Women and the Body
First Female Voices in English Literature

Speaking the Body? Women's Voices in Late Medieval England: Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe

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Western Views of the Body
[The meanings of the body, including the female body, come from culture, not nature.]

A Melanesian, asked by Maurice Leenhardt what the west had contributed to the culture of the islands, did not reply by listing technological, scientific, or medical achievements, nor even (ironically) the disastrous disease history which was the product of western encounters with Pacific peoples (though that last category may have been implicit in what he said). Instead his response undermined the very categories which framed the question: 'What you have brought us is the body.' … We cannot deal with 'the body' in any discussion of representation as though it existed in a realm divorced from other experience. What it is to be and have a body may rest on what your culture understands by the very term 'body.'

(Sawday, *Body Emblazoned*, p. 11)

Originary binary opposition? Form/matter, male/female
The male provides the 'form' and the 'principle of movement', the female provides the body, in other words, the material.

(Aristotle (384-322 BC), *De generatione animalium* [On the generation of animals], cited in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, p. 40)

Galen: the humoral and hierarchical view of the body
Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument. Hence in those animals that have less of it, her workmanship is necessarily more imperfect, and so it is no wonder that the female is less perfect than the male by as much as she is colder than he. In fact, just as the mole has imperfect eyes, though certainly not so imperfect as they are in those animals that do not have any trace of them at all, so too woman is less perfect than the man in respect of the generative parts. For the parts were formed within her when she was still a foetus, but could not because of the defect in the heat emerge and project on the outside, and this, though making the animal itself that was being formed less perfect than one that is complete in all respects, provided no small advantage for the race; for there needs must be a female. Indeed, you ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation.

(Galen (131-201), *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, cited in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, pp. 41-2)

Medieval Women: Access to Literacy and Literary Culture

And for as meche as women ar more febill and cold be nature than men and haue gret trauyale in childynge, ther fallith onto them mo diuers syknes than to men, and namely to the membris [that] longe to engendure.

Wherfore in the worship of our Lady and all holy seyntis I thynke to do myn ententif besynesse to drawe owte of Frensh and Latyn in-to Inglysh the diuers causes of here maledies, the signe that ye shal know hem by and the cures helpynge to them, aftir the tretys of diuers maistris that han translatid owte of Greek in-to Latin and Frensh. And be-cawse that women of oure tunge cunne bettir reede and vnderstonde this langage than ony other, and euery woman lettrid [maye] reede it to other vnlettrid [and] helpe hem and counseyle hem in here maladyes with-owte shewynge here dishese to man, I haue this drawen and wretyn it in Inglish.

(Barratt, *Knowing of Woman's Kind*, pp. 41-2: see also Wogan-Browne, *Idea of the Vernacular*)

Women and Representation: the Voice of the Wife of Bath as an Effect of Discourses

For trusteth wel, it is an **impossible** *impossibility*
That any **clerk** wol speke good of wyves, *scholar, learned man*
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves, *unless*
Ne of noon oother womman **never the mo**. *in any way*
Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God! if wommen hadde writen **stories**, *histories*
As clerkes **han** withinne hire **oratories**, *have* *chapels*
They wolde **han** writen of men more wikkednesse *have*
Than al the **mark of Adam** may **redresse**. *male sex*
amend

(*Wife of Bath's Prologue*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, III. 688-96)

Aesop's fable 'Men and Lions'

[The source for the Wife's comment about lion-painting.]

Once upon a time a lion and a man were travelling together, and both of them were talking boastfully. By the roadside stood a block of stone on which was carved the image of a man throttling a lion. The man pointed a sly finger at it and said to his companion: 'You see, we men are stronger than you.' A smile flickered on the lion's face. 'If lions knew how to carve,' he said, 'You would often see a man with a lion on top of him.'

What Chaucer's Wife does with her clerical, masculinist sources

Do away with fornication, and [St Paul, the Apostle] will not say 'let each man have his own wife'. Just as though one were to lay it down: 'It is good to feed on wheaten bread, and to eat the finest wheat flour' and yet, to prevent a person pressed by hunger from devouring cow-dung, I may allow him to eat barley. Does it follow that the wheat will not have its peculiar purity, if barley is preferred to excrement? …. Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them. … [Christ] said, ''that it may not be advantageous for a man who is striving for the kingdom of heaven to take a wife: but it is a hard matter, and all men do not receive the saying, but only they to whom it has been given.'

(St Jerome (c.342-420), *Adversus Jovinianum* [Against Jovinian] (c.393), cited in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, pp. 64-66)

Virginitee is greet perfeccion,
And **continence eek** with devocion, *refraining from sex also*
But Crist, that of perfeccion is **welle**, *source*
Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle
Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore,
And in swich wise folwe hym and his **foore**. *footsteps*
He spak to **hem** that wolde lyve **parfitly**; *those perfectly*
And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I.
I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage. (III.105-14)
I **nyl** envye no virginitee. *do not intend*
Lat hem be breed of **pured** whete-seed, *refined*
And lat us wyves **hoten** barly-breed. (III.142-4) *be called*

To support a poor wife is hard: to put up with a rich one is torture. Notice too that in the case of a wife you cannot pick and choose: you must take her as you find her. If she has a bad temper or is a fool, if she has a blemish or is proud, or has bad breath, whatever her fault may be—all this we learn after marriage. Horses, asses, cattle, dogs, even slaves of the smallest worth, clothes, kettles, wooden seats, cups, and earthenware pitchers, are first tried and then bought: a wife is the only thing that is not shown before she is married, for fear she may not give satisfaction. … If a woman is beautiful, she is soon desired; if she is ugly, she is soon stirred to lust. It is difficult to guard what many long for; it is annoying to have what no one thinks worth possessing. But the misery of having an ugly wife is less than that of watching over a beautiful one. Nothing is safe, for which a whole population sighs and longs. …. Somehow, or sometime, a fortress is captured which is attacked on all sides.

(St Jerome (c.342-420), *Adversus Jovinianum* [Against Jovinian] (c.393); from the section called the *Liber de nuptiis* [Book on marriage], attributed by Jerome to Theophrastus (d.288), cited in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, pp. 70-1)

'Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief *you say*
To wedde a povre womman, for **costage**; *expense*
And if that she be riche, of heigh **parage**, *birth*
Than **seistow** that it is a tormentrie *you say*
To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie.
And if that she be fair, **thou verray knave**, *you absolute rogue*
Thou seyst that every **holour** wol hire have; *lecher*
She may no while in chastitee abyde,
That is assailled upon ech a syde. (ll. 248-256)
….. And if that she be foul, **thou seist** that she
Coveiteth every man that she may se,
For as a spanyel she wol on hym lepe,
Til that she fynde som man hire to chepe. (ll. 265-268)
…. **Thow seyst** we wyves wol oure vices hide
Til we be fast, and thanne we wol hem shewe—
Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrew!
Thou seist that oxes, asses, hors, and houndes,
They been assayed at diverse stoundes;
Bacyns, lavours, er that men hem bye,
Spoones and stooles, and al swich housbondrye,

And so ben pottes, clothes, and array;
But folk of wyves maken noon assay,
Til they be wedded—olde dotard shrewe!—
And thanne, **seistow**, we wol oure vices shewe.'

(*Wife of Bath's Prologue*, III 282-292)

Women as unruly, unstable, fickle, garrulous, cheats, and seductive to men

[E]very woman is by nature not only miserly but also an envious backbiter of other women, a grabber, a slave to her belly, fickle, devious in speech, disobedient, rebellious against prohibitions, marred with the vice of pride, eager for vainglory, a liar, a drunkard, a tongue-wagger who cannot keep a secret. She indulges in sexual excess, is inclined to every evil, and loves no man from the heart.

(from Andreas Capellanus, *De amore* [On love] (c.1185), cited in Blamires *Woman Defamed*, p. 117)

'I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my syde,
Til he had **maad his raunson** unto me; *paid his debt*
Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his **nycetee**. *foolish lust*
And therefore every man this tale I telle,
Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle ...' (III. 409-14)

'As help me God, I was **a lusty oon** …. *a person who delights in sexual pleasure*
And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,
I hadde the beste ***quoniam*** myghte be.
…I folwed **ay** myn inclinacioun *always*
By vertu of my **constellacioun**; *horoscope*
That made me I koude noght withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.
Yet have I **Martes mark** upon my face, *the mark of Mars i.e. a red complexion*
And also in another privee place.
For God so wys be my savacioun,
I ne loved nevere by no **discrecioun**, *moderation*
But **evere** folwede myn appetit …' (III. 605-23) *always*

Medieval Women's Voices: Femininity/Speech/*Jouissance*

If the first Adam is associated with the **spirit** of an utterance, Eve is associated with its **letter**, divided from intent or spirit, fragmentary, limited and unstable.

(Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 7)

You only have to go and look at Bernini's statue [of St Theresa] 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, 'Encore', p. 147)

> And to make sure [that a non-masterful, non-masculinist logic] does not come up, the right to experience pleasure is awarded to a statue. 'Just go 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?
>
> (Irigaray, 'Così fan tutti', pp. 90–1)

Body/Voice/Femininity

> our lord … led forth the understondyng of his creture be the same wound into his side withinne. And then he shewid a faire delecytabil place, and large enow for al mankynd that shal be save to resten in pece and in love. And therwith he browte to mende his dereworthy blode and pretious water which he let poure al out for love.
>
> (Julian, *Revelation of Divine Love*, p. 26 (Long Text, ch. 24).

Julian emphasizes the bleeding of Christ as 'grete dropis of blode … like pellots … like to the dropys of water that fallen of the evys after a greate showre of reyne that fall so thick that no man may numbre them with bodily witte'

(Julian, *Revelation of Divine Love*, p. 8 (Long Text, ch. 7).)

The Voices of the English 'Mystics'

He loves the soul he has made in his own likeness.

For just as the body is clothed in its garments, and the flesh in its skin, and the bones in their flesh, and the heart in its body, so too are we, soul and body, clothed from head to foot in the goodness of God. Yes, and even more closely than that, for all these things will decay and wear out, whereas the goodness of God is unchanging, and incomparably more suited to us. Our lover desires indeed that our soul should cleave to him with all its might, and ever hold on to his goodness. Beyond our power to imagine does this most please God, and speed the soul on its course.

The love of God Most High for our soul is so wonderful that it surpasses knowledge. No created being can know the greatness, the sweetness, the tenderness of the love that our Maker has for us. By his grace and help therefore let us in spirit stand and gaze, eternally marvelling at the supreme, surpassing, singleminded, incalculable love that God, who is goodness, has for us. Then we can ask reverently of our lover whatever we will. For by nature our will wants God, and the good will of God wants us. We shall never cease wanting and longing until we possess him in fulness and joy. Then we shall have no further wants. Meanwhile his will is that we go on knowing and loving until we are perfected in heaven.

It was for this reason that this lesson of love was shown, with all that follows from it.

(Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Ch. 6.)

All this I saw physically, yet obscurely and mysteriously. But I wanted to see it even more vividly and clearly. To my mind came the answer, 'If God wills to show you more, he will be your light. You need none but him.' It was he whom I saw and yet sought. For here we are so blind and foolish that we never seek God until he, of his goodness, shows himself to us. It is when we do see something of him by his grace that we are stirred by that same grace to seek him, and with earnest longing to see still more of his blessedness.

So I saw him and sought him; I had him and wanted him. It seems to me that this is and should be an experience common to us all.

(Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Ch. 10.)

The Difficult Genesis of Kempe's *Book*

Then the creature had no writer who would fulfil her desire, nor give credence to her feelings, until the time that a man living in Germany—who was an Englishman by birth, and afterwards married in Germany and had there both a wife and a child—having good knowledge of this creature and of her desire, and moved, I trust, through the Holy Ghost, came to England with his wife and goods, and dwelt with the said creature until he had written as much as she would tell him in the time that they were together. And afterwards he died.

Then there was a priest that this creature had great affection for, and so she talked with him about this matter and brought him the book to read. The book was so ill-written that he could make little sense of it, for it was neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters are. Therefore the priest fully believed that nobody would ever be able to read it, unless it were by special grace. Nevertheless, he promised her that, if he could read it, he would willingly copy it out and write it better.

Then there was such evil talk about this creature and her weeping, that the priest out of cowardice dared not speak with her but seldom, nor would write as had promised the said creature. And so he avoided and deferred the writing of this book for nearly four years or more, notwithstanding that this creature often entreated him about it. At last he said to her that he could not read it, and for this reason he would not do it. He would not, he said, put himself in peril over it. Then he advised her to go to a good man who had been great friends with him that first wrote the book, supposing that he would best know how to read the book, for he had sometimes read letters written by the other man, sent from overseas while he was in Germany.

And so she went to that man, asking him to write this book and never to reveal it as long as she lived, granting him a great sum of money for his labour. And this good man wrote about a leaf, and yet it was little to the purpose, for he could not get on well with it, the book was so badly set down, and written quite without reason.

Then the priest was troubled in his conscience, for he had promised her to write this book, if he could succeed in reading it., and he was not doing his part as well as he might have done, and so he asked this creature to get the book back again, if she fittingly could. Then she got the book back and brought it o the priest very cheerfully, praying him to work with a good will, and she would pray to God for him, and gain him grace to read it and to write it as well.

The priest came, trusting in her prayers, began to read this book, and it was much easier, as he thought, than it was before. And so he read over every word of it in this creature's presence. She sometimes helping when there was any difficulty.

(Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 35-37)

Then she made her way to Norwich, and came into his church on a Thursday a little before noon. And the Vicar was walking up and down with another priest who was his confessor, and who was still alive when this book was written. And this creature was dressed in black clothing at that time.

She greeted the Vicar, asking him if she could—in the afternoon, when he had eaten—speak with him for an hour or two of the love of God. He, lifting up his hands and blessing himself, said, 'Bless us! How could a woman occupy one or two hours with the love

of our Lord? I shan't eat a thing till I find out what you can say of our Lord God in the space of an hour.'

(Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 74)

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