

Estella Antoaneta Ciobanu

# The Spectacle of the Body *in* Late Medieval England



**Estella Antoaneta Ciobanu**

**THE SPECTACLE OF THE BODY IN  
LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND**

**Revised edition**

**LUMEN, 2019**

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Estella Antoaneta CIOBANU

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*For Mother,*  
*now more than ever*

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I am grateful to Lumen Publishing House for the invitation to publish a revised edition of my 2012 book.

Last but not least, I must express my deepest gratitude to my mother. I dedicate this book to her memory.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- BL – London, British Library (in manuscript references)  
*Book* – *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ed. Staley, 1996)  
CDH – Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus homo* (ed. Laemmer, 1857)  
CG – Augustine, *The City of God* (trans. Walsh et al., 1950–54)  
DR – *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version* (1989)  
LSJ – Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1940)  
OED – *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991)  
OLD – *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (1968)  
MED – *Middle English Dictionary* (2001)  
NKJV – *The New King James Bible* (1984)  
REED – Records of Early English Drama (followed by the name of the town whose activities it documents)  
*Tretise* – *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (ed. Davidson, 1993)

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## INTRODUCTION

Why a ‘spectacle’ of the body? Why not an ‘imaginary’ of the body or ‘images’ or perhaps ‘concepts’? Even to the lay reader, the two sets – ‘spectacle’ as a category unto its own versus the remainder, especially the latter two concepts – likely evoke entrenched binaries such as dynamic vs. static views of the body. Yet not even at the most abstract conceptual level can the body be pictured as entirely static: medieval discursive practices testify to this much despite their rejection of body dynamics and change, regarded as damaging to spirituality. As we shall see, the body, whether in a strict biological sense or in metaphorical senses, was for medieval people the phenomenon most clearly anchored in earthly life. If ‘spectacle’ can better evoke life dynamics than ‘the imaginary’ does, then what could the *spectacle of the body* be about in England in the late Middle Ages?<sup>1</sup> The query

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<sup>1</sup> For convenience and thus also courting many intellectual fallacies, I use the terms ‘the Middle Ages’ and ‘medieval’, as well as the traditional nineteenth-century German inner division of the Middle Ages into three sub-periods, with complete disregard for the many historiographical controversies over the relevance of symbolic dating (Bull 2005, 42–5, 48–52) and national differences in periodisation. Thus, for my present purposes the medieval period in western Europe can provisionally be subdivided into: (1) the early Middle Ages (from late antiquity to c. 1050) or, in the English case, the Anglo-Saxon period (from the seventh century up to the Norman Conquest), (2) the central Middle Ages (c. 1050–1270s) or the Anglo-Norman period (from 1066 to the (long) twelfth century), and (3) the late Middle Ages (c. 1280s–1520s) (Galloway 2006, 11–50). For the theory and practice of historiographical periodisation, see Robinson (1984), Wagner (1988) Raedts (2000, 2002), Bull (2005) and



informs not only this introduction, but my entire investigation.

Originally published by Lumen Books in 2012, *The Spectacle of the Body in Late Medieval England*, now thoroughly revised and with an updated bibliography, welcomes medievalists, humanities students and the general public alike to the bygone world which created and performed the Middle English biblical theatre.<sup>2</sup> The body represented on page in such dramas and thence on the stage, like its cognates in various other late medieval practices, is not simply a body publicly visible. Rather, it is identified/-able as a potent signifier – or rather signifying practice – of the extra-ordinary as well as the ordinary; often exposed as fraudulent, it sometimes appears resistant to, even subversive of, the status quo. Issues concerning the body and its spectacular visibility provide, in fact, the very focus for the present study, if not with respect to biblical drama. Whether we speak of what the medieval people saw elevated after the consecration of the Host in the aftermath of the ecumenical Fourth Lateran Council (1215) or how the mystics saw and reported their union with God, whether it is practices of looking at religious images or of watching the religious theatre, we must tread carefully lest we risk unwarranted presentism. Nor should we, however, take the ideology of medieval practices at its own word and turn a blind eye to the entanglements of power, truth and knowledge (in a Foucauldian sense).

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Van Engen (1986, 2008); for the connections between positing ‘the Middle Ages’ and western colonialism, or temporal colonisation, see Dagenais and Greer (2000) and Brown (2000).

<sup>2</sup> For a useful historicisation of theatrical vocabulary as pertains to medieval practices see Kolve (1966, 12–14, 17–20), Mills (1998, 6–11), Dillon (2006, 144–6) and Clopper (1990; 2001, 128–35).

*The Spectacle of the Body in Late Medieval England* uses a flexible feminist, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist methodology to investigate late medieval concepts and performances of the body in western Europe, with an emphasis on England. Not traditional structuralist thinking organised dichotomically – e.g. sacred vs. profane (or demonic) body; whole vs. fragmented body – informs the approach, but a concern with how body *performance(s)*, in Judith Butler’s sense, configure(s) the body *in* and *as spectacle* which confirms or sometimes challenges socio-political, ideological and religious meanings. What this undertaking will hopefully demonstrate is not just the diversity of bodies – or the complexity of the body concept – in the Christian late Middle Ages, but also the necessity of a theoretical revision of what modern research does. Herein also lies the novelty of my approach: I propose a reading against the ideological (Christian) grain of the cultural phenomena discussed not so as to shock or offend modern sensibilities, but in order to try out new epistemic avenues for broaching a lived phenomenon of the past with the aid of the not so ‘dead letter’ of extant documents.

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Dr. Estella Antoaneta Ciobanu is an associate professor in English at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University of Constanța, where she teaches Gender Studies, Culture and Religions in the US, Postmodernism, and Iconisation Studies. She has published on representations of the body and gender in medieval English theatre and culture, medieval and post-medieval cartography, anatomical illustration and the arts. Her research interests include the iconisation of the human body in the biomedical sciences from early modernity to the present.

“ Why a 'spectacle' of the body? Why not an 'imaginary' of the body or 'images' or perhaps 'concepts'? Even to the lay reader, the two sets – 'spectacle' as a category unto its own versus the remainder, especially the latter two concepts – likely evoke entrenched binaries such as dynamic vs. static views of the body. Yet not even at the most abstract conceptual level can the body be pictured as entirely static: medieval discursive practices testify to this much despite their rejection of body dynamics and change, regarded as damaging to spirituality. As we shall see, the body, whether in a strict biological sense or in metaphorical senses, was for medieval people the phenomenon most clearly anchored in earthly life. If 'spectacle' can better evoke life dynamics than 'the imaginary' does, then what could the spectacle of the body be about in England in the late Middle Ages? The query informs not only this introduction, but my entire investigation.

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*The Author*

