CHAPTER 3

MYSTICAL DESIRE, EROTIC ECONOMY, AND THE WOOING GROUP

The very magical privacy of the bed, the pentacle, may itself only be bought with money.

—Angela Carter, The Sadeian Woman

My readers may find it odd that mysticism, that most obvious source of devotional eroticism in the Middle Ages, has been only tangentially discussed in chapters 1 and 2. If we take the term “mystical” loosely, as designating a direct experience of the divine, or “union with God,” then the monastic and anchoritic texts I have examined certainly have mystical elements. Christ’s concentric analogies play with the idea of being “inside” divine bodies, even if the possibility of unmediated experience of those bodies is foreclosed. More directly, the Bernardine tropes of the Ancrene Wisse center on the motif of the Sponsa Christi, the “bride” of Christ, bound to the divine in a spiritual–physical union. But few would consider either of these texts to be examples of mysticism at work. First, there is the obvious issue of genre, especially in the case of Ancrene Wisse. As a guide to anchoritic ritual, the Wisse’s mission is not to witness spiritual union, but to outline the means by which to achieve it. When compared to the writings of later English mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, the Wisse lacks the mystic’s personal testimony and consequent visionary authority. Second, and perhaps more important, neither Christ nor the Wisse aim at producing “transcendant” spiritual experience. As we have seen, both encourage their readers to remain in constant awareness of their material surroundings, to use the church, refectory, or anchorhold as visual and spatial tools for belief. This is in striking contrast to Julian’s thinking, which distinguishes “spiritual sight” from “actual vision,” and to her ecstasy, which transported her so far “out” of her anchorhold that all of creation appeared to her “the size of a hazelnut.” Written in the

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fourteenth century, Julian’s work is an example of “later” English mysticism, but works more contemporary with those I’ve discussed, such as the twelfth-century biography of Christina of Markyate, offer similar glimpses of mystical priorities. Christina’s biography, unlike the Wisse, highlights the recluse’s visions of ascendance and ecstatic indifference to her surroundings, sketching a devotional experience more like Julian’s or that of Julian’s contemporary, Richard Rolle.3

Clearly, neither the monastic nor the anchoritic works are easily identifiable with the particular tradition of English mysticism said to effloresce in the fourteenth century, primarily in the North and East, and most familiar from the works of Rolle, Julian, and Margery. There is, however, a subset of the AB texts—that group of devotional works sharing the Wisse’s Western dialect and manuscript history—that is regularly considered part of this tradition.4 The four, very similar texts of the “Wooing Group” have as much in common with the mystical as they do with the anchoritic. Rhythmic prose prayers, they neither focus on pragmatic advice about choosing a spiritual career (as does the Wisse’s companion text Hali Meidhad) nor offer schedules and “rules” for daily life once that career has been undertaken (as does the Wisse itself). Instead, they are wholly given over to providing a textual cue for meditative exercise focused on Christ’s Passion, furnishing the reader with visual imagery and incantory verbal structures for that purpose. Although they occasionally make references that could be applied to the material conditions of life in an anchorhold, the mapping of anchoritic space is of less concern than it is in the Wisse. Indeed, the texts of the Wooing Group are often said to transform anchoritic space in a more profound way, by leaving behind the sense of material environment for complete immersion in ecstatic, transportive contemplation. Written in the first person, they also offer a glimpse of what could be an almost completely interiorized, and thus experientially “individual” devotion, which is again consonant with mystical detachment from the material.

Yet, as I stressed in chapter 2, rhetorical disavowal of the material World often masks a heightened consciousness of its presence, and the “interior” is often—perhaps always—impossible to articulate without the “exterior.” Studies of mysticism, as Sarah Beckwith has shown, have tended to occlude the material conditions of its practice; the idealism of modern interpretations, Beckwith argues, has led to a re-presentation of medieval mysticism as “radically individualistic. . .putatively asocial and transcendent,” immune from history.5 Some years after her critique, study of English mysticism remains frequently author-centric and psychological, focused on the “exceptional” individual, despite the abundance of convention in mystical writing and the evidence of contact between writers, such as Margery’s