Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective

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In the Classroom and the Bookstore

A friend of mine is leaving for eastern Europe where she has been asked to establish a women's studies program. She is working on the reading list. Her students will come mostly from a city where a few years ago there was little to buy in the stores except a large selection of paprikas; now the stores are full, but many people whose days were formerly occupied in work are unemployed. The concerns are very different from those on American campuses where eating-disorder clinics proliferate and the place of gay studies or Western civilization in the curriculum are heated topics of debate. "There's so much written about the body," she groans, "but it all focuses on such a recent period. And in so much of it, the body dissolves into language. The body that eats, that works, that dies, that is afraid—that body just isn't there. Can't you write something for my students that would put things in a larger perspective?" I said I would try.[1]

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[1] My friend's point is echoed in Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York, 1990), p. 145: "What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and

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In a sense, of course, "the body" is the wrong topic. It is no topic or, perhaps, almost all topics. As many contemporary theorists point out, we no longer think there is such a thing as the body—a kind of "flesh dress" we take up, or put off, or refurbish according to the latest style.[2] Whatever our position on "antiessentialism" (and it is certainly true that many of the recent attacks on "essentialists" have been both intellectually imprecise and cruel), no one in the humanities seems really to feel comfortable any longer with the idea of an essential "bodiliness." We tend to reject both a "bodiliness" that is in some way prior to the genderings, sexings, colorings, or handicappings particular persons are subject to and a body that is easily separable from the feelings, consciousness, and thoughts that occur in it.[3] Nor does it really help much to replace *the body* with *my body,* as Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss have suggested we should do.[4] For if *my body* is not simply a synonym for *me,* I must, by using the

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time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all." As I mention in n. 67 below, medieval debates over the glorified body of the resurrection consider some of the same issues.

[2] Margaret Atwood uses the idea of a flesh dress in her novel *The Robber Bride* (Toronto, 1993). The idea comes from a poem by James Reaney called "Doomsday, or the Red Headed Woodpecker," *Poems,* ed. Germaine Warkentin (Toronto, 1972), pp. 112–13.

[3] For recent discussions of essentialism, especially with regard to feminist issues, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York, 1989); Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," pp. 133–56; Ellen Rooney, interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In a Word: *Interview,*" in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, 1993), esp. pp. 14–23; and Jane Roland Martin, "Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps," *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994): 630–57. All four authors deplore recent uses of the charge of essentialism to attack empirical, historical research. All four show courage in speaking out; I find myself most in sympathy with the specific formulations of Susan Bordo.

[4] See Fuss, *Essentially Speaking,* pp. 51–53. When I say it doesn't help much, I mean precisely this; it does, of course, help some. Focusing on the variety of individual experiences, and guarding against generalizing from self to other, produce a more nuanced understanding of both the present and the past.

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term, raise questions about some particular aspects of the self. Which aspects? And why does the phrase suggest them? So I am stuck again with my original topic. But it, we are told, is the wrong category. What, then, is everybody writing about?

Perhaps some help is to be found in the usual scholarly move of surveying the literature. What does the phrase mean in the rapidly increasing number of books with *the body* in the title—an increase only too apparent to anyone who walks these days into a bookstore? A survey of recent Anglo-American scholarship turns up only a welter of confusing and contradictory usages.[5] In certain areas of philosophy, attention to the body means attention to the role of the senses in epistemology or to the so-called mind/body problem; in others it provides an opportunity to enter into discussion of essence or objectivity.[6] The most ambitious recent sociological treatment of the body defines it as "environment," "representation," and "sensuous potentiality"; it is, however, disease, especially anorexia nervosa, that furnishes Bryan Turner with his most frequent and telling example.[7] Discussing recent historical writing, Roy Porter and Susan Bordo each enumerate an amazing range of topics—from biology and demography to artistic depiction—under the rubric of body history.[8]

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[5] In the survey of literature that follows I deliberately bring together authors who never read each other. The books and articles I cite below often speak with great assurance of what "the body" is and yet display little awareness of each others' conversations—conversations in which totally diverse assumptions and definitions figure. It is thus part of my purpose here to serve as a historian of our present moment, calling attention both to the ghettoization of contemporary discourses and to their common emphases. It is *not* part of my purpose either to provide a complete survey of recent literature or to recommend as serious and valuable every title I cite.

[6] For several recent (and very different) examples, see *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism,* ed. Stuart F. Spicker (Chicago, 1970); Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago, 1987); Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany, N.Y., 1987); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993); Patrick Quinn, "Aquinas's Concept of the Body and Out of Body Situations," *Heythrop Journal* 34 (Oct. 1993): 387–400; and Jean-Luc Nancy, "Corpus," trans. Claudette Sartiliot, in *Thinking Bodies,* ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford, Calif., 1994), pp. 17–31.

[7] See Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford, 1984). Important recent works that are, properly speaking, part of the new field of cultural studies but have much in common with what was the enterprise of sociology a generation ago are Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985), and David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley, 1991). See also Jakob Tanner, "Körpererfahrung, Schmerz, und die Konstruktion des Kulturellen," *Historische Anthropologie: Kultur, Gesellschaft, Alltag* 2, no. 3 (1994): 489–502.

[8] See Roy Porter, "History of the Body," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing,* ed. Peter Burke (University Park, Pa., 1991), pp. 206–32, and Bordo, "*Anorexia Nervosa:* Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance,* ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston, 1988), pp. 87–90. An older survey that is still powerful and convincing is Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women's History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring–Summer 1976): 83–103.

A large number focus in some way on issues of reproduction or sexuality, or of the construction of gender and family roles, especially through medicine.[9] The work of Foucault and the "new historicist" approach of literary critic Stephen Greenblatt often lie behind the way the questions are posed in this sort of history, although New Historicism itself has not until recently been characterized by a focus on gender.[10] In a good deal of recent theological writing, particularly of the popular variety, *the body* raises issues of medical and/or sexual ethics, rather than more conventional questions of eschatology or soteriology.[11] In feminist theory, especially in the linguistic and/or psychoanalytic turn it has taken in the past decade, the body as "discovered" or "constructed" has been replaced by bodies as "performative" (as becoming what they are by performing what they "choose" or must choose).[12] In much of this writing, *body* refers to speech acts or discourse; this is what my friend meant when she said: "The lived body seems to disappear."[13] In art history, the proliferation of recent work on the body refers not so much to the formal qualities of depicted figures as to the way in which what is seen is constructed by the viewer's gaze.[14] For literary criticism, philosophy, sociology, history, and theology, the body is a recent enthusiasm. A full survey would have to include as well such fields as biology, medicine, and behaviorist psychology, whose well-established and familiar understandings of the body as physiology are often the object of intense criticism by the new literary and historical approaches.[15]

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[9] See, for example, *Feminism and Foucault; The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley, 1987); Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston, 1987); *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York, 1990); and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1989). Martin is an anthropologist but her method is similar to that of the historians cited here. An important recent work that takes a somewhat different approach is Barbara Duden, *Geschichte unter der Haut: Ein Eisenacher Arzt und seine Patientinnen um 1730* (Stuttgart, 1987); trans. Thomas Dunlap, under the misleading title *The Woman beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

[10] See Martha C. Howell, "A Feminist Historian Looks at the New Historicism: What's So Historical about It?" *Women's Studies* 19 (Spring 1991): 139–47; and John E. Toews, "Stories of Difference and Identity: New Historicism in Literature and History," *Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht, deutsche Sprache und Literatur* 84 (Spring 1992): 193–211.

[11] See, for example, Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Body Works: Knowledge of the Body in the Study of Religion," *History of Religions* 30 (Aug. 1990): 86–99; Antoine Vergote, "The Body as Understood in Contemporary Thought and Biblical Categories," *Philosophy Today* 35 (Spring 1991): 93–105; James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, Ky., 1992); and James F. Keenan, "Christian Perspectives on the Human Body," *Theological Studies* 55 (June 1994): 330–46.

[12] See Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter.* Butler is herself aware of the criticism and takes skilful steps to avoid some of the problems pointed out by her critics. I return to discussion of this below.

[13] See n. 1 above. The major place where the body that dies receives extensive treatment in contemporary scholarship is in gay studies. See, for example, Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York, 1987), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1993).

[14] See, for example, Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, 1989).

Thus, despite the enthusiasm for the topic, discussions of the body are almost completely incommensurate—and often mutually incomprehensible—across the disciplines. There is no clear set of structures, behaviors, events, objects, experiences, words, and moments to which *body* currently refers. Rather, it seems to me, the term conjures up two sharply different groups of phenomena. Sometimes *body, my body,* or *embodiedness* seems to refer to limit or placement, whether biological or social. That is, it refers to natural, physical structures (such as organ systems or chromosomes), to environment or locatedness, boundary or definition, or to role (such as gender, race, class) as constraint. Sometimes—on the other hand—it seems to refer precisely to lack of limits, that is, to desire, potentiality, fertility, or sensuality/sexuality (whether "polymorphously perverse," as Norman O. Brown puts it, or genital), or to person or identity as malleable representation or construct.[16] Thus *body* can refer to the organs on which a physician operates or to the assumptions about race and gender implicit in a medical textbook, to the particular trajectory of one person's desire or to inheritance patterns and family structures.

Such discussions have, in their details, almost nothing to do with each other. Three general observations can, however, be made. The first is that an extraordinarily large amount of this recent discussion of the body is in fact a discussion of sex and gender. This is in part true because, as Porter and Ludmilla Jordanova have pointed out, so much of the good recent work has been done by feminists.[17] But the equation of body with sex and gender is now also found in discussions that are not really feminist in inspiration. A recent popular work entitled *Body Theology,* for example, includes three sections: one on human sexuality; one on "men's issues" (or gender); and a third entitled "medical issues," which deals primarily with reproductive choice. If my count is correct, the entire book devotes only about seventeen pages to what was surely, in earlier times, theology's major preoccupation with bodies: suffering and death.[18]

[15] See, for example, Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body.*

[16] See Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York, 1966). The two senses of body—as constraint and as potentiality—are in certain ways two sides of the same coin. Debate about the extent to which body can be altered, overthrown, and so on (or to put it another way, the extent to which we can be liberated from body) is lodged in debates over authority and freedom, society (or nurture) and nature, that go back to the Enlightenment. There are also, however, current discussions about bodies (especially but not exclusively around issues of reproduction) that have roots in pre-Enlightenment concerns.

[17] See Porter, "History of the Body," pp. 207, 224–25, and Jordanova, *Sexual Visions,* pp. 10–13.

[18] See Nelson, *Body Theology.* Teresa L. Ebert points out that recent work tends also to leave out the laboring body. See Teresa L. Ebert, "Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance,

The second observation is that both of the current sets of understandings of the body seem characterized by discomfort. Some writers express profound unease with any self-definition, whether based on biological structures or on cultural and social position; others are made nervous by potency. Indeed, advances in reproductive medicine and in contraception seem to have brought in their wake greater agony about both personal reproductive decisions and worldwide overpopulation; AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases have darkened the promise of sexual liberation; subtle analyses of knowledge as perspectival and situated, devised to defeat the omniscient observer, seem to have left viewers not free and creative but rather caught in—because constructed by—their vantage points. For all the contemporary castigation of earlier concepts of embodiment, present discussion reveals surprisingly often its own version of body-as-trap.

Third, it is worth noting that many of these current analyses, different from each other though they be, share a characterization of earlier Western history. From Plato to Descartes, the Western tradition was—in this interpretation—dualist.[19] It despised the body (however defined). Moreover, it in some way identified the body with nature and the female; dualism was thus by definition misogyny. Sweeping two thousand years of history into what can only be called a vast essentialization, some scholars—ostensibly in the name of antiessentialism—have even gone so far as to identify woman with what cannot be said, thus gagging themselves with their own historical generalization. When my friend asks for a wider perspective on the body, she is asking, I think, to be freed not just from a body that "dissolves into language" but also from a self that reduces to an identity-position and a past that dwindles into one or two implausible generalizations.

In the rest of this article I want to put back on the table, so to speak, some issues relating to bodies and embodiment that have been eclipsed in present theorizing. I shall do so through a discussion of my own research on the European Middle Ages. I do this not in order to denigrate or trivialize the recent scholarly concern with sex and gender nor to sug-

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and Labor: Bringing *Materialism* Back into Feminist Cultural Studies," *Cultural Critique,* no. 23 (Winter 1992–93): 5–50.

[19] The cliche is found in some form in most of the books cited above. Porter in his review essay, for example, sees the contemporary interest in body history as a result of our new freedom from such dualism; Bordo, whose *The Flight to Objectivity* brilliantly protests the conventional misreading of medieval thought as Cartesian, nonetheless repeats the generalization in her work on anorexia nervosa. For the standard formulation, see Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982): 109–31, and Jacques Le Goff, "Corps et idéologie dans l'Occident médiéval," *L'Imaginaire médiéval: Essais* (Paris, 1985), pp. 123–27.

gest that the Middle Ages had no such concerns.[20] Rather, by giving a much more complex view of the past than is usually presented, I suggest that the present, whose ancestor it is, may be more complex as well. "Medieval people" (as vague a notion, by the way, as "modern people") did not have "a" concept of "the body" any more than we do; nor did they "despise" it (although there is reason to think that they feared childbirth, or having their teeth pulled, or the amputation of limbs without anaesthesia). Like the modern world, the Middle Ages was characterized by a cacophony of discourses. Doctors took a completely different view of sexuality from theologians, sometimes prescribing extramarital sex as a cure for disease.[21] Secular love poets and ascetic devotional writers meant something radically different by *passion*. *Pissing* and *farting* did not have the same valence in the grim monastic preaching of the years around 1100 and in the cheerfully scatological, although still misogynistic, fabliaux of two centuries later.[22] Alchemists studied the properties of minerals and gems in an effort to precipitate chemical change and prolong life, whereas students of the Bible saw in these same objects lessons about fortitude and truth.[23]

Even within what we would call discourse communities, ideas about matter, body, and person could conflict and contradict. Galenic and Aristotelian ideas of reproduction disagreed sharply about the importance of the female seed, and the new attention to the structure of organs that emerged in the Renaissance was very different from earlier understandings of the physical body as humors and fluids.[24] Dualist Cathar preachers, and some orthodox monks, disapproved of marriage and meat eating, whereas hagiographers often praised the obedience of women who married.[25] Eastern and Western theologians disagreed about whether there was a purgatory for separable souls; and even within the Western tradition, the pope and his cardinals broke for a time over whether resumption of body in the afterlife was necessary before the beatific vision.[26] It would be no more correct to say that medieval doctors, rabbis, alchemists, prostitutes, wet nurses, preachers, and theologians had "a" concept of "the body" than it would be to say that Charles Darwin, Beatrix Potter, a poacher, and the village butcher had "a" concept of "the rabbit."

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[20] Among much splendid work on sexuality and gender in the Middle Ages, I single out Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton, N. J., 1988); and Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993). For a discussion of gender and sexuality in rabbinic Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, 1993).

[21] See Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, pp. 83–138; Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, pp. 271–77; and Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 68–70, 79, and 131.

[22] See the works cited in nn. 41 and 80 below, and R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago, 1986).

[23] See Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, "Rajeunir au Moyen Age: Roger Bacon et le mythe de la prolongation de la vie," *Revue médicale de la Suisse Romande* 106, no. 1 (1986): 9–23 and "Storia della scienza e storia della mentalità: Ruggero Bacone, Bonifacio VIII e la teoria della 'prolongatio vitae,'" in *Aspetti della Letteratura latina nel secolo XIII*, ed. Claudio Leonardi and Giovanni Orlandi (Perugia, 1985), pp. 243–80; and Christel Meier, *Gemma spiritalis: Methode und Gebrauch der Edelsteinallegorese vom frühen Christentum bis ins 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1977).

[24] See Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, and Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, esp. pp. 167–227. For the new emphasis on organ systems found in Renaissance medicine, see Laqueur's splendid study, *Making Sex:*

Nonetheless I would like to describe three aspects of a widespread medieval concern about a particular kind of body—the body that dies. I do so not because the Middle Ages thought the body was corpse, pain, and death rather than pleasure, sex, and life; not because theologies and rituals of death were without controversy in the Middle Ages; not because I think the topics I shall treat are the only proper topics for a discussion of the many bodies of the Middle Ages; and not because I think modern attitudes are the direct descendants of medieval ones (although I shall argue below that there is an important connection). Rather, I do so to correct certain prevalent generalizations about the medieval past and thus, by bringing forward a more nuanced understanding of that past, to suggest that we in the present would do well to focus on a wider range of topics in our study of body or bodies.

At the Movies

To introduce my topic I return for a moment to the late twentieth century. I have argued in an earlier article that the pulp fiction and popular movies of the last two decades, as well as formal work in the philosophy of mind, raise an interesting question about embodiment through repeated exploration of the problem of body-hopping. Films such as *Heaven Can Wait, Maxie, All of Me, Freejack, Death Becomes Her, The Switch,*

Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). The critique by Katharine Park and Robert A. Nye suggests that Laqueur has not taken sufficient account of earlier Galenic notions that would make the body more a matter of fluids and humors. See Katharine Park and Robert A. Nye, "Destiny Is Anatomy," review of *Making Sex,* by Laqueur, *New Republic,* 18 Feb. 1991, pp. 53–57.

[25] For these "mixed messages" to medieval women (and some men as well), see Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 73–99.

[26] On purgatory, see Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984). On the beatific vision controversy, see Simon Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (London, 1990), pp. 125–56, and my own *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995), pp. 279–91.

Heart Condition, or *Robocop,* and TV serials such as *Max Headroom* or *Star Trek,* explore the problem of identity and personal survival through asking whether "I" will still be "I" if transplanted into a body clearly marked by the personal characteristics (the race and sex markers, the scars and aging, and so on) of "someone else." Issues of gender have been particularly prominent in this questioning: can Caroline Bynum still be Caroline Bynum if, having defined her as her stream of memory or her consciousness, we transplant "her" into the body (which comes close here to meaning the identity-position) of Michael Jackson? Or, more simply, do we react as if it is a transplanted "she"—however we define her—if we see what looks like Michael Jackson in front of us? In contrast to the popular literature of the turn of the century, or even the 1950s, when table tipping, spiritualism, multiple personalities, etc., provided the medium for exploring issues of personal survival, today's popular culture worries about bodies. Its stories and images tend to erase the kind of line between mind and body that would make the transplanting or disembodying of consciousness or memory a satisfactory conception of personal continuity.[27]

As Bordo and Robert Nozick have pointed out, a fear of body swapping as destruction of person pervades recent films. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* the pods attack "us" by occupying our bodies; it is "we the bodies" who are afraid. In the remake of *The Fly,* what was in the earlier version a mechanical joining of human and fly parts is now the eruption from within of an alien and uncontrollable "something" that, by replacing the material of the body, destroys the previous self. Popular fiction, such as *Who Is Julia?* or *Memories of Amnesia,* suggests that transplant of a body part (and it is not only the brain that is at stake here) could be transplant of self.[28] Moreover, it is in my view significant not only that religious groups differ in their responses to organ transplants but also that they consider the matter a deeply fraught ethical issue, not merely a medical matter. To come back to the movies: medieval and modern conceptions find a strange and explicit mirroring in the recent film *Jesus of Montreal,* where the modern Christ figure saves others after his death through heart and cornea transplants. Suggesting that organ transplantation *is* the modern translation of resurrection, the film raises complex questions about part and whole, survival and self, familiar to any student of medieval saints' lives and reliquaries. I shall return to them. My point here, however, is less the conclusions reached by filmmakers and audiences than the fact that we ask the question this way. For every ghost in a contemporary film or TV series, one can list dozens of bodily divisions and transplantations that query the nature of personal survival.

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[27] See my *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), pp. 244–52 and *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 14–17.

[28] See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 29–70, esp. 41–42 and 58–59, and Bordo, "Reading the Slender Body," in *Body/Politics,* pp. 87–94. For a discussion of the carrying of race and "racial characteristics" with a body part, see bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, 1992), p. 31, who argues that the theme in the movie *Heart Condition* is a white fantasy. See also my discussion in *Fragmentation and Redemption,* pp. 245–49, and *The Mind's I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul,* ed. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett (New York, 1981).

Much of this recent concern does in fact focus on gender or sexual identity. Almost any episode of *Star Trek* these days seems to raise in some form the question whether it is possible to change sex, sexual orientation, or identity-position by radical change of physical stuff—questions that much sophisticated feminist philosophy, such as that of Bordo or Judith Butler, explores on another level. But such films and stories raise as well other issues of identity and self. They ask not only to what extent is my identity-position "me" but also how can "I" still be "me" next week? Can I, if I die? In other words, they deal with death. It is this aspect of our contemporary concern with body that, I argue, we academics have tended to overlook.

I turn finally then to *Truly, Madly, Deeply,* a lovely film that raises in complex ways the question of death and identity (in both senses of the word *identity*—that is, What makes me an individual? and what accounts for my continuing the same over time and space?). Although it plays humorously and gently with the thousand-year-old theme of our fear that the dead may walk again, it is not a ghost story. The plot of the film is simple: a young woman, grieving passionately for her dead lover, finds him in the house again. As long as her desire and grief encounter and relate to her complicated and full memory of him, all is, in some sense, well. But when he and his buddies return, really playing the cellos and violins they used in life, he is decidedly in the way. So much indeed is physical stuff the problem that in a moving early scene, when the heroine's sister asks for the dead man's cello for her son, the heroine replies in anguish: "It's as if you asked for his body."[29]

I do not have the space here to provide a full analysis of *Truly, Madly, Deeply.*[30] But I want to use the film to argue that popular culture is at the moment asking three profound questions about body that we academics have not really noticed, or at least not noticed correctly, nor have we understood how central the fact of death is to their urgency. I will call them identity, matter, and desire.

By this I mean, first, that questions of the return or transfer of bodies raise for us issues about how we conceptualize identity in both the sense of individuality and the sense of spatiotemporal continuity. Unless the person I love is present in body, does the person continue? Can "she" or "he" really exist in a radically different body (or perhaps one could say identity-position) or in no body (perhaps one could say as spirit or consciousness)? How would you know it was "she"?

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[29] *Truly, Madly, Deeply,* BBC, 1990; Samuel Goldwyn Company, Los Angeles, 1992.

[30] For example, the film raises interesting, and unresolved, gender issues: Why are the returned figures all male? Moreover, although the ending clearly suggests that the re-

Moreover, as Jean-Claude Schmitt has reminded us, remembering someone else after his or her death is at least as much a way of letting go as of retaining.[31] I construct my memory of what I have lost in order to be at peace with it; before the peace comes, the ghosts walk. But I am not inclined to think that (either before or after your death) *you* are in my mind when I remember what you meant to me. I may remember you, or not; but if you exist, you are someplace other than in my mind.

Films such as *Truly, Madly, Deeply* also raise the issue of our bodies in another sense; and here the cello is crucial. What difference does it make that we leave behind clothes, papers, a favorite brooch or mixing bowl, a corpse? In a sense the dead lover of *Truly, Madly, Deeply* returns because the heroine cannot let go of his cello. But do we ever easily let go of the cello? Do we not need transitional objects to cope with death as much as with our initial formation of self? And isn't their very "stuffness" important? As grief therapists tell us, the relatives of MIAs and of victims of air crashes in which no bodies survive must travel a much more complex route in grieving than that travelled by those who can cremate or bury a body. When medieval thinkers spoke of the saints as "in the tomb (or reliquary)" and "in heaven," they understood (as Giles of Rome tells us) that they used synecdoche in both cases; but they understood something else as well. Whereas remembering lets the spirits rest and be forgotten, relics (including what the Middle Ages called contact relics—physical bits that were not body but touched the body—clothes, that is, or cellos) keep the person present.[32] In our own decade, those who have created the

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turned Jamie has come back exactly in order to release his lover, nothing in his character suggests why he might act thus.

[31] See Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les Revenants: Les Vivants et les morts dans la société medievale* (Paris, 1994).

[32] For a general discussion of relics in the Middle Ages, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981); Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, N. J., 1978) and *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), esp. pp. 42–44 and 163–218; and Nicole Hermann-Mascard, *Les Reliques des saints: Formation coutumière d'un droit* (Paris, 1975). The remark of Giles of Rome is found in *Quodlibeta* 4, q. 4, fol. 47va; quoted in Kiernan Nolan, *The Immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection of the Body According to Giles of Rome: A Historical Study of a Thirteenth-Century Theological Problem* (Rome, 1967), p. 60 n. 49. For a fascinating example of medieval contact relics, see the late sixth-century account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land written by a traveller from Piacenza: *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium,* ed. P. Geyer, in *Itineraria et alia geographica,* 2 vols. (Turnhout, 1965), 1:129–74. The account includes such objects as "manna" from the Sinai, dew from Mount Hermon, rocks from Mount Carmel (supposed to prevent miscarriages), and "measures" of Jesus's body (that is, strips of cloth measured and cut to fit what was supposedly the body's imprint and then worn around the neck of the pilgrim).

AIDS quilt seem to me to evidence a sophisticated understanding of the role physical transitional objects can play in carrying our love and our grief as we mourn.[33]

Third, *Truly, Madly, Deeply* raises the question of desire. The heroine falls in love again; the real problem with the physical presence of the dead lover is that, by the end of the film, he's one lover too many. The dead lover is not, in other words, just an identity in the sense of an individual, particular self, nor just an identity whose continuation seems guaranteed by his physical body; he is also the object of desire—a straining, expanding, pulling of self toward other that seems to have something to do with "body" (*body* in both the senses we find in contemporary writing, that is, body as "locatedness" and body as potentiality). For the heroine's conflicted, troubling, and guilty desire to disappear, what must disappear is not her memory of the departed but the particular, embodied self, complete with cello, that is occupying her house. Bodies are both the subject and the object of desire.

I have certainly not exhausted here either *Truly, Madly, Deeply* or modern literature on the body. But I hope I have suggested that, for all the proliferating number of body books on the shelves of American bookstores, theorists are not discussing much of what our popular culture indicates we in fact worry about. For we do worry about survival, about bodily stuff, about desire. And the films and TV shows we choose for our entertainment suggest that we often think about these things in the context of the possibility or impossibility of defeating death. Gayatri Spivak has said: "Death as such can only be thought via essence or rupture of essence. . . . I cannot approach death as such."[34] This is undoubtedly true, but it is not "death as such" that is the threat for most of us. Theoretical impossibility neither stills the need to approach and ask questions nor provides solace for our fears.

What I am proposing therefore is that body or embodiment is an aspect of many conversations we are now having—including conversations about death—and was part of many such conversations in the European past. I wish to broaden our awareness and understanding of both sets of conversations by broadening our awareness of each.

In the Middle Ages

I return then to the stereotype, common in textbooks, of the Middle Ages as "dualistic"—that is, as despising and fleeing "matter" or "the body," which in this interpretation is often understood to be gendered "female" because "passive," "negative," and "irrational."

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[33] For a sensitive discussion of what I am calling here physical transitional objects, see Sedgwick, "White Glasses," *Tendencies*, pp. 252–66. I am grateful to Tilman Habermas for discussion of these matters at a crucial moment in my thinking.

[34] Rooney, "In a Word," p. 20.

Medieval thinkers did, of course, speak of "the body" *(corpus)* or "the flesh" *(caro)* in certain contexts, although as I explained above *corpus* meant something very different to a doctor looking at a flask of urine and to a priest consecrating the eucharist. But even if we stay for a moment within orthodox Christian discourses in which there was some agreed upon moral and ontological significance for the word *corpus,* the understanding of "medieval attitudes" as "dualistic" in the sense of "despising" or "recommending flight from" the body is wrong for three reasons.

First, even when discussing soul *(anima)* and body *(corpus)* as components of person, medieval theologians and philosophers did not discuss anything at all like the Cartesian mind/body problem (any more, by the way, than Aristotle did).[35] Late medieval philosophy used the Aristotelian concept of soul as life principle.[36] Thus both in metaphysics and in embryology there was argument over whether the person had one soul or many. Indeed, dualities or binaries were frequently not at stake. Many discussions of knowing and seeing used a threefold categorization of body *(corpus),* spirit *(animus* or *spiritus),* and soul *(anima)* that placed experiencing either sense data or even dreams and visions in *corpus* or *spiritus,* not *anima.* Under the influence of the Arab philosopher Avicenna, psychologists also tried to work out a theory of "powers" located between *anima* and *corpus* to connect the activities of the two. These discussions often, as I have explained elsewhere, drew a sharper distinction between levels of soul than between soul and body.[37] Moreover, knowing, feeling, and experiencing were located in body. As David Morris (among others) has pointed out, these thinkers would not have understood the question (frequent in modern circles): Is pain in my body or in my mind?[38] Even in the late medieval dialogues that personify two clear components of person as Soul and Body, the Body character often "wins" the debate by charging that evil is lodged in the Soul's willing, not in the Body's senses.[39] As I shall show in a moment, the debates in high scholasticism over identity involved in some real sense rejection of soul and body as separable parts of "person." What I wish to stress here is that such discussion was embedded in larger discussions in which trinary or multifold categories were basic ways of thinking about psychology or anthropology.[40]

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[35] See Wallace I. Matson, "Why Isn't the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?" in *Mind, Matter, and Method: Essays in Philosophy and Science in Honor of Herbert Feigl,* ed. Paul K. Feyerabend and Grover Maxwell (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 92–102; Hilary Putnam, "How Old Is the Mind?" and (with Martha C. Nussbaum), "Changing Aristotle's Mind," *Words and Life,* ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 3–21 and 22–61, esp. pp. 23–28. In certain ways I agree here with the more theologically formulated position of Vergote, "The Body," pp. 93–105.

[36] To Aquinas, who made historically accurate use of Aristotle's ideas, soul is the substantial form of the organized living body. For Bonaventure and others who held the doctrine of a multiplicity of forms, the question is more complicated. I discuss these technical philosophical issues in *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 229–78. In order to avoid overloading this article with notes, I refer my reader to the book. I give here only citations for quoted primary sources or material not referred to in the book.

[37] See my *Fragmentation and Redemption,* pp. 226–27, for a discussion of ways in which medieval thinkers blurred the soul/body contrast or used trinary rather than binary models. On medieval psychology of vision, which made use of trinary categories, see Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Abo, 1965), pp. 15–22, and Schmitt, *Les Revenants,* pp. 38–40 and 223–26. On functions shared by body and soul in Aristotle's account, see Putnam (with Nussbaum), "Changing Aristotle's Mind," pp. 38–43; on Aquinas, see Putnam, "How Old Is the Mind?" pp. 4–7.

We must also reject the characterization of most medieval literature and art as dualistic in a second sense of the word *dualism.* Even in the most (to our tastes) macabre of late medieval poems and images—the Dances of Death or the *transi* tombs that depict their occupants as putrefying corpses—one can hardly with accuracy speak of "rejection of the body." I do not mean to argue here that modern accounts have concentrated too much on sensationalist and morbid themes in medieval literature, although that is to some extent true. Historians such as Jean Delumeau and Robert Bultot, who have chronicled the theme of *contemptus mundi,* themselves admit that it was frequently complemented in medieval treatises by discussions of the glory of creation and of "man."[41] Many historians of funerary practices point out that the injunction of memento mori was embedded in imagery that promised resurrection to the same corpse that moldered in the grave.[42] My argument here, however, is different. It is that the extravagant attention to flesh and decay characteristic of the period is not "flight from" so much as "submersion in." The attitudes and practices of religious specialists in the late Middle Ages, and the reverence they won from a wide spectrum of the population, assumed the flesh to be the instrument of salvation (in many senses of the word *instrument*—musical instrument, kitchen implement, instrument of torture, etc.). In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast,* I cited examples of religious women who spoke of striking music from their flesh through extravagant asceticisms such as flagellation or self-mutilation.[43] Technical theological tractates and works of popular piety in the thirteenth century described Christ's body on the cross as suffering more exquisite pain than any other body because it was the most perfect of all bodies.[44] One can even interpret the eucharistic theology of the high Middle Ages as a sort of cannibalism—a literal incorporation of the power of a tortured god.[45] My point is simply that, whatever the technical terms that circulated around such practices, the cultivation of bodily experience as a place for encounter with meaning, a locus of redemption, is not "flight from" the body. Nor could it have been in a religion whose central tenet was that the divine had chosen to offer redemption by becoming flesh.

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[38] See Morris, *Culture of Pain,* p. 152, although elsewhere he tends to interpret the Middle Ages more dualistically; see, for example, pp. 131–34. See also Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages,* pp. 7–9; Putnam (with Nussbaum), "Changing Aristotle's Mind" and "Aristotle after Wittgenstein," *Words and Life,* pp. 38–43, 69–78; and Stanley Cavell, "Natural and Conventional," *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 86–125.

[39] On the genre, see Robert W. Ackerman, "*The Debate of the Body and the Soul* and Parochial Christianity," *Speculum* 37 (Oct. 1962): 541–65.

[40] I leave aside here for the moment positions—such as the theology of some thirteenth-century Cathars—that were in a technical sense ontological and cosmic dualism, that is, they argued for two sorts of reality, material and spiritual, created by two distinct and opposing ultimate powers. In *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 214–25, I show how orthodox and Cathar discussions were in many ways animated by the same fears and argue that orthodox theologians were working out their own understandings of matter in their polemics against heretics.

[41] See Jean Delumeau, *Le Peur en Occident: Une Cité assiégée* (Paris, 1978) and *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, Thirteenth–Eighteenth Centuries,* trans. Eric Nicholson (New York, 1990); and Robert Bultot, *Christianisme et valeurs humaines: La Doctrine du mépris du monde, en Occident, de S. Ambroise à Innocent III,* 6 vols. (Paris, 1963–64), vol. 4, pts. 1 and 2.

[42] See, for example, Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: The Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1973).

Third, it is inaccurate to see medieval notions of *corpus, caro, materia, mundus, tellus, limus,* or *stercus* as gendered feminine. Both Butler and Luce Irigaray, who have built complex and highly politicized readings around a collapsing of woman and heterosexuality into the receptacle of Plato's *Timaeus* (conflated then with Aristotle's matter), admit that such collapsing is a deliberate misreading.[46] It is not useful for my purposes to pursue the complicated issues of psychoanalysis, politics, and philosophy they raise, although (as I shall explain below) I have sympathy with Butler's idea of the performative body. But somehow a misinterpretation of their argument has left, in more journalistic treatments (feminist and nonfeminist), the notion that vast binaries—reducible to a male/female binary—marched through the medieval past from Plato to Descartes. (In some accounts, Augustine and an Aristotle in rather curious seventeenth-century garb play bit parts in the intellectual drama as well.) This generalization is not tenable. Medieval ritual, practice, story, and belief made use of many binary contrasts, some of which corresponded with a male/female opposition. In formal theological and devotional writing, these contrasts often associated women with body and matter, especially in a number of highly complicated treatments of the incarnation of Christ and the role of the Virgin in the economy of salvation. But symbolic patterns do not, of course, fit into only a single grid. Moreover, in medieval writing, they can be shown to have undercut as well as undergirded traditional understandings of gender. Much of the serious work on medieval sources from the past fifteen years has shown us how polymorphous are medieval uses of gender categories and images.[47]

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[43] See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987). And see Keenan, "Christian Perspectives on the Human Body." The radical physicality of medieval religion provides the context for such genuinely new somatic events as stigmata and miraculous inedita.

[44] For example, see Bonaventure, *Breviloquium,* in vol. 7 of *Opera omnia,* ed. A. C. Peltier (Paris, 1866), pt. 4, chap. 9, pp. 292–94.

[45] There is an obvious parallel between the late medieval devotion to the suffering Christ and the cannibalistic practice of torturing a captured hero before consuming him. In many cannibal cultures, the one to be eaten was seen to gain in power the longer he held out under torture. See Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System* (New York, 1986); Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Le Cadavre: De la biologie à l'anthropologie* (Brussels, 1980), pp. 159–69; Georges Bataille, *Consumption,* trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 of *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York, 1988), pp. 45–61; Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, N. J., 1990); Gananath Obeyesekere, "'British Cannibals': Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 630–54, trans. Sibylle Brändli, under the title "'Britische Kannibalen': Nachdenkliches zur Geschichte des Todes und der Auferstehung des Entdeckers James Cook," *Historische Anthropologie: Kultur, Gesellschaft, Alltag* 1, no. 2 (1993): 273–93; and Philippe Buc, *L'Ambiguïté du livre: Prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au moyen âge* (Paris, 1994), pp. 206–31 and 406.

[46] See Luce Irigaray, "Une Mère de glace," *Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 168–79, and Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* pp. 32–55, esp. nn. 22, 28, 31, and 34. And see the essays in *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy,* ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame, Ind., 1965).

To say this is not to argue that there was no widespread misogyny in the Middle Ages.[48] Within monastic didactic literature and folktales, there was fear of female sexuality; within medical discourse, there was curiosity and wonder, tinged with fear, about female anatomy; and of course legal codes treated female property-holding and economic opportunities as less than those of males (although with complex differences of time and place I will not go into here).[49] In embryology the father's seed was associated with form, the mother's seed (or, in other theories, her menstrual matter) with potency. Such attitudes did carry over in complex ways into religious ritual to produce symbolic usages in which female was seen as below and above reason—as witch or saintly visionary—whereas male was seen as a rather pedestrian middle, incapable of direct contact either with angelic or with demonic power.[50] But soul *(anima)* was gendered feminine far more often than *corpus* (in part of course because of the grammar itself). The contrast between male and female was sometimes connected to Genesis 1:7 and 1:21–24, in which God created Adam from mud but Eve from flesh. Female characteristics (that is, characteristics that our sources suggest were understood by contemporaries, both male and female, to be feminine) were used to describe God in his/her ruling as well as nurturing capacity.[51] Rarely in any period has religious poetry provided such androgynous or complexly erotic images of desire.[52]

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[47] I have touched on these issues in my *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 110–69 and *Fragmentation and Redemption,* pp. 151–79. Recent and sensitive examples of such argument are Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991); Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London, 1993); Jeffrey M. Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," *Viator* 20 (1989): 161–82 and *Nuns as Artists in Fifteenth-Century Franconia: Devotional Drawings from the Convent of St. Walburg in Eichstätt* (forthcoming).

[48] See Diane Bornstein, "Antifeminism," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages,* ed. Joseph R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York, 1982–89), 1:322–25, and R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1992). There have been several recent attempts to read medieval texts against themselves and find women's voices raised against the misogyny built into the accounts by both male and female authors; see, for example, E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1993). More successful, in my judgment, are the sophisticated technical studies that actually discover women's voices in texts written by male scribes. See, for example, Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth-Century Visionary* (Philadelphia, 1992), and Catherine M. Mooney, "The Authorial Role of Brother A. in the Composition of Angela of Foligno's Revelations," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance,* ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia, 1994), pp. 34–63.

[49] Especially good, among much good recent work, are Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *Corps et chirurgie à l'apogée du moyen âge: Savoir et imaginaire du corps chez Henri de Mondeville,*

Nothing entitles us to say that medieval thinkers essentialized body as matter or essentialized either body or matter as female. Indeed, philosophically speaking, body as subsisting was always form as well as matter. Although it is true that medieval discussions, from natural philosophy to secular love poetry, often reveal a profound distrust for fertility and biological process, this is not at all the same thing as essentialized physicality. Medieval visionaries sometimes saw life as a river filled with muck or hell as eternal digestion.[53] Monks such as Hermann of Reun warned

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chirugien de Phillipe le Bel (Paris, 1983); James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987); Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1993); Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, N. J., 1993); and Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago, 1986).

[50] Still useful on this is the older work of Eleanor C. McLaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions,* ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York, 1974), pp. 213–66. Buc, *L'Ambiguïté du livre,* esp. pp. 323–66 and 401–6, has recently shown that there was a tradition of questioning hierarchy in medieval exegesis.

[51] See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother,* pp. 110–262, for many citations.

[52] See Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh;* Beckwith, *Christ's Body;* Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary"; and Danielle Régnier-Bohler, "Voix littéraires, voix mystiques," in *Le Moyen âge,* ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, vol. 2 of *Histoire des femmes en occident,* ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Paris, 1991), pp. 443–500.

[53] See, for example, Eadmer's account of a vision received by Anselm in which the life of the world is a river full of detritus but the monastery is a vast cloister of pure silver; see Eadmer, *The Life of St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury* [Latin and English], trans. and ed. R. W. Southern (Oxford, 1962), pp. 35–36. Anselm returns to the image in his own preaching, where he compares life to a rushing stream; the safety of the monastic life is imaged both as a mill and as a vessel holding the milled flour; see ibid., pp. 74–76. The idea of life as a river, and safety as a building by its side, is also found in Peter Damian; see Bultot, *La Doctrine du mépris du monde,* 4:2:84, 90. The contrast of flow and stasis as evil and good is very clear.

that human beings were in the process of aging, corrupting, and dying from the first moment of birth.[54] Innocent III, like many other moralists, spoke of our origins in "vile sperm."[55] Exegetes felt it important to underline that the earth God created on the third day did not contain seeds; rather, God first created the plant life that then shed seeds into the earth.[56] Cathar and Catholic preachers accused each other of denigrating the world and the flesh and of not caring properly for the bodies of the dead.[57] The profound discomfort with biological process betrayed in all this needs more research and elucidation.[58] But medieval theorists did not reduce embodiment either to matter or to female matter. (Peter Damian's statement about embracing a corpse when one embraces a female body is notorious, but as the quotation from Innocent III given above suggests, male sexuality and matter could also be identified with putrefaction, physical or moral.)[59]

As I shall try to show in a moment, some antique and medieval thinkers put forward a technical conception of embodiment that departs (for better or worse) as radically as do the theories of Judith Butler from an understanding of body as stuff or physicality. And while it is true that medieval philosophers sometimes tried to define person (and it is important that this was their category for thinking about the human, not essence *[esse]),* they did not usually in these discussions deal with gender. Those passages where they do deal with what we would consider identity in the sense of individual (or identity-position) are not about definition at all and are certainly not essentialist. They are about death and triumph

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On hell as digestion, see my *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* plates 3, 6, 12–16, and 28–32, and Robert M. Durling, "Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell," in *Allegory and Representation,* ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 61–93.

For medieval understandings of "matter" as a philosophical concept, see *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy* and *The Concept of Matter in Modern Philosophy,* ed. McMullin (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963), pp. 5–14.

[54] Hermann of Reun, sermon 67, *Sermones festivales,* ed. Edmund Mikkers et al. (Turnhout, 1986), chaps. 4–5, pp. 306–10.

[55] Innocent III, *De contemptu mundi sive de miseria humanae conditionis,* in vol. 217 of *Patrologia latina,* ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1890), bk. 1, chaps. 1–5, col. 702. Innocent also says, quoting Jeremiah, "[ist] mihi mater mea sepulcrum" (ibid.). And see the many passages cited in Bultot, *La Doctrine du mépris du monde,* and Delumeau, *Sin and Fear,* pp. 9–34.

[56] See Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis,* trans. and ed. John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols. (New York, 1982), bk. 5, chap. 4, 1:150–53. The idea was repeated in later discussions.

[57] See my *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 214–20, and M. D. Lambert, "The Motives of the Cathars: Some Reflections," in *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 49–59.

[58] On this fear of decay, see Piero Camporesi, *The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore,* trans. Tania Croft-Murray and Helen Elsom (Cambridge, 1988).

[59] See Peter Damian, letter 15, *Epistolarum libri octo,* in *Patrologia Latina,* vol. 144, bk. 1, cols. 232D–233A. And see Bultot, *La Doctrine du mépris du monde,* 4:1:25 n. 27.

over it—and, as I shall show, the metaphysical principles that are put into play have surprising implications.

I have, however, spent too much time now on characterizations to be rejected. Hardly a way to broaden the conversation! So I shall turn to my own recent work on eschatology and funerary practice, not because I think the topics I shall now treat are the only proper subjects for a conversation about the many bodies of the Middle Ages, but because even a few new topics may begin to expand our rather cramped and limited picture of the medieval past. I use the somewhat inelegant categories I used to discuss *Truly, Madly, Deeply:* identity, stuff or matter, and desire.

In the Afterlife

In my recent book *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity,* I chronicle both technical discussions of what it means for the body to return at the end of time and the spread of burial practices that treat the corpse, whether its parts are carefully united or deliberately divided, as an object of great cultural significance. From this complicated story I wish here to extract three points, which I intend to place in conversation with certain of the recent theoretical positions discussed above. The first concerns identity.

Throughout the Middle Ages theorists who dealt with eschatology tended to talk of the person not as soul but as soul and body. (As a number of scholars have established, Platonic definitions of the person as the soul were explicitly rejected by the middle of the twelfth century.)[60] Of course theologians and philosophers knew the corpse was in the grave; they buried corpses, and they revered as relics bits of holy corpses that remained above ground (a point to which I shall return). Moreover, they thought the souls of the dead sometimes walked abroad; and occasionally they imagined these spirits or ghosts in other than recognizable bodily form (as lights or doves). But ghost stories and other-world visions came increasingly in the course of the Middle Ages to depict the dead—even immediately after death—as already in their totally particular earthly bodies (or at least ghostly versions thereof).[61] And Catholic theologians very early rejected the idea of metempsychosis—the idea that we find in

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[60] See Richard Heinzmann, *Die Unsterblichkeit der Seele und die Auferstehung des Leibes: Eine problemgeschichtliche Untersuchung der frühscholastischen Sentenzen- und Summenliteratur von Anselm von Laon bis Wilhelm von Auxerre* (Munster, 1965).

[61] See Schmitt, *Les Revenants;* Ronald C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (London, 1982); Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York, 1987); and Peter Dinzelbacher, "Reflexionen irdischer Sozialstrukturen in mittelalterlichen Jenseitsschilderungen," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 61, no. 1 (1979): 16–34.

Plato's *Republic,* for example, that soul or spirit can inhabit a body other than "its own."[62] The doctrine that the same body we possess on earth will rise at the end of time and be united to our soul was part of the Christian creeds from the early third century on.[63] That doctrine almost immediately forced a good deal of sophisticated speculation about how the resurrected body can be "the same" as the earthly one.

From the end of the second century, certain theologians felt it necessary to respond to philosophical doubts about the resurrection of the flesh. Both pagan critics and Christian theorists of a Gnostic and Docetist persuasion argued that corpses are prey not only to decay in the earth but also to destruction by wild beasts or even, in the case of cannibalism, by other human beings; therefore, the same body cannot come back. Moreover, they argued, we are not even the same body from one day to the next, certainly not from one decade to another; the matter turns over. What can it mean therefore to be the same?

I do not intend here to explain all the answers this question elicited.[64] What I want to demonstrate, however, is that, through discussion of eschatology, a number of thinkers grappled with the issue of how identity, in the sense of spatiotemporal continuity, is maintained; they also came, in the process, to give an answer to the question of identity as individuality.

To give two examples. The great third-century theologian Origen formulated a complex theory of body as an *eidos* that carried within itself a potentially unfolding pattern; the idea is not unlike modern notions of DNA. Origen thought this *eidos* might unfold into versions of body very different from those of earth; no particle of the original body was to him necessary for the body to be the same, and Origen vacillated a good deal over how much of its earthly structure (organs, scars, and so on) it would retain.[65] In the middle of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas adumbrated a theory (which was worked out by the next generation of scholars) that soul, the single form or principle of the person, carried all the specificity of that person with it; it then, at the resurrection, informed or activated matter to be that person's body. Thus any matter at all, if informed by the form of Harry, would be Harry's body (even particles that had once been in the living body, or the corpse, of a specific Joe or Jane). That body, restored at the resurrection, retained all the specific structures it had in earthly life (organs, height, even—in certain cases—scars).[66] If it was the body of one of the elect, it was "glorified," that is, subtle, beautiful, and impassable, in heaven.[67] My point here is not to explain these abstruse theories fully, although they are shrewd and complex and should not be caricatured. Rather, my point is to show that, in any commonsense understanding of the word *matter,* Origen has eliminated "matter" but retained "body," whereas Aquinas appears on some level to have retained "the same matter" by a philosophical trick (defining "my matter" as anything activated by "my soul"). The bodies they put forward "dissolve into language" as thoroughly—and in as sophisticated a fashion—as the recent theories deplored by my friend. And in a not dissimilar way, they made those who read them uncomfortable. Theologians contemporary with Origen and Aquinas, drawing in some cases explicitly on popular practices concerning the care and reverencing of corpses, protested the idea of such a divorce of self and stuff.

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[62] See Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Paul Shorey, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), 2:505–21 (10.15–16.617E–621D). In *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* I suggest that, in certain ways, the early Christian fear of being eaten was tantamount to a fear of transmigration of souls; see pp. 86–91 and 108–14. See also Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism.*

[63] The profession of faith that became the so-called Apostles' Creed required Christians to believe in *resurrectio carnis;* see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York, 1950). By the high Middle Ages, this was glossed as meaning: "all rise with their own individual bodies, that is, the bodies which they now wear"; see Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum, et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum,* 11th ed., ed. Clemens Bannwart (Freiburg, 1911), pp. 189, 202–3.

[64] For a survey, see H. Cornélis, et al., *The Resurrection of the Body,* trans. M. Joselyn (Notre Dame, Ind., 1964); Joanne E. McWilliam Dewart, *Death and Resurrection* (Wilmington, Del., 1986); Gisbert Greshake and Jacob Kremer, *Resurrectio mortuorum: Zum theologischen Verständnis der leiblichen Auferstehung* (Darmstadt, 1986); and Antonius H. C. van Eijk, *La Résurrection des morts chez les pères apostoliques* (Paris, 1974).

[65] See Mark Edwards, "Origen No Gnostic; or, On the Corporeality of Man," *Journal of Theological Studies,* n. s., 43 (Apr. 1992): 23–37, and Elizabeth A. Clark, "New Perspectives

Yet in some ways, early fourteenth-century theological discussion saw the triumph of Aquinas's idea of the specificity or "whatness" of the self as packed into the form, or soul, or principle of identity (in the sense of continuity). And with a very interesting consequence. The soul of the person starts to look like what we would call today his or her identity-position. Soul is not a sort of rational essence to be only incidentally or accidentally sexed, gendered, colored, handicapped, and aged in various unequal ways. Soul carries the structure of the "me" that will rise at the end of time—with all my organs, and even my acquired characteristics,

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on the Origenist Controversy: Human Embodiment and Ascetic Strategies," *Church History* 59 (June 1990): 145–62.

[66] See Vergote, "The Body," pp. 93–105; Quinn, "Aquinas's Concept of the Body and Out of Body Situations," pp. 387–400; Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death;* and Bernardo C. Bazán, "La Corporalité selon saint Thomas," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 81, 4th ser., no. 51 (1983): 369–409.

[67] Technical theological discussion saw the glorified body as dowered with four gifts: agility (a sort of weightlessness that enabled it to move with the speed of light), subtlety (a sort of incorporeality—if one can use such a term for body), clarity (which seems to have meant beauty), and impassibility (an inability to suffer). These technical terms are carried over into the mystical descriptions of desire I discuss below. On the four dowries, see Nikolaus Wicki, *Die Lehre von der himmlischen Seligkeit in der mittelalterlichen Scholastik von Petrus Lombardus bis Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg, 1954), and Joseph Goering, "The *De dotibus* of Robert Grosseteste," *Mediaeval Studies* 44 (1982): 83–109.

at least if these wrinkles and scars are the result of bearing up virtuously under hardship. It is no accident then that such a soul cannot body-hop! No accident that it is repeatedly said in the literature to yearn for its "own" body. Nor is it an accident that Dante, in canto 25 of his *Purgatorio,* works out a complex analogy to embryology when he explains that, even in the separated state between death and resurrection, the soul generates an aerial body with all the particularities of its earthly condition.[68] If there *is* a sense in which one can say that soul carries identity in late medieval theories of the person, one must also note that much of what was traditionally meant by body has been packed into soul. Soul is not some sort of essential humanness to which gender, say, is attached—whether in equal or unequal varieties. Nor is soul "me," any more (says Aquinas) than my foot is me. To Aquinas, "me" is carried in soul when body is absent. (This is the abnormal situation.) "Me" is expressed in body when things are as they should be (that is, in life and after the resurrection). But "I" am not soul or body; I am a person. Moreover, "I" am a person with an identity in both senses of the term *identity.*[69] We have to do here with a theory of person not so different really from much late twentieth-century talk about body.[70]

My second point about medieval eschatology can be made much more succinctly. It is simply that certain Christian beliefs and practices of the late Middle Ages (and there are parallels in Jewish practice and belief although I shall not treat them here) pulled radically against any theoretical position that led to the dissolution of either person or body into discourse. Not only did a good deal of preaching and storytelling stress resurrection as the literal reassembling of every bit that went into the tomb at death; it is also true that dead bodies were extraordinarily charged objects—fields of force from which emanated miracles or the work of demons.

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[68] See Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* in *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Charles S. Singleton, 3 vols. (Princeton, N. J., 1977), canto 25, 1:1:269–77. See also Étienne Gilson, "Dante's Notion of a Shade: *Purgatorio* XXV," *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 124–42; Rachel Jacoff, "Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of Female Desire in Dante's *Commedia,*" *Romantic Review* 29, no. 1 (1988): 129–42, rpt. in *The New Medievalism,* ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 183–200; and Bynum, "Faith Imagining the Self: Somatomorphic Soul and Resurrection Body in Dante's *Divine Comedy,*" in *Imagining Faith: A Festschrift for Richard Reinhold Niebuhr,* ed. Wayne Proudfoot, Sang Hyun Lee, and Albert Blackwell (forthcoming).

[69] See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *On First Corinthians,* vol. 21 of *Opera omnia,* ed. S. E. Fretté (Paris, 1876), chap. 15, lect. 2, pp. 33–34: "anima. . .non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego." See also Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles,* vol. 12 of *Opera omnia,* bk. 4, chap. 79, p. 592 and *Summa theologiae* Ia, trans. and ed. Timothy Suttor (New York, 1970), vol. 11, q. 75, art. 4, reply to obj. 2, pp. 20–21, in both of which Aquinas asserts that the soul is only a part of the person, like the hand or foot. Hence: "It is more correct to say that soul contains body [continet corpus] and makes it to be one, than the converse" (ibid., q. 76, art. 3, pp. 60–61; trans. mod.).

By connecting Aristotelianism and sexism, Prudence Allen has raised a very important issue; it is true that the idea of woman as defective man had a long and unfortunate history. But my interpretation of Aquinas's use of Aristotle differs from hers: see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250* (Montreal, 1985). And see Buc, *L'Ambiguïté du livre,* p. 108.

[70] Butler in *Gender Trouble,* citing Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* comments: "In Foucault's terms, the soul is not imprisoned by or within the body, as some Christian imagery would suggest, but 'the soul is the prison of the body'" (p. 135). She is of course correct that some Christian imagery suggests that the body is a prison; what is interesting here, however, is that there is a sense in which Aquinas makes the same move as Foucault and imprisons body in soul.

As is well known, holy bodies were revered as relics, as places where supernatural power was especially present; they were deliberately divided in order to produce more such objects for veneration. Not only they, but even objects they had touched (their clothes, utensils, even their bodily effluvia, such as milk, spittle, or wash water) were revered. From the tenth century on, in certain parts of Europe, bodily partition was practiced on the dead of high secular status as well. The corpses of kings and nobles were fragmented in order to be buried in several places, the practice being accompanied by complex arguments about the need to garner more prayers and also about the presence of the person's power where his or her body part resided.[71]

These practices seem to have assumed a kind of assimilation of resurrected body to corpse, for which the texts give confirmation. Pious Christians sometimes said that the bodies they placed in graves or reliquaries "were" the saints, although they said simultaneously (as Simon Tugwell and Thomas Head have reminded us) that the saints "were" also in heaven.[72] Such usages are found in many cultures. What is more interesting for my argument is the fact that hagiographers, preachers, and artists fairly often said that the body in the grave or reliquary "was" "the resurrection body."[73] Such locutions were used to argue both that bodies could be divided (that is, their specific treatment in burial did not matter because God had promised resurrection to all bodies in whatever condition they might be found) and that they should be buried without disturbance (that is, that because exactly this stuff would rise, it should be kept close to its resurrection condition as long as possible).

These practices and beliefs are very complicated and I cannot deal with them fully here. It should by now at least be clear how and why they pulled in a countervailing direction from theories of person to which material continuity was not necessary. The doctrine of formal identity could solve technical issues of personhood and survival, it is true. But to late thirteenth-century theologians, a theory of body had also to account for continuity between living person and cadaver, both in order to make relic veneration veneration of the saint and in order to make Christ's body in the triduum between his crucifixion and resurrection "really" his body and therefore really the redemption of our bodiliness.

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[71] See Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse," *Viator* 12 (1981): 221–70 and "Authority, the Family, and the Dead in Late Medieval France," *French Historical Studies* 16 (Fall 1990): 803–32; and Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 200–25 and 318–29.

[72] See Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death,* pp. 125–34, and Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800–1200* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 144, 268. And see Arnold Angenendt, "*Corpus incorruptum:* Eine Leitidee der mittelalterlichen Reliquienverehrung," *Saeculum* 42, nos. 3–4 (1991): 320–48.

[73] See, for example, Goscelin, *Life of St. Ivo,* in *Acta sanctorum,* ed. the Bollandists, *June:* vol. 2 (Paris, 1867), pp. 286–87.

It should also be clear that there are parallels in all this to modern concerns about disposal of bodies, organ transplants, artificial intelligence, and so on. As new work in the field of medical ethics and cultural studies has emphasized, many in the late twentieth century hope (or fear) that self is transferred with body part (especially but not exclusively with the brain) in transplants, autopsies, or disposals.[74] The body that dies is also the body that remains; whether, and how, we handle it makes a difference. Those who have experienced the loss of loved ones in the violent disappearances of spacecraft explosions, air crashes, drownings, or war can understand how Jewish and Christian resurrection belief arose in the context of persecutions that threatened to make it impossible to reassemble the shattered bodies of the martyrs for burial.[75] They can also understand the power of medieval veneration of remains and the complex insistence of medieval hagiography and eucharistic theology that, with God, *pars* not only stands *pro toto* but is truly *totum.*

All this is clear. What is perhaps less clear and should therefore be underlined is that, whether or not the concern for identity and the concern for material continuity were fully compatible, both were deeply related to the fear of biological change I noted above. The resurrection body, reassembled from its earlier physical bits and conforming in every detail to its earthly structure, was a guarantee that change has limits; process is under control; development stops at death. Butterflies may come from cocoons and worms from corpses, but we will not be, in the afterlife, something we cannot recognize.

One does not have to essentialize body as matter to feel that the spiritualized and glorified body of scholastic theology is something of an oxymoron. A body that cannot age, corrupt, feel pain, or change in any way that would involve incurring or filling a lack, is a curious sort of body—which may be one of the reasons why theorists, especially in the early modern period, moved as much as they possibly could of the senses into heaven.[76] But this theory of a resurrection body reconstructed from the same physical bits and according to the same plan it had in life (and it is significant that high medieval thinkers were, when they dealt with the physical stuff of creation, atomists) implied that redemption had something to do with stasis.

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[74] See Renée C. Fox and Judith P. Swazey, *The Courage to Fail: A Social View of Organ Transplants and Dialysis* (Chicago, 1974), pp. 27–32.

[75] See Bynum, "Images of the Resurrection Body in the Theology of Late Antiquity," *Catholic Historical Review* 80 (Apr. 1994): 215–37, and Lionel Rothkrug, "German Holiness and Western Sanctity in Medieval and Modern History," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 15, no. 1 (1988): 215–29.

This leads me to my final point, which concerns desire. For stasis was not the only image of the afterlife in the late Middle Ages. Especially in the poetry and visions of mystical women, heaven was ever-expanding desire. Such a notion was, however, long in coming.

In the visions and tales of the early Middle Ages, heaven was the realm of gold, gems, and crystal, whereas hell was the place of digestion and excretion, process, metamorphosis, and fluids. Exegetes were even reluctant to use biblically authorized images of flowers and seeds to describe either resurrection or reward. According to most scholastic theory (at least before the fourteenth century), heaven was *requies aeterna,* where longing was satiated and stilled. After the final Judgment, motion ceased (Apocalypse 10:6); eternity, as Boethius had said, is life *tota simul.*[77] Indeed, complex arguments, which I will not describe, circled around the texts in which Peter Lombard, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Bonaventure (themselves building on Augustine's *Literal Commentary on Genesis*) spoke of the separated soul as "retarded" by longing for its body after death.[78] What is important for my purposes here is that, in thirteenth-century university discussions, this longing was lodged in soul and was understood as a distraction from the peace of salvation. As Tugwell has recently reminded us, Aquinas held that the beatific vision was "decisive arrival. Once it is attained, there is no more change. Beatitude is a participation in eternity."[79]

And yet there were other ideas. Devotional literature and religious poetry (which often borrowed rhythms and vocabulary from secular love lyrics) spoke increasingly of a desire that would never be stilled.[80] Cracks appeared in the crystalline heaven of the scholastics.

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[76] See Camporesi, *Incorruptible Flesh,* esp. pp. 46–63 and 179–207.

[77] See Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death,* pp. 152–54, and Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336,* pp. 164–65, 264–71, and 303–5.

[78] See Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis,* bk. 12, chap. 35, 2:228–29; Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae,* 2 vols. (Grottaferrata, 1971), bk. 4, dist. 49, chap. 4, art. 3, 2:553; Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo,* in *Sancti Bernardi Opera,* ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols. (Rome, 1957–77), chaps. 10–11, 3:143–47; and Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences,* vol. 6 of *Opera omnia,* dist. 49, pt. 2, p. 578.

[79] Tugwell, *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death,* p. 153.

[80] There has been much debate over the borrowings and mutual influence of secular and religious literature. On the idea of passion as ecstatic desire and suffering—an idea developed by religious writers—see Erich Auerbach, "Excursus: *Gloria passionis,*" in *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), pp. 67–81.

In the final lines of the *Paradiso,* for example, Dante's heaven is not a gem but a flower. And at the heart of the heavenly rose is the great wheeling motion of love.

> Thus my mind, all rapt, was gazing . . . ever enkindled by its gazing. . . .
>
> My own wings were not sufficient . . . save that my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it. Here power failed . . . ; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.[81]

Mystical women such as Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, and Marguerite of Oingt spoke of selves (body and soul together) yearning in heaven with a desire that was piqued and delighted into ever greater frenzy by encounter with their lover, God. Angela described Jesus as "love and inestimable satiety, which, although it satiated, generated at the same time insatiable hunger, so that all her [that is, Angela's own] members were unstrung."[82] Mechtild indeed wrote that she wished to remain in her body forever in order to suffer and yearn forever toward God.[83]

My point is not merely that writing about desire becomes more complex and fervent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although this is true. It is that such desire is not only *for* bodies; it is lodged *in* bodies. When Mechtild and Marguerite speak of being lifted into the arms of God, tasting his goodness, seeing themselves reflected in his shining surface, they make it explicit that they speak of embodied persons, not of souls. All their senses are in play. And if certain of the university theologians of the thirteenth century would not fully have comprehended or accepted their poetry, there were already in the twelfth century Cistercian monks who wrote of the development of empathy through the encounter of our embodied selves with the body of Christ; they would have understood.[84]

It should be clear that this medieval idea of desire is both like and unlike the notion of desire I discussed when I considered *Truly, Madly, Deeply.* I do not wish to strain for parallels. I merely suggest that the sort of presence we usually mean by body and the sort of tug we usually mean by desire are radically related to each other in both the medieval and the modern periods. We do not usually speak of desire for a ghost or a memory, or think of our desire as in our minds. *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is not about ghosts but about persons.

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[81] Dante, *Paradiso,* in *The Divine Comedy,* canto 33, ll. 97–99, 139–45, 3:1:359–81.

[82] Angela of Foligno, *Le Livre de l'expérience des vrais fidèles: Texte latin publié d'après le manuscript d'Assise,* ed. M.-J. Ferré and L. Baudry (Paris, 1927), pp. 156–58.

[83] See Mechtild of Magdeburg, *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit: Nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in kritischem Vergleich mit der gesamten Überlieferung,* ed. Hans Neumann (Munich, 1990), esp. p. 222; and see also Marguerite of Oingt, *Les Oeuvres de Marguerite d'Oingt,* ed. Antonin Duraffour, P. Gardette, and P. Durdilly (Paris, 1965).

[84] See Karl F. Morrison, *"I Am You": The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art* (Princeton, N.J., 1988) and *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville, Va., 1992).

Nor is late medieval discussion of personal survival, whether popular or learned, mostly about ghosts. In devotional writing, as in medieval love poetry, body and desire are connected. Thus not only do we see that body (in the sense of particular identity) is packed into soul by the theories of the scholastics; we also discover in the mystics a hint that passionate and ever unfolding love of God lodges fully in souls only when they get their bodies back.

Medieval discussions of the body that desires and the body that dies must of course be understood in the context of many other ideas. For a full picture of the many bodies of the Middle Ages we would need to consider understandings of disease and health, of growth and decay, of nature, the supernatural, the sacramental and the magical, of reproduction, contraception and birthing, of sexuality and rape, of pain and pleasure, of gender expectations, group affiliations, and social roles, of lineage and work, mothering and childhood. Moreover, as I have suggested in the discussion above, ideas differed according to who held them and where and when. The philosophy, the practices, the stories of late antiquity, of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of the age of Dante and Christine de Pisan, were not the same. Not only did mystical women and scholastic theologians differ; each group varied and disagreed among themselves. Experiences as basic as birthing and being born, working and eating, aging and dying were very different in the fens of England, the forests of Brittany, and the bustling cities of the Rhineland and the north of Italy.

Nonetheless I hope I have made it clear that medieval theories about the body that dies addressed philosophical issues of identity and individuality that still bother us today. I wish now to suggest how these theories relate to the contemporary debate over essentialism and especially to the performative feminism of Judith Butler (with which, as I said above, I have some sympathy). I will not attempt to provide a full discussion of the emerging field of gender studies (any more than I have treated fully either medieval scholasticism or the current cinema). Rather, I wish to make two general points about how medievalists should approach the plethora of body theory out of which my friend in eastern Europe (like many of her contemporaries) is struggling to build a course syllabus.

In Theory

In current philosophical and historical discussion, "identity" refers to two related issues: spatiotemporal continuity and identity-position. It refers, that is, to the question of how a thing survives in time and space as "the same thing" (for example, Bynum as Bynum), and the question of what makes two separate things describable by the same grouping noun (for example, Native American). The recent debate over essentialism is really an effort to find understandings that do not assume a common essence or nature (or, in some theories, even a common definition) for identity in both senses.[85] The effort stems in part from the desire of certain groups (self-identified *as* groups) to seize control of descriptions that had been imposed on them by outsiders,[86] in part from dissatisfaction with the sex/gender distinction (understood as a distinction between the biologically given and the culturally constructed) so popular in the early 1980s.[87] The antiessentialism of many recent theorists, and especially the performative feminism of Butler, are impressive efforts to explain how the categories with which we live are created by us as we live them. No one, Butler argues, is born "woman" or "black" or "lesbian," nor are these categories "cultural interpretations" of biological "facts." Yet one does not simply choose an identity-position. One becomes a lesbian by living as a lesbian, changing the category as one incorporates and inspires it (the echoes of *corpus* and *spiritus* in the verbs I have chosen here are intentional).

Seen in a slightly longer perspective, the antiessentialist position is, of course, a reaction to Cartesian and Enlightenment dichotomies: mind versus body, authority versus liberty, society (or nurture) versus nature, and so on.[88] For all its energy and intelligence, it sometimes seems to flail in its analysis from one pole to the other—from performance to regulation, mind to matter, socialization to physical structure—as if both were traps from which something (but what?) might escape. In my own more ludic moments, I find the discussion empowering; in gloomier times I too (like the theorists themselves) feel trapped by categories. By and large, as the best of contemporary feminists enjoin me, I try to listen to the voices of others. But does any of this have anything to do with the Middle Ages?

The debate about essentialism that has so dominated feminist and gender studies over the past five years is clearly an event in contemporary politics. As Bordo and Jane Martin (among others) have argued, it has unfortunately sometimes been used to repress empirical historical research. Historians have been accused of silencing past voices when they fail to find in them decidedly 1990s sensibilities,[89] of essentializing categories when they have instead (often after long and painstaking research) discovered an unfamiliar attitude in the past. Such charges are abusive, both of the historical record and of the contemporary diversity they purport to foster. But does this mean that current feminist theories, especially the debate over essentialism, have no relevance—or even destructive implications—for the study of remote periods such as the European Middle Ages? I suggest on the contrary that there is something to be learned, but in two quite specific ways.[90]

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[85] On the difference between essentialism of words and of things, see Jane Roland Martin, "Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps," and Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*.

[86] For examples of resistance to misuses of identity-positions, images, or stereotypes, see Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (New York, 1989), and Ann duCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhoood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994): 591–629.

[87] For an early expression of dissatisfaction with the distinction, see Davis and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Call for Papers," *Common Knowledge* 1 (Spring 1992): 5.

[88] See Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity*.

First, if we situate our own categories in the context of our own politics, we must situate those of the Middle Ages in theirs. The relationship between then and now will thus be analogous and proportional, not direct. It seems to me, that is, that the fruitful question to explore is not likely to be, How is Origen (or Christine de Pisan or Aquinas) like or not like Butler (or Spivak or Foucault)? Posed in this simple way, the answer (whether we applaud it or condemn it) is almost certain to be, not very like. It is far more fruitful to think along the lines: Origen is to Origen's context as Butler is to Butler's. By understanding the relationship of figures to contexts, and then the relationship of those relationships, we will often see that there is a large and developing issue with which both figures struggle, each in his or her own vocabulary and circumstances.

Or, to put it another way, the past is seldom usefully examined by assuming that its specific questions or their settings are the same as those of the present. What may, however, be the same is the way in which a question, understood in its context, struggles with a perduring issue such as, for example, group affiliation. Origen asked, What of our bodily self survives into the realm of resurrection? Butler asks, How is a sexual orientation constituted by a way of being in the world? That is, Origen dealt with identity in the sense of spatiotemporal continuity; Butler deals with an identity-position. For Origen, the continuing of body into the afterlife seems to involve the transcending of what we call gender; for Butler, it is unimaginable that we could be "we" without performing what we call gender. Moreover, Origen's context was martyrdom, persecution, and debate over how we know the truth; Butler's is homophobia, the academy, and debate over who has the power to define. Neither the issues nor their contexts are the same. If we assume they are, we get only boring results. We learn very little that is important about the third or the twentieth century if we ask, for example, What does Origen think about transvestites or Butler about angels (although it is clear that each would condemn the views of the other)? Yet I would suggest that Origen, struggling with the categories he inherited and the traumas of his world, can be seen as "solving" an issue of identity in a way surprisingly similar to the solution Butler forges from her inheritance and her experience. Both Butler and Origen speak of a labile, active, unfolding body that somehow becomes more what it is by behaving as it does; both have trouble explaining how what we think of as "physical stuff" fits in.[91]

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[89] Although I have my own criticisms of Bloch's recent *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (chiefly of its failure to take sufficient account of chronological change), I find many of the attacks on it examples of this second type of fallacious charge. For warnings against such attacks, see Jane Roland Martin, "Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps," and Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism."

[90] It should be clear that my focus in this article is "body theory," not gender theory. For a survey of recent applications of gender theory to the study of the past, see the important article by Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (Dec. 1986): 1053–75. See also n. 8 above.

Second, we must recognize that we are, at least in part, the heirs of many earlier discourses.[92] The conversation about nature and difference, about individuality and identity, that is so heated today has roots in centuries of debate. Our current concerns have not sprung full-blown from the 1970s. I do not, of course, argue that Origen of Alexandria, Aquinas, and Angela of Foligno had twentieth-century notions of difference and desire, but I do insist that, by the early fourteenth century, mystical and scholastic understandings of body implied that both physicality and sensuality lodge squarely in person. If there had been no sophisticated discussion of identity and survival, of gender and longing, before *The Feminine Mystique,* recent discussions would not be so nuanced and powerful. It is partly because premodern Western philosophy is not dualistic, not essentialist, that we struggle so hard today with certain issues of philosophical vocabulary inherited from the Enlightenment. Much (I did not say all) of what we include in an identity-position (especially gender) was already in the late Middle Ages established as intrinsic to self exactly because it was understood to return at the moment of bodily resurrection. Debates about spatiotemporal continuity and personal survival came to imply notions of the individual that foreshadowed the modern concern with identity-position (although the term has no medieval equivalent).

My friend in eastern Europe asked me to write something for her students. In the face of arguments that seemed to make the premodern past irrelevant, irretrievable, and irredeemable, she wanted an example of what it might mean to relate feminist theory to the Middle Ages. One of my purposes here has been to provide such an example. I might indeed suggest that it is impossible not to. For the only past we can know is one we shape by the questions we ask; yet these questions are also shaped by the context we come from, and our context includes the past. Thus my picture of medieval concerns is as influenced by current feminist debates as those debates are influenced by the ideas from which they partly descend.

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[91] See Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* pp. 1–11.

[92] Those since the Enlightenment are also, of course, important. See, for example, Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* 3 (Spring 1994): 1–6.

It is not only possible, it is imperative to use modern concerns when we confront the past. So long as we reason by analogy rather than merely rewriting or rejecting, the present will help us see past complexity and the past will help us to understand ourselves. Thus we need not succumb to the despair or solipsism to which modern historians are sometimes reduced by the plethora of new approaches. Nor need we abandon the study of the Middle Ages in favor of the study of other medievalists.[93] We must never forget to watch ourselves knowing the otherness of the past, but this is not the same as merely watching ourselves.

Indeed, awareness of our individual situations and perspectives can be freeing rather than limiting, for it removes the burden of trying to see everything. The enterprise of the historian becomes, of necessity, more cooperative and therefore more fun.[94] Recent theorizing has surely taught us that our knowledge is "situated," that the effort to understand "the other" is fraught with danger.[95] But any medievalist who tackles her professional subject matter writes, and must write, about what is other—radically, terrifyingly, fascinatingly other—from herself. If we no longer believe that the *pars* elucidated by any one historian stands *pro toto,* we must nonetheless not surrender our determination to reach outside ourselves in our encounter with the part. Exactly because we recognize *pars* for *pars,* we can have greater confidence—and greater pleasure—in a kaleidoscopic whole that is far larger than the limited vision of any one of us. The sources are there to be deciphered, the charnel houses to be excavated, the reliquaries to be studied in terms of their contents as well as their design. We can, I think, bring recent theoretical discussion to bear on the Middle Ages without doing violence to the nuances of medieval texts and images or to the slow, solid efforts of medievalists to understand them.

In closing, then, I return to medieval ideas and images of the body. I have considered them (as should now be clear) in the light of a modern concern with identity and individuality, physicality and desire. What, if anything, has emerged from this encounter of present and past?

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[93] That a number of recent authors have turned, in a kind of despair, to studying medievalism or medievalists rather than the Middle Ages will be obvious to anyone who reads the journals. A joke going the rounds in anthropological circles makes the point I make here. It is a joke that has only a punch line. The informant says to the anthropologist: "Don't you think it's time we talked about me?"

[94] I made the same point four years ago in the introduction to *Fragmentation and Redemption,* pp. 11–16. In *The Flight to Objectivity,* Bordo argues, similarly, that we must be careful lest a rejection of the omniscient observer merely leads feminists to offer arrogant (and inadvertently universalizing) critiques from the margins.

[95] See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Fall 1988): 575–99. A recent and powerful defense of historical research against the extreme claims of deconstructionism is Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York,

In Conclusion

Certain philosophical theories about the body that developed in late antiquity and the high Middle Ages answered the question, How can "I" continue to be "I" through time, both the time of earth and the time of the eschaton? But they were understood by contemporaries to do this at the expense of taking lived life very abstractly, at the expense of jettisoning the stuffness of "me." These theories did not essentialize "me" as a general human abstraction. Even for Origen, the "I" that unfolds in heaven carries with it some of my particularity. And for thirteenth-century followers of Aquinas, "my" particularity—not only my sex but also personal characteristics, such as beauty or size—were understood to be carried by soul or form. Although Origen's contemporaries feared that he opened the way to metempsychosis, by the thirteenth century no philosophical theory of the person admitted any possibility of transmigration of soul. Body was individual and immediately recognizable as such; for better or worse, one could not shed gender or appearance; one could not body-hop in this life or in the afterlife.

In such a theory, however, body became an expression of soul; indeed, body could be expressed in any stuff. As a number of more conservative thinkers of the late thirteenth century noticed, this raised questions for religious practice. No less a figure than the Archbishop of Canterbury pointed out that there would be no reason for revering the relics of a saint if any stuff could provide his or her body at the end of time.[96] It is remarkable that we find scholastics in the years around 1300 raising questions about relic cult and burial practices as ways of objecting to technical philosophical theories, since in the Middle Ages (as today), practice and the discourse of university intellectuals were seldom explicitly related to each other.

The new philosophical theories did more than threaten specific religious practices. They tended to make body itself into a concept, to dissolve body into theory. And they made salvation repose or stasis. The goal of human existence became crystalline permanence. Yet the period that produced such theories saw an explosion of poetry, religious and secular, in which labile, physical, agile, yearning body received new articulation. The abstractions of the philosophers and theologians were not so much defeated as simply and very effectively ignored by the poets and mystics, preachers and storytellers, of the later Middle Ages. (Even in the universities, the new theory received remarkably little attention outside certain circles.) To the singers, preachers, and lovers of the fourteenth century,

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1994); see also Lawrence Stone and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History and Post-Modernism," *Past and Present* 135 (May 1992): 189–208.

[96] See John Peckham, *Registrum epistolarum fratris Johannis Peckham, archiepiscopi cantuariensis*, ed. Charles T. Martin, 3 vols. (London, 1882–85), 3:921–23.

the self is a person whose desire rolls and tumbles from fingertips as well as genitals, whose body is not only instrument, expression, and locus of self, but in some sense self itself.

My friend suspected that a conversation between medieval ideas and modern ones might reintroduce into her classroom something of the stuffness of body that she found missing in contemporary literary and feminist theory. As I have tried to show, that expectation is only partly right. Medieval theories too could be highly abstract; some at least of the many bodies of the Middle Ages themselves dissolved into discourse. But there was also resistance to such discourse. And I hope I have demonstrated that there was as well, in social and religious practice, a sense of the immediacy of bodies, living and dead, that provides some of what my friend wanted to show her students.

The roots of modern notions of a particular embodied self that cannot, we feel, body-hop despite the intellectual and technical opportunities presented by organ transplants and artificial intelligence, thus lie in the later Middle Ages. Hundreds of years of controversy, in which person was seen as a unity (not a mind/body duality), a particular individual (not an essence), and a yearning stuff (not—and here despite the theologians—a form for which any matter can be its matter) have profoundly shaped the Western tradition. Compared to this, the real mind/body dualism introduced by early modern philosophers is a small blip on the long curve of history.[97] For better and for worse, we are the heirs of Aquinas's notion of a particular self (not an essence) carried in soul but expressed in body, as we are of those long lines of pilgrims who kissed relics of fingers and garments, or of Angela's, Dante's, and Mechtild's dreams of insatiable desire.

Finally, however, I stress not parallels between medieval and modern understandings—or the roots of present and past in each other—but the diversity within each period. Medieval writings about *corpus* or *caro*—or even *materia* or *tellus*—were as multiple and multivalent as the varying discourses found in modern writing about the body. If I have pulled from my own detailed research certain themes concerning death and survival, it is because I think modern treatments of person and body have recently concentrated rather too much on issues of gender and sexuality to the detriment of our awareness of other things (such as death and work) that are also at stake.[98]

Indeed, if (as I have asserted above) we are all shaped by our many presents and pasts, I may be merely *reflecting* the broader understanding of body for which I appear to be calling. Why all the fuss about the body? Perhaps because I am not, after all, alone in noticing—in *Truly, Madly, Deeply,* the AIDS quilt, or the controversy over organ transplants—the complex link between body, death, and the past.

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[97] See Putnam, *Words and Life,* pp. 4–6.

[98] For perceptive remarks on our modern fear of death, see Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages,* pp. 1–5.