Virginity Redux: Dueling Social Voices in Margery Kempe's *Book*

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The *Book* of Margery Kempe, the spiritual autobiography of a Catholic mystic of fifteenth-century England, would seem an unlikely aperture into late-twentieth-century politics. Its status as the first autobiography in English is equivocal because Kempe was illiterate and told the story of her Christian spiritual journey to two amanuenses before she finally found, near the end of her life, one who was sufficiently convinced of her piety to tie his own career to the credulity of hers. And yet the complexity of theorizing about the politics inherent in the *Book* repays the reader's effort to untangle the many social voices that compete to speak in it authoritatively: devotional, juridical, bourgeois, antinomian. This earliest example of English autobiography lays bare, surprisingly and viscerally, the risks attendant in rendering public and visible a subject's psychic resistance to cultural orthodoxy. Critics have long been mired in the *Book*'s simple binary (is Kempe's mysticism fraudulent or authentic?), a conceptual axis delimited by the *Book*'s sharp narrative cues. But to take sides either with or against Kempe is to miss the autobiography's subversive formal structure. Caught in a grid of antagonistic disciplinary regimes, Kempe's narrative does battle with essentialist modes of perceiving identity by

asserting that virginity is not a bodily essence but a construction of volition and desire. In the spirit of current debates about the body's primacy as a signifying device,[1] Margery Kempe ruptures the easy conflation of body and essence by figuring her sexualized, middle-aged woman's body as a site of virginal purity and then demanding that clerics acknowledge it as such.

This inquiry asks not whether Kempe's mysticism is fraudulent or authentic but to what extent the *Book*'s epistemic claims sustain integrity despite their fragmentation into voices that emanate from a discursive public sphere. Kempe's bracing honesty—her choice not to hide aspects of her *vita* that mark her as a product of the material conditions of her day—provides an example of modern subjectivity that's not hampered by the *Book*'s "active double-voicedness"[2] but enhanced through it. Canvassing her ideological commitments as both subject and author of her *Book*: Kempe describes being arrested on charges of Lollardy (a conviction would have given the Church the right to burn her at the stake) and escaping rape by the town's steward.[3] She notes the irony of being ostracized by religious pilgrims because they shun her peculiar form of devotion, a loud wailing that imitates Mary's grief during Christ's Passion. She dons white robes which signify virginal status even though she has borne fourteen children. The clearest summary of the *Book*'s devotional narrative is to say that Margery is an orthodox Christian but a heterodox mystic: as a Catholic she believes in transubstantion, confession and holy images, but as "mystic"[4] she fights fiercely to make clerics accept her selection by God. Kempe provides fulsome accounts of social voices which sound around and against her own.

Daringly, Kempe does not omit episodes that undercut her claim to holiness, such as her willingness to commit adultery and her preoccupation with her public image. Neither does the *Book* erase traces of her selfhood, as other mystical treatises do.[5] Margery foregrounds moments in

which her somatic responses to visitations from Christ involve cries of passion, weeping, and an unambiguously sexualized “fervent love” that elicits from her phrases such as “Mercy, Jesus . . . I die.”[6] This practice fits uneasily into more conventional mystics’ forms of devotion, such as prayers for debilitating illness that might edge one closer to comprehending Christ’s suffering during the Passion. Margery’s claims to mysticism are strongest when her text celebrates her highly unusual relationship with Christ; they are weakest when she attempts to measure her contrition alongside that of mystics like Julian and Bridget, against whose strict self-abnegation Margery’s devotion will inevitably be found worldly. Though evaluations of Margery’s mysticism filter into my assessment of the *Book*, the paper’s primary work is to examine the ways in which Kempe’s narrative structure obviates the authenticity/fraudulence binary that it seems to solicit.

I

In Michel Foucault’s introduction to the *History of Sexuality*, he characterizes the Middle Ages as the lost time of unified discourse before “a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions” exacted their toll on human attitudes toward sexuality.[7] Kempe’s characterizations both of sex and persecution, however, contest Foucault’s fantasy that there was ever a time of “unified discourse” antedating culture’s fragmentation into multiple disciplinary discourses.

> The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centu-

> ries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism. More precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified: between the objectification of sex in rational discourses, and the movement by which each individual was set to the task of recounting his own sex, there has occurred since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions, conflicts, efforts at adjustment, and attempts at retranscription. (33)

Foucault asserts that during the Middle Ages forms of sexual deviance and pleasure were managed by "the secure bond that held together moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession." Though Margery is one example of Foucault's ideal subject that "feels obliged [to] confess" her sins, the pleasure she takes in listing her sins to her confessors subverts the disciplinary mechanism that confession sets in motion.[8] The more lowly and unworthy of God's love Margery perceives herself to be, the more animated she is in the confessional chamber, and the more determined she is to render herself acceptable to Christ. The church's intention to humiliate the subject by requiring the subject to confess its shameful lapses into sin succeeds in some basic way, but in fact confession makes Margery more likely to appeal her sins in the highest court, her visitations from Christ himself. Confession gives Margery fodder for the "dalyawns" ("dalliances") with Christ that she relishes. In turn, Christ authorizes her to challenge clerics publicly, and chastise in His name those who dispute her entitlement to scriptural opin-

ions. Far from containing Margery's spirit, confession is yet another spring-board for her individual relationship with Christ.

De Certeau emends Foucault's model of totalized authority by counter-proposing that those who are subjected to disciplinary technologies evade their control by mimicking conformity while in fact bending rules to suit individual needs. "*La Perruque* ('the wig') is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. . . . [H]e cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work*."[9] Though de Certeau's subject is the modern factory worker, by analogy this same act of self-affirmation can be applied to Margery's reconfiguration of confession into a satisfying experience of worship; her supine prayer position is another example of this, her white raiment another.[10] But the *Book* itself is a much more radical example of Kempe's defiance because writing it entailed the risk that she would be perceived by church officials as preaching, which was forbidden to women and the laity. Kempe, the prototypical *perruqueuse*, wisely guarded her intention to publish her life's story in vernacular English from all but a very few people.[11]

There is no evidence to support the contention that the "relative uniformity" which Foucault locates in the Middle Ages really existed. Though Foucault might have argued that the Lollards' heresy trials and subsequent executions testify to the success of a "unified discourse" ruthlessly protecting its hegemony, in fact Church and State were incapable of preventing Lollards from continuing to teach a diverse population (among them women, artisans and servants) to read vernacular translations of the Bible.[12] Lollards continued to meet, even to proselytize in town squares, despite the twin facts of heightened suspicion against hetero-

dox believers and the church's injunction against any form of preaching by the laity.[13]

During her time at Leicester—where she was detained on suspicion of Lollardy, put on trial and exonerated, only to be arrested on suspicion of Lollardy in the next town, Beverley—Margery's inscrutability is the source of great conflict.[14] After Margery had been granted status as a bride of Christ, the performance of her authenticity becomes vitally important to her physical safety, particularly since her white robes attract dangerous attention.[15] Of the three accusations leveled against her in Leicester, all three turn upon the concept of Margery as sexually threatening. The first two, issued by the mayor, focus on Margery as a temptation to both men and women in the community: he calls her a "fals strumpet," a whore, and he worries that if she were allowed to roam free through the town that she would persuade wives to leave their husbands. The third accusation is posed by the town's steward, who physically menaces her and is prepared to assault her until she frightens him by invoking the holy ghost's ubiquitous presence. Why would the local authorities fixate on Margery's sexuality (and hence their own) as the primary reason she is objectionable?

Even the wariest of clerics could not have mistaken Margery for a Lollard: she was a religious pilgrim; she could read neither Latin nor vernacular translations of the Bible; she believed fervently in transubstantiation. The abbot and his assessors quizzed Margery on aspects of the Articles of Faith, with particular emphasis on transubstantiation.[16] Margery answered those questions "ryth wel to vs," the abbot told the mayor, Margery's "dedly enmy."[17] She was released on the condition that she go to the Bishop of Lincoln to procure a letter discharging the mayor of Leicester of responsibility for her.[18] Margery was interrogated by Bishop Arundel and exonerated, but she was still treated as a criminal by lay people after the trial.[19] Margery's white raiment, a sign that she has rejected conventional marriage, is the thing

the mayor finds inscrutable.[20] At his first meeting with Margery he accosts her, proclaiming "[thou] art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, & a fals deceyuer of [th]e pepyl, & [th]erfor I xal haue [th]e in preson" (111-12). ["You are a false strumpet, a false Lollard and a false deceiver of the people, and therefore I shall have thee in prison."] The mayor's accusations explicitly conjoin sexuality ("a fals strumpet") with religious defiance ("a fals loller") and seductive appeal (a "fals deceyuer"); the parallelism of the sentence, by repetition of the adjective "false," constructs strumpet, Lollard and deceiver as shards from the same broken glass, each of them threatening to cut the authoritative integrity of clerical and secular leaders. The mayor's charges reveal a cultural anxiety about unreadable women; he reads three aspects of Margery's person and distills from them epithets that conjure the exact opposite of what the signs would seem to indicate. He reads her white robes as an advertisement of her sexual availability, her talking of scripture as evidence of heresy, her readiness to defend her opinions in court as sign that she is a liar.[21] The mayor's rhetorical practice of privileging reversals echoes the *Book*'s interest in binary oppositions.

In fact, Margery's tense exchange with Leicester's steward replays precisely this concern, but with the punishing agent shifted from the penal system to the "penile" system. The steward questions Margery in Latin before a large assembly, and she tells him to address her in English. He does and she answers his questions unobjectionably. Powerless to have humiliated her in front of the onlookers, he takes her hand and leads her to his chamber. He threatens to rape her, using "fowyl rebawdy wordys" and presses his body against hers. She tries to dissuade him by telling him that she is "a mannys wyf"; he persists, and threatens to throw her into prison. But Margery confounds him by welcoming prison as an opportunity to demonstrate to Jesus her willingness to repay him for his suffering:

> The Stiwarde, seyng hir boldenes [th]at sche dred no presonyng, he strogelyd with hir, schewyng un-clene tokenys & ungoodly cuntenawns, wher-thorw he frayd hir so mech [th]at sche teld hym how sche had hy speche & hir dalyawns of [th]e Holy Gost & not of hir owyn cunnyng. And [th]an he, al a-stoyned of hir wordys, left hys besynes & hys lewydnes, seying to hir as many man had do be-forn, 'Ey[th]yr pu art a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman (113).
>
> [The Steward, seeing her boldness {in} that she did not dread emprisonment, struggled with her, showing unclean tokens and "ungoodly" countenance; whereupon he frightened her so much that she told him how she had divine speech, that she had dalliance with the Holy Ghost and {spoke} not of her own cunning. Astonished by her words {the Steward} left his business and his lewdness, saying to her as many men had before, "Either thou art a right good woman or else a right wicked woman."]

Margery's encounter with juridical forces in the midlands just after Oldcastle's revolt focuses with peculiar intensity the telos of the *Book*. Symbols of purity (like the white raiment) suggest to onlookers precisely the opposite; efforts to express her unique relationship to Christ are collapsed into a political and social movement which she explicitly repudiated. My point is not that the *Book* solicits precise reversals of its stated intent, but that the gaps between the word and the speaking subject elasticize the binaries not only of the *Book*'s narrative, but also of the analytical terms by which critics apprehend how narrative works.

II

Margery remarks twice in the *Book* that she took inordinate pleasure in having sex with her husband: "[th]ei oftyntymes, sche wyst wel, had dysplesyd God by her *inorynant lofe & gret delectacyo*n [th]at [th]ei haddyn ey[th]yr of hem in usyng of o[th]er" (12, my emphasis).[22] ["She well knew that they had often displeased God by her inordinate love and {the} great delectation that each of them had in the using of the other."] She repudiates sex with her husband after having viewed the mirth of Heaven in a vision, but even many years later from the vantage point of celibacy and mysticism, Margery makes no effort to deny the pleasure that sex brought her. Roberta Bux Bosse notes that Kempe uses terms which "appropriate some of the anti-sex language of clergy counseling virginity."[23] Margery says, for example, that she would rather eat the ooze and muck in the ditch than consent to any physical intercourse, except for the sake of obedience. Bosse studies the language of *Holy Maidenhood,* a treatise probably written between 1175 and 1225, and she claims that it had a profound effect on Margery's post-visionary life even though it was addressed to young virgins. That Margery would identify with a text that technically does not apply to her demonstrates the extent to which she thinks of her sexuality as a mental, not corporeal, state. *Holy Maidenhood* describes sexual intercourse as

> the vicious act which begot you upon your mother, that same brutish physical burning, that fiery itch of bodily lust before that loathesome deed, that bestial coupling, that shameless joining, that epitome of stinking filth and that disgusting deed.[24]

But, as Bosse notes, such a description of sex "gains only a limited assent from [Margery].... While she eagerly embraces

the concept that she must chastize her body, she is far too realistic to deny its nature or the reality and poignancy of pleasure" (17-18). But Kempe's language and her intention are at odds with each other: though she wishes to disclaim the worldliness that robust pleasure in sex bespeaks, in fact Margery maintains her love of sex but transposes it into a form of religious devotion. She somatizes her relationship to Christ.

At least part of Margery's attraction to Christ's manhood emanates out of a desire to unite with a body that is iconographically female and benignly male: mental union with Christ will not result in another painful pregnancy.[25] Caroline Walker Bynum has written extensively on Christ as a maternal figure. She argues that Jesus as Mother was an incredibly attractive image to female worshipers because in Christ they found a man who had experienced physical vulnerability and who had sacrificed his life so that others might live. "Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, which generated redemption, was described as a mother giving birth; Christ's love for the soul was seen as the unquestioning pity and tenderness of a mother for her child; and Christ's feeding of the soul with himself (his body and blood) in the eucharist was described as a mother nursing her baby."[26] Margery's sexual reorientation from conjugal heterosexuality to a devotional practice that conjures the multiple causes and effects of bisexuality suggests that the *Book* signifies much more than it can explain under the dueling rubrics of "devotion" or "repudiation."

The simple binary that the text sets up as the signal continuum guiding choice and agency for Kempe undoes itself. Judith Butler's landmark investigation of the heterosexual matrix of desire draws out the theoretical underpinnings of "masculine" and "feminine" dispositions that the *Book* violates with playful oscillation. "The conceptualization of bisexuality in terms of *dispositions*, feminine and masculine, which have heterosexual aims as their intentional corre-

lates, suggests that *bisexuality is the coincidence of two heterosexual desires within a single psyche*."[27] Kempe represents her turn away from John Kempe and towards Christ as a return to her true origin in devotion from which marriage distracted her, but of course this return, Kempe's appropriation of chastity as the essence of both girlhood and devotion, is paradoxically a sexual response to the manhood of Christ. The layering of identifactory shifts is insistently labyrinthine: the *Book* draws attention to the material conditions of motherhood (pain, madness, recovery, and the daunting promise of its repetition—for Margery, fourteen times); it cherishes a nostalgic fantasy for the irrecuperability of innocence; it agitates to usurp some of the status conferred upon virgins. Kempe's desire shuttles between these identifactory states, and, astonishingly, does not register a disciplinary internalization of the limitations that her society insist she place on renegade desire. Kempe portrays herself as protean, constantly remaking herself and endeavoring to render these changes visible and legible to the skeptical communities that judge her harshly.

During the middle of the *Book*, when Archbishop Arundel postpones conferring on Margery the privilege of wearing white robes until she has undertaken a long and taxing pilgrimage to Jerusalem, one gets the sense that it is Margery's persistence—itself an assertion of will at odds with the typical mystic's resignation—that finally persuades the bishop to remove his injunction against white raiment. When the archbishop relents and allows Margery to wear white robes, the text's narrative conflict no longer focuses on clerical resistance to Margery's resumption of "virginity," but on the laity's scorn for what appears to them as ostentation. Margery had always been publicly bourgeois; as a young woman in Lynn, the daughter of the town's mayor, she flaunted her ability to violate sumptuary laws without fear of reprisal. The text represents the community's deep skepticism about her claim that virginity represents a mental rather than

physical state. Especially in the context of her former displays of rich clothing, the significatory power of the white raiment works in precisely opposite directions, conveying both extreme piety and a desire to publicize a private sense of devotion. Ultimately, the white robes signify beyond the text's ability to control meaning.

The *Book* aims to recast virginity as a state of mind that can be earned through penance and renunciation, but her devotion is alloyed with a sense of what she stands to gain should her "virginity" be publicly restored; a skeptic might argue that her aim to exchange personal comfort for religious selection underscores her implication within the material world she claims to repudiate. But Kempe's devotional voice deserves to be taken in earnest not in spite of its fragmentation, but because of it.

Despite the odds against her success, Margery measures herself against female saints in an ambivalent effort to blend in with other holy women and yet distinguish herself from them on the basis of her uniquely conjugal relationship with Christ. Margery observes at mass one day the eucharistic bread shaking in the hands of the priest, and likewise the chalice of wine; she expresses to Christ her desire to see more such consecrations, and Jesus tells her: "[Th]ow xalt no more sen it in [th]is maner [th]erfor thank God [th]at [th]ow hast seyn. My dowtyr, Bryde, say me neuyr in [th]is wyse" (47). ["Thou shall not see more in this manner than thou hast already seen. My daughter, Bridget, never saw me in this way."] The suggestion that Jesus gratifies Margery's desire to outdo Saint Bridget reveals the traces of Margery's worldly desires even in the presence of a minor miracle. The passage implies that Christ would engage in similar comparisons with other holy women, thereby undermining his more customary *modus operandi*, which is (as the *Book* tells us later) to love all of his acolytes regardless of their worldly status: "Ya, dowtyr, trow [th]ow rygth wel [th]at I lofe wyfes also, and specyal [th]o wyfes whech woldyn levyn chast" (49).

["Yea, daughter, know that I love wives also, and especially those wives who would live chaste."]

Margery endeavored to imagine her autobiography in dialogue with the *vitae* of other mystics because a great number of holy stories were circulated in vernacular translations. Although illiterate, Margery was a voracious "reader," learning by heart lengthy passages of scripture and other religious texts. Margery was surely familiar with the most influential *vitae* like St. Bridget's; critic Anthony Goodman notes smugly that

> [o]nce Margery developed an interior life dedicatedly biased on [Bridgettine] lines, she commanded rapt confessorial attention. Priests were agitated or excited by what she claimed as real spiritual experiences, such as they had only read about in modish treatises. Some of those inclined to accept the validity of her revelations were nevertheless prey to suspicions that she was a pious fraud, suspicions stirred by the oddity of her physical symptoms and the scepticism of colleagues.[28]

Goodman implies that Margery schooled herself in the "style" of the mystics, a style she mimetically replays to the shock and delight of local confessors. It is possible that Margery's mysticism fraudulently rehearses what is supposedly an authentic channeling of God's voice, though the text gives us no standard of "authenticity" by which we could measure such a claim.

Goodman's sarcastic evaluation of Margery's lack of religious qualification stems at least in part from her reluctance to torture her body. Mystics standardly sought severe forms of mutilation in order to experience firsthand some of the agony Christ endured during the Passion. "Understood sometimes as chastening of sexual urges or as punishment for sin," Caroline Walker Bynum writes, "[self-torture] was

more frequently described as union with the body of Jesus."[29] In the context of both male and female saints who "regularly engaged in the [practice of] jumping into ovens or icy ponds, driving knives, nails or nettles into their flesh, whipping or hanging themselves in elaborate pantomimes of Christ's Crucifixion,"[30] Margery's penance is relatively cautious. She fasted and wore a hairshirt for several years until Mary and Christ, respectively, enjoined her to stop these practices. Mary asked her to resume eating meat to strengthen her body for pilgrimages, and Christ ordered her to replace the hairshirt with the white robes that signify being His "bride."

Margery continues in *imitatio Christi* by imagining her head getting cleaved by an ax. However, she deliberately selects this method because she thinks that it would be the quickest and least painful, a calculation that undermines the purpose of self-sacrifice. Nancy Partner has argued persuasively that because Margery's adult life had consisted of a long sequence of painful pregnancies, she could not bear the thought of enduring pain; but this is yet another example how Margery's pre-conversion life renders her unfit for "virginity"—she has experiential knowledge of pain that exceeds a virgin's capacity to imagine it.

Margery's mutually exclusive drives to sacrifice herself for Christ and to feel as little pain as possible obviously bespeak contradiction; but the decision to include this material in the autobiography demonstrates her impulse to reconcile her devotional mission with her social life. Caught in various disciplinary regimes that circulate around public acknowledgment of devotional rites, Margery is not the cause of the text's contradictory impulses so much as its occasion. Precisely because the *Book* is not sealed off from its destabilizing social context (as the *vita* conventionally is), it actually promotes the reader's sense of the *Book* as occasionally parodic, a burlesque of the saint's vita; when Margery claims to feel Christ's toes wriggling in bed, for example, the reader's temptation to laugh at the vision's prosaic quality

undercuts the implied sacredness of the visitation.

Anthony Goodman's comment about Margery's self-reinvention along "Bridgettine biases" addresses a commonplace critical suggestion, that the "authentic/fraudulent" axis is the primary one on which Margery's revelations should be situated. But this scheme artificially limits the range of responses solicited by the text. Margery seeks to have a relationship with Jesus that pushes through the mimetic isolation that imitation entails; she wants a relationship with Christ that is explicitly reciprocal.

Margery's wifely experience surfaces in her "dalyawns" with Christ, and this is the narrative sequence that clearly distinguishes her from virginal mystics.[31] Margery ascribes reciprocity to the unusual exchanges between herself and Jesus; Christ tells her

> [th]u hast suffyrd me to werkyn my wil in [th]e & [th]at [th]u woldist layth me be so homly wyth [th]e. For in no-thyng dowtyr, [th]at [th]u myghtyst do in erth [th]u myghtyst no bettyr plesyn me [th]an suffryn me speke to [th]e in [th]i sowle for [th]at tyme [th]u vnderstonyst my wyl & I vnderdirstond [th]i wyl [210].
>
> [{T}hou hast suffered me to work my will in thee that thou would lay by me so familiarly. For nothing that you could do on earth, daughter, would please me more than allowing me to speak in your soul, for you understand my will and I understand your will.]

The last sentence's rhetoric implies a strikingly non-mimetic exchange. Its parallel construction of "[th]u vnderstondyst my wyl & I vnderstondyst [th]i wil" implies that Margery is not imitating Christ but achieving a state of mutual transparency with him. The last sentence's rhetoric implies not just reciprocity, but equality. It seems a strange demotion that

Jesus would represent his will as intelligible to Margery's reason. In the same speech he says that

> [Th]u hast gret cawse to louyn me ryth wel & to geuyn me al holy [th]in hert [th]at I may fully restyn [th]erin as I wil my-self, for yf [th]u suffyr me, dowtyr, to restyn in [th]i sowle in erth, beleue it ryght wel [th]at [th]u schalt restyn wyth me in Heuyn wyth-owtyn ende (211).

> Thou hast great cause to love me and to give me your heart all holy, that I may fully rest there, as I will {it} myself. For if you suffer me, daughter, to rest in thy soul on earth, believe it that thou shall rest with me in Heaven, without end.

Marketplace tropes of exchange surface again in the notion that Christ's residence in Margery's heart while she lives on earth will assure her place in heaven eternally. This claim of reciprocity is tame, however, in comparison to Margery's radical representation of Christ's volition. This passage attributes to Christ desire ("[th]at I may fully restyn {in Margery's heart} as I wil my-self") which implies that Christ *lacks* something since he is in a state of desiring. That there should be anything which Christ should want, but not have, is fascinating. Margery underscores the role of free will in Christ's relationship with humans; Jesus wants Margery to adopt his will as her own, but the passage's rhetoric connotes the sense that Margery is in a position to gratify a desiring Christ; it is an astonishing position of power and self-importance that Margery carves for herself via a genre that generally foregrounds self-erasure.

While Christ is nominally male—and as Bynum notes, Margery's Christ is always gendered male[32]—his manhood is nevertheless strikingly gentle. Other portraits of masculinity in the *Book* are almost uniformly grotesque: John Kempe in

youth is aggressively amorous and in his old age senile and incontinent; the steward of Leicester is lewd and physically menacing; the mayor of Leicester is prejudicial and trouble making; Bishop Arundel is harsh and ominous; the priests whose "gostly membres" are exposed in Margery's horrific vision are constant reminders that anatomy demarcates access to clerical privilege. Jesus, on the other hand (and despite Margery's unambiguously sexual response to Him) is portrayed as placidly benign, as if he were a virginal courtly suitor wishing to impress his beloved. Christ's language of reciprocity and mutual understanding only shores up this impression. The major literary genres available in the vernacular during the first decades of the fifteenth century were love poetry and romantic stories which Margery imports into her religious autobiography. In doing so, she highlights the difference between Christ's goodness and common men's self-interestedness; the romantic language justifies Margery's choice to abandon the good opinion of worldly men for the love of Christ.

Margery assumes an unusual position while praying—she lays on her back—and it is significant that most of her visions occur while she is recumbent. Nancy Partner observes that Margery "seems to have lain on church floors, as well as at home . . . her mystical experiences . . . are always associated with lying down, ceasing formal devotions and allowing her mind to move in its own trains of associations and fantasies."[33] Margery's position during prayer implicitly refutes the authority of church ceremony that fashions Eucharist as the occasion of the most meaningful connection to Christ. Margery's unusual prayer position harkens back to the images of wifely domesticity that she occasionally uses to illustrate her intimacy with Christ; but more importantly, her prayer position presents her body as an instrument in iconoclastic religious devotion. Instead of torturing her body into submission, Margery uses it as an antenna for Christ's visitations. Margery's manipulation of her body signifies most

unpredictably in her pilgrimage to Mount Calvary.

The episode at Mount Calvary is pivotal to the *Book*'s narrative development because is it atop Mount Calvary, the site of Christ's crucifixion, where Margery becomes endowed with her gift of tears. Her multiple identifications with Christ as his wife, daughter and mother, plus her identification with Christ himself and Mary Magdalene, erupt together in a confluence of "plentyvows" tears. The passage's extraordinary Marian imagery, conjured by the "gostly labowr" that "ourycome[s]" Margery, constitutes the emotional climax of Margery's pilgrimage and her *Book*, but the amazing feat undertaken by her is the representation of all these psychic identifications as *integral* to Margery's being. Kempe's narrative of this episode begins with Margery falling to the ground and extending her arms out each side, in a clear *imitatio Christi*, but she is then overwhelmed by labor pains. The narrative emphasizes the fact that her body mimes each of these identifications, shuttling between loci of devotional truth; Kempe's rendering of the scene obviates the trappings of gender roles by becoming the quintessence of both corporeal femaleness and maleness: her text oscillates between a "performance" of Marian labor and of a godhead defiled by crucifixion.

> And [th]erfore, whan she knew pat sche xulde cryen, sche kept it in as long as sche mygth & dede al [th]at sche cowde to withsond it er ellys to put it a-wey til sche wex as blo as any leed, & euyr it xuld laborwryn in hir minde mor & mor in-to [th]e tyme [th]at it broke owte & what [th]e body myth ne lengar enduryn [th]e gostly labowr but was ouyrcome wyth [th]e unspekabyl lofe [th]at wrowt so fervently in [th]e sowle, [th]an fel sche down & cryde wondyr lowede & [th]e mor [th]at sche wolde labowryn to kepe it in er to put it a-wey, mech [th]e more xulde sche cryen & [th]e more lowder (69).

> [And therefore, when she knew that she would cry, she kept it in as long as she might and did all that she could to withstand it, ere else to put it away until she waxed as blue as any lead; and when it should labor in her mind more and more until the time that it broke out, the body must no longer endure the ghostly labor but was overcome with unspeakable love that wrought so fervently in the soul {that} she fell down and cried wondrously loud. And the more that she would strive to keep it in her and put {the cries} away, that much more she would cry, and loudly.]

As Margery attempts to stifle her body's impulse to "cry out" at her "bodily eye's" vision of Christ's Passion, the desire to release her anguish only coils more tightly inside her body. The text's portrayal of this moment shifts between subject and object identification, from her internal anguish to the color of her taut skin, which she describes as losing its natural coloring and becoming "blo as any leed" in its effort to suppress the imperative to release. The body's desire to release her pent up cries "labowryn in hir minde mor & mor." "Labowryn" in this sense aligns with the word "wrowt," as in the "unspekabyl lofe [th]at wrowt so fervently." "Labowr" and "wrowt" create a vivid image of desire's movement, friction, agitation; so, too, the doubling of "mor & mor" emphasizes the back-and-forth oscillation in Margery's mind of the competing desires to restrain and release cries of sympathy. Her writhing on the ground is a miming of a sexual pulsation of union with Christ's manhood.[34]

The language itself that Margery uses to conjure this scene beats out a sexually intense, back and forth, "mor & mor" patter of its own. "Labowryn," "wrowt," and "mor & mor," all situated in context of multiple identifications with Christ, pound out a rhythm of pleasure at the same moment that Margery's mind apprehends the horror of watching her

Savior die; her speech is inscribed by dueling impulses to desire Christ and to save Him. Margery constitutes the sublime experience of Christ's love and death *in language* as an aesthetic and political experience: the stories of Christ's somatic pain that Margery memorized during her years of devotion literally animate her body, overtake it with an explosion of love so powerful that even oxygen deprivation—signified by her skin turning blue—cannot kill her: she draws life force from the vivification of her husband/son/brother/father Christ. Politically, her narrative intervenes in the reception of saintly *vitae*, because Margery's extreme reaction on Mount Calvary contests the privileged relation to Christ that the Church says virgins are entitled to: for though Margery attempts to reclassify virginity as a spiritual state not a somatic one, it is precisely her experience in labor that marks her for divine selection. The aesthetic aims of Kempe's *Book* are at one with its politics; both as subject of the *Book* and as its author, Kempe's representational strategy foregrounds the precariousness of identity formation at the same time that it risks foregrounding a precipitous fragmentation.

The *Book*'s narrative lacunae—its gaps, deferrals, conflicts—fuel a sustained consideration of Margery's tactics of self-presentation. We read Margery as "modern" in part because she does not write over the echoes of disciplinary voices that read *against* her. Marshalling those voices towards her own authorial ends, Margery Kempe's *Book* actually prompts divisive counter-readings that, though they made deride her claim to selection, cannot drain the text of its devotional vitality. Kempe writes the *Book* seventeen years after the conflicts it narrates and the retrospective point-of-view suggests a comfortable stasis, triumphant if only because its conflicts are already, at the time of the *Book*'s composition, consigned to the past.

Notes

[1] For an insightful overview of the theoretical stakes of essentialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York, Routledge, 1989). Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990) engages questions of the body's significatory power and the interplay between performance and essence. Henry Louis Gates's *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, 1986), a collection of essays that originally appeared in two issues of the journal *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1985, Autumn 1986), is an excellent investigation of, as Gates puts it, "writing 'race' and the difference it makes." On the subject of essentialism and gay identity, see Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out* (New York, Routledge, 1990). Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* (New York, Routledge, 1994) investigates intersections of gay/straight and black/white identity in "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of "Race" (42-78).

[2] "Active double-voiced words are internally dialogized to a great degree," write Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson. "If this internal dialogization is intense and complex enough, then there may be too many competing and contrary intonations to be retained when the text is read aloud. But silently we may still 'hear' the intonational play." My choice to identify Margery's words as actively double-voiced, rather than more generally dialogic, reflects my sense that Kempe represents her worldliness multivalently. Her revelation of biographical facts that would undermine her claim to holiness, for example, suggest that although the Book earnestly records Margery's path towards union with Christ, it cagily assesses Kempe's social climate. On active double-voicedness, see Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 154-166.

[3] I refer to the author of the *Book* as Kempe, and to its subject as Margery. Obviously, these roles are not always distinguishable from each other, but I follow this practice as a general rule. Lynn Staley Johnson also denotes the Kempe/Margery split; she thematizes it and uses the author/subject split as the structuring device of her "Margery Kempe: social critic," *JMRS* v. 22, n.2

(Spring, 1992).

[4] I label Margery a "mystic" because it is what she called herself; however, I encase the term in quotation marks to register that her entitlement to that label is in question. Sarah Beckwith's discussion of Margery's mysticism, and her summary of critics' debates about its authenticity or fraudulence, are quite good. See her "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval Mysticism: Language, Agency and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe, "Exemplaria* 4.1 (March, 1992): 171-189.

[5] Beckwith notes that "[t]he mystic must be a transmitter, and not a representer of the Word. Her voice must not mix with, fuse with, talk with [God's]. So for example the very opening lines of the *Revelations of St. Birgitta* start with Christ's unhampered, unrepresented voice." By these standards, of course, Margery's mysticism will be found lacking; her drive to find a suitable amanuensis signifies, to some critics, a suspiciously secular agency. See Beckwith, "Problems of Authority," 182.

[6] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Stanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS 212 (London, 1940): 40. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes a contemporary meaning of the verb *to die*: "to pine away with passion; to be consumed with longing desire."

[7] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, Vintage: 1990): 33.

[8] Although I take issue with Foucault's representation of the Middle Ages as a time of "unified" discourse, my work is deeply informed by his explication of the subject interpollated by disciplinary regimes. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison and Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* are two books that have particularly guided my critical method.

[9] De Certeau, Michel, The *Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984): 25.

[10] I don't mean to dehistorize either Margery or the industrial factory worker by making a comparison between the two. Certainly an historical particularization of Margery and of the worker would produce more nuanced profiles than those I am sketching here. But my point is exactly the *irrelevance* of historical particularity: although in widely different contexts, their strategies for

exerting individual will against institutional force (*pace* Foucault) fundamentally resemble each other.

[11] "It is intimated that [Margery] intended in general to keep the book a secret in her lifetime. At various points she gives evidence that she does not easily divulge her full supernatural experience to layman. For her to do so would be dangerous, and against orthodox teaching." See Hope Emily Allen in Kempe, 258.

[12] The acquisition of vernacular translations of the Bible could be discouraged by the clergy but not entirely prevented. The aristocracy had copies of the gospels in vernacular that could be stolen, purchased, or otherwise procured even if translations were impossible to get otherwise, which they were not. Thomas Arundel, the Bishop who presided at Margery's heresy trial, is reported to have noted in his sermon at Anne of Bohemia's funeral (1394) how happy Richard's Queen was to have the four gospels in English "with the docturis [glosses] upon them." Clearly, vernacular translations of the Bible were perceived to be dangerous only when in the hands of artisans, merchants or servants. The aristocracy would, of course, have a stake in maintaining the clergy's prohibition against vernacular translations for and by Lollards. See Janet Coleman, "Vernacular Literacy and Lay Education," in *English Literature in History 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers* (London, Hutchinson, 1981): 20.

[13] Lollards disliked the symbolism and mystery of the Catholic church, which seemed to them to obscure essential truths. Lollardy began as an academic movement at Oxford, under the stewardship of the charismatic leader John Wyclif. He refuted the miracle of the mass, transubstantiation; and he believed that the individual ought to be able to read God's word directly in vernacular translations of the Bible. See Lambert, 219-233. For discussion of clerical objection to reading and preaching by the laity, see Knighton, below.

[14] When Margery was released from the Leicester jail and sent through Beverley still under arrest, a group of housewives ran out of their homes "shaking distaffs and crying out 'Brennith this fals heretyk.'" See Malcom Lambert, *Medieval Heresy* (New York, Holmes and Meier, 1976): 254.

[15] Frequent accusations of Lollardy were leveled against Margery, especially during 1417, when pilgrimages took her through the midlands only three years after Oldcastle's revolt.

[16] Margery avows the orthodox (Catholic) doctrine on transubstantiation. “I be-leue [th]at it is hys very flesch & hys blood & no material bred ne neuyr may be vnseyd be it onys seyd.’ & so sche answeryd forth to alle [th]e artycles as many as [th]ei wolde askyn hir [th]at [th]ei wer wel plesyd” (p.115, l.16-20). [“I believe it is his very flesh and his blood and not material bread, {a miracle which} can never be unsaid once it is said.”]

[17] Kempe, 115.

[18] Kempe, 115.

[19] The mayor allows Margery to leave Leicester in order to procure a letter from the Bishop of Lincoln that would discharge the mayor of responsibility for her. She goes on her way with a companion named Patrick. But she forgets her staff and her bag and sends Patrick back to retrieve them. The mayor threatens to throw Patrick in jail and does not give him the objects he came in search of.

[20] “‘I wil wetyn why [th]ow gost in white clothys, for I trowe [th]ow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & ledyn hem w*y*th [th]e’” [116]. [“I want to know why thou goest in white clothes, for I know thou art coming here to take our wives away from us and lead them with thee.”]

[21] Due to the rise of Lollardy and that sect’s emphasis on women’s fitness for teaching scripture, backlash against unconventional women was virulent during the second decade of the fifteenth century. Henry Knighton, defending the clergy’s exclusive access to the Bible, testified against Wyclif by deploring the effect of his heresy: “The Gospel—which is traditionally available only to clerics sufficiently literate and learned—might be made common, fully open to the laity, and to women who know how to read; and thus the pearl of the Gospel is scattered to be trampled on by the pigs, and what has been dear to clerics and laics alike is now given to the laity as a common joke, and the jewel of the clergy is turned into a game for the laity, that it what used to be the great talent of the clergy and the doctors might be the common possession of the laity.” Knighton’s imaging of the Bible as a “pearl” and the laity as “pigs” who might “trample” upon the numinous beauty of the Word juxtaposes the worlds of luxury and farm life. Fearful that common access to the Bible would pollute the sacredness of the Word because opening it to unpredictable (because not clerical) interpretation, clerical advocates like Knighton took extreme mea-

sures to stop the spread of Lollardy. The social implications of Lollardy, an heretical sect that believed the body of Christ should be dispersed among the people via Bible reading groups. radically refigured conventional gender and class politics: women were taught to read the Bible, and those skills obviously spilled over into secular activity. Knighton's hysterical fantasy about the polluting effect of women replays in a different register the Mayor of Leicester's fear that wives would abandon their disciplined lives to follow Margery Kempe on the path to religious ecstasy: women's status as alien from men is underscored in both examples. See Henry Knighton on Wyclif and the Lollards, translated by Steven Justice from *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby, Rolls Series 92 (London, 1895), vol. 21.

[22] The second time that Margery mentions her "inordinate" pleasure in sex with John Kempe is at the end of his life when she is caring for him at God's command. "Many tymys sche xuld an yrkyd hir labowr saf sche bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, & inordinat louys to hys persone & [th]erfor sche was glad to be ponishchyd withy [th]e same person" (181). ["Many times she would have shirked her labors but she remembered how she, in her youth, had many delectable thoughts, fleshly lusts and inordinate love for his person; therefore she was glad to be punished with the same person."]

[23] See Roberta Bux Bosse, "Female Sexual Behavior in the Late Middle Ages: Ideal and Actual," *Fifteenth Century Studies*, v.10 (autumn, 1984): 17.

[24] The translation here is Bosse's. *Holy Maidenhood* was a treatise designed to persuade young girls to continue cherishing God's love through puberty, which constituted the marriageable years. Encouraged to guard virginity as a sacred "fluid" contained within their fragile bodies, *Holy Maidenhood* represented sex with men as repugnant as juxtaposed against the purifying ecstasy of giving one's maidenhood to God.

[25] Kempe suffered from what physicians would now call postpartum disorder. On this subject Nancy Partner writes: "In the interior logic of Kempe's memories (which does not conform to the usual sequence of holy lives), everything followed from marriage: sexual initiation, pregnancy, sickness, pain, fear of death, madness, and at last, the healing presence of God. She suffered an extended

episode of insanity for months after the birth, six months and eight days as she remembered it with uncharacteristic precision, months of fear and hatred of everyone around her, and she had to be restrained from doing violence to herself" (39). See her "Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria*, v. 3, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 29-66.

[26] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols" in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion.* (New York, Zone Books, 1991): 158.

[27] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 61. The italicized emphasis is Butler's. She is speaking in the context of Freud's theorization of bisexuality.

[28] See A.E. Goodman, "The piety of John Brunham's daughter, of Lynn," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford, Ecclesiastical History Society, 1979): 354.

[29] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 184.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Hope Emily Allen notes that "dalyawns" is Margery's usual term for colloquies with the Divinity(256).

[32] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 313.

[33] Partner, "Reading *The Book*," 52, n. 41.

[34] After her return from the Holy Land, Margery directly mentions her sexual union with Christ. Christ tells her: "[Th]erfore most I nedys be homly wyth [th]e & lyn in [th]i bed wyth [th]e. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, & [th]u mayst boldly, whan [th]u art in [th]i bed, take me to [th]e as for [th]i weddyd husbond, as thy derwrothy derlyng, & as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be louyd as a sone schuld be louyd wyth [th]e modyr & wil [th]at [th]u loue me, dowtyr, as a good [wife] owyth to loue hir husbonde. & [th]erfor [th]u mayst boldly take me in [th]e armes of [th]i sowle & kyssen my mowth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wylt" (90). [Therefore, I must be familiar with you and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in your bed, take me to you as if I were your wedded husband, as your dearest darling and as your sweet son, for I will be loved as a son should be loved by the mother and will that you love me, daughter, as a good [wife] ought to love her husband. And therefore you may boldly take me in your soul's arms and kiss my

mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you wish"]. The sexual connection here is explicit, whereas in the pantomime on Mount Calvary it is only alluded to through the agitation and release that Margery describes so richly.