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IV. Good Game and the Language of Affective Spirituality
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Somewhere near the beginning of Margery Kempe's controversial pilgrimage to mystical perfection, she tells of a particularly unpleasant skirmish with church authorities at Canterbury. According to her account in The Book of Margery Kempe, a group of monks, priests, and secular men who were greatly provoked by her habit of weeping in public places, began to upbraid and curse her: "I would you were closed in a house of stone so that no man should speak with you," says one outraged monk.¹ While Kempe's husband sneaks away out of embarrassment, she stands her ground by begging leave to tell a tale.

Her story is about a man who had sinned so greatly against God that as penance he was enjoined to pay people each day to chide and heap scorn upon him. After spending quite a sum on such abuse, Kempe tells us, he found himself one day among "many great men," just as I do now, she remarks to her audience. These great men proceeded to attack and revile him generously without any promissory payment--just as you do me, Kempe adds once again to her Canterbury crowd. Instead of retaliating as the great men expect him to do, the abused man merely laughs and, in Kempe's words "[had] good game at their words." When the perplexed great men ask him "why are you laughing, you wretch, when you are being greatly despised?" he thanks them for saving him a good deal of silver that day. Kempe then turns to her own detractors and thanks them for their verbal assaults which only further her own cause of penance. Whether she laughs as she tells this tale or not, she doesn't say, but the fact that she is chased out of town by some angry great men, calling for her to be burned at the stake, suggests that Kempe has succeeded at her own good game.

The reason I am calling your attention to this story of good game from The Book of Margery Kempe is that I think it can serve as a kind of parable for Kempe's strategy of resistance against patriarchal harassment. As an illiterate woman aware of her own exclusion from clerical discourse which threatens to silence her, she uses good game, a kind of aesthetics of play, to undermine their efforts, and at the same time, to claim her own right to speak. Just as the man in her story has good game at the words of great men, Kempe practices her game with her own

¹ Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds., The Book of Margery Kempe, Early English Text Society 212 (1940), 27.

words at their expense. She takes pleasure in her tale's power to disrupt by insisting on laughter in the face of her detractors.

I would like to suggest that Kempe's story not only serves as a parable of her discursive strategy, but it raises a problem about women's spirituality which I think feminist theory can do much to address: that is, the problem of language in women's spiritual writings. Because Kempe was illiterate, we are never quite sure what her relationship to language is, whether she is author of the good game or whether it is author of her; whether her mystical experience ever went beyond her boisterous roaring and her daringly literal visions, or whether she simply failed to understand the transformative potential of the language of visionary experience. As a woman on the margins of language, however, Margery Kempe offers an example of one who, "denied the full resources of language," is able to construct her own discourse which is at once disruptive and gameful.²

Margery Kempe's story poses a challenge to feminist scholarship: to discover and describe the ways in which female spirituality reconfigures women's relationship to language, and therefore, the mystical experience itself--in other words, to unpack the good game which women inevitably practice when they transgress the boundaries of male discourse. The language of affective spirituality as it was used by female mystics needs to be examined for its power to reimagine mystical experience and women themselves, for its transformation of male mystical discourse, and for its fundamentally different understanding of the relationship of the physical--the bodily--to language itself.

In her fascinating study of the significance of food imagery and the practices of fasting in women's spirituality, Caroline Bynum does much to differentiate between the ways in which male and female mystics used symbols, particularly symbols drawn from the female body and female experience, such as pregnancy, maternity, as well as food, eating, and fasting. According to Bynum, while men often assumed a dichotomous relationship to the symbols they use to enact reversals, say from priest offering the eucharist to a pregnant woman, women relied less on symbolic reversal than they did on synthesis and transfiguration.³ Thus, in her ecstatic eating or her fasting, the woman mystic not only joined in Christ's suffering, she restored as she celebrated the symbollic relation of the female to flesh and to food.

Yet it seems to me that the real difference between the spirituality of men and women resides in women's relationship not only to symbols and the cultures and societies which produce them, but to language itself, and that until feminist scholars begin to try to describe women's relationship to language, we cannot fully appreciate the significance of their mystical experience. This is where I think feminist theory, especially the

2 Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 193. Quoted in Patricia Yaeger, Hone-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 29.

3 Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 277-96.

work of Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, can be helpful. The predicament of woman's exclusion from language must not be overlooked in our study of female spirituality. "Estranged from language," Kristeva has said, "women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak."⁴ The origin of women's estrangement is the suppression of the physical, of pleasure, of desire, and of woman in the dominant discourse, in this case, of the discourse of mysticism. However, we can see in the discourse of female mystics, particularly their emphasis on eating and food imagery, a kind of expropriation of language taking place. Not only do these mystics transgress and render opaque the borders between the flesh and spirit through food and eating metaphors, but they restore--put into play--the relationships of their own bodies to language. In a sense, these women mystics, with their often deplored indulgence in the literal, are actually reclaiming their own relationship to language as they return language to the sensual, the literal, and the female. In so doing, they break down the hierarchies of letter and spirit, body and soul, and transcendence and immanence.

In her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous calls for just such a reclamation of women's speech in language which recalls the orality in female mysticism which Bynum explores:

If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sound, it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.⁵

When Marie d'Oignies tasted honey in her mouth at the eucharist, Ida of Louvain encouraged her sisters to devour God, Margery Kempe insisted on weekly celebrations of the eucharist, or Dorothy of Montau craved the eucharist to the point of frenzy, or Angela of Foligno described her violent trembling after swallowing the host--they are each taking that word, seizing it, and inventing that language to get inside of. The sheer orality of the eucharistic imagery in these women's writing surely celebrates their reinventions--of that "language to get inside of," Cixous refers to, and the restoration of language to physical pleasure. The eucharistic act is their metaphor for seizing that discourse within which they have functioned in order to sacralize and carnalize their own speech.

If women mystics are necessarily engaged in a good game with language due at least in part to their estrangement from it, mystical scholarship needs to discover its own critical discourse for comprehending the play of mystical language. The conventional categories and concepts of what we call "affective

4 Quoted in Yaeger, 1. Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle Courtivron, eds., New French Feminisms (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 165-66.

5 Quoted in Yaeger, 14. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," NFF, 257.

spirituality" are, I believe, inadequate, as they rest on the old hierarchical dualities of physical/spiritual, literal/symbolic, male/female, and transcendence/immanence. As long as we continue to use the categories of this discourse, we remain outside the good game of the women's mystical language somewhat like the so-called great men who pursue Kempe out of town with their curses.

A recent book by Patricia Yaeger entitled, Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing, advocates just such a search in the works of all women writers for what she calls "play," what Kempe called good game. As Yaeger explains:

Play itself is a form of aesthetic activity in which, for the woman writer, reality loses its seriousness and what has been burdensome becomes--at least momentarily--weightless, transformable, transformative. As women play with old texts, the burden of the tradition is lightened and shifted; it has the potential for being remade.⁶

In order for feminist critics to describe this potential in the works of women mystics for remaking mystical language and experience, they must assist in the lightening of the burden by indulging in such play themselves. "The wise interpreter," says Julia Kristeva in "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," must "give way to delirium."⁷ The writing of both Kristeva and Cixous offer possible strategies of good game, of discovering the transformative potential of language in the writings of women mystics without diminishing their seriousness. Neither does such interpretive delirium rule out historical scholarship. I don't see why we cannot both explore the interrelationship and contexts for female mysticism and let Kempe have her good game. Borrowing from Huizinga's concept of the homo ludens, "men at play," I am suggesting that we might embark on a study of female mysticism of "gyno-ludens," the woman at play with language, whether she is claiming the eucharist as her speech or having good game with her words as she reimagines both mystical discourse and herself.

V. Feminism and Medieval Literature I: Theory: Explicit and Implicit.

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Beth Robertson speaks of the division between those interested in theory and those wary of it. I think it is important for feminists to engage in theory because if we do not, we risk reproducing the unexamined assumptions embedded in the traditional study of literature--I think for example of the heterosexual bias that has been a real problem in the study of Marlowe. Yet I appreciate and occasionally share the wariness of those suspicious of theory, for heavy theoretical analysis of literature at times seems to substitute for texts we know a secret language available only to a small group of initiates. I

⁶ Yaeger, 18.

⁷ Quoted in Yaeger, 229. Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," Margaret Walker, trs., Critical Inquiry (Sept. 1982).