CHAPTER 2

NOLI ME TANGERE: THE ENIGMA OF TOUCH IN MIDDLE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS LITERATURE AND ART FOR AND ABOUT WOMEN

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According to Aristotle, touch “is the primary sensation that belongs to all animals,” a basic principle reiterated by Thomas Aquinas when he writes, “Touch is the basis of sensitivity as a whole.”¹ In analyzing the senses, Aristotle describes for each sense a corresponding medium, a sensible object, and an organ. One might assume that the organ of the sense of touch would be the skin; Aristotle concludes instead that skin is not the organ of touch, but its medium, a distinction that allows Aristotle, according to Daniel Heller-Roazen, to develop an understanding of touch as a highly complex sense, one ultimately closely linked to and as elusive as thought itself.² Probing the meaning of touch led Aristotle and those who follow him to describe a further sense called the common sense, one that, as Aquinas writes, “also perceives sensory intentions, for example, when someone sees that he is seeing.”³ As Robert Pasnau points out, such “awareness of our own mental states” forms the basis of our modern attempts to define consciousness.⁴

At the same time that Aristotle was becoming well known in the West in the thirteenth century, touch was becoming increasingly significant in religious writings, and especially so in works produced for or about those considered to be limited by their sensuality in their understanding of God, women.⁵ In Middle English writings for and about religious women and in art works about women that represent tactile encounters with the

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divine, touch, we shall see, becomes the site for the exploration of the nature of mental processes instigated by physical sensation regardless of the degree of that work’s direct engagement with Aristotle; that is, these medieval works begin to consider those aspects of the self’s encounter with the world that comes to be called, after Descartes, the mind/body problem. These vernacular and artistic meditations on issues of metaphysical import often focus on sensual engagements that take place on the skin, the medium of touch that not only polices the border between inner and outer, but also that, as a semipermeable membrane, negotiates the interaction between physical sensations and mental and affective states. Alternatively, these works focus on a bodily site often associated with touch, the hand, an entity that inspires consideration of touch in both its active (reaching, grasping, holding) and its passive (feeling, receiving, acquiescing) aspects. These meditations not only define a self attuned to the needs of a newly articulated confessional culture, but one that manifests aspects of what we might call, within an Aristotelian framework, consciousness, a word that even today has uncertain meaning.

Paradoxically it is prohibitions against touch in literature and art for and about women that generate searching meditations on its metaphysical and epistemological complexities. Such prohibitions, which pervade literature written for and about women in the religious life, predominate in the thirteenth-century Middle English devotional writings known as the AB texts (which include a guide to the reclusive life Ancrene Wisse, and the related five texts that make up the Katherine group: a tract on virginity, Hali Meidenhad, three saints’ lives, and a homily on the guardianship of the soul, Sawles Warde). In all these texts, women are warned to keep their skin inviolate and not only not to touch others, but also not to allow others to touch them. At the same time, however, these women are encouraged to experience heightened sensation through touch by imagining their skins as Christ’s and reliving his suffering in their own bodies. These contradictory instructions lead the authors to probe the fundamental dialectics of touch, especially as manifest in that response to the intensified tactile sensation that most acutely demonstrates the complexity of the mind/body problem, pain.

The complexity of touch that early medieval writers reveal in their considerations of prohibitions against it is distilled in later medieval and early modern literary and art works whose subject is the quintessential scene of prohibited touch: Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the newly risen Christ described in the Gospel of St. John when she is forbidden to touch him. While epitomizing female limitation, Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Christ, in keeping with meditations on prohibitions against touch in the AB texts, offers meanings that exceed its central