

The Flesh Made Word: Margery Kempe's Experiential Feminine Christianity

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Margery Kempe's fifteenth-century story of conversion, *The Book of Margery Kemp*,¹ like those of her continental precursors Brigitta of Sweden, Angela of Foligno, and Dorothea of Montau, is a narrative that redefines women's corporeality as a conduit between earthly existence and spiritual development. Margery's devotion evolves from her internalization of the New Testament narratives of the life and passion of Christ, and her subsequent interpretation and understanding of these narratives, expressed in her text and through her physical outbursts. While Margery seems to be a bizarre, and even potentially mentally-unbalanced woman, she remains extremely orthodox in her devotion and ideology.² She is familiar with the tenets and doctrines of her religion, and she accepts the church's authority. But Margery, a non-virginal, not-yet-widowed woman, seeks a place for herself within the established church, an institution that considers virginity the appropriate human state for communing with God. As she progresses in her conversion from sinful, sexual woman to pious, chaste mystic, Margery becomes more disruptive of religious and social order, gaining public voice and authority. Finally, by narrating (and living) her experiential Christianity, Margery becomes the creator of a feminized gospel for women – who are

| 1

¹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Trans. and Intro. Sanford Brown Meech. Early English Text Society 212. London: Oxford UP, 1961).

² Margery is well aware of religious doctrine and customs. She follows the examples of female martyrs, attends church regularly, accepts the Eucharist, and functions in her church guild. When examined for Lollardy, she is fully able to recite the tenets of her faith: "sche answeyd forth to alle þe arrtcles as many as þei wolde askyn hir þat þei wer wel plesyd" (Kempe, *Book*, 115).

neither virgins nor widows – who have difficulty (consciously or subconsciously) empathizing with the phallocentric³ New Testament passion narrative. Furthermore, *The Book*, the narrative of Margery’s experiential feminine Christianity,⁴ emphasizes the Blessed Virgin Mary’s emotional and physical responses in a way that the canonical Biblical gospels do not, and relies on the example of Mary Magdalene to confirm woman’s place as revealer of God’s word. Because it places women firmly in religious events and ideology, Margery’s *Book* can be felt and understood by her female contemporaries who are outside the official Biblical narratives,⁵ but who want to participate in holy life. And although Margery’s text is only enabled by male language and male interference because it is narrated to a series of male writers, it remains a model of affective piety that married women can emulate, and a commentary on women’s role in religious discourse.

Since the modern discovery of *The Book* by Hope Emily Allen in 1934, critical interest has opened many avenues of exploration. These include the analysis of Margery’s bizarre behaviour using twentieth-century medicine and psychology⁶ and

³ By “phallocentric” I mean “focussing on male participation.”

⁴ By “experiential feminine Christianity” I mean a Christian devotion and lifestyle that has evolved from the internalization of the New Testament narrative and its subsequent re-expression through female, bodily experiences.

⁵ Women like Margery are “outside” the Biblical Gospels, in part, because many are unable to read the Gospels themselves, and must receive God’s word from man’s mouth (from male clergy). Furthermore, deemed by the church patriarchy as innately inferior beings, they were not to contribute to the interpretation of the Gospels.

⁶ For example, in “Mysticism and Hysteria: The Histories of Margery Kempe and Anna O.,” Julia Long (*Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson. London: Routledge, 1994. 88-111) argues against the diagnosis of Margery’s initial childbirth tribulation as post-partum psychosis. Richard Lawes, “Psychological Disorder and the Autobiographical Impulse in Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Thomas Hoccleve” (*Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*. Ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead. Toronto: U of

the examination of homoerotic desire in the text.⁷ But Karma Lochrie considers the text as a defiance of social and Christian authority through the productive use of the female body.⁸ At the same time, Margery's narrative is bound to her world and the realities of life in fifteenth-century England. As Windeatt puts it, Margery displays an "endearingly earthbound awkwardness."⁹ Margery's use of her body, combined with her earthy humanity provides the basis of my argument. But Peter J. Pelligrin reminds us "that Kempe would never have viewed herself as challenging the patriarchy."¹⁰ Thus, one must be careful in using twentieth and twenty-first century ideas to analyze a medieval text. However, Christian feminism seems an appropriate route for investigation because Margery's social and religious struggles develop from her perception of medieval women's roles and her response to the patriarchal authority of the church.

| 3

Luce Irigaray's work provides a foothold for examining the text as a bodily, feminized expression of traditional Christian narrative. Irigaray asserts that a feminine text disrupts and

Toronto P, 2000. 217 – 243) claims that Margery suffered from frontal lobe epilepsy.

⁷ In her analysis of Margery Kempe, Kathy Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (*Premodern Sexualities*. Ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Frecceno. New York: Routledge, 1996. 175-198) suggests the existence of homoerotic desire as part of Margery's desire to emulate other women. Given Margery's self-confessed enjoyment of sex with her husband and her frequent comments on the "good-looking" men she encounters, as well as a lack of evidence of homoerotic intention in the text, I find Lavezzo's argument dubious. Rather than stimulating desire for those being mirrored, Margery's emulation of other women fulfills her desire to *be desired* by God despite her sexual past.

⁸ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (*New Cultural Studies*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991). 6.

⁹ B. A. Windeatt, "Introduction" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery Kempe, ed. Windeatt. London: Penguin, 1994.), 23.

¹⁰ Peter J. Pelligrin, *Bis creatur: Margery Kempe's Pursuit of Spiritual Virginity* (Diss. U of Southwestern Louisiana, 1999), 9.

4 | modifies patriarchy from an external perspective.¹¹ This is exactly what Margery does, at least subconsciously, in her text. Without consciously challenging the authority of the four New Testament texts, she inserts the female experience into the salvation mystery. Yet in three of the four passion narratives, those by Matthew, Mark, and John, Mary's role is limited.¹² And while Luke does include the birth narrative, his gospel does not address Mary's contribution to humankind's salvation through her suffering. Their texts are Christocentric, focusing on the masculinized humanity of Christ, on His extreme suffering, and on His power as the saviour of humankind.

Margery's own text responds to the traditional New Testament story to place the Blessed Virgin Mary in a more prominent role, and is a "remembrance" of the mystical experiences in which Margery herself plays a role in the events as

¹¹ Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and Subordination of the Feminine" (Trans. Catherine Porter. *The Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 68-85.

¹² Ross S. Kraemer discusses the origins of these gospels in "The New Testament." (*Women in Scripture*. Carol Meyers, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 17-23.) He asserts that "[t]he twenty-seven books of the New Testament reflect the work of multiple authors" (18) and that the four gospels in particular "draw extensively on earlier materials, both oral and written" (19). In Matthew's gospel, only the scantest of details are given regarding the Annunciation and the birth of Christ; Mary is not mentioned during the Passion narrative. Mark's gospel omits the entire birth narrative, and any mention of Mary in the Passion story. Likewise, John also omits the birth narrative, and although Mary is mentioned at Golgotha, her role is minor. It is Luke who glorifies the Blessed Virgin, having the archangel Gabriel announce to her, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1: 28).

As evidenced in Carol Meyers' volume *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and The New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.), many female characters are present in all four of the apostles' gospels. Many of the women serve in their roles as mother, sister, and wife/widow, or function within one of Jesus' healing miracles or parables. Kraemer notes that English translations of the New Testament are complicated because of gender-inclusive language. For example, he states that "the Greek masculine plural adelphoi (literally 'brothers')" (22) could be translated to mean "brothers and sisters."

they occur. Her narrative illuminates her engagement with the gospels and her interpretation of them from her female perspective. Margery focuses on the feminine qualities of God and Christ, on Mary's grief as a mother, on Mary's role as mediatrix, and on Christian women's place in devotion. In including the female voice's expressions of devotion, suffering, and praying, *The Book* comments on the importance (and appropriateness) of women's place in worship and charity. Margery's perspective, physically intimate with the narrative favours of Marian responsiveness. This is not surprising since, as Gail McMurray Gibson explains, "At the heart of fifteenth-century devotion . . . was Mary, the Virgin Mother of God."¹³ Margery's interpretation of the Gospel is supported by the popular conception of England's place as Mary's dower. |5

As well, by claiming to receive the Word directly from God,¹⁴ Margery usurps patriarchal clerical authority as disseminator of God's revelations. Because Margery is illiterate, her reception of the Word of God has always been mediated through a male priest. But with the divine gift of the Holy Ghost (that is, Grace), Margery is able to hear God's Word directly, and is able to interpret it from her own female perspective. God himself sanctions her public voice, a necessary permission: "ower mercyful Lord Cryst Ihesu, to þe magnyfying of hys holy name, Ihesu, þis lytyl tretys schal tretyn sumdeel in parcel of hys wonderful werkys."¹⁵ But Pauline tradition demands Margery's silence: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor

¹³ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglican Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1989.) 137.

¹⁴ I remind the reader that this and subsequent references regarding God's voice and his commands are those that Margery believes to be true, occurring during her mystical encounters.

¹⁵ Kempe, *Book*, 1, Margery's Introduction.

to use authority over the man but to be in silence”¹⁶; “Let women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted them to speak, but to be subject.”¹⁷ Yet Margery has a vision of Saint Paul who tells her that he “haddyst suffyrd mech tribulacyon for cawse of hys wrytyng.”¹⁸ Is Margery, in her mystical fervour, saying that Saint Paul is rescinding his position in favour of the female voice?

6 |

Margery’s direct communication with God also precludes her need for clerical intervention. But although Margery receives and interprets God’s words herself, she is careful to seek clerical acceptance to avoid penalty as a heretic. In particular, she often asks her confessor, Robert Spryngolde, to evaluate the legitimacy of experiences. She also seeks out Julian of Norwich to affirm that her mystical experiences are genuinely holy. Having been assured of the holiness of her mysticism, Margery even begins to give orders to male clerics, believing that their failure to obey her leads to their punishment by God. For example, when one monk challenges her authority she tells him that although he has sinned, he will be saved “3yf he wyl forsakyn hys synne & don aftyr þi counsel.”¹⁹ And finally, she begins to act without the permission of her confessor, because she believes God has directed her to do so. But Irigaray cautions, “women who enjoy such visions are complicit in their own subordination because they continue to accept priestly mediation.”²⁰ However, Margery increasingly develops her clerical autonomy, her authority beyond the phallocentric church.

¹⁶ 1Timothy 2:12.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 14: 34.

¹⁸ Kempe Book 160, Chapter 65.

¹⁹ Kempe Book 26, Chapter 12.

²⁰ Luce Irigaray, “La Mystérique” (Trans. Gillian C. Gill. *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*. Ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O’Grady, and Judith L. Poxon. London: Routledge, 2002.) 30 – 39.

Although Margery does not see herself as a priest – nor would she want to be, given the penalties for heresy – her affective piety, in part displayed by her citing of scripture, places her in that role. Her unofficial position as female priest begins with her reinterpretation of the Biblical command to go forth and multiply. While the male interpretation of this dictate is to populate and control the earth, Margery’s interpretation is to spread the word to and by other women. Replying to a man’s questioning her interpretation of this passage she replies, “Ser, þes wordys ben not vinirstondyn only of begetyng of chyldren bodily, but also be purchasyng of vertu, wech is frute gostly, as be heryng of þe wordys of God, by good exampyl zeuyng, be mekenes & paciens, charite & chastite, & swech oper.”²¹

|7

Further, her failure to confess after the birth of her first child exemplifies Margery’s belief that many priests are not as compassionate as they could be. She refers to the confessor’s “sharp repreuyng”²² and being “a lytyl to hastye.”²³ Rightly, Sarah Salih argues that, for Margery, this is “a failure of institutional religion, which has aroused anxieties it cannot satisfy.”²⁴ Citing Mary as Mediatrix doing more good for sinners than priests do, Margery believes that female sensibilities are more effective than a stern male countenance. Indeed, she insists her own actions of crying and praying for sinners (“þe sayd creatur was desiryd of mech pepil to be wyth hem at her deyng & to prey for hem”²⁵) are more useful than priests’ actions, especially when they scare people

²¹ Kempe, *Book*, 121, Chapter 51.

²² Kempe, *Book*, 7, Chapter 1.

²³ Kempe, *Book*, 7, Chapter 1.

²⁴ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), 179.

²⁵ Kempe, *Book*, 172, Chapter 72.

away from confession. These qualities are particularly important in light of the female qualities of Christ and God.

8 | Indeed, Margery makes use of her highly emotional and bodily (and, therefore, feminine) experiences to develop a personal strategy for devotion as well as to ensure her place in the history of the female mystics. From her feminist perspective, Hélène Cixous contends that to know and understand grace and innocence, one must know sin and temptation.²⁶ Margery, unlike the female religious or virgin martyrs, is familiar with both sin and temptation (in various forms including sexual desire, vanity, and gluttony), and can, therefore, knowingly seek grace. Furthermore, having experienced bodily sin, Margery is able to comprehend the miracle of Mary's virginity. Her conversion from sinner to holy woman is achieved through her bodily acceptance of God's Word and Grace. Therefore, Margery's female body enables her spirituality.

Despite medieval acceptance of the notion of the redeeming nature of the Blessed Virgin Mary's purity and acquiescence to God's will, the medieval perception of woman was largely based on misunderstood biology and theological interpretations of Genesis' Eve, and firmly bound woman to her body and its functions. Basic Aristotelian biology taught that women, because of their lack of a penis, were necessarily lacking, and therefore inferior. Women's innate physical inferiority, combined with their emotional irrationality, translated into a perceived intellectual inferiority. Perhaps more damaging to women were the conclusions drawn from the Genesis story of the Fall. Tina Beattie explains that:

²⁶ Hélène Cixous, "Grace and Innocence: Heinrich von Kleist" (Trans. Verena Andermatt Conley. *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader*. Ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon. London: Routledge, 2002), 234–36.

women's subordination is not part of the order of creation, nor do women have to accept as part of 'the evil already there' that we are denied the capacity to imagine God. Rather, we need to recognize this as part of 'the evil that we do,' in so far as patriarchal interpretations of Genesis perpetuate the evil into which humanity is initiated.²⁷

Consequently, post-lapsarian woman is sentenced to eternal earthly subordination. Eve is clearly blamed for the Fall, her gullibility proving, according to Rosalynn Voaden, that "women are prone to being deceived"²⁸ and her quest for knowledge proving her insatiability (translated into sexual desire). Because her sin was the result of her corporeality, Eve's punishment was likewise corporeal. Having been sentenced to experience great pain in childbirth (and having necessitated post-lapsarian marriage), Eve (and thus woman) is forever associated with the supposed limitations of her body. Consequently, as Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt show, women "were perceived as unable to transcend the flesh."²⁹ But Margery, who has lived through her body (both as sexual wife and as mother), shows that a woman need not transcend the flesh, but allow it to be part of her spiritual experience.

With society's and the church's obsession with virginity, Margery feels unworthy, the worst kind of sinner even though God himself has called her to the religious life. Consequently, after

²⁷ Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002), 117.

²⁸ Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (York: York Medieval, 1999), 7.

²⁹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800-1500* (Twayne's Women and Literature Ser. New York: Twayne, 1997), 171.

sixteen or seventeen years of marriage, Margery *decides* to live a life of celibacy exerting her free will and, eventually, rejecting her husband John's authority over her. After being called by the heavenly music, she explains that although she is still bound by her marriage vows, she "sche had neuyr desyr to komown fleschly"³⁰ John. Before attaining John's permission to be chaste, she converts her emotional response to sex from pleasure to disgust. And, after being chaste for eight weeks, she dramatically tells John, "I had leuar se 3ow be slayn þan we shuld turne a-3en to owyr vnclennesse."³¹ Eventually, she is able to secure her own chastity by convincing John – by paying his debts – to take the same vow. Furthermore, with the plenary remission of her sins she eventually receives, her past sexual life is all but erased: "the past is now irrelevant, that her desire to live chastely means that she has attained a new virginity."³² Thus, Margery enters into a state of spiritual chastity, which according to Katherine Coyne Kelly's analysis of medieval Christianity, "is superior to physical virginity"³³ because of the conscious choice to transcend sexual desire. Margery's voluntary celibacy allows her a wide range of female experiences, ultimately leading to Margery's place as a better Christian. Her goodness comes from personal reformation rather from cloistered virtue.

For Margery, who candidly reveals her concupiscence – remembering intercourse with John she recalls, "þe great delectacyon þat þei haddyn eyþyr of hem in vsyng of oþer"³⁴ – and

³⁰ Kempe, *Book*, 11, Chapter 3.

³¹ Kempe, *Book*, 23, Chapter 11.

³² Salih, *Versions*, 182.

³³ Katherine Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (Routledge Research in Medieval Studies. Vol. 2. London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

³⁴ Kempe, *Book*, 12, Chapter 3.

who often was tempted to repeat her offence, chastity does not come easily or quickly. Although her quest for celibacy is ostensibly a form of self-purification necessary for her new devotion to God, Margery's rejection of her marital obligations is complicated. While chastity allows Margery to act like the virgins about whom she has heard, and gives her body the physical cleanness appropriate for communing with God, Margery's rejection of sexual intercourse is also a form of sacrifice, a form of willpower. And her willpower is tested repeatedly throughout her twenty-year conversion. Even after she (supposedly) squelches her desire for John and only has sex with him in compliance with her marriage vows, her sexual desire for other men is still active:

| 11

for to comown wyth hym it was so abhomynabyll on-to
hir þat sche mygth not duren it, & 3et was it leful on-to
hir in leful tyme yf sche wold. But euyr sche was
labowrd wyth þe opper man for to syn wyth hym
in-as-mech as he had spoke to hir.³⁵

Indeed, she faces three years of temptations (she frequently comments on the physical attractiveness of various men in her company), and has tempting visions of genitals, reminding her that sexual pleasure is forbidden, before she buys her freedom from John and dons the white clothes of a virgin at God's request. She writes,

Ryth euyn so had sche now horybyll syghtys &
abhominabyll, for anythyng þat sche cowde do, of
beheldyng of mennys membrys & swech oþer
abhominacyons . . . comyn be-for hir syght þat sche
myght not enchewyn hem ne puttyn hem owt of hir

³⁵ Kempe, *Book*, 15, Chapter 4.

syght, schewying her bar membrys vn-to hir . . . & hir
thowt þat þes horrybyl syghtys & cursyd mendys wer
delectabyl to hir³⁶

12|

Furthermore, celibacy ensures that Margery will not bear more children, a function that, besides endangering a woman's life, confines her to home and its "burdens," taking time away from her holy devotions.

Because of her innate corporeality, it is appropriate that Margery's first mystical vision occurs within the context of her postnatal hysteria. Her initial madness, as Salih states, is "a failure of institutional religion, which has aroused anxieties it cannot satisfy, and also as emblematic of Margery's perpetual trouble with confessors."³⁷ The timing of this vision is not at all surprising, for at the time of deepest despair, a Christian woman such as Margery should be relying on her faith. But she believes that Christ comes to admonish her for her failure to trust in the Godhead's mercy. Although placement of this first vision in the context of Margery's postnatal experience may lead one to interpret the unmentionable sin as one of a sexual nature, no evidence to support this is in the text. In fact, hers may be any one of a number of sins. Margery's fear signals her initial understanding about the potentially hazardous roles of wife and mother, both innately tied to her sexuality.

This vision is the start of her journey of self-knowledge, a signal that Margery must perform her duties as wife and mother before she can devote herself to religion if she is to stay "in the world." But David Aers argues that, "Margery catalyzes specifically

³⁶ Kempe, *Book*, 145. Chapter 59.

³⁷ Salih, *Versions*, 179.

masculine anxieties about potential female autonomy ... in which servicing males is not on the agenda.”³⁸ However, according to Margery’s text, servicing men does remain on the agenda – she is still obligated to uphold her marital vows. Serving males also remains part of the female mystic’s role, for God tells her that her care of John is a form of devotion. Even women who remain in the confines of married life can serve God by being obedient servants of other people and raising their families to be devout. If masculine anxieties are raised, Margery, in part, calms them by keeping herself within the bo(u)nds set by society while stretching the limits of the acceptable. | 13

Margery’s conversion also shows that women can have a place in religious discourse. She surprises even herself with her abilities and receives validation from several members of the clergy: “For euyr þe mor slawnder & repref þat sche sufferyd, þe mor sche incresyd in grace & in deuocyon of holy medytacyon of hy contemplayon.”³⁹ Margery also shows that rather than intellectual or spiritual inferiority, woman’s marital and physical obligations impinge on her ability to fulfill her spiritual duties. Indeed, God tells her that women’s purgatory is in this world, which Margery interprets as women’s ties to her corporeality and social roles as wife and mother. A woman who must care for a husband, children, and a household does not have time for religious contemplation.

However, despite her lack of conscious desire to disrupt the *status quo*, and her acceptance of simplistic church ideology, Margery’s text does represent non-compliance with the church’s subordination of women. Although Margery herself strives to be

³⁸ David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430*. (London: Routledge, 1988), 100–101.

³⁹ Kempe, *Book*, 2, Margery’s Introduction.

orthodox – her acceptance by so many clergy confirms her compliance with Catholic doctrine: “Summe of these worthy & worshipful clerkys tokyn it in perel of her sowle and as þei eold answer to God þat þis creatur was inspyred wyth þe Holy Gost”⁴⁰ – her reception by society shows that she was extremely disruptive. Thus, as Voaden asserts that Margery is “disempowered as a visionary,”⁴¹ because she does not accept the restrictions placed upon her by society. But Margery’s rejection of restrictions (placed upon her as mother, wife, and holy woman) suggests that women can be devout and pious without being removed from society to a nunnery or an anchorage, and she uses her knowledge of female saints’ *vitae* as encouragement to live as a holy woman: “St. Bridget and ‘St. Bride’s Book,’ as Margery calls it, are mentioned in Margery’s *Book* in ways that suggest how potent a model the Englishwoman found for herself in the life and revelation of the visionary Swedish saint.”⁴² Further, men’s fears that their wives will follow Margery’s example illustrate part of the reason women were restricted. As Susan Signe Morrison argues, Margery’s “disruptive nature could inspire other women to be equally transgressive”⁴³ but Margery never suggests that any woman should shirk her wifely or motherly duties.

Her extreme devotion during her pilgrimages is also disruptive, outraging her fellow pilgrims who, although ostensibly devout, complain that she is too zealous and irritating; they even forbid her to mention the gospels to prevent her endless

⁴⁰ Kempe, *Book*, 3, Margery’s Introduction.

⁴¹ Voaden, *God’s Words*, 72.

⁴² Windeatt, “Introduction,” 17.

⁴³ Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance*. (Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 3. London: Routledge, 2000), 130.

harangues. Clearly her extreme behaviour, according to her companions, would be better suited to an anchorite's cell or at least outside the cities and towns, outside their sight and hearing. One old monk says, "I wold þow wer closyd in an hows of ston þat þer schuld no man speke wyth þe."⁴⁴ Eventually, her neighbours force her to move out of town, out of earshot. According to Sarah Beckwith, "Margery was a religious woman who refused the space traditionally allotted to religious women – the sanctuary (or imprisonment) provided by the anchoress's cell or the nunnery."⁴⁵ Margery shows that a woman, particularly one who does not need to fear the loss of her physical virginity, can perform holy duties without retiring from the world. Further, her disruptive behaviour in mass, an extension of the reactions of pious women she has heard of, indicates an interruption of the male dominance inside the walls of the church. Father Melton despises her disruption of his sermons, and finally "he wolde not suffyrn hir ro crye in no wyse."⁴⁶ In fact, "[i]t was zerys þat sche myth not by suffyrd to come at hys sermown."⁴⁷ But Margery avers that she, like St. Brigitta of Sweden, is not in control of her outbursts, but is merely God's channel.

| 15

Because of Margery's emotional outbursts and bombastic moralizing, a vicar dismisses Margery's ability to discuss her experiences, saying, "What coud a woman ocupyn an owyr er tweynowyrs in þe life of owyr Lord?"⁴⁸ but she proves him wrong. And she squelches the criticism of those who tell her she should

⁴⁴ Kempe, *Book*, 27, Chapter 13.

⁴⁵ Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe" (*Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*. Ed. David Aers. New York: St. Martin's, 1986.), 37.

⁴⁶ Kempe, *Book*, 150, Chapter 61.

⁴⁷ Kempe, *Book*, 151, Chapter 61.

⁴⁸ Kempe, *Book*, 38, Chapter 17.

not speak in public by saying, “me thynkyth þat þe Gospel zeuyth me leue to spekyn of God.”⁴⁹ In retaliation to male theologians’ refusal to allow women to contribute to Christian ideology and religious practice, Margery attacks “empty-headed” devotion and hollow preaching, for, as God tells her, such men avoid the things he loves: “schamys, despitys, scornys & reoreuys of þe pepil.”⁵⁰ Holding office does not necessarily make one a good Christian, priest, or teacher. She attests that “vndyr þe abyte of holynes is curyd meche wykkydnes.”⁵¹ For Margery, to live a pious, holy life is better than being a shallow representative of the church.

As a sincerely pious and holy woman, Margery internalizes the male narratives of the New Testament (as read to her by her confessor and by clergy at mass) and, through her body, comes to understand what they mean for the medieval Christian woman. During the period of her conversion, Margery believes God commands her to write her *Book*. God tells her, “I wil not han my grace hyd þat I zeue þe,”⁵² although, fearing social ostracization, she is not initially amenable to that. Once her conversion is complete and she is a sixty-something-year-old woman too feeble to go on pilgrimages, she agrees to dictate her recollections, not leaving her narrative to be written after her death (in which case when she would have no control over its contents, or indeed it might not be written). She indicates that her document is not meant as a form of praise to God and as an example of pious Christian life.

⁴⁹ Kempe, *Book*, 126, Chapter 52.

⁵⁰ Kempe, *Book*, 158, Chapter 64.

⁵¹ Kempe, *Book*, 158, Chapter 64.

⁵² Kempe, *Book*, 138, Chapter 56.

To legitimize her place as exemplar of piety, Margery relies on the Biblical character of Mary Magdalene. After Jesus rises from the dead, he first appears to Mary Magdalene, making her the first witness of God's power over death. It is she who announces that Jesus has arisen, revealing the central mystery of Christianity. In John's gospel, the resurrected Christ says to Mary Magdalene, "Woman, why weepest thou?"⁵³ In aligning herself with the repentant woman who is commonly worshipped in the Medieval period by those (especially women) who seek redemption, Margery reveals that God says to her just after she experiences Christ's death, "Why wepist þu so, woman?"⁵⁴ And like the Magdalene, she believes she receives the word of God directly from God, not from man. If Mary Magdalene, a sinner and woman, can function in this capacity, then Margery, mother and wife, can also see herself in this role. If Mary Magdalene, a woman, is the first person in the New Testament to act as revealer of God's Word, then Margery can justify her reception and dissemination of divine revelation.

Margery's feminized narrative should, therefore, be, as Cixous contends, subversive because it is written from a nonofficial, nondominant perspective.⁵⁵ But the interference of male writing is problematic in Margery's text. How subversive can a feminine text narrated by an illiterate woman to three successive male amanuenses be? Nothing can be certain about these men's influence on the text.⁵⁶ But, in comparison with the *vitae* of some

⁵³ John 20:15.

⁵⁴ Kempe, *Book*, 125, Chapter 46.

⁵⁵ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1981), 245-264.

⁵⁶ Among the texts that discuss Margery's inability to write and the complexities arising from using three amanuenses are Wendy Harding's "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (*Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*. Ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993. 168-

women, written (by men) after their deaths, Margery is able to ensure that her experience is recorded and does have some control over the text. Furthermore, the fact that the text was written and then partially transcribed and rewritten complicates the analysis of Margery's authorship and the relative contributions of these men. Li Ling Ong analyzes Margery's "autobiographical impulse"⁵⁷ and the fact that the narrative is actually penned by three men. The authority of the text is certainly suspect. But, as Ong points out, there is evidence that shows Margery maintained a great deal of authority over the text. Nicholas Watson also examines this facet of *The Book*, with the intention of "establish[ing] that Kempe herself, not her scribe, was primarily responsible for the *Book's* structure, arguments, and most of its language."⁵⁸ He concludes that the book, regardless of the writing, is Margery's story, a story "about the demands made on Christians . . . and the powerful obligations that bind them to the difficult work of obedience to God."⁵⁹ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide evidence or direct argument on this matter, that the text is written through the male hand and through male logos diminishes some of Margery's power in writing a feminized gospel.

Regardless of these difficulties, it is clear that Kempe relied heavily on the texts she heard, such as the New Testament and

87. 1993), Peter J. Pelligrin's dissertation (*bis creatur*), and Li Ling Ong's master's thesis (*Medieval Autobiographical Writing in The Book of Margery Kempe*. Diss. U of Regina, 2000). Although the extent of the scribes' influence on *The Book* cannot be ascertained, Ong argues that Margery's authorial impulse (the command from God to write the story) and the similarity of the text to traditionally female texts (such as hagiographies, treatises, and confessions), the text is largely autobiographical (92).

⁵⁷ Ong, *Autobiographical*, 3.

⁵⁸ Nicholas Watson, "The Making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (*Voices in Dialogue*. Ed. Linda Olsen. Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 2005), 397.

⁵⁹ Watson, "Making," 427.

hagiographic narratives that were popular in the period. Her confessor apparently read to her a great number of texts, including works by Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton, as well as narratives of holy women such as Brigitta of Sweden: “He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon & oþer bokys, as þe Bybyl wyth doctowrys þer-up-on, Seynt Brydys boke, Hyltons boke, Bone-venture, Stimulus Amoris, Incendium Amoris, & swech oþer.”⁶⁰ She was also familiar with her more famous compatriot, visiting Julian at the Norwich anchorage while seeking confirmation of the authenticity of her experiences. Indeed, her own narrative often mimics those of others. S. Dickman notes that “[i]n an extraordinarily unself-conscious and literal fashion ... she put all the motifs commonly associated with the tradition of pious women into action”⁶¹ Kempe clearly situated herself with the holy women of whom she had heard, to lend legitimacy to her narrative.⁶² But as Pelligrin attests, “[n]o one prior to Kempe had ever laid claim to a previously lost virginity.”⁶³ Unlike other *vitae*, Margery’s *Book* validates the non-virginal, not-yet-widowed woman’s ability to be holy, and her conscious decision, her will, to live chastely despite her lack of physical purity, just as Mary Magdalene and other saints who were not virginal. Rather than overcoming her corporeality, Margery has not abandoned her

⁶⁰ Kempe, *Book*, 143, Chapter 58.

⁶¹ S. Dickman, “Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman” (*The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*. Marion Glasscoe, ed. Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1984. Cambridge: Brewer, 1984), 158.

⁶² Lynn Staley concludes that Margery’s recurring reference to illiteracy is a conscious act: “Kempe’s emphasis upon illiteracy may also indicate her sure understanding of the conventions of spiritual writings by or about women ... [in which] the scribe was an essential component of the authority of the life itself” (*Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*. University Park PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994.), 33.

⁶³ Pelligrin, *bis creatur*, 1.

reproductive function or her socially imposed roles until she (and she presumes God) decides she has done enough. Her chastity does not force Margery to give up her female roles (for she has already done them), but allows her the freedom to avoid further impositions on her time, efforts, and health.

20 | In addition to her knowledge of the saints' *vitae* and other religious texts of her time, Margery extrapolates on contemporary ideas of Christian love and suffering. Having experienced Christ's Passion within her body, Margery can reinterpret it from her own female perspective. Denise Depres writes, "Margery's imitation of Christ led to a deeper understanding of scripture, giving her the power and authority to teach others ... from experience."⁶⁴ But Margery's experiences have taught her more than Christ's story. Margery has experienced the bodily despair felt by Christ's mother, a despair that Margery believes should be felt and acknowledged by all Christians. It is this experience that allows Margery to see her role as a holy woman. Margery learns that as a historical event, Christ's passion can only be known on an intellectual level. But experiencing the events and participating in them allows her to understand the sacrifice that both Christ and his mother made for Christians' salvation. This understanding of a human response to divine suffering motivates her to devoutly worship God. Although, as Ritamary Bradley comments, "The Scriptures are the mirrors which help people progress in their spiritual lives,"⁶⁵ for Margery, what is *not* written in the Scriptures is similar to the concave

⁶⁴ Denise Depres, *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman OK: Pilgrim, 1989), 63.

⁶⁵ Ritamary Bradley, "The Speculum Image in Medieval Mystical Writers" (*The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*. Marion Glasscoe, ed. Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1984. Cambridge: Brewer, 1984), 15.

mirror that shows women how to progress. And what the concavity reflects is Mary's humanity existing *beside* Christ.

While women cannot emulate Mary's perfection or virgin motherhood, they can find and mimic Mary's humanity in grieving and prayer. Women like Margery need to see the image reflected from the sides of the concave mirror, the image of the humanity of which they are capable. Wendy Harding states that "as a married laywoman, Margery can only express herself orally and carnally, through the marginalized medium of her female body. Repressed on account of this body, she communicates from the site of her subjugation."⁶⁶ Yet through the narrative of Margery's feminized experience, married women, women with children, women in the world, can see, their roles as holy women. Margery summarizes her command: "ȝyf þu wilt drawyn aftyr Goddys counsel, þu maist not don a-mys, for Goddys counsel is to be meke, pacient in charite & in chastite."⁶⁷

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Because she knows (because she believes God told her) that she will not die a martyr's death, Margery, according to Clarissa W. Atkinson, means her book to be "a testimony and inspiration to other Christians, designed to comfort them by displaying God's gracious activity in the author's life. That intention was consistent with Margery's vocation to be a mirror."⁶⁸ But Margery's message, at least subconsciously, is that the choice of religious life for a woman does not necessarily mean committing oneself to a nunnery or anchorage at a young age, or denying oneself the experience of marriage or motherhood. As in her own life, Margery shows that a

⁶⁶ Harding, "Body into Text," 168–87.

⁶⁷ Kempe, *Book*, 207, Chapter 85.

⁶⁸ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), 24.

woman can show devotion to God and be a holy woman during marriage through the care and raising of her family (as she cared for John until his death). She also shows that a woman can further involve herself in service to God after the marriage debt is paid. Margery believes God tells her, “ȝyf þu knew how many wifys þer arn in þis worlde þat wolde louyn me & seruyn me ryth wel & dewly, ȝyf þei myght be as frely fro her husbandys as þu art fro thyn.”⁶⁹ Clearly, Christian devotion is not just for virgins. Yet Margery concedes that a woman must deny her sexuality to be holy.

Clifton Wolters wonders, “[t]he fact that nearly all the great visionaries were women suggests the possibility that there is something in the feminine make-up which renders it peculiarly sensitive to such visitations.”⁷⁰ He questions the nature of such visitations. In response to this, one should consider the form of Margery’s mystical experiences. Given the medieval construction of mystical experiences as extremely emotional and corporeal, women, perceived to be forever tied to their emotions and bodies, are the appropriate vehicles. Women were largely excluded from medieval Christian hierarchy and ministry. They could not give sacraments, perform consecration, or sermonize. Yet according to Anne E. Carr, the Gospel narratives reveal a pattern

of Jesus’ disregard for the social inferiority and uncleanness of women. Jesus, against all social and religious custom, had women friends and helpers, discussed religious matters with Jewish women, ... broke the blood taboo by acknowledging the faith of

⁶⁹ Kempe, *Book*, Chapter 86.

⁷⁰ Clifton Wolters, “Introduction” (*Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian of Norwich. Trans. Wolters. Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), 27.

the women with the hemorrhage, and broke the double taboo against talking to women in public.⁷¹

Furthermore, as Leonardo Boff indicates, Jesus “regard[ed] women as individuals, daughters of God, addressees of the Good News, who, together with men, are invited to join the new community of the Reign of God.”⁷² If maleness has overtaken the writing, interpreting, and dissemination of Christ’s story, mystical experience, in which the place given to women by Jesus during his human life can be reaffirmed, becomes the only female response, the only female mode of expression. Commenting on Irigaray’s stance, Beattie suggests that, “mysticism might contribute to the locus of another logic and another language, specific to women’s desire.”⁷³ Mystical experience, the placement of women’s (arguably overzealous) desire onto an acceptable receptacle (Christ), is indeed another logic, beyond the phallogentric teachings of the gospel writers and priests, a logic that speaks to a woman through her corporeality. By extension, another language is required to translate this experience, this feminized logic, into narrative. This is the medieval woman’s *écriture féminine* that Cixous describes.⁷⁴

Since, as has been shown, Margery’s book is intended to aid women like herself, then Margery does so by translating Christian knowledge through her own body, through her crying, suffering, and despairing. Reason is not the same as knowing; male-centred language is not the same as female-experienced revelation.

⁷¹ Ann E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 32.

⁷² Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expression* (Trans. Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 66.

⁷³ Beattie, *God’s Mother*, 29.

⁷⁴ Cixous, “Medusa.”

Expressing divinely-inspired physical experience in plain, human, male-codified language is difficult. Margery, holding the infant Jesus, says, “þe creatur had þan a newe gostly joye & a newe gostly comfort, wheche was so meruelyows þat sche cowde neuyr tellyn it as sche felt it.”⁷⁵ Although she gains “gostly syghtys & vndirstondyngys”⁷⁶ from her corporeal experiences, she has trouble, even after twenty years of contemplation, expressing herself: “Sche had many an holy thowt & many an holy desyr whech sche cowde neuyr tellyn ne rehersyn ne hir tunge myth neuyr expressyn þe habundawnce of grace þat sche felt.”⁷⁷ While Gospel narrative can tell the story of Christ and priests can expound on the complexities of faith and religion, Margery cannot translate her experiences because they are beyond her earthly experiences, beyond earthly language:

had sche so many holy thowtys, holy spechys, and dalyawns in hir sowle techying hir how sche xulde louyn God . . . þat sche cowde neuyr rehersyn but fewe of hem; it wer so holy & so hy þat sche was abaschyd to tellyn hem to any creatur, & also it weryn so hy abouyn hir bodily wittys þat sche myth neuyr expressyn hem wyth hir bodily tunge as sche felt hem. Sche vndirstod hem bettyr in hir sowle þan sche cowde vttyr hem.⁷⁸

Indeed Margery is so overwhelmed by her experiences that she would rather ascend to heaven than inadequately express her experiences. Reason is not the same as knowing. Earthly language is inadequate to express experienced revelation. Other mystics,

⁷⁵ Kempe, *Book*, 209, Chapter 85.

⁷⁶ Kempe, *Book*, 197, Chapter 81.

⁷⁷ Kempe, *Book*, 187, Chapter 78.

⁷⁸ Kempe, *Book*, 201, Chapter 83.

both male and female, may also have had difficulty translating such experiences through inadequate earthly language.

Margery's text, then, is a compromised expression of her mysticism, enabled only through its maleness. The text, possibly altered by one or more of the male amanuenses, is composed of male-codified language and, by necessity, describes Margery's bodily experiences according to the patriarchal construction of God and the church. Her real language is that of her body, the crying fits, the ostentatious worship, the self-sacrifice and service. Her body is the site of her mystical experience, the site of her female language, the site of her desires. Unfortunately for Margery, as for all others, her corporeality is limited and temporary. If she is meant to be a mirror beyond her own town or after her earthly death, she must resort to penning the male text.

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The Book of Margery Kempe effectively shows that women, even those who are not virgins or widows, can participate in Christian life through affective piety, as well as through religious contemplation and dissemination. Furthermore, the text comments on religious discourse, exemplifying the difficulty of language to express mystical experience, avoid the trappings of heresy, and consider female perspectives. Margery's experiential feminine Christianity, forefronting important female icons – the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and saints – provides a model for worldly women to lead holy lives, without suggesting that any woman should shirk her wifely or motherly duties. Margery's own rejection of restrictions placed on her as mother, wife, and holy woman suggests that women can be devout and pious while remaining in the world, without being removed from society to a nunnery or anchorage. And in her feminization of the Gospel

narratives, she illustrates the value of women's bodies as the sites of mystical revelation: the flesh made word.