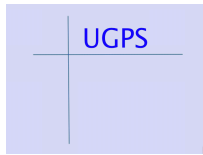


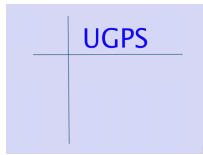
# UGPS Working Paper Series

(UGPS WP 2013-005)

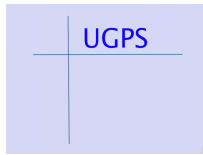
## Mystical Bodybuilding

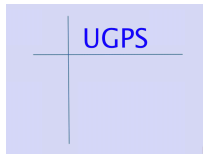
Virginia Langum





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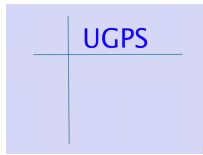




## **UGPS Working Paper Series**

*Mystical Bodybuilding*

VIRGINIA LANGUM



## **Mystical Bodybuilding**

[brief talk as presented at Umeå University Department of Language's Research Days]

[Opening slide of Katherine of Siena and Iris Kyle]

Katherine of Siena was a fourteenth century religious woman known as a “mystic”. In the Middle Ages, mystics, who were overwhelmingly women, underwent extreme fleshly mortification and denial in order to imitate the physical suffering of Christ and to achieve mystical union with the divine. Katherine was reported to survive only on the Eucharist: minute portions of wine and the bread. She allegedly ate and drank nothing else, saving sometimes the pus from the sores of the sick. Other mystics bathed in the bathwater of lepers, ate scabs, and performed various other acts of mortification.

Iris Kyle is the reigning Ms. Olympia. Bodybuilders like Kyle must train with weights rigorously to develop and maintain their mass, some as much as three or four hours a day. In preparation for their competition, they begin what is known as “cutting”, the stripping the body of fat to make the muscles appear more prominently. This consists of additional hours of cardio each day as well as a diet in which they sacrifice fat, salt, and sugar, subsisting on half or less than half their normal caloric intake.

In suggesting those experiences that the medieval mystic and female bodybuilder may have in common, I reference two theoretical frameworks: transhistoricism and affect theory.

### **TRANSHITORICISM**

The comparisons of female experience transhistorically, particularly in relation to the body, has proved both attractive and contentious to medieval scholars.

A monograph entitled *Holy Anorexia* argued that there is “a resemblance between the contemporary anorexic teenager counting every calorie in her single-minded pursuit of thinness, and an ascetic medieval saint examining her every desire.”

Predictably, this study raised some hackles. One of the most prominent medieval cultural historians argued against such correspondences in the epilogue to her highly influential *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*.

Caroline Walker Bynum writes that modern “women cultivate not closeness to God but physical attractiveness by food abstinence.” As for the relevance of her study of the Middle Ages to the modern world, Bynum offers only a negative analogy: “Compared to the range of meanings of medieval poetry and piety, our use of *body* and *food* as symbols is narrow and negative...”

Nevertheless, sociological studies completely unrelated to medieval studies make a transhistorical parallel, by invocation of “asceticism.” Asceticism implies a pleasure in no pleasure, specifically a rejection of the pleasures of the flesh for the greater pleasure in the mind or the spirit.

### AFFECT THEORY

Our approach to the past necessarily reflects our own culture’s concerns and desires, which is what makes the humanities an infinite and relevant discipline.

Likewise our approach to the past also reflects our own personal concerns, desires and experiences. Feminist theory has long recognized the role of experience in shaping scholarly approaches, and this idea has been enforced in the affective turn in the humanities.



These transhistorical and affective theories inform how I relate my own experience of bodybuilding in approaching medieval texts, for example, that of the late fourteenth-century medieval mystic Margery Kempe.

Readers have been calling her “crazy” with varying degrees of nuance since her autobiography was discovered in the 1930s. Her most common diagnoses are hysteria and post-partum depression. In more recent years, one critic has made a well-reasoned case for temporal lobe epilepsy, which has been applied to many medieval mystics.

I do not want to subject Margery to another pathology, but rather to correlate some of her experiences and reactions so as to provide another inflection of reading. Above I mentioned some of the physical rigors of the medieval mystic and the bodybuilder. Now I will look briefly at some of the spiritual, cultural and social implications of those rigors.

### Break or Rejection from Social Norms

**Food:** Research on the sociology of food suggests that food is the most basic form of ‘gift’, the means by which people establish their social bonds. The more time devoted to its preparation and consumption, the more love the person shows for the recipient. Ascetic eaters, medieval and modern, disrupt the rituals surrounding food.

**Reproduction:** Both female mystics and bodybuilders actively reject that the ideal female body is a reproductive female body. Many female mystics actively resisted marriage, preferring a life of chastity against enormous social and family pressures. Some fasted so intensely that they suffered from amenorrhea. Through her intensive training and diet, as well as competitive leanness, the female bodybuilder does the same, either temporarily or in some cases permanently ending her ability to conceive.

**Sexuality:** Related to this lack of reproductive purpose is the rejection of heteronormative sex, both in desire and efforts to provoke desire. Female mystics resist sexual gratification and any attempt to gratify in heteronormative sex, preferring mystical union which is conveyed with erotic language. Likewise, female bodybuilders have decreased sexual drive during their intense dieting. Furthermore, female bodybuilders resist heteronormative standards of beauty which still promote softness and thinness. There is now a trend toward “fitness” in women's magazines but some feminists have suggested this is much the same thing. “Fitness” has become a new word for “thinness.” The “toned” body is not a muscular body so much as a “slim” body.

**Sado-masochism:** Some scholars and theorists have argued for a collision of mysticism and masochism. Whether the physical and/or emotional suffering is regarded as a positive obliteration of the self or evidence of patriarchal domination, sadomasochism can be applied to both the mystic and the bodybuilder. In Margery's text, God compels her to suffer by commanding behavior that he knows will prompt others to scorn her. Margery's agency in this process depends upon whether the reader takes her as author of her visions or passive recipient. However, the female bodybuilder is clearly both masochist and sadist, controlling her own mortification and deriving pleasure from it.

### **Bodybuilding as Mystical Experience**

What is the nature of this pleasure? There is a well-established link between religious experience and intense physical experience. Medieval mystics were rewarded for their denial of the flesh with visions and greater clarity. It is easy to apply a broad definition of “religious experience” to bodybuilding or any intensive sport. Runners, for example, have described “runner's high” in such terms, the vanquishing of the body over the mind.

The theologian Fredrick Streng, for example, defines religious experience as a “means of ultimate transformation.” In her workouts, the bodybuilder breaks her own body in order

to grow, to transform. She both conceptually fragments the body into isolated muscle groups and physically “tears” or “breaks” the muscles.

### **The Temptations of Virtue**

Just as the obesity epidemic has been couched in language of “sloth” and “gluttony,” fitness of body and spirit have their own sins. For medieval mystics one of the greatest temptations is pride, or a particular species of pride, *singularitas*. The medieval churchman Jean Gerson, a noted skeptic of many female mystics, most notably Bridget, argued that religious people should not draw attention to themselves through excessive behavior.

Margery Kempe with her constant sobbing and pounding at the floor drew attention to herself.

However, Margery reclaims this notion of *singularitas* in her text. In private communication with her, Jesus uses the term to describe the uniqueness of her visions and directives for her behavior. In the rhetoric of female bodybuilding what might be deemed as *singularitas* or pride has been reframed and problematized as a self-determination against social expectations. Some theorists, however, argue that bodybuilding is still a beauty contest with different aesthetics. Thus, their self-discipline supports superficial and sexualized ends and may even serve as a "mime or masquerade of masculine power" in the words of Leslie Heywood.

### **Conclusion**

Such suspicion of motives and excess of virtues may explain why both the female bodybuilder and Margery Kempe evoke and evoked distaste and unease in their

contemporaries. In theory, Margery was in line with cultural and social ideals: imitation of Christ through mortification of the flesh. She fasted, expressed grief at the crucifixion, evangelized. Yet she was ridiculed and scorned by her contemporaries. Likewise, the female bodybuilder also enacts social ideals of self-control, personal drive and initiative, and fitness of body. However, what press attention she receives is almost always negative, focusing on drugs or prostitution. However, as marginal figures, the female bodybuilder and Margery Kempe may embody central cultural contradictions that are worthy of further exploration.

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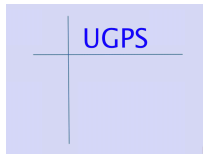
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