it cannot contain the semiotic. Kristeva argues that Christianity, with its Virgin birth, both unravels and protects the paternal function (Kristeva 1989, 40). Like sacrifice, the violence of the semiotic returns within the very ritual that attempts to repress it. The maternal semiotic is focused in the symbol of the Virgin and its threat to the Symbolic order is thereby controlled (Oliver 1993, 51).

Because she is concerned with crises in identity and sites of "revolution" in language,⁸ Kristeva's writings on maternity and the Christian myths can shed light on Kempe's "hysterical" behaviour. As Oliver points out, during the course of her oeuvre Kristeva has also

"become increasingly interested in the dynamics of religious fantasies and symbols" (Kristeva 1984b, 268; Oliver 1993, 125). Kristeva argues that Christianity cannot entirely regulate maternity within its discourses, precisely because maternity is the crucial juncture between nature and culture, biology and language, the (Irigaray would say reductive) binaries by which the subject's experience becomes intelligible in the symbolic. As Grosz observes, Kristeva's earlier works claim:

that religious discourses are in a unique, privileged position to recognise the *cost* of symbolic organisation. It is the system by which the renounced *jouissance* of the drives is recuperated back into the symbolic order.... As the privileged site of the symbolic, the space where it can "elaborate a theory which represents its own signifying practice to itself" (Kristeva 1976, 65), it is a highly condensed, rich object of speculative investigation for her researches on the speaking subject's debt to repressed maternity (Grosz 1989, 82).

Because the Christian religion presents sublimated figures of maternity in the Virgin and the feminised Christ, the unassimilable residue of maternal experience that escapes coherent symbolisation can sometimes appear in "discourses of the sacred...religious ecstasy" and corporeal surrender (Grosz 1989, 84) in which these figures appear. The text of a late medieval, "positive" female mystic like Kempe might be seen as such a discourse.

The portrayal of the "hysterical Virgin" in medieval culture - to which Kempe's *Book* attests - is also a discourse of crisis. As previously described, in this image of the Virgin, which derives from "eastern" traditions, she "is unmeasured in her sorrow" (Lochrie 1991a, 180). As with Kempe's madness at the opening of the *Book*, the Virgin expresses her suffering by mutilating her own body, crying uncontrollably and experiencing physical convulsions (Lochrie 1991a, 180; Chapter Two, 121). While her movements mimic the pains of conventional childbirth, her suffering at Christ's death marks her first experience of such trauma, as she gave birth without pain, but suffers belatedly with Christ in his Passion. While Mary is "hysterical" in her extreme imitation of Christ, articulating personal pain for which there is no other means of expression, Kempe is "hysterical" in imitation of the Virgin, and by this means she presents herself as a virginal woman who is also a mother, or a mother whose purity is painfully regained. Mary is a fitting model for Kempe because Kempe can identify with her corporeal excesses and their maternal source while she also mimics her by adhering to a visionary way of life normally only available to virgins. As Weissman states of

Kempe's tears in Chapter 28, in which Kempe envisions Mary as well as Christ:

At Jerusalem [Kempe] is reenacting her own harsh labor of childbirth, the labor unto madness, and almost unto death, with which her *vita* begins. By reexperiencing the pains of labor at the scene of Christ's Passion, [Kempe] cancels both the sin and the legacy of shame. For by reexperiencing her labor pains at the scene of the Virgin's Compassion, [Kempe] demonstrates her passage beyond Eve's biological maternity to achieve a maternity suprasexual and faultlessly pure (Weissman 1982, 215).

Lochrie has noted how Christ's crucified body was understood in the late middle ages as a book in which Christian believers endowed with special grace might read edifying information.⁹ This theory also implied participation in Christ's suffering on the part of believers as the rupture in the text of Christ's body - signified by his wounds and eventual death - allowed a transference of his pain into the meditators' hearts (Lochrie 1991a, 167-8). Through Kempe's reading of Christ's crucified body she attempts to "fill up in [her] flesh the sufferings which are wanting" (Monk of Farne 1961, 76, cited in Lochrie 1991a, 169) in the body of Christ - the Church - more generally. This imitation may be seen as similar to a hysterical displacement in which Kempe's formidable grief becomes central in her text and threatens to overwhelm that of Christ. This too is behaviour exemplified by the Virgin, whose grief as it was portrayed in Kempe's culture rivalled that of her Son (Lochrie 1991b, 181). The Virgin is the exemplar of Kempe's claim to a privileged relationship with Christ, one which gives her own sufferings special significance and enables their dramatic, even (in a spiritual sense) "therapeutic" expression.

Lochrie observes how in a range of medieval representations of the hysterical Virgin, in which she is frequently joined by the other female mourners at the Cross mentioned in the Gospels - Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleophas - the women refuse to take comfort from Christ's promise of his Resurrection: "Instead, they seek to decipher their own thoughts, words, and deeds in his body" (Lochrie 1991a, 191). In Kempe's Passion meditations she mimes the Virgin's behaviour at the point in the Passion narrative when Christ dies and Mary's grief overwhelms her completely, sending her mad (Kempe 1988, 234).

Kristeva's work helps illuminate Kempe's response to the Passion and its maternal component

when, in an essay on a painting of the dead Christ in his tomb by Hans Holbein the Younger, she describes Christ's death in psychoanalytic terms as an image or cultural mediation of the "many separations that build up the psychic life of individuals" (Kristeva 1989, 132). These separations are those potentially traumatic events which threaten psychic balance but are a necessary aspect of human growth: "birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration" (Kristeva 1989, 132). Kempe's mimicry of the Virgin who identifies with Christ most strongly at the moment of his death, when the sufferings which Mother and Son hitherto shared become wholly laid upon the Virgin's body, emphasises "rupture and loss over union and transformation," in Karma Lochrie's words (Lochrie 1991a, 135). Christ's death represents the ruptures in human subjectivity which make meaning possible, but Kempe's identification with the Virgin at this point highlights the maternal presence, whereas psychoanalytic discourse focuses on the necessity of leaving the mother behind. Kempe's devotional identification with the Virgin as extreme exemplar of subjective splitting means that she identifies with the maternal source of her own subjectivity (Lochrie 1991a, 135), her birth into the symbolic order and her own special involvement in this process through having given birth. While Kristeva describes the process of a woman's giving birth as a kind of reunion with the body of her own mother through which a woman exemplifies an "instinctual" form of memory that threatens her with madness (Kristeva 1980a, 239), Kempe's spiritual madness in identification with Mary, as a spiritualised reworking of her former maternal suffering, may be seen as an attempt to articulate the maternal experience which is unsymbolisable in her culture and so to ward off this destructive threat.

Kempe's "gostly labowr" ("spiritual effort") (Kempe 1940, 169; 1988, 105) can be seen to represent what in Kristevan terms would be described as "a privileged symbolic representation of the semiotic" in religious discourse, "in which the symbolic is able to tolerate the expression of normally unspoken pre-oedipal pleasures" (Gross 1990b, 99). Kristeva argues that poetic discourses are the most privileged site of "revolution" in language, where semiotic energies breach the symbolic. Religious discourses, in her view, represent a more conservative expression of this tendency, the move towards presenting semiotic elements in symbolic (culturally acceptable) terms. For Kristeva, "the religious recodes what is becoming uncoded and destabilized in the poetic" (Gross 1990b, 99), it is a textual system of "renovation" (Kristeva 1976, 64). However Kristeva does acknowledge that religious discourses contain the

potential for symbolic transgression (Kristeva 1976, 64; 1987, 249-50; 1988a, 40-1; 1989, 24-5, 132-5). The popular devotional discourses of late medieval Christianity and the affective mysticism associated with them reflect this potential, as they tend to allow the articulation of experiences not prescribed by official doctrine, in ways which exceed orthodox devotional norms.

In Kristeva's analysis, human subjects are enabled to cover over the traces of the abjection of maternal origin by the resolution of the Oedipus complex and submission to the Law of the Father. Linguistic exchange is built upon and substitutes for the renounced pleasures of the mother's body (Kristeva 1988a, 40-1; 1989, 43; Gross 1990b, 101). From a Kristevan angle, Margery Kempe's wild tears and simulation of a woman in labour, in which incoherent cries and strange physical movements breach the boundaries of normal speech, display the debt language owes to maternity and the fragility of orthodox religious discourse's attempts to contain and subdue this power that belongs to women. In fact Kristeva suggests that Christ's Passion indeed figures the loss of the mother which subjects undergo before they can enter into the symbolic order of language. In *In the Beginning Was Love* she claims that "Christ's Passion brings into play even more primitive layers of the psyche" than the Oedipal scenario of the Father visiting punishment on his Son, namely: "a fundamental depression (a narcissistic wound...), that conditions access to human language" and is the sign of the renunciation of "the maternal paradise" (Kristeva 1988a, 40-1).

In the Passion narrative of Kempe's *Book*, when Christ dies Mary asks to be buried with him, lamenting the fact that she saw so little of him when he was alive. When Mary is persuaded to yield up her Son's body, Kempe in turn expresses the same desire, to be buried with Christ (Kempe 1988, 235). Mary's sufferings, the delayed birth pains which presage the new birth for humanity gained by Christ's death, signify the fact that she exists only as a once-necessary appendage to the God-man. Upon his death, she has no more reason to live. Her desire to join Christ in the tomb figures the prior appropriation of her womb by God the Father, since the place where she longs to go with her Son is the place in the earth from which Christ is reborn, this time without the aid of a woman. Christ's rebirth from the tomb and Mary's desire to partake of his descent there would be seen, in an Irigarayan reading, as the finale of the Gospel narrative that is built upon her unsymbolised body. The extreme grief she

displays in popular medieval religion at Christ's death can also be read as an unconscious expression of sorrow for her own annihilation (Irigaray 1991d, 167). It is a return of the repressed maternal function in the popular discourse of Christian piety.

However Kempe's desire, following the Virgin's, to enter the tomb with the dead Christ adds to Mary's expression of despairing "madness" a disruptive carnal and maternal aspect. Whereas the madness Kempe describes in the opening pages of her *Book* signals her perception of her state of spiritual death, here, near the end of the bulk of the narrative which constitutes Book I, the death and burial of Christ which presage the Resurrection are expressed through Kempe's hyperbolic miming of the pains of giving birth. The suffering which is the result of Kempe's necessary efforts to repress her sexual and maternal past (a task which is ultimately impossible) and which achieves expression here as her desire to become one with Christ, marks Christ's descent into the tomb as a return to its inescapable maternal source in the body of the Virgin.

While the Virgin mediates between Kempe and Christ, offering Kempe a model of maternal compassion which it is the mystic's task to emulate and inscribe into her text, Kempe signifies with and on her body the signs of Christ's maternal debt that the Virgin - alone of all her sex - cannot signify. There is then an impulse of life about Kempe's death wish, in which the meanings of physical (maternal) and spiritual (masculine-appropriated) birth intermingle and (re)inform each other. As Lochrie observes:

The burial of Christ's body produces a crisis in Kempe's reading [of the Christic text] and a rupture in her desire. Its absence becomes displaced in the Virgin's sorrow and her own marvelous body with its wresting, writhing, turning blue as lead, and loud roars. The body which the Marys seek at the tomb has already reappeared elsewhere - both in Kempe's body and in the mystic text that we are reading (Lochrie 1991a, 174-5).

If, as in the Kristevan view, Christ's death is understood as a cultural symbol for the most basic symbolic processes of human life in "western" culture - "birth, weaning, separation," and so on (Kristeva 1989, 132), and if it is suggestive of the loss of the maternal body (Kristeva 1988a, 40-1), then at the moment of her Saviour's death Kempe can be seen to face once again her maternal trauma, one of the unresolved processes of psychic life which led her first

to a crisis of madness and then to a holy vocation. According to Kristeva: "[the] nonexecution or repudiation [of the processes of birth, weaning...castration] leads to psychotic confusion; their dramatization is, on the contrary, a source of exorbitant and destructive anguish" (Kristeva 1989, 132).

Kempe dramatises such "exorbitant...anguish" in the Passion visions of her *Book* when she relates how after Christ died she

thought that she continually ran to and fro, as if she were a woman without reason, greatly desiring to have had the precious body by herself alone, so that she might have wept enough in the presence of that precious body, for she thought she would have died with weeping and mourning for his death, for love that she had for him (Kempe 1988, 234).

Kempe's desire to have Christ's body to herself, away from the ministrations of the other Marys, signals her desire to be one with Christ. Her madness and her weeping - the uncontrolled expressions of her love - are to her the equivalent of a longing for death, Kristeva's "destructive anguish." But they also signify - in Irigaray's terms - the relentless immediacy (madness) into which the mystic is plunged when the one who has offered her a resolution from her earlier maternal madness is seen, in her vision, to die. In the following description of female mystical experience from Irigaray's "La Mystérique," "the unknowable," without "self-identity," is a description not only of mystical union but of the experience of femininity in "western" patriarchal culture as a state of indifferenciation from the maternal, which itself remains unsymbolised. Kempe's first postpartum madness attests to this lack of symbolisation of maternal experience in patriarchy and her later "ghostly labour" may be seen as a more empowering evocation of her earlier sorrow. Irigaray writes that:

Everything is relentlessly immediate in this marriage of the unknowable, which can never be evaded once it has been experienced.... Each becomes the other in consumption, the nothing of the other in consummation. Each will not in fact have known the identity of the other, has thus lost self-identity except for a hint of an imprint that each keeps in order the better to intertwine in a union already, finally, at hand (Irigaray 1985b, 196).

Kempe's desire to be one with Christ can be seen as a desire to return to the womb that is

signified by his tomb, to a state of maternal plenitude. The female hysteric's symptoms have also been considered by feminists, and particularly by Irigaray, as an effort to articulate the relationship between mother and daughter which is denied expression in the symbolic, an attempt on the hysteric's part to "give birth" to herself symbolically by depicting a woman-to-woman connection which is not based solely on female castration but privileges a kind of (maternal) excess (Irigaray 1985a, 136-8; Collins et al 1985, 249-50; David-Ménard 1989, 130-1). Kempe's returning carnality to the discourse of the Virgin could be read in this way since, like the double-bind depicted by hysterical expression in phallogentric culture, it is an expression of anguish which is ultimately unresolvable in mortal life. In terms of Kempe's culture, of course, her distraught mimesis represents a union which, however incomplete while she lives, is expected to be wholly achieved in eternity.

The anguished articulation of Kempe's maternal experience described above is represented more positively elsewhere in her *Book*, and I have considered some of these occasions in other chapters. In Chapter 75, however, there is an episode that recalls most specifically Kempe's earlier suffering, and simultaneously marks her as a healer, a woman through whom God works wonders. In this scene a distressed husband tells Kempe that his wife has gone mad after giving birth, and has been physically bound to stop her harming herself and others (Kempe 1988, 218). When Kempe visits her, the woman is quieted, but in the presence of others she is plagued by demonic sights. Eventually the woman is healed by Kempe's prayers, and is taken to the church to undergo the Purification ceremony that follows childbirth. As described in Chapter Three (179), the period after giving birth and before Purification, during which a woman was denied the sacrament, added to "the physical trauma of childbirth...the spiritual trauma of virtual exclusion from the Christian community" (Erickson 1976, 196) in the middle ages. This woman's anguish, like Kempe's earlier suffering, displays the traumatic effects of this exclusion and its associated fear of dying unpurified and not in a state of grace (Erickson 1976, 196).

This scene, as Sue Ellen Holbrook notes, clearly "reverses the opening one in the book," in which Kempe herself has "lost the power of words" (Holbrook 1985, 103). Here, Kempe's words, inspired by God, effect healing and serve as a sign of her own recovered judgement and her role as a woman whose words bear divine sanction. And yet, the *Book* suggests that

Kempe's ability to heal the mad woman is also dependent on her empathy, her own never-quite-resolved experience of being earlier denied participation in the Church's healing rituals. While this woman's madness is used to signify Kempe's recovery from such illness, the whole of her *Book* bears the marks of her condition as a woman whose life experiences fall outside the Church's requirements for female visionaries. It is these experiences which, inevitably, return again and again to shape her Passion(ate) devotions and to move towards a kind of resolution in them. Although this resolution is never conclusively achieved, the movement constituted by Kempe's struggles to reinvent her wayward past insistently returns maternal excess to Christian narrative.

Insofar as contemporary cultural understandings of maternity in the "western" world are informed by these same Judeo-Christian narratives, as Irigaray claims that they are, Kempe's discourse may be of interest and even instructive for twentieth-century women. Susan Suleiman contends that, still, "we know too little about what and how and why mothers write," most critical work on writers, even female writers, dealing with "the-mother-as-she-is-written rather than the-mother-as-she-writes" (Suleiman 1985, 358). Margery Kempe's writing strategies reflect the difficulties of "writing" as a mother and of achieving a public identity that are specific to her time and place, but they also shed light on the long history of the repression of maternity in the dominant discourses of the "west," which has continued to affect women up to the present time. In the next section I will explore another stage in this history and one specifically concerned with the development of the notion of hysteria, by investigating the function of the Virgin in the incomplete case study of Freud's most famous patient, "Dora."

5. 2 **Hysterical rapture and bodily madness: Dora and the Virgin Mary**

Freud's case history concerning eighteen-year-old Ida Bauer, whom he named "Dora," is one of his most famous and has been much written about by feminists (Ramas 1980; Gallop 1982, 132-50; Moi 1985b; Sprengnether 1985; 1990, 41-54; Cixous and Clément 1986, 48-9; Evans 1989, 81). My reading of the case takes up this interest in Dora as a resistant figure but with particular attention to the absent figure of the mother in her case, and relates this blind spot

in Freud to Dora's adoration of the Virgin in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (c. 1512-1513) painting and her related (according to Freud) phantom pregnancy or hysterical imitation of the Virgin. While Margery Kempe's "hysteria" may only be figuratively named as such, the Dora case has become "the psychoanalytic model for the etiology of hysteria" (Kahane 1985, 19) and provides several clues to specific Freudian dilemmas that have informed the history of this female "illness." Maria Ramas writes that "'Fragment of an Analysis' is considered a classic analysis of the structure and genesis of hysteria and has the first or last word in almost every psychoanalytic discussion" of the illness (Ramas 1980, 473). That the analysis was prematurely terminated by Dora herself was of great concern to Freud, but his fretting at the case's "failure" is symptomatic of both his attempt to cast Dora into a mould as part of a developing theory and the resistance she displays (which he names madness), itself a central feature of hysterical women.

Charles Bernheimer writes of this text that Freud:

while admitting that his own text is fragmentary, full of detours, gaps, and omissions...nevertheless insists on its difference from Dora's hysterically disjunctive and incoherent narrative. Thus the patient-analyst in attempting to cure himself is also involved in a kind of narrative cure, one intended to establish the dominance of a (male) discourse of scientific mastery (...) over a duplicitous (female) tale of guilty fantasies and repressed desires. The productive failure of this therapeutic effort is a symptomatic narrative that invites us to read Dora as an overdetermined figure in Freud's unconscious (Bernheimer 1985, 18).

And Madelon Sprengnether claims that "ultimately, [Freud's] own narrative displays the symptoms he attributes to the hysteric [Dora], whose pathology, he claims, manifests itself in the inability to construct a coherent story" (Sprengnether 1990, 40). I want to explore just a few of the more glaring omissions from Freud's text - aspects of the Freudian unconscious, if you will - in order to firstly chart how Freud's indifference to questions of female and specifically maternal desire (what Irigaray calls "the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry" (Irigaray 1985a, 13-129)) leads to his construction of Dora's physical responses to her intolerable situation as a kind of bodily "madness."

Secondly, I want to use the work of Irigaray and Kristeva on the Virgin Mary to explore something of the possible significance for Dora of her focus on and mimicry of the Madonna

in relation to her problematical connection with her mother. Finally, I will address Irigaray's work on divinity as a hysterical strategy by which she attempts to reimagine mother-daughter relations in the symbolic. This section, then, will not only critique the representation of hysterical rebellion as madness but attempt to understand what unrepresentable processes and events might have been being played out through Dora's specific hysterical behaviours, and in turn relate these to Irigaray's similar if more explicit visionary moves.

In the Lacanian formulation of hysteria, the superficial seductiveness of female hysterics (Dora's "leading Freud on," only to terminate the analysis prematurely) is seen as "the necessity of maintaining a puzzle - the relationship between the sexes as something impossible to know" (Evans 1991, 182). Hysterics wish to disrupt or remove themselves from the circuits of phallic desire (Grosz 1989, 134), to posit conventional heterosexual relationships and the roles associated with them as a perennially open question (Lacan 1987c). In the Lacanian view, the hysteric's "tendency to idealize nonsexual mothers" (Evans 1991, 183) reflects her desire for knowledge about her own sex from a female source (Lacan 1987c, 68). Evans' related claim that "the hysteric's idealization of wise, virginal mother figures thus retrospectively sheds light on a similar idealization of the hysteric expressed by many analysts and psychiatrists" (Evans 1991, 183) makes clear that Freud's discourse - indeed that of all psychoanalytic theory - is ever dependent upon the expression (in symptoms) of the non-satisfaction of the hysteric's desire. In other words, it requires knowledge about women from a female source. Thus Ned Lukacher writes that "Freud cures Elisabeth [von R.] of her symptoms by allowing her to present to him the impossibility of satisfying her desire; this presentation becomes itself a kind of satisfaction that one calls the cure." And "for Freud himself the presentation of the impossibility of satisfying his desire to understand the mystery of Elisabeth's divided subjectivity becomes itself a kind of satisfaction that one calls theory" (Lukacher 1989, xi. See also Cixous and Clément 1986, 9).

In exploring the process at work in the representation of Dora's psychic struggles through a relation to the Virgin Mary there is implicit, then, a critique of Freud's colonisation of the hysteric's excess of desire. But since hysteria consists in the attempt to represent the unrepresentable - the female body as other than lacking in the way conventionally required by phallic discourse - no interpretation of hysterical activity can escape complicity with this

colonising effect. Monique David-Ménard notes, however, that "it is important...to say at what price the universalism of the concept wins out over the hearing of a fantasy" in psychoanalytic theory, although "the one who undertakes that task is doubtless unable to say it, at least not while doing it" (David-Ménard 1989, 195). This, of course, is the great contribution of Freud's discovery of the unconscious:

Freudian thought ruins every philosophical or scientific idea of truth, not by dissolving the difference between interpretation and theory, but by making it possible to say at what price the universal is constructed - by making interpretation the aftermath of constructions of concepts that pretend to put an end to interpretation (David-Ménard 1989, 195).¹⁰

The following exploration is an attempt to identify and pay a different kind of attention to what was left aside by Freud in Dora's case, and to move towards answering the - perhaps ultimately unanswerable - question of the possible significance of the hysteric's "mad" struggle to re-present in non-phallic terms the separation from her mother.

The description of Dora's remaining "rapt in silent admiration" for two hours before Raphael's Sistine Madonna (Freud 1953, 96) in Dresden occurs as part of Freud's interpretation of what is named "The Second Dream" in the text of Dora's case. In the dream Dora found herself "wandering about alone in a strange town" (Freud 1953, 95) which Freud describes as "overdetermined," since the previous day she had had to show a visiting cousin around Vienna, which in turn reminded her of a prior visit to Dresden, when the scene before the Madonna took place. In order to critique the Freudian interpretation of both the dream and Dora's situation some background information will be necessary. "Dora" was brought reluctantly to Freud for treatment in 1900 by her father, whom Freud had previously treated for symptoms of confusion, "paralysis and slight mental disturbances" associated with an earlier contraction of syphilis (Freud 1953, 19).

Sprengnether outlines the history of Dora's symptoms as including: "shortness of breath, coughing, loss of voice, an apparent attack of appendicitis [according to Freud the hysterical pregnancy], catarrh, and a vaginal discharge of undetermined origin" (Sprengnether 1990, 42; Freud 1953, 22). She also apparently suffered from mild anorexia, "a limp, and a phobia which prevented [her] from walking past 'any man whom she saw in eager or affectionate

conversation with a lady'" (Freud 1953, 29, cited in Ramas 1980, 475). Ramas notes that "in addition, she was chronically depressed and had threatened suicide. She had long been on bad terms with her mother, but recently she had become hostile towards her father as well" (Ramas 1980, 472). Dora's father told Freud that his daughter's symptoms were doubtless due to an incident that had taken place two years previously, when the family were staying with some "intimate" friends, Frau and Herr K. and their children, in the Alps. At this time Dora had informed her mother that Herr K. had made a sexual proposal to her while the two were out walking, upon which she had slapped his face and run away. When confronted Herr K. denied all knowledge of the event, and Philip Bauer concluded that Dora had imagined the scene, since, according to Herr K., she "took no interest in anything but sexual matters" (Freud 1953, 26). This information Herr K. had from his wife, who confided that Dora had read books on such subjects in their house.

Both the Bauers and the K.'s were unhappy as couples, and Dora had become friendly with both the K.'s, but had formed an especially close friendship with Frau K. However Frau K. and Philip Bauer had been having a love affair for some years prior to and during the time in which Dora was seeing Freud, and during this time also Herr K.'s attempted seduction of Dora took place.¹¹ When Dora's father told Freud of this event, he described his relationship with Frau K., using the words, "you know...that I get nothing out of my own wife" (Freud 1953, 26). Freud observes that Dora was well aware that she had been "handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife" (Freud 1953, 34). As Ramas puts it, "to all intents and purposes, an exchange of women had taken place" (Ramas 1980, 476), and already in this scene Dora's mother is the absent party.

While Freud saw that Dora's anger at her father was justified, his construction of her psychic situation was intolerable to her, leading eventually to her termination of the analysis. To quote Ramas again:

At the most obvious and general level, Ida Bauer's hysteria signified refusal.... Freud recognized this, but never deciphered the meaning of the refusal. While Freud's analysis is complex, his main proposition is a simple one. Freud claimed that Ida Bauer was aroused by Herr K.'s pursuit of her, but was unwilling to acknowledge her desire consciously.... Her hysterical symptoms were compromise formations that represented both her desire to yield to Herr K. and a composite force rebelling

against that desire (Ramas 1980, 477).

In Freud's interpretation of Dora's case he takes the part of Herr K., describing him as an attractive man (Freud 1953, 29) and regarding Dora's actions rather than his as misplaced. As Sprengnether points out, Freud sees both seduction attempts "through the eyes of Herr K., going as far as to provide Herr K. with an erection at the scene of the kiss" (Sprengnether 1990, 46). Freud thus produces a "virile construction of Herr K.'s advances," representing "'normal' - that is, aggressive - male heterosexuality. By representing Dora's refusal of Herr K.'s courtship as abnormal or 'hysterical,' Freud protects the Oedipal as opposed to the preoedipal fiction" (Sprengnether 1990, 47).

Freud's emphasis on the heterosexual, postoedipal paradigm with its blindness to inter-female relationships necessitates the suppression of Dora's mother from his account of Dora's life and the related failure, admitted in a footnote, to "discover in time and to inform the patient that her homosexual (gynaecophilic) love for Frau K. was the strongest unconscious current in her mental life" (Freud 1953, 120n).¹² As Jane Gallop (citing Cixous) observes, "the Dora case is punctuated by women being declared 'nothing.' Both Herr K. and Dora's father say that of their wives" (Cixous and Clément 1975, 281, cited in Gallop 1982, 147). Describing Kathe Bauer's obsession with housecleaning, Freud states that "such women (and this applied to the patient's mother) are entirely without insight into their illness, so that one essential characteristic of an 'obsessional neurosis' is lacking" (Freud 1953, 20), a statement which reflects the extent of his interest in her: she knows nothing of importance; she is "nothing."¹³

Dora's adoration of the Madonna in Raphael's painting, recalled whilst recounting "the second dream" to Freud, is connected by Freud with his interpretation of an acute attack of "supposed" appendicitis suffered by Dora, prior to getting her period with violent pains, several months previously (this attack of appendicitis is also mentioned by Dora in the course of musing on her dream). Upon asking his patient when this attack had occurred in relation to the scene by the lake, and discovering that it had taken place nine months later, Freud decided that Dora had been "enabled...with the modest means at her disposal (the pains and the menstrual flow) to realize a phantasy of childbirth" (Freud 1953, 103). Dora's remembered rapture before the figure of the Virgin is thus interpreted by Freud as a hysterical

identification with the Madonna, figuring - in Freud's view - both Dora's desire for a child by Herr K. and her wish to protect her virginity, to consciously refuse Herr K.'s attentions.

Sprengnether notes "the coercive quality of Freud's interpretations and...the uneasy tone of the narrative" in relation to Dora's dreams (Sprengnether 1990, 50) and concludes that, "on an interpretive level, [Freud] subjects her to a process of defloration, impregnation, and parturition in an aggressively Oedipal fashion at the same time that he invalidates her rejection by naming it hysteria" (Sprengnether 1990, 50). Freud's reading of Dora's fixation with the Madonna provides endorsement of his belief that Dora has repressed her conflicted desire for Herr K. The "hysterical pregnancy and childbirth.... confirms his view that Dora secretly wished for a different upshot" (Jacobus 1986, 174; Freud 1953, 104) to the scene that occurred by the lake. Freud's conclusions resolve this situation in a conventionally heterosexual manner and in the process Dora's own mother is excised once again from the scene.

The fact that Dora ultimately colludes with Freud in this interpretation (after being told that her love for Herr K. has persisted Freud notes that she "disputed the fact no longer" (Freud 1953, 104)) may be explained on one level in terms of the female hysteric's inability to "reabsorb the mother's potency" (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1978, cited in Evans 1991, 167). For hysterical women, caught between the need to struggle against maternal power by gaining the protection of the paternal realm, and a fear of adult heterosexual relations (experienced as a "massive misreading" of their need for male protection) (Evans 1991, 167), bargaining with male power ensures a sense of psychic survival. This would explain Dora's continuing to receive the attentions of Herr K. (Freud 1953, 28) following his attempt to seduce her, which she rebuffed. As David-Ménard points out:

In hysteria, the connection to seduction, to the man, is so strong only because it masks terror of the maternal, the impossibility of picturing incest with the mother. The hysteric demands from the man that he guarantee that she will not have to confront that which binds her to the mother (David-Ménard 1988, 54).

The hysteric's symptom stems from the absence of symbolic representation of her relationship with her mother but also from her excess of desire, which disables her from accepting herself as lacking and so from becoming a subject of language:

[The hysteric] relates to her femininity, as incarnated in the mother, as something she must at once adopt and resist (Geahchan 1973; Schaeffer 1986), and to her sexuality, as incarnated in her father's desire, as simultaneously supremely frightening and as a temptingly convenient tool in her search for love and protection. Faced with choices all of which seem to represent an inconceivable loss (Fain and Bégoïn-Guignard 1984), the hysteric remains inwardly on the threshold of sexual difference while outwardly representing an exaggerated version of femininity. This false femininity, mistaken so often for willful trickery, performs the multiple function of protecting her from her inner confusion, expressing indirectly her anger at a society that provides her with an unpalatable either/or choice of gender roles, and attracting at least the attention, if not the affection, of those around her (Evans 1991, 167-8).

The question to be asked in Dora's case is what might her adoration and mimicry of the Virgin Mary suggest about her repressed and problematic relation to her mother. And given that Freud constructs his narrative on the basis of Dora's case, the only way to go about answering this question is to observe the symptoms in his narrative, the "uneasy tone" that pervades his "coercive" assertions (Sprengnether 1990, 50). When Freud describes outlining what he considers to be the facts concerning Dora's "phantasy of childbirth" to Dora, he includes a substantial footnote on the Madonna, in which he states his view that:

The "*Madonna*" was obviously Dora herself; in the first place because of the "adorer"¹⁴ who had sent her the pictures [p. 96], in the second place because she had won Herr K.'s love chiefly by the motherliness she had shown towards his children [p. 25], and lastly because she had had a child though she was still a girl (this being a direct allusion to the phantasy of childbirth). Moreover, the notion of the "Madonna" is a favourite counter-idea in the mind of girls who feel themselves oppressed by imputations of sexual guilt, - which was the case with Dora.... If the analysis had been continued, Dora's maternal longing for a child would probably have been revealed as an obscure though powerful motive in her behaviour (Freud 1953, 104n).

Freud's interpretation of the Madonna with regard to Dora relies upon the orthodox depiction of her - which is also Raphael's - as a vessel for the desire of the Father and an object of masculine adoration. As Jacobus notes:

The Christian dogma of the Immaculate Conception depends on the fantasy of the Madonna's unconsciousness; one might almost call it her hystericization. She must become a maternal body unawares in order to be sanctified as the mother of God. In this sense, the Christian Madonna is a sublimated version of the hysteric. Like

Dora's, her body swells of its own accord; she knows nothing about it (Jacobus 1986, 140).

Jacobus concludes that Dora's falling silent before the image of the Virgin hystericises "the Madonna's muting by Christian motherhood and the innocence of carnal knowledge which makes hers a Virgin Birth" (Jacobus 1986, 140). Freud's long footnote on the Madonna finishes with a reference to Frau K. in relation to Dora's precocious sexual knowledge: "Behind the almost limitless series of displacements which were thus brought to light, it was possible to divine the operation of a single simple factor - Dora's deep-rooted, homosexual love for Frau K" (Freud 1953, 105n). As Jacobus points out, Dora's love for Frau K., passed over by Freud, suggests an alternative, possibly preoedipal scenario to the Oedipal interpretation of events on which he aggressively insists: "he is blinkered when it comes to dealing with a triangle in which a man [Dora's father] mediates the relationship between two women" (Jacobus 1986, 142).¹⁵

Freud's relegation of the important but belated insight concerning Dora's love for Frau K. to the end of a footnote on the Madonna suggests that the Madonna serves her usual function as repository for unsymbolisable aspects of female sexuality - maternity in its specificity and love between women - in his narrative. To quote Jacobus again:

As the other of the missing mother, the Sistine Madonna becomes a symptom of the repressed maternal discourse which surfaces in the sublimated discourse of Christianity. Where Freud falls silent, the other woman in the picture hints at the existence of a rival source of instruction, secular rather than religious, unsanctioned rather than sanctified, maternal rather than paternal, oral rather than written (Jacobus 1986, 142).

Dora's imitation of the Virgin's muteness, along with her other (oral) hysterical symptoms, invest the Madonna with an unfathomable power. Ramas likewise claims that:

The image of the Madonna and child is a preoedipal phantasy that suggests oral sexuality. This image, as well as the location of Ida Bauer's hysterical symptoms - chronic cough, gastric pains, mild anorexia - indicate that the conflict, which was framed in terms of genital sexuality, was transposed to and played out on the oral terrain (Ramas 1980, 499).

This is certainly true. But if Dora's oral symptoms are the result of her inability or refusal to

accept her body as lacking, we might well ask what special function the Madonna serves for her in the articulation of this "rebellion." For Freud, the Madonna represents Dora's unacknowledged desire for a child, her repressed longing to tread the path of "normal" femininity and heterosexual union with Herr K. David-Ménard points out what is at stake in an identification such as Dora's with the Virgin when she describes the relationship between the hysteric and her body as one of a particular kind of lack:

The hysteric lacks a body¹⁶.... But...if the hysteric lacks an erotogenic body, it is because he or she passionately rejects the lack, dreams of a perfect erotic body that could display itself as a whole.... There is obliteration of the subject by a body that could be figured as a whole and adored as Dora adores the Madonna or Frau K., through her gaze (David-Ménard 1989, 130).

The hysteric suffers from the experience of an excess of body insofar as the body which must be represented as castrated in the phallic domain is "too much," there is nothing left with which to signify other (unsymbolised) desires. She has "*an inability to conceive of any reality but that of her own body*, with the result that she uses this ground to express her refusal of an unrepresentable incompleteness" (David-Ménard 1989, 127). As Evans puts it, the hysteric "drowns the symbolic order of language in the immediacy of a bodily act, thereby challenging...the primordial law of castration" (David-Ménard 1989, cited in Evans 1991, 188).

The Madonna, with her "perfect erotic body...figured as a whole," simultaneously stands in for the lack which Dora cannot or refuses to represent to herself through her own body, and the dream of impossible completeness to which her hysterical symptoms attest. The Virgin Mary is nothing but body and as such remains unrepresented in her agency in Christian myth, according to Irigaray (1991d, 167; 1993b, 68). She symbolises maternal "lack" in Christian tradition. But she is also, in the Kristevan view, a figure of plenitude and ambiguous nostalgia: her milk and tears, "evoking sorrowful humanity," represent the disruptive impact of the semiotic in language (Kristeva 1987, 249-50):

Starting with the high Christly sublimation for which it yearns and occasionally exceeds, and extending to the extralinguistic regions of the unnameable, the Virgin Mother occupied the tremendous territory on this and that side of the parenthesis of

language. She adds, to the Christian trinity and to the Word that delineates their coherence the heterogeneity they salvage (Kristeva 1987, 250).

As Anna Smith states, "Kristeva suggests that maternal love [for whom Mary's 'privileged position allows her to stand,'] is founded, like all our loves, on loss, but that it retains something distinctive - the capacity to remind us of and compensate us for our fleshly identity" (Smith 1993, 69). The Virgin is suggestive of the loss experienced by all speaking subjects but her privileged language of milk and tears recalls a time of wholeness which existed prior to representation: "milk and tears: oral absorption, fusion, and the moment of its loss: symbols of a presymbolic, a nonlinguistic order of relationship" (Weir 1993, 82).

When Dora hystericises the Madonna's muteness and, later, her "virgin birth," she represents the Virgin's contradictory status (the Virgin as icon of femininity who yet lacks female sexual experience) as a figure for her own impossible position. Dora's oral fixation stops her from experiencing genital erotogeneity. Her disgust with sexuality is, in David-Ménard's reading, "one side of a process whose other side is the displacement of erotogeneity that mobilizes the body of *jouissance*" (Lukacher 1989, xv):

So that no part of the body has to represent an absent portion of *jouissance*, a missing portion, this *jouissance* has to be present, *dargestellt* and not *vorgestellt*: hysterical conversion as precipitation of the subject's entire existence in attacks that privilege certain erotogenic zones in an attempt to totalize the body, to ensure that nothing has to be represented as lost (David-Ménard 1989, 104).

The hysterical symptom constitutes the hysterical subject as physically both present and absent: Dora absents herself from the world of adult sexuality by her behaviour, which yet dramatises her desire that nothing should be experienced as lost. The Virgin, too, is simultaneously present and absent to Dora. She is silent in Christian tradition but everything - the salvific events of the Gospels - depends upon her "yes" (Irigaray 1991d, 167). Dora's oral symptoms, like the Virgin's initial submission, have the effect of freezing her desire even as they are an attempt to express it. And a "pregnancy" achieved without heterosexual contact is the outcome of both Mary's and Dora's oral responses. The Virgin is untouched by any man, yet commands the adoration of all men. She is thus the perfect model for Dora, who flees sexual contact but is happy to receive tangible signs of the admiration of Herr K (Freud 1953, 28; Grosz 1989 134).

I think it is possible to conclude, contrary to Freud's belief that the Virgin merely symbolises Dora's repressed maternal longings, that the Madonna is the site of a complex intersection of processes involving Dora's refusal to allow part of her body to signify lack (in the conventional manner) and her inability to represent separation from her mother in empowering terms.¹⁷ The collective writers of "Questioning the Unconscious: The Dora Archive," suggest something like this, noting that:

In the second dream Dora attempts unsuccessfully to return to her mother; indeed she goes home, only to find her mother absent.¹⁸ This places Dora's contemplation of the Sistine Madonna in another perspective. Her immobilization in front of this image recalls the fascination of the mirror-stage, in which the child is held in its mother's arms before its own reflection. It may be, therefore, that Dora's deepest desire is not identification with the mother (in the sense of the assumption of the mother's role) but fusion with the mother, a return to that "desperate paradise" which is riven by entry into the Symbolic (Collins et al, 1985, 249-50).¹⁹

Dora's virginal "pregnancy" may reflect her inability to make her body signify the renounced pleasures of her preoedipal experience and so to represent the maternal separation in empowering terms. Her gazing on the Virgin, what David-Ménard calls her "passion for form," impels an infantile regression and "prevents her body from taking on an erotic configuration":

Dora's orality and the specific way her passion for seeing comes into play perhaps allude to what binds a woman to her mother and is so difficult to symbolize.... It may be that [Dora's] passionate interest in the form of another woman's body, along with her voracious orality, manifests a woman's need to symbolize differently the experience of emptiness that her separation from her mother's body entails. And we know that, in the remainder of her story, that inclusion in her mother is indeed what Dora faces. She has identified with the only feature Freud picks up concerning her mother: the housewife psychosis (David-Ménard 1989, 131-2).

In the Kristevan view, motherhood effects "the reunion of a woman-mother with the body of her mother" (Kristeva 1980a, 239), the mother who had to be "killed" so that the child could become a subject (and a woman) but who can never be killed completely as that would mean death for the daughter herself (Kristeva 1988a, 28-9, cited in Oliver 1993, 63). Dora's phantom pregnancy, achieved without male contact, makes her - like the Virgin - a child and yet a mother, or, to put it another way, neither a child nor a mother. Through this hysterical

response to the ambiguous figure of the Virgin she refuses her own castration while preserving a sort of connection with her mother. She refuses to acknowledge that part of her body must signify lack, which means that she cannot effectively represent separation from and so remains locked in combat with her mother. And yet, if Dora accepts herself as neither a child nor a mother then she denies the necessity of obliterating her mother by consenting to take her place. Perhaps Dora's passion for the Madonna and her mimicry of the Virgin's maternal state may, then, be an attempt to reconfigure the impossible separation from her mother by way of a third term which isn't entirely subsumed within the phallic function.

The Virgin herself, as arch-hysteric of the Christian tradition, may seem ambiguous and excessive enough for Dora to imagine her as representing a way out of her predicament. The Virgin's physicality, unsymbolised as such in Christian myth, achieves a disturbing return through milk and tears (according to Kristeva her compensatory signs (1987, 249-50)) and the violent displays of grief such as those in medieval representations described earlier. The Virgin's sorrow is not her own; she is both hysterical (i.e., like a daughter who feels compelled to seek the attention of both parents through her extreme somatic behaviours²⁰), and maternal, represented as a container and not in her own right. In an interview, David-Ménard suggests that women's dependence on "the phallic problematic" can only be altered by an "analysis of what is terrifying in the relation to the mother and finding forms for symbolizing that." If women can somehow "face their difficulty in separating from the mother while identifying with the mother in a certain way, they will be able to symbolize that which constitutes them without going through the intermediary of seduction of men" (David-Ménard 1988, 54). Irigaray depicts female hysteria as such an attempt at mediation when she asks:

Isn't hysteria a privileged place for preserving - but "in latency," "in sufferance" - that which does not speak? And, in particular (even according to Freud. . .), that which is not expressed in woman's relation to her mother, to herself, to other women? Those aspects of women's earliest desires that find themselves reduced to silence in terms of a culture that does not allow them to be expressed (Irigaray 1985a, 136).

Since the Virgin is both a mother and a hysteric, could she perhaps symbolise "what is terrifying in relation to the mother" for Dora?

For Kristeva, of course, the Virgin represents the "symbolic-paternal" version of motherhood par excellence (Jacobus 1986, 149; Oliver 1993, 52), the "resorption of femininity within the Maternal" that is brought to its peak in Christianity (Kristeva 1987, 236; 1981, 158). She writes that "the war between mother and daughter" is not addressed by the myth of the Virgin, and the Virgin's status as adjunct to the paternal Word would for Kristeva make Dora's identification with the Madonna a sterile one. Kristeva - unlike Irigaray - does not see the hysteric as a heroine. Instead, as Alice Jardine states:

if Kristeva does have a primary text, it is Freud.... While recognizing hysteria as a historical form of contestation, she also relentlessly emphasizes its very real limits: the fantasy of the phallic, all-powerful mother through which women reconnect with the very Law they had set out to fight (Jardine 1985, 263).

Irigaray, however, not only proposes new readings of female hysteria but of female participation in acts traditionally belonging to God, to the divine. In the third section of *Marine Lover*, as we have seen, she argues for a reinterpretation of Mary's role in the birth and death of Christ (Irigaray 1991d, 172-3), an essential part of her call for a revision of Christ's life and the cultural impact of the resultant Christian myths. Irigaray contends that Mary's place in Christian myth, because it is fundamental but officially suppressed, has the power to transform our understanding of the Christian religion if rethought. In her deconstruction of the canonical stories, Irigaray posits Mary as a divine figure who has not been thought of as divine since "God is found only in Distance.... encountered only through death and resurrection," and not in the dark mysteries of birth which nonetheless must precede incarnation (Irigaray 1991d, 171). For Irigaray, too, of course, the enquiry into what remains unsymbolised of Mary's contribution to Christianity is explicitly linked to her visionary project of (re)imagining what it might mean to be a specific female self in the symbolic instead of the other of the male same, and how such an achievement might become possible.

Because Irigaray reads Mary's divinity - her contribution to the divine - as an irreducible aspect of the construction of Christian religion, and because her focus on interpreting this contribution is part of her broader desire to refigure and change women's experiences as mothers and daughters in the symbolic, an Irigarayan reading of Dora's mimicry of the Virgin would produce a different result from a Kristevan one. For Kristeva, every human being must

rid itself of its mother, but if a woman "enters...combat" with her mother, struggling to separate while recognising the relationship, "this gives rise to fairly serious forms of psychosis" (Kristeva 1988b, 136-7). Kristeva writes that "language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss" which is the loss of the emergent subject's mother (Kristeva 1989, 43). As Kelly Oliver explains, in Kristeva's view:

the child must agree to lose the mother in order to be able to imagine her or name her. The negation that this process involves is not the negation of the mother. Rather, it is the negation of the loss of the mother that signals proper entry into language (Oliver 1993, 62).

The child must consent to lose the mother so that it can find her again in signs and in language, and this "finding," this compensation, constitutes the negation of the initial loss (Kristeva 1989, 43). For Irigaray the fact that women especially cannot adequately represent the loss of their mothers means that the relationship and women's experiences are already in the realm of the inchoate and inexpressible, of madness: "The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother," she writes, "where are we to find them? In what darkness, what madness, have they been abandoned?" (Irigaray 1991e, 39).

Consequent on these differing views of mother/daughter relations in the symbolic, Irigaray and Kristeva, as we have seen, take different lines on the Virgin. For Kristeva, to imagine the mother as a subject rather than a "*filter*": a passage, the threshold on which nature and culture confront one another.... is the kernel from which religious mystifications develop, the soil of their breeding ground is this phantasy of the phallic mother" (Kristeva 1981, 159). In other words, Christianity's "hypostatisation" of the heterogeneous maternal body through the figure of the Virgin is the negative outcome of attempting to assign the mother a subject position; the subversive power of maternal experience is thereby annulled and frozen (Kristeva 1981, 159).

Irigaray, however, engages in "religious mystifications" of her own, as I have argued, weaving alternative readings in and out of her analyses of religious concerns such as the position of the Virgin. Rather than arguing that women must at all costs avoid the type of recuperation enacted on the figure of Mary, Irigaray reinterprets Mary in view of the problems

women/mothers face in the symbolic order. This is part of her broader contention that Christian mythology not only enforces the social order but is a potential site of reformulation of social norms because the absoluteness of its claims rely on the disavowal of the feminine. In Irigaray's view that which sets itself up as singular must always annihilate its other in the process, but can never do so completely. This is particularly so when maternal physicality is disavowed; therefore Christianity and indeed "western" culture must be made to recognise and rehabilitate its debt to the maternal. For Kristeva the feminine and particularly the maternal, as figured in Christianity, serve as "the ultimate affirmation of transcendence" (Kristeva 1981, 158), but Irigaray's own "mystifications," her transfiguring of "the divine" in relation to women's position in the symbolic, refuse the notion of transcendence as such and force its return to the physical, indeed the maternal, sphere.

Dora's imitation of the Virgin might well, then, in an Irigarayan reading, appear as a strategy for attempting to represent the impossible separation from her mother, as an altered version of "the maternal function" that is repressed through the figure of Mary in traditional Christianity, but never completely. In Irigaray's view, Mary stands as an icon for everything concerning the maternal body that is barred expression in the symbolic (Irigaray 1991d, 166-8). Within the traditional myths about Mary is found the paradigm of male-appropriated motherhood but also its challenge to the dominant order of things, a challenge that consists in Christianity's inability to escape the fact of the body (Irigaray 1989a, 65; 1991a, 169; 1991d, 172; 1993b, 60-1).

In *Marine Lover* Irigaray rewrites Mary by suggesting her as a "divine source" (Irigaray 1991d, 172). In Irigaray's terms, to act as "divine" means to serve as a threshold for a new incarnational ethics in which no one type of subject bears the burden of "flesh." Instead each is symbolised specifically and physically through the divine, that which partakes of each and yet creates a space between them. Irigaray's figuration of Mary as "divine" elaborates on Mary's quintessential mediating act, bearing the Christ, signalled by her affirmative response to the angelic Annunciation. For Irigaray, Mary's physicality is an ambiguous and unassimilable element in Christianity, and its mediating properties are where its subversive potential most strongly lies.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray writes in utopian mode of ordinary mothers and daughters as figures for a future "love for the feminine" among women, and she recasts this relationship too in terms of the threshold, the "divine":

Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. *Both of them*. In a female whole that, furthermore, is not closed off. Constituting, perhaps, both of them in one female whole that is not closed up, the sign of *infinity*? Achieving, through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, *in-finite* (Irigaray 1993b, 105).

Here, Irigaray refigures women's boundarylessness, their having "no place" of their own in the symbolic order - while men appropriate the female/maternal body as their nourishing home - as a kind of "infinity" achieved via acts of love. She seeks to imagine an extendable limit (called "infinity") to women's attempts to be both mothers and daughters at the same time, to confound the law of the same by which "the two become at once accomplices and rivals in order to move into the single possible position in the desire of man" (Irigaray 1993b, 102). Irigaray reimagines a space of exchange or movement between the figures of mothers and daughters, who cannot yet become independent subjects but can only replace each other according to phallic law, and she constructs this space of mediation from and within the bodies of mothers and daughters themselves. Instead of characterising female bodies as lacking, she rereads the site of castration as a moveable, "divine" (or infinite) threshold. The divine/threshold is a space of plenitude and dynamic excess which resists recuperation by phallic law. The divine as a figure of extension for the (female) symbolic body thus bears similarities with (female) hysterical activity which overwhelms the symbolic body with an excess of desire manifested in physical symptoms.

Irigaray's reading of these filial and maternal acts of love as mimetic acts depicts them as tactical, excessive performances of women's conventional roles; in this sense they are hysterical. In order to "make possible a love among us" - in order to be subjects of the symbolic order - "women need to double and play what we are twice over, lovingly" (Irigaray 1993b, 105). Love is figured as the ethical impulse behind such transformation while "infinity" or the divine is its "safeguard," its moveable limit. The divine is the means of creating a space in the symbolic for otherwise impossible acts of filial-maternal love, but it is also that which cannot be denied in terms of the body, as made clear by Irigaray's figuring

of it through the mucous membranes which mother and daughter share:

A world for women. Something that at the same time has never existed and which is already present, although repressed, latent, potential. Eternal mediators for the incarnation of the body and of the world of man, women seem never to have produced the singularity of their own body and world. The originality of a sameness that would relate to incarnation.... This *sameness*, quite apart from everything that can be said about it from the outside, has a way of relating to its appearance which cannot be equated with that of the masculine world, as a result of the way it lives in mucous (Irigaray 1993b, 109).

While for Dora, the Virgin may hold forth but cannot fulfil the promise of mediating her inescapable struggle, serving as a bridge between corporeal reality and impossible female desire that Dora cannot cross, Irigaray recasts the mucous membranes of the body, that which presently mediates without symbolisation, as divine: as a substance which exists both inside and outside - at the threshold of - the body/self and as a symbolic anchor for developing a notion of a female self or selves. In writing about "the mucous" as "possibly correspond[ing] to something that needs to be thought through today" (Irigaray 1993b, 110), as an unsymbolised material substance particularly associated with women and repressed in psychoanalytic and philosophical discourse, Irigaray suggests that:

because the mucous has a special touch and properties, it would stand in the way of the transcendence of a God that was alien to the flesh, a God of immutable, stable truth. On the contrary, the mucous would summon the god to return or to come in a new incarnation, a new parousia (Irigaray 1993b, 110).

Irigaray refigures the traditional masculine, Christian God as feminine by positing the mucous as property of the female and as an irreducible challenge to the notion of (masculine, phallic) transcendence.

The mucous, unlike the Madonna's body as traditionally understood, is that which can never be wholly appropriated by another. It is a symbol of profound embodiment and of the potential for "divinity" or creativity that is contained within the female body. It is:

never merely something available, never merely a material ready for some hand or some tool to use to construct a piece of work. And equally something that cannot possibly be denied. That always leaves a trace behind: nostalgia for a return to the

womb.... Impossible to suppress or forget entirely, without trace, it is only in an *act* that the mucous perceives and loves itself. Without thesis, without position outside itself. The potency achieves "its" act which is never set in a finished piece of work. But which is always *half-open*. Never amounts simply to consumption (Irigaray 1993b, 111).

The mucous, as a figure for a feminine divine, the sensible transcendental which proceeds beyond binaries, marks "nostalgia for a return to the womb" but is present to itself only in "an act" (of love), thereby escaping phallic recuperation. This act, too, is "never set in a finished piece of work." The mucous, read as an image of Irigaray's reworking of Christian divinity, has several things in common with (Dora's) hysteria, especially in the David-Ménard reading outlined earlier. And since Irigaray - unlike Kristeva - *does* see the hysteric as a heroine, and moreover acts the hysteric herself in her writing, this should perhaps come as no surprise. In fact, in an essay translated as "Women Amongst Themselves: Creating a Woman-to-Woman Sociality," Irigaray connects "women's so-called hysterical symptomatology" with their search for modes of expression for female jouissance, which she depicts as relating to "a dimension ranging from the most corporeal to the most spiritual," and as generating "a passage or bridge between what is most earthly and what is most celestial" (Irigaray 1991, 190).

According to David-Ménard, as stated previously, hysterical symptoms represent the visible aspect of a process whose invisible side is a "displacement of erotogeneity" (Lukacher 1989, xv) that results in the somatic symptom, as the body frantically attempts to symbolise itself as an undiminished whole (David-Ménard 1989, 104). Dora's fixation with the Virgin represents, as others have suggested, her desire to return to the womb, or at least to express in her body (in the present) a continuity of experience in which preoedipal pleasures can accede to symbolisation. Her imitation of the Virgin suggests that she desires to be neither mother nor daughter in the symbolic order insofar as both these options require a repression of her jouissance, which is unacceptable to her, and an acknowledgement of specific lack in phallic terms. Or, perhaps, she desires to be both mother *and* daughter in the way in which Irigaray means it: to refuse the available options for a female in the symbolic by exceeding them, "doubl[ing] and play[ing] what we are twice over" in order to suggest, through symptoms, the possibilities of love among women. Indeed, Dora's love for Frau K., passed over by Freud, might seem to suggest this interpretation.

Irigaray's divine has in common with Dora's hysterical activity - her oral symptoms and her rapture before and mimicry of the Virgin - status only in the passage between opposites (between mothers and daughters or women and men as specific subjects, in Irigaray's case, and between the rejected symbolic body and the absent body of *jouissance*, in Dora's) which momentarily disrupts the circuits of phallic desire. As David-Ménard notes, what Freud defined as hysterical conversion involves "a momentary extinction of discourse and a presentification of the impossible" (David-Ménard 1989, 181), and "in hysteria, in the spectacular crisis with so much excess, there is the will to actualize something crazy, to represent it in order for it to exist" (David-Ménard 1988, 58). What Irigaray calls divine, the strategic possibilities for women of a reworked notion of "infinity" that would partake of and so create space between different subjects (principally women and men), bears similarities with and has specific bearing on Dora's doomed struggles to symbolise separation from her mother in non-phallic terms. And yet Irigaray's conscious use of hysterical strategy in her writings is also worlds apart from Dora's reactive symptoms which we may read only as portrayed in the Freudian text.

Irigaray's avowedly hysterical response to the limitations imposed on women by the phallogocentric order have more in common with the writer of my next textual object of investigation, Julia Kristeva. While recognising the obvious ways in which the views of these two writers differ (Gallop 1982, 114-6, 121; Grosz 1989, 100-4; Sellers 1991, 52; Oliver 1993, 176-9), I will argue that some of Kristeva's writing tactics resemble, in their performative qualities, Irigaray's mimetic and disruptive philosophical style, if not her overtly mystical moves.

5.3 The poetics of passion: Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater"

Hers is a divine that does not need to erect any capital letter. Hers an omnipresence that pertains to no Person. Creeping through the mesh of any code of law, the nets of institutions, the organization of Churches. That uproot her from her most living source of inspiration. By assigning her a place in the religious scenario. As a receptive-passive female extra, not as a divine source. Flesh that has already become word beyond any locatable figure. The holy spirit? (Irigaray 1991d, 172)

A woman's discourse, would that be it? Did not Christianity attempt, among other things, to freeze that see-saw? To stop it, tear women away from its rhythm, settle them permanently in the spirit? Too permanently... (Kristeva 1987, 259).

In "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva discusses feminist struggles in relation to women's place in the phallic domain, the symbolic "order of sacrifice and...language" (Kristeva 1986c, 199).

She writes:

No longer wishing to be excluded or no longer content with the function which has always been demanded of us (to maintain, arrange and perpetuate this socio-symbolic contract as mothers, wives, nurses, doctors, teachers...), how can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it? (Kristeva 1986c, 199).

Kristeva's own answers to this question may be said, like Irigaray's, to be strategic and performative. Circling around the issue of the nature of women's place in the symbolic, Kristeva is reluctant to formulate general statements about the specific representation of women. Instead, she recommends a "self-analytical" attitude,

which - without refusing or sidestepping this socio-symbolic order - consists in trying to explore the constitution and functioning of this contract, starting less from the knowledge accumulated about it (anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics) than from the very personal affect experienced when facing it as subject and as a woman (Kristeva 1986c, 200).

Such affective formulations are "hesitant but always dissident" and attempt to articulate "a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract" (Kristeva 1986c, 200). Perhaps Kristeva's most obvious tentative articulation of such a discourse is her 1976 text "Stabat Mater," an analysis of the function of the Virgin Mary

in traditional Christianity and "western" culture as it bears on the cultural status and personal experience of motherhood.

In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva constructs a kind of dialogue with the figure of the Virgin as she is traditionally understood. On the right-hand side of the page Kristeva writes, in "academic," scholarly mode, about the Virgin and her place in "western" civilisation, and this part of the text frequently takes over, covering the entire page of the work. On the left-hand side of the page, at intervals, appears a record of the "personal affect[s]" felt by Kristeva during her own experience of motherhood, a lyrical account which has been read variously as the voice of the child in opposition to the mother (Suleiman 1985, 369); the semiotic body (Oliver 1993, 53); and the "flesh made Word" (Jacobus 1986, 186).

As well as interrogating the terms of female sacrifice in the symbolic order through a tentative exploration of a language "closer to the body," "Stabat Mater"'s dual structure theatricalises Kristeva's own formulation of maternity as "a strange fold that changes culture into nature...speaking into biology" (Kristeva 1987, 259-60). The interaction of the text's two types of language - one logical, philosophical, learned; the other poetic, strange, emotive - summons a space between in which the reader, through the act of reading and interpretation, must consider the maternal/physical origin of language addressed by the essay as a whole and the question of her own maternal source. This interpretation is suggested by Kelly Oliver's view of "Stabat Mater" as signifying "the split columns of the mother's sex" through which the child is birthed (Oliver 1993, 54). While it is ultimately up to the reader to bridge the text's two types of discourse, this act of discerning meaning involves bridging the passage between Kristeva's view that in order to be speaking subjects "matricide is our vital necessity" (Kristeva 1989, 27), and her production of "a perverse witness to the excess of maternal alterity overflowing the symbolic system" (Ziarek 1993, 70-1).²¹ The reader must confront the question of her origin as a speaking/reading subject who replaces the absent mother through her negotiation of the Kristevan dialectic between sacrifice and excess.

Alison Ainley observes that Kristeva

posits motherhood as the site of potentially reconceptualized notions of production and reproduction, as different kinds of time, a different notion of identity. In this

sense it represents a possible irruption or interruption of the Symbolic, in the conjunction of stasis and dynamism, of cyclical and monumental time with the linear time of genealogy and grammar. In "Stabat Mater," the personal, left-hand, "other" side of the text irrupts into the historical mapping of the Virgin Mary as paradigmatic mother. Textually, this double writing corresponds to the mother as a body positioned and repositioned in language, but a body with intimations of its own splitting, separation and pleasure (Ainley 1990, 58).

But what is the significance of these intimations? And how far can Kristeva herself be conscious of (master of) this experimental process without setting herself up - like the Virgin - as a phallic mother, thus binding the subversive impact of her "double writing" and its maternal (subject) matter? In the text Kristeva attempts to inhabit, if only briefly, the space between maternal madness (such as that which would result from "rejection of the paternal function...generating psychoses" (Kristeva 1986c, 199)) and phallic recuperation of motherhood. In her refusal to posit or take up a female "subject position" (here named maternal), her persistence in maintaining an ambivalent relationship to the Virgin - neither complete identification nor substitution, as indicated by the two columns of text, but a kind of subversive mimicry - "Stabat Mater" may be read as a hysterical piece like Kempe's *Book* or Freud's study of Dora.

Kristeva can be seen to take a "hysterical" stance in "Stabat Mater" as a result of the two speaking positions she articulates, as mother and female academic, both of which she seeks to undermine in their conventional formations. "Stabat Mater" can be seen to exemplify her later statement about how women "might try to understand their sexual and symbolic difference in the framework of social, cultural and professional realization," so as to "go further and call into question the very apparatus itself" (Kristeva 1986c, 198). However, the text's self-critical workings and indeed Kristeva's own views on motherhood as a process without a subject (Kristeva 1980a, 237) require that Kristeva, even while writing "as a mother," feign innocence of sexuality (her experience of motherhood) within it, since writing as an intellectual (becoming a speaking subject) necessitates losing the mother: "Matricide is our vital necessity," she writes, "the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (Kristeva 1989, 27-8). Thus Kristeva, in a hysterical move which Kempe and Dora also make, sets another woman - The Virgin - up as knower in her text. The Virgin as "knower" is the figure who takes the place of that which cannot be expressed in language: the impossible

combination of the subject's maternal loss speaking a discourse of maternal plenitude.

In other words, if pregnancy is "experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject" (Kristeva 1986c, 206) in which "no one is present" to signify the experience (Kristeva 1980a, 237), the Virgin must stand in Kristeva's text as a figure for the impossibility of maternal speech, as "a sort of subject at the point where the subject and its speech split apart, fragment, and vanish" (Kristeva 1980a, 237). The Virgin is traditionally the means by which "western" culture, through the doctrines of the Church, domesticates the challenge of maternity to its sacrificial logic. Kristeva's incorporation of the Virgin into her autobiographical text allows her to avoid claiming a maternal "subject position"²² - the Virgin herself stands as emblem of the dangers of such a move - while making space for a tentative exploration of alternatives. Mimetically, strategically, Kristeva skirts around the figure of the Virgin and, like the hysteric, articulates a physical excess which cannot be wholly interpreted in phallic terms.

While Kristeva, unlike Irigaray, does not see the female hysteric as a figure of subversion, she does, as Jane Gallop puts it, repeatedly place herself "in the privileged position of marginality, in the position to represent heterogeneity, 'in that space both double and foreign, to signify it'" (Kristeva 1977b, 409, qtd. in Gallop 1982, 119). The theatricality of this move, Kristeva's "drawing attention to her self, her body, her individual history in the midst of [a] larger theoretical discussion" (Gallop 1982, 118) highlights the "reality" of female experience which it would be madness, in Kristevan terms, to name as such in theory.²³ Thus, like the hysteric, she attempts to articulate what cannot be said in phallogocentric discourse through the production of an excessive personal aspect which aims to displace the terms on which she speaks and depends finally upon the response of an audience of readers.

Anna Smith notes that "where the hysteric denies the separation of body *from* words (the 'somatic symptom'), 'Stabat Mater' similarly denies the purity of the signifier, but it does so through displacing the effects of the body *into* words" (Smith 1993, 66). In "Stabat Mater," Kristeva's text of maternal experience may be read as an attempt to engage in the subversions that belong to "poetic language": in Kristeva's terms, language which challenges the truth of the symbolic at the crisis point of its emergence in the thetic phase of linguistic enunciation

(Hekman 1990, 88-9).²⁴ For Kristeva, "poetic language" stages the confrontation between "semiotic jouissance and thethetic" (Kristeva 1986b, 103; Hekman 1990, 89), celebrating the maternal remnants of language at the limits of sense (Lechte 1990, 129; Oliver 1993, 97). As Oliver describes it:

Poetry is a type of borderline case that calls into question all that is central to representation.... Poetry unravels the symbolic and the unity that it requires. Poetry reveals the nature of all signifiacnce through its practice. Kristeva defines a practice as the acceptance of the symbolic Law together with the transgression of the Law for the purpose of renovating it (Kristeva 1986d, 29. See also 1974, 195-234, cited in Oliver 1993, 99-100).

Poetic practice as a simultaneous acceptance and tactical transgression of the Law is akin to Kristeva's technique of double writing in "Stabat Mater." Although for Kristeva herself, "poetic writing" has been emblematised by the works of certain male writers (including Shakespeare, Mallarmé, and de Sade, among others) in whose work she has discerned a politically revolutionary potential (Roudiez 1980, 5),²⁵ "Stabat Mater"'s own poetic elements invite reading as transgressive text that engages the maternal body - irreducible in language - and thereby calls into question the absolute rule of the Law. Mary Jacobus writes that, although:

for Kristeva, there is only one way to traverse the religion of the Word and its supporting pendant, the mother; that is, the way of the artist.... the "drama of the word/body separation whose flash-spasm the poet alone can hear" (Kristeva 1980b, 196) is the same drama enacted by Kristeva's discourse of maternity (Jacobus 1986, 170).

Such a reading is encouraged by the fact that, for Kristeva, poetic language is the subversive flipside of orthodox discourses of the sacred. She describes poetic language as "an unsettling process - when not an outright destruction - of the identity of meaning and speaking subject (sic), and consequently, of transcendence or, by derivation, of 'religious sensibility'" (Kristeva 1980a, 125), and claims that poetic language is "the only language that uses up transcendence and theology to sustain itself" and that it is "knowingly the enemy of religion" (Kristeva 1980a, 125). Elizabeth Grosz argues that, for Kristeva:

where the poetic text signals a language to come, the sacred text attempts to stabilise a situation in decay or breakdown; where the poetic engenders a semiotic breach of the symbolic, the religious is a semiotic recoded in symbolic terms.... Religion is the recoding of what is becoming uncoded in the poetic or the revolutionary (Grosz 1989, 84).

Thus the staging of the conflict between the historical representation of Mary and Kristeva's own experience of motherhood presents maternity, as in all of Kristeva's writing on the subject, as the crisis point where the "personal" (individual experience) meets the social and "a dangerous threat [is posed] to the notion of subjectivity itself" (Jacobus 1990, 22).²⁶ As the poetic radicalises the religious, undoing its recuperative effect, and as Kristeva herself usurps the Virgin as the agent of transgression in her text, she plays the hysteric to the arch-hysteric, Mary. Kristeva's own passion, her searing account of the psychic pain of motherhood, mimics and displaces Mary's orthodox Passion, itself a mimetic displacement of Christ's, enacting a challenge to Christian discourse and its appropriation of the maternal.

"Stabat Mater" produces, via a discourse centred on the body, a series of displacements not unlike "the displacement of erotogeneity that mobilizes the body of jouissance" (Lukacher 1989, xv) in hysteria. Where hysterical symptoms are a doomed attempt to vacate the symbolic body and represent it (in fact, an other body) as an impossible whole, "Stabat Mater" attests to the general difficulty of effecting "political transformation when the terms of that transformation are given by the very order which a revolutionary practice seeks to change" (Rose 1991a, 148), the impossibility of inhabiting an "other body." The text's double writing both confounds and reflects the way in which writing about maternal experience is circumscribed by the symbolic. The text's subversive impact, like that of hysteria, perhaps ultimately lies in the response it calls forth from readers who must confront the maternal body at the point where it is effaced by language. The text's hysterical qualities, its multiple, strategic displacements, create in the end an uncomfortable space in which the reader is inserted, and this discomfort attests to both the inescapability and inexpressibility of the relation to the maternal, which the female hysteric's somatic symptoms also dramatise.

Writing about responding to Kristeva, Anna Smith observes that:

"Stabat Mater"... "nourishes" and exhorts, but its conceptual strangeness forbids any permanent identification. The discourse of maternity as I read it according to Kristeva swallows the necessity for a paranoid reader ("alone of all her sex") and sustains us instead through a vibrant play with the textures of language. Yet at the same time it does not forget its debt to the semiotic, the body. Thus it moves between drives and signs, bodily gratification and representation (Smith 1993, 68).

What Smith describes as "Kristeva's ambivalent borderline position here between separation and fusion, body and text" (Smith 1993, 72), resembles the hysteric's inability or refusal to resolve her combat with her mother by taking up a position in the phallic domain. The female hysteric's bodily speech draws attention to the site of female experience which cannot be represented in language, just as Kristeva's confrontation - in language - of the maternal "heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier" (but which "explodes violently with pregnancy" (Kristeva 1987, 259)) creates a space in her text for interpretation which Kristeva herself vacates and which ultimately the reader must fill.

Does the female reader in turn, then, have to read "Stabat Mater" hysterically? What radical reading possibilities are suggested by the hysterical movement of the text? If the Virgin is the starting point, and the stand-in, for Kristeva's explorations of the problems of maternal speech, can she serve a similar function for a woman responding to this difficult piece? I think it is possible to read Kristeva's text "hysterically," to productive effect, if one seeks to reread the Virgin, the phallic mother par excellence, as Irigaray does when she deconstructs maternity as the unrepresentable substance of masculine invention. To reread the Virgin in the highly poetic and visionary terms of Irigaray could be to displace her as Kristeva herself does and perhaps thus to mime, excessively, the already destabilising gestures of the text. But if such a reading is "hysterical," what exactly might it produce, and further (to return to the question I set out at the start of this chapter), what might it specifically reveal about the Virgin as a model for women's hysterical protests? In the remaining pages of the chapter I will attempt to shape some answers to these questions.

Kristeva has said that, in "Stabat Mater," she wanted to create the impression of "a sort of wound, a scar" (Kristeva 1984c, 24, cited in Jacobus 1986, 167, and Oliver 1993, 53) as an image of the position of the psychoanalyst which she herself is. She describes psychoanalysis as "a knowing discourse, a discourse which pretends to some objectivity," and states that "at

the same time we elaborate this discourse through what is often painful involvement in the observation. We have to exhibit this contradiction, this pain" (Kristeva 1984c, cited in Jacobus 1986, 167). In Kristeva's reading, the Virgin Mary mediates a fixation on the fantasy of the all-powerful mother which is not disabling to the subject, since the Virgin is recuperated into the service of phallic Law. In this sense the Virgin covers up the threat of castration symbolised by the mother, which the child must recognise on entry into the symbolic (Jacobus 1990, 22). The poetic side of Kristeva's text, however, in displacing Mary as a coherent symbol, reopens the wound of maternal castration, confronting the reader with her own maternal loss.²⁷ At the same time Kristeva inhabits this wound as analyst, seeking to displace the experience of motherhood in the symbolic by giving voice to its repressed pain (Oliver 1993, 53).

Irigaray's reading of the Virgin in *Marine Lover* involves, like Kristeva's, a poetic meditation on Mary's symbolic function, but in it she suggests castration as threshold, and conflates the experience of Mary with, rather than separates it from, that of ordinary women. Like Kristeva, Irigaray reads Mary as an ordinary mother made extraordinary (i.e., virginal) in Christianity so as to control the threat of maternal jouissance to the phallic order (Oliver 1993, 51), but her continual reversal of the terms of Christian discourse leads her to translate Mary's uniqueness back through the repressed maternal experience she undergoes. This interpretation is prompted by Irigaray's desire to produce an alternative version of motherhood to the conventional one, in which she hopes, eventually, a maternal subject might speak. In Irigaray's visionary terms, Mary as a "divine" figure serves as an active locus of exchange (or mediation) which instead of recuperating female physicality within the phallogocentric symbolic attempts to bring it to signification. Irigaray's articulation of the divine as always-embodied agent of symbolic exchange, in terms of which she reads the Virgin in *Marine Lover*, allows her a more explicitly visionary, optimistic focus as regards the representation of motherhood than Kristeva would be willing to accept.

In order to read Mary as a figure suggestive of the transformation of female (maternal) sexuality in the symbolic, however, Irigaray must also speak from the site of the scar which marks the repression of maternal jouissance or the semiotic (Oliver 1993, 53). She also speaks as an analyst, and as one with a particular concern for mother-daughter relations as they bear

on the analytic environment (Irigaray 1991c). Irigaray, too, speaks of the necessity for the analyst to reflect upon the pain of her own transference (Irigaray 1991c, 114-5). She suggests that the mucous, which analytical language "does not speak" (Irigaray 1991c, 113) and which is excessive to current theory, can be used as a figure for the necessary relationship between female analyst and analysand, as an invisible "space-time that is a gift, moving from inside to outside, like a body already becoming flesh..." (Irigaray 1991c, 116); as a threshold which inspires non-appropriative interaction.

Irigaray's thoughts on Mary in *Marine Lover*, then, have points in common with Kristeva's in "Stabat Mater," although what in Kristeva amounts to a poetic invasion of the religious becomes in Irigaray this and more. Where Kristeva claims that Christianity freezes "the strange feminine see-saw" (between an "unnamable community of women" and "the war of individual singularities") that constitutes female identity in the symbolic (Kristeva 1987, 258-9), Irigaray (re)discovers this inside/outside effect *within* Christianity, by reading Mary, and Christ in relation to Mary, as figures of dynamic excess.

Irigaray consistently aims to resituate what has traditionally been named the divine in Christianity in the realm of the human, the flesh. She argues that God's return "in the womb of a woman" (Irigaray 1991d, 175) makes Mary the harbinger of "another world" for contemporary women, although this aspect of Mary as symbol has been denied (Irigaray 1991d, 189). This interpretation depends upon a reading of Mary's maternal role in which Mary enacts Christianity's potentially revolutionary synthesis of the divine (a transcendental projection of the (traditionally male) sexed subject) and the flesh. Mary's mediating act - consenting to bear the Christ - means that for her the divine "occur[s] only near at hand" (Irigaray 1991d, 171), whereas "evil, sin, suffering, redemption, arise when God is set up as an extraterrestrial ideal, as an otherworldly monopoly" (Irigaray 1991d, 173) which requires a forgetting of fleshly (maternal) origin.

Irigaray writes of Mary that "her sexuate body never separates from the place where it has place" (Irigaray 1991d, 172). On one level this is another way of saying that she cannot become a maternal subject as such in the phallogentric order, because she must signify phallic lack, unable to "forget" her body and rise to an image of illusory wholeness. Thus far Kristeva

would agree. However in Irigaray this lack of separation is figured as an excess which is itself the very site of intersubjective exchange, although in order to signify and have an effect it must be "read" and responded to by an other (different) subject. Irigaray's rereading of Mary, then, is part of her rereading of Christianity as she would like to transform it; that is, into a system which would enact an ethics of (sexual) exchange and not of sterility and appropriation, which in her view it currently does.

Irigaray reads Mary's communion with the divine as a contract with the Holy Spirit which is "an effusion that goes beyond and stops short of any skin that has been closed back on itself. The deepest depths of the flesh, touched, birthed, and without a wound" (Irigaray 1991d, 171). But is this reading any different from Kristeva's, in which the Virgin masks maternal castration and the threat of maternal power? In Irigaray the wound of maternal castration becomes a divine threshold, divine here in Irigaray's revised sense as physical and symbolic mediation (the sensible transcendental), in this case between the Virgin and the Holy Spirit who plants the seed of Christ in her womb. Irigaray uses the conventional representation of motherhood, as, indeed, a "process without a subject" in phallocentrism (Kristeva 1980a, 237-8) ([Mary's]...body never separates from the place where it has place" (Irigaray 1991d, 172)), along with a re-presentation of Christ and the Virgin, to reread maternity as the site of an *exchange* between separate subjects.

In this revision of Christian orthodoxy Christ and Mary are the "subjects," but they are inseparable, just as, in Irigaray's view, ordinary female and male "subjects" of the symbolic are in fact inseparable, although they accede to representation according to a singular masculine model. Consequently the conventional, phallogentric figuration of the two sexes relies upon the repression of one of them, the female, in the absence of any means of intersexual ethics or exchange.²⁸ The divine element of which both Mary and Christ partake - traditionally the Holy Spirit who is the source of conception in Mary's womb and the sign of the union of mother and child - is transformed in Irigaray's reading into a "third term" capable of symbolising each, but only in the sense that it is bound up with and *represents* the maternal (here the Virgin's castration as refigured threshold) and doesn't, as in the orthodox manner, repress it.

In Irigaray, as we have seen, the divine is that which acts as a mediating substance or site of exchange within and between human bodies but does not yet accede to symbolisation. As that which can be seen as enabling hitherto unsymbolised aspects of female experience to signify, the divine, however, also retains the properties of Mary's "yes," her affirmative response to the angelic Annunciation. That is, it is visionary: it refers to a persistence of hope in relation to human sexual and social interactions that the psychic pain of maternal experience, for example, can achieve articulation as other than a void in discourse and gain new meaning. But this hope depends upon attempts by subjects-who-would-be-separate (such as mothers and daughters) to find new ways of enacting and representing the hidden processes that pass between them.

I don't think Irigaray's reading of Mary as a kind of model for ordinary women suggests that contemporary women should imitate Mary's submission and willing maternal sacrifice. Irigaray rereads Mary's "yes" as exemplifying her formulation of a new code of sexual ethics. This new ethics both enables and is constitutionally open to exchange; it depends upon the response of an other which precipitates movement into an uncharted and productive space between the other and the self (Irigaray 1991a, 167-8, 171-6; 1991d, 175-8; 1992b; 1993b, 82, 149-50). Irigaray also points out the ways in which the traditional depiction of Mary has glossed over that which is, in her, a normal experience of motherhood. She thus questions and reverses the way in which Mary has served as a figure to contain and curtail a possible women's discourse of maternity.

Like Kristeva, Irigaray states that this "virgin...lives forever because she dies to her generation in order to become merely the vehicle for the Other" (Irigaray 1991d, 166. See also Kristeva 1987, 257-8), and that "all that is left of her loves and desires is the patience, gentleness, tenderness or compassion that, on occasion, she breathes into the ear of her 'son'" (Irigaray 1991d, 167. See also Kristeva 1987, 248, 257). Irigaray even comes close to Kristeva's view of artistic practice as the only site of expression of a (semiotic) excess which recalls the maternal body. "What does it mean that the word is made flesh?" she asks:

Why does its prophecy have such a wide influence? And, despite all the well-known horrors and repressions, how do we account for all the works of art which that prophecy gave rise to? What energy let them root and flourish, through the centuries,

as places where the divine lives and breathes?... And can that creative strength be reduced to the power of the love between son and father, that matrix for idealism, with the virgin-mother as its sensory substrate? Are the desire and the sharing of the flesh not at work here? Don't they paint? Sculpt? Speak? In a language that of course goes beyond and stops short of any grammar of reason. Cryptic, or mystic, in its language.... Something always, and at each opportunity, heretical in the eyes of orthodoxy (Irigaray 1991d, 179. See also Kristeva 1987, 253).

To read Mary excessively in this way, as a figure suggestive of the possibilities of symbolic exchange between those who are as yet non-subjects in the symbolic order - mothers and daughters for example - is to read her hysterically. Hysteria is, in Irigaray, an attempt to articulate a process for which there are no symbolic channels, the lack of which the hysteric refuses to accept (Grosz 1989, 138-9). In this sense Irigaray's own reading of Mary as a model for a sexual ethics of exchange (which would enable communication between mothers and daughters, as well as between women and men) is an intentionally hysterical move.

If I read "Stabat Mater" through the lens of Irigaray's hysterical vision, I can see the Virgin as effectively enabling Kristeva to "speak" as a mother in the semiotic spaces of symbolic discourse. In other words, I read the Virgin as an essential part of Kristeva's attempt to analyse "what is terrifying in relation to the mother and finding forms for symbolising that" (in David-Ménard's description of the focus of female hysteria (David-Ménard 1988, 54)) as regards her own experience. "What is terrifying" in Kristeva's work concerns the fantasies by which phallogentric culture strives to accommodate the maternal, of which the Virgin is a prime example, but this same Virgin is also the means by which Kristeva can unravel the religious via the poetic in "Stabat Mater" and create a space to reflect upon her own maternal experience.

Reading Kristeva (and Kempe and Dora) back through Irigaray, I am struck by the number of ways in which it is possible to read the Virgin, and by the variety of readings in which she serves as an interface for women's attempts to express what she has traditionally been set up to hide: fear of the maternal; the madness that threatens when a woman seeks not to repress the maternal relationship; maternal experience as an exercise in self-reflection which challenges the current symbolic system. I conclude that the Virgin's simultaneous erasure and elevation in orthodox Christian discourse makes of her an excessive but also a continually

shifting, mediating symbolic presence. Some women, in substituting her for the female self they cannot yet speak (this is her hysterical function) and the maternal presence that has been repressed, seem able to attempt articulation, however tentatively, of a connection to the maternal which might bypass psychic breakdown or madness.

Reading the Virgin in "Stabat Mater" as enabling Kristeva's tentative expression of a kind of maternal speech itself hints at the possibility of maternal-filial communication. Indeed, to read "Stabat Mater" hysterically would, in Irigaray's terms, mean to read with the hope of eventually signifying just that. But of course work towards that kind of exchange, if it is ever to be actively signified, must be continued off the page as well as on it. The lesson of female hysteria, in many feminist readings, is that the analyst can recuperate or respond to the symptom depending on her/his willingness to take into account the unsymbolised aspects of female sexuality and the hysteric's gesture toward the as yet unseen.

This visionary kind of attitude and continual readiness to be surprised, the timbre of Irigaray's "ethics of sexual difference," needs of course to be put to work between mothers and daughters, between specific maternal and filial subjects, so that this relationship which seems threatening to female self-constitution (the traditional mother-daughter bind with which the hysteric struggles) can move, can be imaged and understood by its participants in new ways, altering the dependence on "the phallic problematic" (David-Ménard 1988, 54) by mobilising the excess within. What I am attempting to describe is, evidently and necessarily, a *process* which, although it can be written about suggestively, cannot be charted ahead of time by virtue of its constant attention to the initiatives and responses of the body. Writing about this move toward specific female self-expression as "the generation of a *sensible* transcendental," Irigaray states that "it would be of the order of the constant and gradual creation of a dimension ranging from the most corporeal to the most spiritual, a dimension which is never complete and never reversible" (Irigaray 1991c, 190). The texts I have examined in this chapter reflect aspects of a process of rereading female bodies through the agency of the excessive figure of the Virgin, but if such a process is to have contemporary and culture-specific relevance, other rereadings must be undertaken in specific ways by specific female subjects, so that female subjects themselves can reinscribe their bodies as active, living matter.

1. E. Ann Kaplan writes that "many theorists of motherhood...end up looking from the child position. That slippage from talking about the mother to talking from the child's perspective seems endemic to research in this area, and in itself revealing of the instability of the mother construct." Kaplan claims that, according to Kristeva, "things are further complicated by the fact that when we try to think motherhood, what we end up thinking is rather the idealized relationship between her and us" (Kristeva 1986a, 99, cited in Kaplan 1993, 40).
2. See MacCannell (1992, 65-7).
3. Elsewhere a woman interviewing Irigaray remarks that "we [women] often feel so guilty about not being resigned [to passive femininity], or so powerless, that the only path that remains open to us is madness," and Irigaray responds: "It is not certain that we even have the right to madness. Or in any case to a certain type of madness to which one accedes only through language [*langage*]. How can we define the madness in which women are placed? You often need something of language [*du langage*], some delusion [*délire*], to signal that you are living in madness. Women do not in fact suffer much from delusions. If they could, it would protect them. They suffer in their bodies. An absolutely immense bodily suffering" (Irigaray 1991f, 48).
4. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray asks whether female hysteria isn't "a privileged place for preserving... that which is not expressed in woman's relation to her mother, to herself, to other women? Those aspects of women's earliest desires that find themselves reduced to silence in terms of a culture that does not allow them to be expressed. A powerlessness to 'say,' upon which the Oedipus complex then superimposes the requirement of silence" (Irigaray 1985a, 136).
5. Kempe's *Book* reports that, "when she had long been troubled" by the aforementioned difficulties, Christ appeared to her one night in a vision and told her of his love for her (Kempe 1988, 42). This experience made her "calm in her wits and reason" and, although she had yet to undergo the more thorough conversion which would lead her to take up her special vocation, she was able to "perform all her responsibilities wisely and soberly" (Kempe 1988, 43) as a result of this divine intervention.
6. This is a reference to the unsatisfactory response of Kempe's confessor to her initial confession, described in the *Book's* first chapter.
7. Allison Weir notes that in Kristeva "the Virgin represents the semiotic order - the order of bodily drives and their rhythms, which is associated with the mother - and reconciles this with the symbolic order under God the Father" (Weir 1993, 81).
8. As Oliver explains, "the semiotic disposition in language...calls signifying practice to its crisis" or limits. In this sense, for Kristeva "the semiotic in language is revolutionary.... Like a political revolution, the semiotic in language causes an upheaval of the Symbolic and the subject" (Oliver 1993, 96). Kristeva argues that revolution which occurs in the signifying system of language through particular aesthetic practices, for instance, is akin to and indeed sparks revolution in the realm of the socio-political (Kristeva 1984a, 104, cited in Oliver 1993, 96). For her the

two spheres are not neatly separable.

9. The most explicit representation of Christ's body as a written text was the "Charter of Christ," which figured the body of Christ as a legal document whose inscription - symbolising the wounds which marked Christ's body - promised fulfilment of the debt of sin owed to God by fallen humankind. See Rubin (1992b, 306-8); Evans (1994, 123-4).
10. Jacqueline Rose has elaborated this point in relation to feminism in "Femininity and its Discontents" (Rose 1991b).
11. The attempt recounted above was in fact the second Herr K. had made to Dora. The first had occurred a few years earlier, when Herr K. invited Dora to his place of work where he had contrived to be alone. There he clasped the young woman to him and kissed her. Freud's persistence in interpreting Dora's hysterical symptoms as a sign of her repressed desire for Herr K. is heralded here where he states that "this was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached" (Freud 1953, 28), a reading that has been greeted with understandable dismay by feminists.
12. Freud continues: "I ought to have guessed that the main source of her knowledge of sexual matters could have been no one but Frau K. - the very person who later on charged her with being interested in those same subjects" (Freud 1953, 120n).
13. In a footnote on the same page on which this statement occurs, Freud refers to Philip Bauer's having contracted syphilis before his marriage. However he fails to connect this fact - relating clearly to the "contamination" of Kathe Bauer and the Bauer's sexual relationship - with Kathe Bauer's housecleaning obsession, her attempt to purify her domestic space as a response to the contamination of venereal disease.
14. This is a reference to a young man who had sent Dora an album of pictures from a German health-resort, showing views of the town, which she had been looking for on the day prior to the dream (Freud 1953, 95). Freud writes of this young man that "it was easy to guess that he intended to come forward as a suitor one day, when his position had improved. But that would take time, and it meant waiting" (Freud 1953, 96), just as Dora waited before the image of the Madonna.
15. Jacobus points out that the Madonna proves to be the "mediating or third term" between the two stories Freud tells: the heterosexual narrative concerning Dora and Herr K., which appears in the body of the text, and the homosexual one, involving Dora and Frau K., which is mentioned only in footnotes and a textual postscript (Jacobus 1986, 171). Freud's observation that Dora used to praise Frau K.'s "'adorable white body' in accents more appropriate to a lover than to a defeated rival" (Freud 1953, 61) suggests Dora's visual fixation with the Madonna and the Madonna's function as a symbol for Dora's subjective impasse, her inability to accept herself as the object of masculine desire (Lacan 1987c, 68, cited in Jacobus 1986, 70).

16. Another quotation from David-Ménard helps to clarify this point. Earlier, she writes that "we need to specify that the somatic compliance through which hysteria is defined depends upon the hysteric's absence to her own body. The hysteric has no body: Breuer's earliest research was directed along these very lines. Among Anna O.'s symptoms were her absences. These may be described equally well as a way of ceasing to answer to her own identity or as a way of ceasing to recognize people, in particular the doctors in attendance. The symbolic mainspring of these negative hallucinations was particularly clear in her case, since the presence of her visitors was abolished for Anna solely by the loss of meaning of the words they spoke. Anna no longer spoke nor understood the language of her own people" (David-Ménard 1989, 101). Thus the hysterical symptom simultaneously presents the hysterical subject as absent from the circuits of normal communication and present in protest at the requirements of her conventional role.
17. These processes are, of course, intimately connected in the passage to subjectivity of girls, who must replace their mothers, without compensation, in order to become subjects in the symbolic (Celermajer 1987, 62-3). In Lacanian terms, the hysteric refuses everyone's castration - her mother's and her own - because she cannot admit to such symbolic privation nor tolerate heterosexual relations as they are figured in phallogocentric culture (Lacan 1987c, cited in Evans 1991, 181).
18. In her account of the second dream Dora describes arriving at the house where she lived and finding a letter from her mother informing her of the death of her father. When she arrives at her family's house she finds that her mother has left for the funeral (Freud 1953, 94).
19. This point, cited earlier by Jacobus and Ramas, is also made by Wiseman (1993, 134).
20. In Mary's case the "parents" whose attention she seeks would be Christ as mother and God the Father since Christ (according to Irigaray) becomes Mary's mother in a symbolic reversal of their roles, by appropriating her maternity for his humanity. The Virgin as hysteric could be read as articulating the dearth of maternal representation with which this process leaves her, as was suggested in the previous section in regard to the excessive depictions of her grieving common in medieval religion.
21. At this point in her essay on Kristeva and Levinas from which this quote is taken, Ewa Ziarek is actually considering Kristeva's writing position in her book *Black Sun* as a dialogue between "the conservative analyst" and "the patient philosopher," in which she reverses the conventional hierarchy of patient and therapist and "rearticulates it as a more complex exchange between the philosopher and the analyst" (Ziarek 1993, 71).
22. According to Kristeva, there can be no such thing as a maternal subject position since, in her words, "if we suppose that a *mother* is the subject of gestation, in other words the *master* of a process that...is prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract of the group, then we acknowledge the risk of losing identity at the same time as we ward it off" (Kristeva 1980a, 238). See also Rose (1991a, 156-7); Ziarek (1993).

23. As Rose points out, in Kristeva's writings, (sexual) identity, while "necessary...[is] only ever partial and therefore carries with it a dual risk - the wreck of all identity, a self-blinding allegiance to psychic norms" (Rose 1991a, 150). Rose writes that Kristeva desires "to hold onto both sides of this dynamic" and that in her view "sexuality - the crucial ways it determines and structures our lives - cannot be understood without acknowledging the importance of fantasy, and fantasy in turn reveals aspects of subjectivity which crush the splendor of our (conscious) dreams" (Rose 1991a, 150, 163). Phallogocentric culture's fantasies of the female and the maternal and their functions are a persistent concern in Kristeva's work and she follows Lacan in maintaining that the identity and therefore "reality" of sexed individuals, because always influenced by fantasy, is a constantly shifting thing (Rose 1991a, 156).

24. Kristeva describes the thetic phase as "the precondition for signification" and as marking "a threshold between [the] two heterogeneous realms" of the semiotic and symbolic (Kristeva 1986b, 102). It thus represents the point at which the subject enters the symbolic order and takes up a speaking position that results in the recognition of subjective splitting characterised by the Lacanian mirror stage (Kristeva 1986b, 98-102; 1974, 49, cited in Oliver 1993, 40). See also Rose (1991a, 144); Lechte (1990, 135).

25. Leon Roudiez writes that in Kristeva "'poetic language' is distinct from language as used for ordinary communication - but not because it may involve a so-called departure from a norm; it is almost an otherness of language. It is the language of materiality as opposed to transparency (where the word is forgotten for the sake of the object or concept designated), a language in which the writer's effort is less to deal with those objects or concepts words seem to encase than to work, consciously or not, with the sounds and rhythms of words in transrational fashion (...) ... effecting ... 'semantic displacements'" (Roudiez 1980, 5).

26. Mary Ann Doane observes that Kristeva's delineation of the maternal body as containing an "unmasterable...other" (Kristeva 1980a, 237) results in "a confusion of identities [which] threatens to collapse a signifying system based on the paternal law of differentiation." She argues that "it would seem that the concept of motherhood automatically throws into question ideas concerning the self, boundaries between self and other, and hence identity" in Kristeva's work (Doane 1990, 170).

27. Gallop claims that Kristeva "dephallicizes" the Virgin and the phallic position by theatricalising her and speaking from what in Kristeva is the "necessarily vacant position of the Mother" herself (Gallop 1982, 121, 118; Oliver 1993, 54).

28. Irigaray writes that "the double event of the annunciation and the crucifixion would, in fact, always be tied together. This virgin, indeed, is always to be found at the side of the man they call the son of God, like his female other of whom he would be the manifest reproduction" (Irigaray 1991d, 167).

CONCLUSION/HORIZON: DIVINE WOMEN

The woman is not protected by the mechanism of the *fort-da*, by the way in which it is constituted by divisions of time, space, the other, the self, by its phonetic divisions. She is more often than not unable to express herself unless to start with, her lips touch each other again and she moves her whole body. A woman is more at a loss when she is immobile than when she is moving, for she is fixed in one position, exposed in her own territory (Irigaray 1989c, 136).

Is not locating myself in my in-finite the only way of doing without the criminal intervention of the Other? Renouncing the infinitely large so that at any moment I can experience, move, relate, exchange myself as incomplete. Having within me an infinitely small space which prevents me from closing myself up as a whole. Never whole in any place. Rather the melodious rhythm of half-opening which makes my measure limitless. Or limits a lack of measure. Concerned to hit the right note without claiming to speak the truth.

Right, for what can be sung now, and not what might be true for all time (Irigaray 1992b, 85).

I began this thesis with a comment by Irigaray about the (im)possibility of "speaking as a woman" in masculinist culture. This speaking is understood by Irigaray as always excessive because to speak as a human subject means to speak as a man, and the alleged "neutrality" of masculine speech marks the feminine as mute and outlawed body. Consequently it is of paramount importance, in her view, that women find ways to understand and represent the experience of their bodies, since female bodies are the site of the masculine transcendent, the claim to neutral language.

Irigaray makes a clear connection between the construction of language as neutral and the socio-symbolic function of a monotheistic, masculine God. Both language and God are rendered invisible by the operations of "western" culture. In this sense they are both considered external or transcendent to the subject. As Irigaray writes: "the human race tends to be of the view that the rules of syntax are eternal and unchangeable. This is part of a fear of social change. As Nietzsche says, we will always believe in God while we believe in grammar" (Irigaray 1991b, 64).

In this study I have explored some of Irigaray's thoughts on the Christian God as symbolic representative of man, a function which she claims is intimately connected to general belief in the neutrality of symbolic structures, including language (Irigaray 1993b, 112-3), and the resistance to large-scale change in these structures, such as would be required for "the entry of women [*as women*] into the public sphere" (Irigaray 1991b, 64). To speak as a woman in public, to refuse the modes of speech ("neutral"; unemotional; "objective") that men have used for centuries, requires work on the structures of language which refuses to deny the body its own speech. Irigaray claims that the disavowal of the body and the projection of this disavowal onto women by men has traditionally enabled public, "objective" (masculinised) speech at the expense of women's bodies and the possibility of female language (Irigaray 1993).

Therefore, to "speak as a woman" requires transformations in the signification of women's bodies. In Irigaray such transformation is figured primarily in terms of an ethics or language of exchange in which male subjects recognise their (bodily) debt to female (including maternal) subjects in the constitution of their identity, and in which female subjects are enabled to articulate a (bodily) language of their own. The divine or sensible transcendental is a primary figure for this new sexual ethics in Irigaray. It both challenges the masculinisation of language and culture in the "west" and enables the symbolic transformation or articulation of female speech and embodiment. The idea of the Christian God as a kind of meta-category for the male proto-subject is questioned and reworked by Irigaray so that that which is left out of the traditional man=God equation might attain representation.

Hence Irigaray's divine is always uniquely embodied; as a means of providing cultural expression for the as yet unsymbolised and immanent, it is always intimately related to the physical reality and physical moves of the subject. Irigaray reverses the conventional understanding of God in the "west" as setting up the conditions of man's metaphysical (teleological) journey through life: her divine, proceeding from the physical placement of each individual sexed subject, is in the service of that subject's articulation of its experience (Irigaray 1985d, 32). In the case of women, the divine enables them to mediate or represent their bodies for themselves when traditionally they function as mute matter from which they cannot distance themselves in order to speak.

In the foreword to the English translation of *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray's reconsideration of the element of earth in the elaboration of "an ethics of sexual difference," she describes the book as:

some fragments from a woman's voyage as she goes in search of her identity in love. It is no longer a man in quest of his God, his path, his identity through the vicissitudes of his life's journey, it is a woman. Between nature and culture, between night and day, between sun and stars, between vegetable and mineral, amongst men, amongst women, amongst gods, she seeks her humanity and her transcendency (Irigaray 1992a, 4).

Instead of "a man in search of his God," the traditional orientation of the human subject which appropriates female substance and renders women invisible and groundless, with no specific place from which to speak, Irigaray suggests another kind of journey, figured in the book, which proceeds by means of the articulation of a space between (polar) opposites: "nature and culture...night and day...sun and stars." The type of journey described here is not linear nor primarily circular, but it is physical; it works over "spaces between" in an attempt to insert the female body into language; thus the woman seeks "her humanity and her transcendency," she recognises her bodily experience through attempting to give it a future which will continually enable its specific recognition. The always embodied space between present and future is represented by the divine. As Irigaray states in "Divine Women":

Love of God... shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming. It marks the horizon between the more past and the more future, the more passive and the more active - permanent and always in tension. God forces us to do nothing except *become*: The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment (Irigaray 1993a, 68-9).

The "horizon" in the context of this essay represents the possibility of a future for women. However the idea of a horizon as an always embodied and continually moving way-marker for self-constitution is a refiguration of the Christian concept of space and time as goal-oriented and masculinised, the understanding of reality as that which exists outside the self: "Their love is teleological. It aims for a target outside them. It moves toward the outside and to the constitution, on the outside, within that which is outside themselves, of a home. Outside the self, the tension, the intention, aims for a dwelling, a thing, a production" (Irigaray 1993b,

101). What Irigaray is describing here, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, is the tendency of man to forget "the fact that his body is the threshold, the portal for the construction of his universe" (Irigaray 1993b, 100), and instead to attempt continually to reconstruct, "outside himself," a home to possess, which corresponds with the possession, the appropriation through forgetting, of the female as subject.

Irigaray's divine, then, is a means of symbolising the threshold of not only the female but also the male body, of returning each sex to itself in specific representation: "What protects me from the other and enables me to move toward him or her is...often the settling of a space, an enclave of air rather than the interposition of mirrors and glasses whose cutting edge all too often threatens to turn against me" (Irigaray 1993a, 66). Vision is traditionally understood (in its metaphysical and physical senses) as a projection forward by the eye from a static, unimplicated situation: "shutting [the body] up within a gaze that originates in it but detaches itself to constitute the identity of a subject that is always metaphysical" (Irigaray 1992b, 88. See also 1978, 50). But vision is refigured by Irigaray as a passage through space between subjects where that space is understood as material, "an enclave of air"; there is no possibility of distancing oneself from the body since there is no space that cannot be or is not already materialised, understood in terms of its elemental properties, figured as a mediating substance between "me" and "the other."

Irigaray's reimagining of phallogocentric vision as a continual awareness of the situatedness (in space and time) of the sexed body-subject constitutes her feminist visionary endeavour, itself a reworking of the conventional notion of the visionary as "seer." Traditionally the visionary is far-sighted, capable of observing at a distance developments that ordinary people cannot see. But the visionary qualities of Irigaray's work, while indeed forward-looking and oriented towards a specifically female future, align her with a positive mystic who restively embodies her visions of God, or a dancer who learns to articulate moves through space: "to *construct and inhabit* our airy space is essential. It is the space of bodily autonomy, of free breath, free speech and song..." (Irigaray 1993a, 66. Emphasis added). She writes that:

Language [*langage*] seems to have paralysed our gestures, including our verbal gestures. As adults, we no longer have any mobility. Once childhood is over, our moving trajectories are limited to poetry, art, prayer. Does not the still silent

understanding of the feminine signify *movements* to be liberated? This is not a matter of women outbidding technology, even if they can, but of their discovering forgotten, misrecognized gestures, and also verbal gestures other than those of mothering, shedding a different light on corporeal generation in the strict sense (Irigaray 1991i, 152).

In the same piece Irigaray observes that God, who has "for centuries been the focus of a monopoly on truth(s)," is invisible, and his invisibility is echoed in the cultural invisibility of female sexuality. So she asks: "What birth takes place, is yet to come, between these two poles of invisibility?" (Irigaray 1991i, 152). How might we rework the function of "God" for the benefit of women?

In this thesis I have explored some specific aspects of Irigaray's interest in the divine and female bodies. I have examined *The Book of Margery Kempe* for its similar and different negotiations of the repression of the feminine in masculine language and for its articulation of vision and journey (which appears as pilgrimage in Kempe, both literally and as a passage through life to eternity) through the medium of a female body understood in terms of its culture as excessive. I have treated aspects of female bodily behaviour which occur on the interface between the production of femininity as physical excess in "western" patriarchal culture and the excessive representation of the divine, proposing that when the two appear together, there is potential for change in the representation of female bodies. In Kempe's case, as in the case of Dora, the archetypal female hysteric of Freudian psychoanalysis, this potential is unrecognised as such; Kempe naturally sees her spiritual endeavours as the means of salvation in her culture's terms. In Irigaray, however, the presentation of female excess as empowerment, "speaking [always excessively] as a woman," is consciously activated by the divine, and re-envisioning the Christian notion of salvation through fleshly denial.

Irigaray claims that "the love of God has often been a haven for women. They are the guardians of the religious tradition." She adds that "certain women mystics have been among those rare women to achieve real social influence, notably in politics" (Irigaray 1993a, 63). Margery Kempe is probably not one of the women Irigaray has in mind here; more politically influential figures (such as St Bridget of Sweden and St Catherine of Siena) spring to mind. But the love of God was certainly a haven for Kempe, and one which had the effect of enabling a material transformation of her life - from inhabiting the home as possession of her

husband, to becoming a visionary pilgrim, a voyager for Christ - which was an embodiment of the spiritual transformation that she understood as her salvation. Kempe's spirituality led her to enact a particular kind of "becoming" through her Christic *imitatio*, the sign of her (future) sanctified self, in which the boundaries, or threshold, of her body were refigured in their excessiveness through mimetic alignment with Christ, as I have explained in the chapter and sections on Kempe. This kind of mimetic behaviour is self-consciously elaborated by Irigaray, in the manner of a hysteric who strives to make her excess of desire present itself in the symbolic through her body.

Irigaray is strategically hysterical in her postulation of discursive terms which refuse to outlaw the female body. The hysteric has "an inability to conceive of any reality but that of her own body" (David-Ménard 1989, 127), as we saw in the case of Dora. The process of hysterical conversion may be read, with a feminist agenda, as an attempt to reconstitute the female body/self through an excessive presentification of female desire, articulated through the body, which overwhelms language (David-Ménard 1989, 104). And yet hysteria is ultimately a paralysed mode of bodily speech, a protest at the limits posed by the symbolic system to femininity, which cannot alter the system as such. Irigaray suggests that to read female hysteria with attention to its particular logic of desire, its "gestural and lingual...latency," might be to move towards the possibility of a future for women, "another mode of 'production' . . . Perhaps as a cultural reserve yet to come?" (Irigaray 1985a, 137):

The problem of "speaking as (a) woman" is precisely that of finding a possible continuity between that [hysterical] gestural expression or that speech of desire - which at present can only be identified in the form of symptoms and pathology - and a language, including a verbal language. There again, one may raise the question whether psychoanalysis has not superimposed on the hysterical symptom a code, a system of interpretation(s) which fails to correspond to the desire fixed in somatizations and in silence.... There is always, in hysteria, both a reserved power and a paralyzed power. A power that is always already repressed, by virtue of the *subordination* of feminine desire to phallocratism; a power constrained to silence and mimicry, owing to the submission of the "perceptible," of "matter," to the intelligible and its discourse (Irigaray 1985a, 137-8).

Yet while Irigaray mimes the body language of hysterics and mystics as part of her excessively seductive reworking of femininity, she regards their suffering as signs of a

physical alienation which must be overcome. In "Divine Women" she states that "this vocation for collaborating in the redemption of the world through suffering and chastity (which is viewed as privation) ought not to remain our only destiny, *our only horizon*, should not constitute the only means or path to our fulfillment as women" (Irigaray 1993a, 66. Emphasis added). Instead, attention to the body must be combined with a recognition of the need for symbolic forms which respect and mediate the female body's reality. In Irigaray, "God" is one of the names for this process, which also insistently recalls the transcendent, including masculine subjectivity, to flesh: "Keep [the body] in its becoming. Be attentive, not tense. Remember, without accumulating or making a profit. A memory open to what is happening. Eyes which gaze without a fixed field of vision" (Irigaray 1992b, 69):

In order to *become*, we need some shadowy perception of achievement; not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the passage between past and future, the bridge of a present *that remembers*, that is not sheer oblivion and loss, not a crumbling away of existence, a failure, simply, to take note (Irigaray 1993a, 67).

I have called this concluding section "Conclusion/Horizon" because, although this is an academic project and must stand on its own merits, I want to claim for it something of the contingency and open-endedness that Irigaray articulates through the concept of a divinely enabled horizon for the future of female subjectivity. The epigraphs to this summary describe a kind of female embodiment which attempts to express a working representation of the self through the movement of the body. A woman's (genital) lips "touch each other again" when "she moves her whole body"; this is the means of her understanding her experience in a form which exceeds the phallic, of attempting to symbolise it specifically, a means which is always capable of reformulation since it is constantly mobile: "a woman is more at a loss when she is immobile than when she is moving" (Irigaray 1989c, 136). In the second epigraph, Irigaray describes the refiguration of the infinite, which may be understood as (the Christian) God, man's transcendental representative. "Locating myself in my in-finite" is both to extend the possibilities for female selfhood and to continually re-embodiment "God," transforming the notion of an extra-subjective, (masculine) transcendent space into a mediation of current, as-yet unsymbolised, female bodily experience: "Renouncing the infinitely large" - renouncing God instead of the female body as Kempe had to be seen to do - "so that at any moment I can

experience, move, relate, exchange myself as incomplete.... Never whole in any place. Rather the melodious rhythm that makes my measure limitless" (Irigaray 1992b, 85). To refuse the desire to be "whole in any place" is to refuse the phallic position, to refuse to become dead to the rhythms and vicissitudes of the body in the name of public, singularly authoritative speech. This refusal is in fact an embracing of possibility and an openness to intersubjective exchange: "The outline engendered between my lips is never once and for all. Reserve, excess, source of movement - my lips could never be reduced to subject or object, instrument of use or function. Our exchanges? An engendering through rare and always infinite fortune" (Irigaray 1992b, 29).

This is the kind of note I want to strike at the end of my study of Irigaray's visionary articulation of connections between female bodiliness and the divine. As I said at the beginning, Irigaray is a "visionary" not only in the sense of her utopianism but also in her desire to be read and understood by a community of (feminist) women. This desire for a (female) response permeates and shapes her work and contributes to its necessary instability, its refusal, by and large, to make definitive statements about female experience. Feminist politics, depending on a tactically unstable coalition of women of various cultural positionings, which aims to make those differences expressible, is the always-contingent (embodied) context for Irigaray's bodily visions. It is also, I hope, the wider context for my own work. Thus, while this project in its academic orientation must end with a satisfying conclusion, a symptom of the linearity of masculinist discourse which Irigaray continually deconstructs, I am also, like Irigaray, "concerned to hit the right note without claiming [univocally] to speak the truth" (Irigaray 1992b, 85).

There are many approaches to understanding and refiguring the contradictions of female embodiment in a patriarchal world, just as there are a great many ways to read Irigaray. In forming my own, "mystically-oriented" response to her work I hope I have produced ideas which can be responded to and rearticulated in the context of feminist debate. This is an academic thesis, but as feminist, teacher, dancer - as a woman - my desire is to articulate as compellingly as possible some consciously open-ended methods of reading "the female body" with "the divine" as a means of empowerment, to express the extent of what might be able

to be individually and specifically "sung now, and not what might be true for all time" (Irigaray 1992b, 85).

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