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Desire and Corporeality: The Material-Spiritual Synthesis of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

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“take ... [Christ] in the armys of ... [her] sowle” (Kempe 2107)

In *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Lady Mary Wroth's sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, a complex negotiation of the earthly and spiritual characterises romantic and religious practice. The texts skillfully blend corporeal and sacred elements to subvert the religious and romantic relations ascribed to women by surrounding male institutions. This essay draws upon Catherine Bate's definition of desire as a state of powerful and energising lack that, in turn, propels the material to spiritual realisation (105). In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the divine is brought into human form and a physical connection realised.

Conversely in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, earthly love is spiritualised as a harbinger of sacred knowledge. This blending of the earthly and spiritual, whilst inverted in the texts, creates a vivid synthesis; one that emboldens the literary work of the authors and enables them to explore the material and spiritual in a new, metamorphosed form. Through her use of desire to produce a spiritual poetic creation, Wroth repurposes the Petrarchan sonnet form to accommodate a female experience of desire void of eroticism but abundant in poetic sustenance (Moore, 69). Similarly, through Kempe's blending of religious practice with earthly desire, she circumvents the medieval ecclesiastical institutions around her, becoming a local site for revelation. Ultimately, desire is an agent which uniquely fuses the sacred and corporeal. Within these texts, desire acts as a catalyst for the literary women and their authors, as desiring agents, to access a spiritual and authorial strata beyond the male-dominated ecclesiastical and literary institutions of fifteenth and seventeenth century England.

Wroth and Kempe interrogate the material-spiritual synthesis of their work within a literary medium that facilitates a reading of desire as an embodied and multiplex form. By using the Petrarchan sonnet, Wroth frames Pamphilia as a simultaneous object and subject of desire. Bates notes that, as a literary mode concerned with desiring, the Petrarchan form's primary desire is to sustain poetic creation through the unmet secondary desire for the object

(107). In turn, the constancy of this “unmet relation” becomes a “self-replenishing site ... for the generation of poetry” (Bates, 114). Wroth heightens this function in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* – Amphilanthus is not a secondary desire but becomes entirely peripheral in the text: he is displaced, as Elizabeth Hansom argues, even more decisively than the Petrarchan Lady (184). The “fervent fire of zeal” which has possessed Pamphilia only fleetingly fixes on the unnamed Amphilanthus (Wroth, F83mod, 10). His “eyes which conquered ... [her] heart” briefly enact subjecthood and a cause-effect relation on Pamphilia’s heart before retreating to the fringes of the sonnet (Wroth, F3mod, 3). Sequences of possessive pronouns and determiners – “my first loving”, “flames which in mine burn”, “my heart-killed despair” (Wroth, F76mod, 1), (Wroth, F3mod, 6), (Wroth, F6mod, 12) – firmly redirect interest in Amphilanthus as “the desired object” to Pamphilia as the “desiring subject” (Bates, 107). As the sonnet sequence progresses into the central crown, the primary focus on the desire that has consumed Pamphilia further morphs into a contemplation of this desire as an embodied male form. Pamphilia positions love as a “guide ... to joyings”, “ruler of ... affections” and “commander of all hearts” (Wroth, F86mod, 9), (Wroth, F94mod, 9, 10). Not only has Amphilanthus retreated into the periphery of the poem, but he has been entirely replaced by love in its embodied form. In love’s replacement of the absent desired object, Pamphilia becomes an object of love’s guiding, ruling and commanding in her position as desiring subject. Through this reciprocal object-subject relation, a didactic relationship between Pamphilia and embodied Love emerged. In turn, this relationship becomes a source of philosophical investigation: in consequence of Pamphilia’s lack of focus on Amphilanthus, a conversation is enacted with love itself, enabling Wroth to engage in a metacritique of human desire. Utilising the Petrarchan sonnet’s form, Wroth rejects the earthly manifestation of human lust and romantic companionship to embark on an intellectual pursuit which sustains the sonnet as a corpus of intellectual creativity. The

polyvalent representation and function of desire, facilitated by the formal conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence, redirect the sequence to a philosophical contemplation of love as opposed to the pursuit of Amphilanthus as a desired object.

The Book of Margery Kempe likewise utilises its unique formal properties to illustrate how desire drives the synthesis of the material and spiritual in Kempe's devotional practices. Through the unorthodox construction of her autobiography, Kempe produces a literary artifact that formally mirrors and enacts the temporal transcendence of her direct connection with God. In her analysis of time in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that in Kempe's direct relationship with God, she becomes an "anachronism ... in her own (temporally heterogenous) time", existing in a "spiritual time frame" that refuses whole categorisation within a historical narrative (236, 226). The anachronistic spiritual present Dinshaw emphasises is demonstrated in the process of textual composition painstakingly evoked in Part One. Kempe was by no means isolated from textual culture but was functionally illiterate and therefore required a "wryter that wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr" and God's command through giving "credens to hir felingys" in literary form (66, 67). The book, then, had to be orally "dictated by Margery and written down by three different men" (Dinshaw, 226). The nature of the text's composition is denoted in Kempe's numerous intratextual clarifications. Kempe states that the "boke is not wretyn in ordyr" but "lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend" (99, 100). She follows that "the ordyr whan thyngys befellyn" is not important but that she has "no thing wryten but ... trewth" (102, 103). The shifting chronology of the text is explained and exemplified in these first utterances of the book. The sudden shift following these utterances to Kempe as a "creatur ... [of] twenty yer ... age" in line 130 immediately mark them as anachronistic. The immediate anachronisms of the text situate Kempe in a "radically separate" temporal sphere from the "secular chronology governing" the religious and social institutions surrounding her (Dinshaw, 226).

The anachronisms destabilise these secular chronologies, suggesting that linear time is not necessary for the communication of eternal spiritual truths. Instead, Kempe, and by extension her autobiography, exists in the “everlasting *now* of the divine” (Dinshaw, 226). As a result, the text appears temporally disjointed when interpreted as a document of *chronological* religious experience. Instead, the text becomes a channel for Kempe’s atemporal “felyngys and revelacyons” within the everlasting now (60). The seeming temporal incongruity of the text is paralleled by its fragmented dictation: Kempe’s use of three independent scribes over a period of many years mirrors the disjointed timeline of the text itself. However, her desire to transpose her spiritual truth into a literary present connects the fragmented dictation of the text into a united whole. The construction of an autobiography preserves her individual, spiritual present in a final eternal form. This form transcends the linear chronology of medieval ecclesiastical institutions, allowing Kempe to record her direct relationship with God in a unique spiritual timeframe.

In *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* a complex negotiation of desire for the corporeal and spiritual culminates in the transformation of earthly passion to a heightened spiritual form. Much like the use of temporal incongruities to illuminate the spiritual truths of the eternal, divine present in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the use of a poetic labyrinth in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*’s crown of sonnets constructs love as a source of guiding spiritual knowledge. Bates argues that within the Petrarchan sonnet’s characteristic dialogue between the speaker and love, the speaker often describes itself as love’s “creature, slave, victim, soldier, friend ... and so on” (109). In Wroth’s use of the labyrinth, she advances this multivalent relationship, positioning love, akin to Kempe’s humanised God, as an embodied spiritual authority and Pamphilia, as its receptive pupil (Moore, 71). The “strange labyrinth” Pamphilia finds herself in at the start of the sonnet crown is visually, structurally, and aurally reinforced through the interlocking of closing/opening lines and interplay of parallel rhyme

schemes (Wroth, F82mod, 1). The regular ABAB rhyme scheme of the individual sonnets is contrasted by the haphazard, slant rhymes of the overarching crown. The sonnets' regular rhyme schemes create a sense of steady direction; however, this direction descends into a contracted chaos as the sonnets rotate through the labyrinth and the directive pattern is not echoed in the overarching rhyme scheme. Moore contends that the "paradox of light within an internal labyrinthine darkness" invokes a spiritual wisdom that transcends "physical light and human perception" (70). In the structural, aural and visual chaos of the labyrinth, love becomes "the shining star of blessing's light", "guide to joyings" and discerner of "our hiddenest though[s]" (Wroth, F83mod, 9), (Wroth, F86mod, 9, 12). The one full rhyme – "might ... /light" – in the overarching rhyme scheme creates a pocket of visual-aural synergy (Wroth, F84mod, 1), (Wroth, F85mod, 1). Here, the "thread of love" weaving through the sonnet imbues the chaotic darkness and aural disharmony of the outer rhymes with a fleeting sensory harmony (Wroth, F82mod, 14). Love, thus, realises Moore's connection between light and spiritual transcendence, acting as a guiding light through the dense claustrophobia of the sonnet crown. Wroth uses the sensory abyss of the labyrinth to illuminate the transition of corporeal desire to love as a transcendent spiritual teacher. Through this spiritualisation of love, Wroth enacts a subversion of transubstantiation, with base, earthly desire transformed into Pamphilia's spiritual guide of the labyrinth.

Whilst *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* enacts a transition from physical desire to an embodied spiritual form, *The Book of Margery Kemp* realises spiritual experience through physical connection with the humanity of Christ. In *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* there is a careful exclusion of erotic desire, however, Kempe's spiritual unification with the divine is expressed as an intensely personal, physical connection. Dinshaw explains that female mysticism and religious experience in the 15th century often expressed itself "in terms of ecstatic union with the humanity of Christ" (234). Towards the end of Part One and after

marrying Christ, Kempe engages in such a union: she “take[s] ... [Christ] in the armys of ... [her] sowle”, kissing his mouth, head and feet upon request (Kempe, 2107). Christ tells Kempe she may “boldly, whan ... in thi bed, take ... [him] ... as for this weddyd husband” (2103). Kempe humanises Christ to the extent that she becomes his simultaneous spiritual “dowtyr” *and* human wife marked by immediate physical relation (1218). This physical relation with the divine contrasts the exclusion of women from “sacerdotal office” in “medieval Catholic doctrine” (Blamires, 144). Instead of Kempe’s spiritual practice being mediated by a position exclusively reserved for men, she uses the universally accessible humanity of Christ to perform the human contract of marriage. This marriage has a clearly erotic expression – one in which Kempe connects with the “manhode [of Christ]” through sexual union (2021). Kempe uses the intimacy sustained through physical connection with Christ to establish a profoundly personal relationship with the divine. She, in turn, realises a relationship with God that relies not on “devotional dependence on biblical narrative” but her own manifest sexual desire (Dinshaw and Wallace, 10). Through the active synthesis of the spiritual with physical desire, Kempe locates herself as a site of meaningful religious experience and, in turn, displaces the masculine religious institutions that restricted access to the divine within her religious practice.

Ultimately, desire drives the syntheses of the sacred and corporeal into unique, spiritual forms in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Fuelled by desire to engage in a complex negotiation of desire, Kempe and Wroth access a metamorphosed spiritual understanding and authorial strata that transcends the surrounding male dominated literary and religious institutions. Desire has a dual function in the texts: it informs the corporeal side of the material-spiritual syntheses and drives the construction of the texts as sustained literary creations. Desire, in turn, catalyses the central syntheses of the

texts, facilitating the reconfiguration of female spiritual experience and literary composition within restrictive masculine institutions.

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