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**“I cluppe and I cusse as I wood wore”:  
Erotic Imagery in Middle English  
Mystical Writings**

# ABSTRACT

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The mutual influences of the medieval discourse of courtly love and the literary visions of divine love have long been recognized by readers of medieval lyrical poetry and devotional writings. They are especially visible in the affinities between the language used to construct the picture of the ideal courtly lady and the images of the Virgin Mary. Praises of Mary's physical beauty, strewn with erotic implications, are an example of a strictly male eroticization of the medieval Marian discourse, rooted in Bernard of Clairvaux's allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, where Mary is imagined as the Bride of the poem, whose “breasts are like two young roes that are twins” (Cant. of Cant. 4:5). Glimpses of medieval female erotic imagination, also employed to express religious meanings, can be found in the writings of the mystical tradition: in England in the books of visions of Margery Kempe, in the anonymous seers of the fourteenth century, and, to some extent, in Julian of Norwich. Though subdued by patriarchal politics and edited by male amanuenses, the female voice can still be heard in the extant texts as it speaks of mystical experience by reference to bodily, somatic and, sometimes, erotic sensations in a manner different from the sensual implications found in the poetry of Marian adoration. The bliss of mystic elation, the ultimate union with God, is, in at least one mystical text, confidently metaphorized as an ecstatic, physical union with the human figure of Christ hanging on the cross.

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**ABSTRACT**

The presence of erotic imagination and erotic metaphor in medieval religious discourse is a well-known phenomenon discussed most often in the context and from the anthropological perspective of Michel Foucault's three-volume *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, which defined the manifestations of sexuality as an important part of cultural identity of any period in history. A search for such manifestations in early English religious literature was proposed and successfully accomplished by Lara Farina in her *Erotic Discourse in Early English Religious Writings*, where Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman texts, such as *Christ I*, the *Ancrene Wisse* or Thomas of Hale's *Lov Ron*, are shown to contain numerous references to sexuality and eroticism. The appearance of the themes in the religious literature of the late Middle Ages is discussed in the writings of Caroline Walker Bynum and Karma Lochrie.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the research that these scholars have done along the lines of an anthropological reading of medieval texts, the present article proposes to look at how the bodily and erotic images work in chosen medieval mystics from the perspective of exegetic and spiritual traditions affecting the growth of medieval mysticism.

The sources of erotic imagery in medieval religious writing have been identified in two distinct phases of religious discourse distant from each other by at least several hundred years. The first one was the Patristic commentary on the Song of Songs, which had to come to terms with, and find an exegetic explanation for, the bold images of sensuous love contained in the Old Testament: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Cant. of Cant. 1.2) or "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Cant. of Cant. 2.6). Inspired by the Judaic tradition, which interpreted the poem as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel, the Fathers allegorized the erotic encounter of Solomon's very carnal lovers as the union of the human soul with God, the meeting of the spiritual bride with her celestial lover.<sup>2</sup> The other, later phase of erotic metaphORIZATION of some religious meanings was connected with the growth of St. Bernard of Clairvaux's Theology of Love, in which the Song of Songs was a central Biblical text, and the later medieval development of the language of the Marian cult which, in its attempt to celebrate Mary as the ideal of womanhood, often employed forms and habits of expression developed by

<sup>1</sup> Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* and Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, both published in 1991, are especially important here.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the history of the interpretations and misinterpretations of the Song of Songs, see William E. Phipps's "The Plight of the Song of Songs."

the secular literature of courtly love.<sup>3</sup> It celebrated Mary's virtue by way of celebrating her physical beauty expressed in pseudo-Petrarchan language<sup>4</sup> as in "sterne that blyndis Phebus bemes bricht" (Saupe §89).

The Fathers of the Church responsible for the evocative allegorization of the Song of Songs were primarily Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. In their homilies and commentaries, the strongly sensuous images and dialogues of love are for the first time in Christian writing interpreted as a metaphor of the spiritual union of God and the human soul (McGinn 157–60). Origen and Gregory both insist that what the poem narrates is not a record of the sensorial experience of the soul's meeting with God, but only a translation of that mystical oneness with Him into a language of the outer senses. Their reading makes allegory the basis of Christian interpretation of the Canticle and renders the images of Solomon's poem and its language a perfect vehicle for later mystical expression. Commenting on the evocative passages of the Biblical text, Origen says in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

The divine scriptures make use of homonyms, that is to say, they use identical terms for describing different things . . . so that you will find the names of the members of the body transferred to those of the soul; or rather the faculties and powers of the soul are to be called its members. (Origen 26–27)

For Origen it is clear that the erotic images are only a linguistic embodiment of an experience of a completely different nature. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Gregory of Nyssa follows this understanding and, additionally, explains the allegorical and also moral adequacy of the erotic metaphor:

The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used mysteriously in the exposition of these teachings. It teaches us the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature's invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin and like itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched, our mind may seethe with passion for the spirit alone. (Gregory of Nyssa 49)

<sup>3</sup> The complicated relationship between the medieval concept of courtly love and religious discourse received the first but so far the most comprehensive discussion in C.S. Lewis's *The Allegory of Love* (1–43). While the Marian cult and its erotic courtly language is primarily a late medieval phenomenon, Farina (25) finds "eroticized representations" of Mary already in the Cynewulfian *Christ I*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Una donna piú bella assai che 'l sole, / et piú lucente," poem 119 from Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (390).

“Transforming passion into passionlessness” echoes the stoic concept of *apatheia*, appropriated for early Christianity by Clement of Alexandria and the Desert Fathers (Dreyer 41), and clearly separates the sensuous from the spiritual and, what follows, the linguistic vehicle, apparently erotic and physical, from its passionless, spiritual tenet. Early Christian thought is still Platonically dualist. True mystical experience is possible only when the burden of the material body and all its passions are shaken off: the spiritual eye opens only when the physical eye closes. Yet Origen and Gregory use the term “senses” to refer to the inner, spiritual faculties through which the soul experiences the presence and love of God.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the term is used figuratively since they both see the spiritual senses as completely different and separate from the outer senses, but the metaphorical approximation they make between the two experiences establishes the parallel and sanctions the future translation of the inner experience into the sensorial language of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. The authority of such a translation, made primarily for a didactic and instructional purpose, is derived by the Fathers directly from the Scriptures, in which God reveals himself through human language. In the understanding of the early Fathers of the Church, the images of erotic love of the Song of Songs should be read as an allegorical implication and not a sensorial representation of the inner experience of the love of God, which remains separate and incommunicable other than through a metaphor.

When we move from Biblical exegesis to the expression of mystical experience, the parallel between the inner joy of the union with God and outer sensorial experience can be understood by recourse to the modern cognitive psychological concept of affective intentionality, that is, the tendency to project our inner psycho-somatic states onto our judgments and experiences of the outer world.<sup>6</sup> Endorsing the process of affective intentionality as partial explanation of the medieval mystic’s experience allows the baffled contemporary reader to understand images akin to “the most acute physical pleasure” not only as linguistic symbols of the ineffable and otherwise inexpressible spiritual experience of God, as Gregory explained it, but also as a projection of the spiritual state of elation accompanying the mystical experience onto the realm of the erotic and sexual pleasure. In

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the concept of the spiritual senses in Origen and Gregory, see *The Spiritual Senses. Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, especially the chapters by Mark J. McInroy (20–35) and Sarah Coakley (36–55).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the concept, see “The Structure of Affective Intentionality,” chapter 7 of Andrew Tallon’s *Head and Heart: Affection, Cognition, Volition as Triune Consciousness* (183–98). Affective spirituality is now commonly referred to in discussions of the mystical experience (see e.g. McGinn 156–71).

such a vision of the mystic expression, eroticism ceases to be only a metaphor and comes to be seen as sensory rationalization of an otherwise extra-sensuous state. An inner and passionless spiritual pleasure evokes associations with a parallel, though essentially different, experience of a physical bodily pleasure expressible through the language of the senses.

The Song of Songs continued to attract the exegetic attention of theologians and continued to serve as a guide for the spiritual growth of seers and visionaries. The erotic metaphor became rooted in mystical discourse for good. It was primarily through the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux that the text was to inspire a new life in the mystical movement. The thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries were a time when the Christian Church became more open to the growing numbers of believers. The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council,<sup>7</sup> the appearance of the mendicant orders and travelling preachers, the growth of vernacular religious literature, are well-known facts which allowed Christian men and women from all social classes to participate more actively in the spiritual life of the church. The period also saw an unprecedented growth in the number of female mystics.

Bernard of Clairvaux's writings were a response to the need for a new less elitist and less intellectual vision of man's relation to God and are considered to be among the founding texts of what is known as medieval affective spirituality. In his sermons on the Canticle Bernard profusely uses the language of the outer senses when he speaks of spiritual experience and while, overall, he still means to use it metaphorically, his bodily images tend to dominate the spiritual. He follows the Patristic caution not to mix the two levels of experience when he says that the mystical soul can only touch God "but by the heart, not by the hand; by desire, not by the eye; by faith, not by the senses" (*On the Song of Songs* 28:9), just as Mary Magdalene was allowed to "touch" Christ in the "*Noli me tangere*" scene in John 20:11–18. Yet his reference to Mary's desire to touch makes the argument gendered and erotic, especially when the spiritual and the bodily become synthesized in the metonymic metaphor, "You will touch with the hand of faith, the finger of desire, the embrace of devotion; you will touch with the eye of the mind." While in patristic interpretations the inner love of God was only expressed by the language of the experience of a carnal desire for God, in Bernard the humanity of God in Christ, the carnal love of Christ, is where spiritual love begins. He writes:

... because we are of flesh (*carnales*) and are begotten through the flesh's concupiscence, our yearning love (*cupiditas vel amor noster*) must begin

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of the decrees and effects of the Fourth Lateran Council, see F. Donald Logan's *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (184–224).

from the flesh; yet if rightly directed, advancing under the leadership of faith, it will be consummated in spirit. (“Epistle II to Guigo” qtd. in Taylor 406)

Popular spirituality and much of medieval visionary practice and visionary writings inspired by Bernard took his emphasis on *affectus* and the role of the outer senses in growing up to love God for granted and turned them into a guide to mystical growth.

This tendency to focus on the outer rather than on the inner experience is especially typical of some women mystics who tend to express their mystical experience in strictly somatic terms that narrate and describe visions in which they come into bodily contact with Christ. An early example of this female affective mystical specificity can be found in the thirteenth-century writings of Hadewijch of Brabant, a Dutch poetess and mystic associated with the emerging spiritual movement of the Beguine nuns. Hadewijch records her experience on an occasion of receiving the Eucharist, the Body of Christ:

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... he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time. As a human man, wonderful and beautiful, with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who belongs completely to another. . . . Then he came to me as himself, took me entirely in his arms and pressed me to him. My whole body felt his, in true bliss, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was wholly satisfied and fully transported. . . . Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. It was thus: outwardly, to see, taste and feel, as one can outwardly taste, see, and feel in the reception of the outward Sacrament. (281)

Hadewijch’s report attempts no metaphor other than that supplied by the context of the sacrament of the Eucharist, which she receives prior to her vision. Most intriguing is the literality with which she treats the implications of coming into physical contact with the Body of Christ. Her language constructs a report of a sensorial bodily experience, indeed an erotic experience, which leaves her satisfied and transported. “. . . I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself” (282). Here the outward senses cease to be only a metaphor and parallel of the experience. The outward sensations of seeing, touching, tasting and feeling, expressed in a sensuous language, become for Hadewijch records of that experience. Becoming “one without difference with” Christ does not, in this context, imply freeing oneself from the burden of bodily passions. Quite the opposite, Hadewijch describes her meeting with the Divinity within the sphere

of her psycho-somatic sensual consciousness. We discover in her a clear digression from the patristic warning against literalism. For Hadewijch, the sensual pleasure she describes seems to be not a metaphor, but an actual part of her mystical journey.

The English mystics of the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, as well as the author, or possibly authoress, of *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, may not all be as erotically suggestive in the description of their experiences as the quotation from Hadewijch, but they certainly come from the school of Bernard's Theology of Love, and all, like Hadewijch, though to different degrees, communicate their meanings through sensuous, somatic, experiential narratives of their visions. They all belong to the cataphatic, positive way of mystical life. They saw the mystic calling as a mission and felt obliged to share their visions which, they believed, could be expressed in a comprehensible human language. The apophatic school of mysticism, on the other hand, spoke of the experience of the union with God as a "cloud of unknowing,"<sup>8</sup> an experience ineffable and inexpressible. The imagery of the cataphatic women mystics follows that of the *Brautmystik* tradition, where the bride and groom from the Canticum are constantly evoked and where the female mystic identifies with the bride and pictures herself as Christ's lover.

The imagination of Julian of Norwich, however experientially and bodily oriented, is much less erotically explicit than Hadewijch's or Margery's. Julian begins her visionary experience with a close meditation of the Passion of Christ, which was a common and a recommended practice. Her own unique vision is the description of the profusion of blood flowing from Christ's wounds in which she almost drowns, and then a telescoped picture of the same blood curdling and drying on the naked body of the dying Christ. Julian experiences her first visions when she lies in sickness in her bed. There is, in her writing, a strong awareness of her own body; she describes the sickness sensation, and she transfers this bodily discourse into her visions of the divine message. The sensual body becomes for her, as if, a vehicle for knowing God. Julian explains that human sensuality is a result of the soul inspiring the body. She writes:

Thus I understand that the sensualite is groundid in kind, in mercy, and in grace, which ground abylyth us to receive gefts that leden us to endless life. For I saw full sekirly that our substance is in God. And also I saw that in our sensualite, God is. (Vision LV)

<sup>8</sup> As the title of the fourteenth-century English apophatic mystical treatise named it; see *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

There is no longer in her vision of body and soul the dualistic divide which keeps the two domains of human experiences apart. Julian goes further than Bernard did when he encouraged the meditation of the humanity of Christ as a preamble to the spiritual journey. For Julian, human sensuality is in itself an experience of God and is divine because it was Christ's own attribute in his death on the cross. While the physicality of God's presence is never treated with an openly erotic vocabulary by Julian, the sensorial experiences are always involved in conveying her visions. Speaking of the final meeting of the saved with God she writes:

And than shal we all come into our Lord, ourselfe clerely knowand and God fulsomely havyng; . . . Hym verily seand, and fulsomly feland, Hym gostly heryng, and Hym delectably smellyng, and Hym swetely swelowyng; and than shal we sen God face to face, homly and fulsumly. (Vision XLIII)

A similar endorsement of the body and the sensual experience can be found in the more controversial and certainly more intriguing *Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery is remembered as much for her evocative mystical visions as for the autobiographical narrative of her pilgrimages. She rises from the pages of her book as a religious traveller traversing Europe in search of spiritual fulfilment in the shrines of saints and of theological instruction from other mystics and seers. We learn from her about her secondary virginity, which she chose after giving birth to fourteen children, her notorious weeping at the sight of the Crucifix, which baffled and annoyed churchmen, her confident rebukes addressed to priests and bishops who did not understand her passionate love and pity of Christ, and, what interests us most, her wedding ceremony with Christ, which she narrates as a vision she experienced.

Margery combines in her visionary book the tradition of the Cantic-inspired *Brautmystic* with the sensuous passion of Bernard's affective spirituality and her own very experiential manner of metaphorizing meanings by mapping the daily world she was familiar with. She represents herself throughout the book as Christ's lover, who she becomes having persuaded her husband to become chaste after "she had ful many delectabyll thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinat lovys to hys persone" (Book I, Ch. 79). Her renouncement of the marriage bed is a continuous theme recurring throughout her book, a decision which, as she believes, will put her in the embraces of her spiritual lover. Christ, whom Margery describes as "the semeliest man that evyr myth be seen er thowt" (Book I, Ch. 85), himself appears to her many times and declares her his beloved:

I have telde the befortyme that thou art a synguler lover, and therfor thou schalt have a synguler love in hevyn, a synguler reward, and a synguler worshep. And, forasmech as thou art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so schalt thou dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes. (Book I, Ch. 22)

66 While the experiential grounding of this singular attention she receives from Christ may be a dalliance taken out of a courtly poem, Margery usually sees her union with Christ in more homely colours. The metaphor of the married union between the soul and God becomes in her book a totally experiential argument on the medieval dimension of marriage, including a detailed narrative of the ceremony. Christ explains to Margery the nature of their union:

Thou wost wel that I far lyke an husband that schulde weddyn a wyfe. What tyme that he had weddyd hir, hym thynkyth that he is sekyr anow of hir and that no man schal partyn hem asundy, for than, dowtyr, may thei gon to bedde togedyr wythowtyn any schame er dred of the pepil and slepyn in rest and pees yf thei wil. And thus, dowtyr, it farith betwix the and me. (Book I, Ch. 86)

The passage is not only an unpoetic echo of the conversation between the groom and the bride of the Song of Songs, but also an example of Margery's straightforward translation of the spiritual union with Christ into the vision of a married couple going to "bedde togedyr wythoutyn any schame er dred" as a symbol of the ultimate consummation of their love. The wedding ceremony, one of the most memorable passages in her book, features all the experiential details of a medieval wedding, with the marriage vow, the witnesses, and even the congratulations and wishes of the guests.

And than the Fadyr toke hir be the hand in hir sowle befor the Sone and the Holy Gost and the Modyr of Jhesu and alle the twelve apostelys and Seynt Kateryn and Seynt Margarete and many other seyntys and holy virgynes wyth gret multitude of awngelys, seying to hir sowle, "I take the, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so that thou be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do. For, dowtyr, ther was nevyr childe so buxom to the modyr as I schal be to the bothe in wel and in wo, to help the and comfort the. And therto I make the surté." And than the Modyr of God and alle the seyntys that wer ther present in hir sowle preyde that thei myth have mech joy togedyr. (Book I, Ch. 35)

Margery's traditional vision of herself as a married woman, with all the duties appertaining to the social role, again brings her to mention sexuality. It is the husband who expects her love.

I wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir hus-  
bonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle  
and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swety as thow wylt.  
(Book I, Ch. 36)

While Margery repeats here the Patristic synthetic metaphor of the "arms of the soul," the invitation to the sweet kisses on the mouth, the head and the feet is delivered without the metaphorical qualification and creates a straightforward erotic image.

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Much more sensual and erotically explicit than either Julian or Margery is the fourteenth-century *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, a collection of prayers and meditations written for and, possibly, by nuns. The sensuous and erotic imagery is evoked to express the speaker's adoration of the crucified Christ. The meditative practice represented by the mystic echoes the affective school of Bernard and was seen in Julian's intensive focus on the dying body of Christ. But the nun of *A Talkyng of the Loue of God* goes much further in depicting the vision of the adoring person in an ecstatic act of embracing, kissing and licking the body of Christ.

Thenne ginneth the loue to springen at myn herte and glouweth up inh  
my brest wonderliche hote . . . I lepe on him raply as grehound on herte  
al. Out of myself with loueliche leete. And cluppe in myn armes the cros  
bi the sterte. The blood I souke of his feet. That sok is ful swete. I cusse  
and cluppe and stunte otherwhile as mon that is loue mad seek of loue  
sore . . . I cluppe and I cusse as I wood wore. I walawe and I souke I not  
whuche while. And whon I haue al don, yit me luste more . . . Thenne  
fele I that blood in thought of my Mynde as it weore bodlich, warm on  
my lippe and the flesch on his feet bi fore and beohynde so soft and so  
swete to cusse and to cluppe. (61)

The enumeration of verbs of action, all erotically explicit (lepe, cluppe, souke, cusse, walawe), coupled with the repetitive "I," builds a rhythmical ecstatic intensity in the text that leaves the reader breathless and shocked by the created image.

The "passionlessness" of the mystic experience preferred by the early Fathers in their reading of the Song of Songs<sup>9</sup> and encouraged by them

<sup>9</sup> The reception of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages is a complicated topic which cannot be addressed here in full. The teachings of the Fathers concerning the sublimation

as a way to spiritual fulfilment is in some later medieval mystics, especially female mystics, replaced with a passionate, and increasingly ecstatic description of bodily sensations, whose vividly evocative erotic language overpowers and subdues the traditional metaphorical message of a spiritual rather than a bodily experience. The original Biblical and Patristic erotic metaphor from the Song of Songs, which was understood as a sensuous, and therefore an approachable and a comprehensible parallel to the inner and otherwise inexpressible experience of the mystic's joy and ecstasy caused by Divine presence, becomes, in some later mystics, the focus and the essence of the mystical message. Like Hadewijch, or the speaker of *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*, the cataphatic, affective female mystic of the late Middle Ages is so engulfed in the description of the sensuous experience of her bodily interaction with Christ that her message, as it is conveyed by the language she uses, appears to be primarily sensuous, somatic and erotic. The expected passionlessness of the ultimate union with God is transformed into a very passionate image rooted in the senses and the erotic experience.

While it is possible to trace the Biblical and exegetic origins of the bodily metaphors of late medieval mystical adoration of Christ as man and to ascribe their erotic quality, at least partly, to the gender of their authors and the phenomenon of affective intentionality, it must be admitted that they baffle the reader with their unabashed eroticism until today. They must have posed a similar problem of taste and propriety to medieval readers. We know, for instance, that the erotic language of another Beguine nun, Mechthild of Magdeburg, was considerably toned down by her Latin translators, as was her open criticism of the Church, for which the Beguines were suppressed in the late Middle Ages (Tobin 7). Margery Kempe herself speaks of the enmity she met for her ecstatic outbursts of tears and her teaching. Their gender, traditionally deprived of authority in religious matters, as well as the uniqueness of their language did not help the female mystics to win recognition. The modern mystic and scholar, Simone Weil, believes that she can understand her visionary predecessors and excuses their sensuous vagaries by an interesting parallel: "To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colors

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of the soul's ultimate mystic union with God from anything worldly and bodily were actually never questioned. In the twelfth century Hugo of St. Victor still says: "*Debemus per haec verba passionis transire ad virtutem Impassibilitatis*" ["We ought to pass over to impassible virtue through these words of passion"] ("Explicatio", PL 196, C406, qtd. in Astell 38). What changed over time was primarily the language in which mystic readers reacted to the Song of Songs. For further discussion, see Anne W. Astell's *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*.

composed of material substances. We haven't anything else with which to love" (Weil 472).

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