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Beata A. Butryn  
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Margery Kempe's Mysticism in the Context of Late Medieval English Spirituality

by

Beata A. Butryn

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore a range of complexities in the piety and mysticism of Margery Kempe and the literary authority she fashions for her spiritual biography. While considering the expression of her spiritual and bodily devotion to God, I take into account Margery's struggles for the acceptance of her personal devotion in her own community and elsewhere, her fight against the misogyny of her religious superiors in their rejection of her mysticism, as well as her efforts to assert her own literary authority. My feminist approach to Margery's mysticism concentrates on the intricate relationship between her status as a laywoman and her piety in the context of late medieval English lay spirituality. I argue that Margery structures her life on the examples of renowned medieval holy women, even though she seems "atypical" in her personal and self-governed devotion to God and her contemporaries view her behavior as strange. Her spiritual devotion is manifested in "bridal" mysticism, and she describes and interprets her visionary experiences in accordance with a popular medieval model. Margery's gender also helps to affirm her mysticism by means of her own physicality in her personal devotion to Christ. She fights against medieval misogyny in order to establish her voice as a woman mystic and to assert herself as the author of her own spiritual and literary work.

*Keywords:* bridal mysticism, feminism, laywoman, medieval, misogyny, piety, spirituality

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiographical text written in the English language, tells the story of the life and religious vocation of Margery Kempe, an English woman mystic who lives in the male-dominated ecclesiastical world of the late Middle Ages. Written by a sympathetic male scribe, the work focuses on the spiritual development and assertion of Margery's spiritual authority in her vocation as a laywoman and mystic. Margery was a daughter of a mayor of the busy town of Norfolk at the port city of Lynn, "one of England's largest towns and part of a European economic system," the wife of John Kempe, and a mother of fourteen children (Aers 256). David Aers notes of her class position: "Her husband, though lacking the prominence and wealth of her father, came from the same class" (Aers 256). Despite her domestic circumstances, Margery receives visions of Christ and other holy persons, engages in pious dialogues with Him and others, and contemplates God's plans and revelations, openly declaring her love of God in Christ through prayer, mourning, and charity. Margery suffers greatly as a result of her spiritual and visionary experiences. Despite facing abuse, ridicule, and threat, Margery perseveres and defends her devotional status as a woman mystic against the religious and secular authorities in Norfolk, and in other cities, as well as during her extensive religious world travels, which take her all over the European continent and to Jerusalem.

Since the discovery of her mystical vocation, Margery explores the manifold dimensions of her religiosity as an ordinary laywoman. I argue that Margery's mysticism is "typical of her time" in her personal devotion to Christ and to God, as well as in the expression of her "bridal" spirituality. Although people in her time perceive her behavior as unusual, Margery, in fact, is patterning her life on the examples of various medieval holy women. As a wife and a mother, she strives to preserve and maintain the qualities and virtues of a traditional Christian woman saint and a laywoman. Despite exhibiting her own unique devotion to Christ, Margery's behavior

demonstrates some striking similarities to that of Continental and Italian women saints and mystics, such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Brigitta of Sweden, Dorothea of Montau, and Julian of Norwich. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that these holy women influenced Margery's religious vocation. While playing their distinctive roles in inspiring her to preserve the virtues of a traditional female saint, these holy women also helped Margery to allow room for her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. Margery also practices self-governed devotion in her obedience to a medieval Christian model, a set of religious qualities patterned on the life of Christ, through her spiritual contemplation on the Franciscan values of poverty and humility of Christ and His mother in His birth and suffering (Ragusa xxvii). In following this model, Margery demonstrates the importance of the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection events in the lives of Christ and St. Mary by her imaginative and spiritual participation in those experiences. Although she structures her spiritual contemplation according to the prescriptions of the medieval model, Margery personalizes the stories of the biblical events and maintains the Christian tradition by developing her own individual devotion to Jesus Christ and St. Mary as an ordinary laywoman.

Margery also employs her bodily devotion to the human Jesus Christ as a weapon against medieval misogyny and a means of proving the literary authority of her book. In her resistance to the male clerical authority of the medieval Church and her perseverance against the abuse of power, Margery expresses her love of Christ and His Passion in the concrete exercise of spiritual devotion, which, in turn, ultimately defines the core of her mystical legacy. She displays the importance of body and gender within the context of the Christian religious tradition through her personal relationship with Christ as a medium for the attainment of her own redemption. She carries on the Christian tradition by mentally and spiritually engaging herself in her inner dialogue with Christ and by participating in her visions and ecstatic experiences of Christ while affirming

her own physicality as a woman. As Margery's love for Christ powers both the text of her spiritual biography and the text of her life, it reinforces her personal devotion to Christ as the singular source of her love. In the diverse, revolutionary blend of her traditional spiritual qualities combined with her personal devotion to God in her status as a laywoman, Margery sets a new standard for spirituality by asserting her religious authority as a mystic and the author of her spiritual biography—all despite the way that others around her view her behavior as unusual or abhorrent, her struggles against the male religious authorities, as well as her reliance on male scribes for the writing of her spiritual biography.

Seeking unity with God through the participation in physical or spiritual visions was a qualifying experience required of visionary women in the late medieval period. Margery finds herself spiritually conversing with God through Christ as she completes a period of chastisement in preparation for her mystical experience. Margery's imitation of Christ's suffering in her fasting, prayer, feelings of shame and sorrow for her past sins, as well as in the passing of her temptation tests, all trigger her visionary encounter with Christ. As He appears to her at St. John's Chapel in the Church of St. Margaret, Christ presents His divine plan for Margery's role as His counterpart. After granting her contrition for all her guilt to her "life's end," Jesus Christ reveals to Margery:

Therefore I bid you and command you, boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your own love and shall be your love without end. And, daughter, you have a hair cloth upon your back. I want you to take it away, and I shall give you a hair cloth in your heart that shall please me much better than all the hair cloths in the world. (Staley 14)

While presenting Himself as her love and lover, Jesus Christ reassures Margery of His never-ending love in their relationship. He requests that she does not wear "a hair cloth" anymore. Instead, He wants her to wear it in her "heart." The Lord's reference to Himself as being both Margery's lover and her father points to the complexity of His role as a medium for their sacred

union. The play between the inner and the outer “hair cloth” in Margery’s vision suggests a double meaning in her experience of the divine love and in the spiritual response of her personal devotion to Christ as being both external and internal. Therefore, the “hair cloth” in Margery’s heart is also the suffering that she will go through as a result of her devotion and her personal engagement in the visionary experiences of her mystical vocation. As it comes from the genuine feelings in her heart, such pure personal devotion is the internal sacrifice that pleases Christ more than the physical punishment that Margery inflicts on her own body by wearing the “hair cloth” on her skin. In this way, while the Lord establishes Margery as His counterpart and a servant, her intimate experience, in turn, presents her spirituality as representative of traditional medieval “bridal” mysticism.

Margery’s manifestation of “bridal” spirituality involves wearing a ring as a token of her marriage to Christ. As she places her trust in the Lord’s assistance on her pilgrimage to Rome, Christ commands Margery to show her devotion to Him by engraving her gold wedding ring with the following words, *Jesus est amor meus*, to publicly proclaim her love of Him. The narrator’s description of Margery’s determination to find her ring after she loses it by involving the wife of her lodger in the search communicates the importance of this token to her. The narrator notes that when Margery “found the ring under the bed on the boards, [...] with great joy she told the good wife that she had found her ring. Then the good wife, obeying her, prayed this creature for forgiveness as she could, ‘Good Christian, pray for me’” (Staley 58). The “good wife” shares in Margery’s happiness at finding her ring because she realizes that she is responsible for keeping Margery and her personal belongings safe in her house. As a married woman and a “good wife” herself, the woman, like Margery, understands the importance of this precious personal item to Margery as symbolic of her love of Christ. The “good wife,” therefore, testifies to Margery’s

“bridal” spirituality as she places her own trust in the power of Margery’s intercessional prayer as the “bride.” As Margery’s attitude toward her ring expresses her true feelings about her personal relationship with Christ, the respectful attitude of the “good wife,” in turn, affirms Margery’s bridal role.

Just as Margery’s ring as the symbol of her love of Christ demonstrates her mystical experience, this token of her “bridal” spirituality is similar to the visionary symbols of love in the experiences of other women saints in the late Middle Ages. In wearing the wedding ring, Margery is similar to St. Brigitta of Sweden, a fourteenth-century Swedish female saint. In her essay, “The Eroticized Bride of Hagiography,” Dyan Elliott discusses St. Brigitta’s visionary experience of wearing an ornament, which symbolizes her “bridal” love (218-219). Elliott credits St. Brigitta as a female saint who paved Margery’s way to spirituality as a “bride” of Christ (218). In discussing St. Brigitta’s “bridal” spirituality, Elliott points out that “the [...] comparable token that Bridget had was a visionary brooch that the Virgin Mary fastened on her breast when adorning her for the bridegroom: there was no ring as yet” (219). Elliott compares St. Brigitta’s “brooch” to Margery’s wedding ring that she receives from Jesus Christ Himself (219). The importance of Margery’s wedding ring, therefore, symbolizes her individual fidelity to Him. Unlike St. Brigitta’s visionary experience, Margery uses her ornament to publicly acknowledge her marriage to Christ by physically wearing her ring on her finger. In this way, as Margery’s ring clearly individualizes her “bridal” experience, the example of St. Brigitta’s “brooch” may have served as a precedent for her.

Although Margery’s unique encounter with Christ is her private visionary experience, this encounter points to the shared qualities of mystical experiences, as it resembles the experiences of other women saints in the late Middle Ages. Margery is similar to St. Catherine of Siena, a fourteenth-century Italian female saint, who was a famous visionary since she was a young girl.

St. Catherine, like Margery, communicated with Christ through her visions. This visionary quality is the most significant among all the similarities between Margery and St. Catherine. In her book, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, Clarissa W. Atkinson argues St. Catherine's great contribution was that she promoted new respect for holy women in late Medieval England (168). Atkinson points out the contacts between the English members of St. Catherine's *famiglia*, which was founded by St. Catherine herself, and the order's friends in England (168).

Atkinson states:

The English Austin friar William Flete, a member of Catherine's *famiglia*, wrote letters about her to his brothers in England. And during the 1390s, Raymond of Capua corresponded with William Bakthrope, prior of Lynn. No Dominican confessor (or his female penitent) could fail to be aware of Catherine's life and work. (168)

The historical figures of Austin friar William Flete and William Bakthrope, prior of Lynn, both suggest yet another way that St. Catherine possibly influenced Margery's visionary experiences, as her hometown of Norfolk was in the English port city of Lynn where Bakthrope was a superior of a religious house and St. Catherine's visionary experiences were renowned. In the context of St. Catherine's enormous success in her life and work as a holy woman, Margery might have understood those experiences as a model for success in her own vocation as a mystic. St. Catherine's visionary experiences make Margery's much easier to understand.

Margery pursues chastity in the expression of her personal spiritual closeness to Christ. The preservation of chastity, one of the central virtues of a traditional Christian female saint since early times, played a crucial role in the personalized devotion that many medieval laywomen manifest in their religious vocations. Margery discovers her own personal call for chastity and devotes herself to the Lord in her new vocation. While remaining a faithful and supportive wife to her husband, she persistently argues with him, trying to convince him to retain her carnal purity in

order to maintain her spiritual dialogue with Christ. In response to the Lord's promise of His support in her struggle for chastity, Margery says to her husband:

‘Sir, if it pleases you, you shall grant me my desire, and you shall have your desire. Grant me that you shall not come to my bed, and I grant you to requite your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God so that you never challenge me by asking the debt of matrimony after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink on the Friday at your bidding.’ (Staley 20)

Commanded by Christ in a vision, Margery agrees to fulfill her husband's wishes of paying his personal debts and abstaining from fasting on Fridays, so that he consents to their mutual chastity in return. Therefore, while skillfully preserving the continuity of her marriage and the close relationship with her husband, Margery proves the importance of her chastity to herself and for her relationship with Christ. Moreover, Margery simultaneously shows her faithful devotion by following His advice for trusting in His protection. In this way, Margery's victory in her struggle reinforces her close relationship with Christ and thereby validates her personal devotion.

Although Margery's pursuit in keeping her body pure was more traditional, her idea of preserving chastity while being married, nevertheless, is similar to the struggles of other medieval women saints. In her pursuit of carnal purity, Margery resembles St. Brigitta, who also maintained chastity in her marriage on her journey to sainthood. In her detailed studies on the Continental women saints of the Middle Ages, Atkinson argues that St. Brigitta, “of all the Continental women saints,” had wielded the greatest impact on the life and vocation of Margery Kempe (168). Arguing for numerous striking similarities between St. Brigitta and Margery Kempe, Atkinson singles out the virtue of chastity, or sexual morality, in the marriage between a young St. Brigitta and her husband Ulf Gudmarsson as an expression of the saint's outstanding moral values and sanctity in her marriage (169). Atkinson states:

They lived ‘as brother and sister’ for two years, and (according to the testimony of their daughter Saint Catherine of Sweden) maintained strict sexual morality

throughout their lives: ‘each time before they came together carnally they would always pray the same prayers to God, that He would not permit them to sin in the carnal act and that God would give them fruit who would always serve Him.’  
(169)

St. Brigitta manages to convince her husband to remain chaste in her marriage for two years, and she and her husband afterwards maintain a successful marriage, which is based on prayerful devotion and service to God by procreation. In a similar way, Margery is also the female spouse who relentlessly presses the husband for chastity in her marriage and, like St. Brigitta, she wins the husband’s consent. Hence, this unique virtue points to the fact that Margery’s own personal struggle for chastity follows the example of the saint. In the context of marriage, Margery, like St. Brigitta, increases the value of her purity as it is harder for a married woman to preserve both marriage *and* chastity.

Furthermore, Margery’s custom of shedding tears as an indication of her devotion to God was typical of the late medieval period. The Christian tradition of devotion to God through tears, which goes back to the strict rules of the religious communities that were associated with St. Benedict’s monastic order and, later, with St. Anselm’s idea of a profound prayer in lifting one’s spirit to God through tears, continued to play an impactful role in mysticism of the late Middle Ages. Margery practices shedding tears to manifest her devotion to God. In her spiritual dialogue with God, she meditates on ways of proving her love of God, and God, in return, reassures Margery of His love and presence in her life despite His invisibility. God maintains that He shows the working of His grace through Margery’s tears. He explains the meaning and value of tears as

the free gifts of God without your merit, and he may give them to whomever he will and do you no wrong. And therefore take them meekly and thankfully when I will send them, and suffer patiently when I withdraw them, and seek busily until you may get them, for tears of compunction, devotion, and compassion are the highest and surest gifts that I give on earth. And what should I do more for you unless I took your soul out of your body and put it in heaven, and that I will not yet.  
(Staley 24)

God says to Margery that tears are His “free gifts” and that He gives them to whomever He wishes whether one deserves them or not. God also tells Margery that she should accept her tears with gratitude, meekness, and patience as “tears of compunction, devotion, and compassion” are God’s gifts of the highest quality (Staley 24). God’s view of Margery’s tears and His expectations, therefore, show His absolute control over the shedding of her tears, just as He has absolute power over her life and her soul. Stated as such, God’s powerful position points to the fact that Margery’s devotion comes directly from Him and is not of her own volition. In this way, as she allows the relief of her heart’s emotions and expresses her fervent love of God, Margery also fulfills His will through her obedient service to God and to all those for whom she intercedes.

Margery’s passion is similar to the devotion of other medieval holy women in their expression of emotion with copious tears. Margery resembles Dorothea of Montau, a fourteenth-century Prussian woman-recluse, who was also known for her habit of crying tears as a statement of her devotion to God. Pointing out some core similarities between Margery and Dorothea, such as the fact that they were both “middle-class married women with many children,” Atkinson stresses the distinctive quality that both women set “their lives and writings on tears as evidence of sanctity” (180). As she refers to the content of Dorothea’s famous biography, Atkinson points out the importance of Dorothea’s tears to her overall story in that “Four chapters (28-31) of the long Latin *Life* of Dorothea are devoted to her tears [...] Dorothea referred often to the tears of the Magdalene which bought the saint forgiveness. She also wept with compassion, compunction, and devotion—the three kinds of ‘holy tears’—as did Margery [...]” (180-181). Dorothea’s frequent reference to “the tears of the Magdalene” shows her profound concern about being forgiven for her own sins and pleading for those of others, as St. Mary Magdalene bitterly wept tears before she was forgiven. Dorothea’s concentration on “compassion, compunction, and devotion” exactly

mirrors the qualities of Margery's tears. These similarities strongly suggest that Margery's expression of devotion might have been influenced by Dorothea's. It is likely that the context of the latter's life and devotion, therefore, helped Margery to emulate the earlier Christian tradition of emotion-based affective devotion.

In addition, Margery's search for reassurance that her spiritual visions are authentic experiences of God is typical of other women in the late Middle Ages. Since the medieval ecclesiastical world was dominated by the spiritual authority of males, who served the Church in all the main positions of power as bishops, priests, clerics, confessors, and spiritual advisers, to name a few, holy women also looked up to one another in search of spiritual guidance. Margery turns to Julian of Norwich, a spiritual counselor and visionary expert, for advice about her visions of Christ, comprised of "holy speeches and dalliances [where the] Lord spoke to her soul," in order to discuss and confirm that her experiences are truly the work of God and not of the devil (Staley 32). In response to Margery's concern about the content of her encounters, Julian explains her views on the workings of God's power and the sanctity of Margery's experiences. She states:

Holy Writ says that the soul of a righteous man is the seat of God, and so I trust, sister, that you are. I pray God grant you perseverance. Set all your trust in God and fear not the language of the world, for the more despite, shame, and reproof that you have in the world, the greater is your merit in the sight of God. Patience is necessary unto you for in that shall you keep your soul. (Staley 32-33)

As a holy woman herself, Julian brilliantly sums up for Margery the truth that if she is a righteous woman, her experiences come from God. In her positive attitude, Julian also encourages Margery to trust in God and to continue the good work, despite the evil treatment that she may receive from others, as her reward from God depends on her good works. Julian's exceptional advice, therefore, helps Margery to deal with her spiritual struggles and to assert her devotion to Christ in her position as a mystic. In this way, Margery testifies to the spiritual reliance of holy women on the support

of other women, as she struggles to maintain the qualities and virtues of a traditional medieval woman, and as women's positions change from the traditional roles of housewife or nun to the religious roles open to laywomen.

As Margery finds it difficult to open herself to her communication with Christ, He reveals His judgment of her sins and those of others. Margery's point on sin reflects her personal struggles in her devotion to God; her concern, nevertheless, is similar to Julian's theological argument on the issue in her book, *Showings*, a work on the sixteen revelations that she experienced, which suggests its possible influence on Margery's point in expressing the medieval uncertainty concerning the salvation of one's soul. Margery's refusal to accept the counsel of God results in God punishing her with "foul thoughts" and "horrible sights" for twelve days (Staley 107). She undergoes pain and sorrow until she believes that it is God who speaks to her and not the devil (Staley 107). God's approach to the elimination of Margery's sin can be compared to Julian's point on the redemptive benefit of Christ's Passion. In her thirteenth "showing," Julian ponders on the Passion as a solution for all the pain caused by sin. Julian says:

[T]his pain is something for a time, for it purges and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy; for the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will. And because of the tender love which our good Lord has for all who will be saved, he comforts readily and sweetly, meaning this: It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well. (Colledge 225)

Christ's resolution for sin and pain applies to Julian and all humanity of the past, present, and future. In Julian's theology, even though our sin causes pain, the sacrifice of Christ's suffering in His Passion, which He endured out of His abundant love for believers, cleanses the guilt of our sins and removes the pain. Julian's reference to God's love as "tender" and His quality as "good" expresses the hope of well-being for all who believe in Christ's salvation (Colledge 225). In this way, despite Margery receiving a less comforting resolution from God than Julian, Margery's

struggles with sin, reflected in God's tough, but forgiving resolution for her, addresses the common medieval uncertainty about dealing with the issues of sin and pain in relation to the salvation of one's soul.

Margery follows a specific religious model in her vocation as a woman mystic, a set of religious beliefs and values patterned on the life of Christ that was eventually promoted as a model for the lay devotions of men and women in the late Middle Ages. This devotional model was founded on the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, a late thirteenth-century account of the life-story of Jesus Christ, which was originally written for St. Clare, a Franciscan nun and one of the first followers of St. Francis of Assisi, as a prescription for the private exercise of her spiritual devotion (Ragusa xxvii). It is also worth noting that St. Clare, as a nun, practiced her spiritual devotion according to the guidance of her famous *Rule*, written about in her *Forma Vitae*. In her essay, "A Medieval Woman's Utopian Vision: The Rule of St. Clare of Assisi," Elizabeth Petroff underlines the importance of St. Clare's *Rule* in the religious communities of medieval women (75). According to Petroff, *Forma Vitae* provided "a strong model for relationships within the community, encumbered by a minimal amount of hierarchy," which helped women to view their community as a "utopia" and they desired a similar "rule," even though St. Clare's *Rule* was the only one that survived (75). The popularity of St. Clare's *Rule*, therefore, shows that a structured and self-governed kind of devotion was becoming popular among women in the late Middle Ages. It also suggests that women like Margery continued to practice their devotion in a similarly organized pattern. While employing the model based on the *Meditations*, women practiced their devotion individually both inside and outside the walls of traditional convent settings. Lynn Staley points out that Nicholas Love adapted the account of Jesus Christ's life in *The Mirrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesus Christ* (1410), his widely copied Middle English translation of the

contemplative text (196). Since Love's account was translated for all vernacular English readers, it helped to transform the story into a model accessible by greater numbers of people in medieval England and beyond, particularly in Michael Sargent's Exeter edition (Liverpool UP).

The scene of the Nativity of Jesus Christ highlights one of the ways in which the *Meditations* helps Margery to express her spiritual devotion to Jesus Christ. While recounting the circumstances of His birth, the author points out the extreme poverty in which Christ is born as the son of the fifteen-year-old girl, St. Mary, and her husband, St. Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus Christ. In order to emphasize the role of His mother, the author combines the details of St. Mary's poverty with the great joy that Jesus Christ brings to His mother, as a newborn son, despite that she is lacking for the most essential necessities for Him to survive. Recounting the great happiness of St. Mary as a new mother, the *Meditations* states:

Unable to contain herself, the mother stooped to pick Him up, embraced Him tenderly and, guided by the Holy Spirit, placed Him in her lap and began to wash Him with her milk, her breasts filled by heaven. [...] She (wrapped Him in the veil from her head and) laid Him in the manger. The ox and the ass knelled with their mouths above the manger and breathed on the Infant as though they possessed reason and knew that the Child was so poorly wrapped that He needed to be warmed, in that cold season. (Ragusa 33-34)

The holy family is so poor that St. Mary uses the "veil" from her head to wrap her newborn son as she lays Him in the manger. This piece of fabric, St. Mary's "veil," also later becomes Jesus Christ's "loincloth" when His mother finds Him nude and she "girds Him with the veil from her head" at His Crucifixion (Ragusa 333). The ox's and the ass's breathing supply the warmth that her newborn baby needs to survive. Yet, St. Mary, as a mother, shows a great joy by tenderly embracing her son and "washes" Him with "the milk" of "her breasts" (Ragusa 33). The author's juxtaposition of the poverty of the scene with the happiness of St. Mary, who cares for her newborn child, inspires Margery's contemplation on His birth. Margery understands that God's

immensurable grace, in giving this Infant to the world as a gift, comes through the most wretched circumstances of His human condition. Jesus Christ practiced the virtues of humility and poverty as He had so little and gave so much, including His own life. As she ponders on the meaning of St. Mary's poverty in relation to Jesus Christ's humble birth, Margery follows Franciscan themes on Christ's poverty.

Consequently, Margery demonstrates her sentiment for the poverty of Christ in His birth through her spiritual participation in the swaddling of Him as a newborn baby. In her meditation on the Nativity, Margery translates its prescription on devotion into a task of assisting St. Mary in keeping her newborn son warm. She fulfills this responsibility in her role as St. Mary's caregiver to her son in her vision when she visits the house of the Friar Preachers and prays in a Chapel of Our Lady. Pointing out the details of Margery's personal interaction with St. Mary, the narrator states that:

[S]uddenly she saw, she thought, our Lady in the fairest sight that ever she saw, holding a fair white kerchief in her hand and saying to her, 'Daughter, will you see my son?' And anon forthwith she saw our Lady have her blessed son in her hand and swathe him full lightly in the white kerchief so that she might well behold how she did it. (Staley 152)

Margery's experience of watching St. Mary's gentle swaddling of her newborn son in "the white kerchief" is as joyful to her as it is authentic in her vision. While watching St. Mary's humble task, Margery spiritually shares in the mother's tender compassion for the well-being of her newborn son. Moreover, as a mother herself, Margery participates in St. Mary's experience in being concerned about her son's naked condition and affected in her own heart. Therefore, as she invites Margery to take care of her son, St. Mary's personal experience becomes Margery's own experience of swaddling the Infant. In this way, Margery is fully involved in St. Mary's motherly care and demonstrates her Franciscan concern about the effects of poverty and taking care of the

poor. As she shows her affection and joy in the swaddling, Margery follows the very model presented in the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.

Margery's visionary task of swaddling the newborn Jesus Christ does not merely demonstrate the working of her spiritual imagination, but rather points out the late medieval focus on juxtaposing the joy of Nativity with the sorrow of Christ's Passion as the evidence of the influence of an earlier Christian tradition. The medieval emphasis on St. Mary's "veil" as being a piece of fabric that warms the naked body of the newborn Jesus Christ, as well as a piece of cloth which covers His stripped and wounded body at the Crucifixion, is deeply rooted in the meaning of Christ's earthly mission. In her essay, "St. Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe*," Gail McMurray Gibson discusses the origin and the spiritual meaning of St. Mary's "veil" in the early medieval Christian tradition (52-53). Although in her critical investigation of the practice, Gibson maintains that it was the belief based on the *Meditations* that propagated St. Mary's "veil" as the link between Christ's birth and His Passion, she argues that the relic's more important spiritual meaning is as a detail of Incarnation history, which goes back to much earlier times in the Christian tradition of the Eastern Church (Gibson 53). Gibson states that "Mary's use of her own veil to clothe Christ is literal manifestation of the ancient and widespread metaphoric explanation of Christ's incarnate body as a 'garment' bestowed upon him by his human mother" (Gibson 53). Christ shares in His mother's humanity through the symbolism of her "veil." The "veil," which covers His naked body, literally means that He partakes in His mother's humanity by being born of her body, just as her "veil" covers His body. In the same way, Jesus Christ, therefore, shares in humanity with everyone else. As Margery's swaddling of Jesus Christ's body expresses her devotion to His Incarnation through the symbolism of the meaning of this "veil," she also follows the model in her visionary meditation and helps preserve the earlier Christian tradition.

Contemplation on the Passion of Christ is another way in which the *Meditations* helps shape Margery's personal devotion to His Passion. As he describes the agony of Christ's Passion, the most important event in His life, the author articulates the details in Jesus Christ's suffering to evoke maximum compassion for the pain from the injuries being inflicted upon Him. The crucifiers, who force the spreading of Christ's hands and feet while nailing His body to the Cross, cause Christ tremendous physical pain by performing this cruel act on His severely injured body. Recounting the impact of the horrible pain, the *Meditations* states:

Behold, the Lord Jesus is crucified and extended on the cross so that each of his bones can be numbered, as He complained by the prophet (Psalm xxi, 18). On all sides, rivers of His most sacred blood flow from His terrible wounds. He is so tortured that He can move nothing except His head. Those three nails sustain the whole weight of His body. He bears the bitterest pain and is affected beyond anything that can possibly be said or thought. (Ragusa 334)

The worst imaginable pain that Christ bears as a result of His injuries is accompanied by bleeding, which is visible in "the rivers of His most sacred blood" that streams down His face and body (Ragusa 334). The author's juxtaposition of these horrific injuries resulting from the atrocious abuse with the sacredness of Christ's blood, which is being spilled out, encourages thinking on the tremendous sacrifice that He endures in His Passion. His suffering recalls the wonderful spiritual value in being a gift from God for the redemption of sins that He offers out of His love for the world, in that He sacrifices "His only *Begotten* Son" (*King James Version*, John 3:16-17). As Margery adjusts this prescription on meditation to her own spiritual needs, she draws on the emotional intensity that the model inspires, in the affective display of her own unique contemplation on the Passion.

Hence, Margery expresses her spiritual compassion for the sufferings of Christ on the Cross through her visionary contemplation on His Passion. While experiencing the Passion in her mind's vision, Margery translates the prescription on the humility of Jesus Christ in His suffering into her

role of the “handmaiden” of St. Mary by accompanying the Blessed Mother in her pain over the sufferings of her son in His Passion (139). Margery fulfills this responsibility of sharing in Christ’s suffering when she observes the solemnity of a Good Friday. Pointing out the cruelty of pain in the nailing of Christ’s body to the Cross, the narrator articulates St. Mary’s and Margery’s compassion for His pain. The narrator states that “His blissful mother and this creature beholding how his precious body shrank and drew together with all the sinews and veins in that precious body for the pain that it suffered and felt, they sorrowed and mourned and sighted full sorely” (Staley 140). Margery’s experience of contemplating Christ’s pain along with His mother’s is as sorrowful in effect as she sees it with her mind’s eye. Moreover, while accompanying St. Mary, Margery’s sorrow for Christ’s pain is doubled such that she also carries the sorrow of His mother in addition to her own. Consequently, Margery is not only concerned about Jesus Christ’s pain but also about St. Mary’s as her experience becomes Margery’s own. In this way, Margery’s visionary participation shows her deep spiritual engagement in the Franciscan devotion to the humility of Christ’s Passion, the devotion to the Passion on which the humble St. Clare dwelled on so fervently in the century before Margery’s time. As she proves her devotional virtue, Margery follows the Franciscan prescription.

As Margery identifies herself with Christ in His suffering, His Passion plays the central role in the sequence of events in Margery’s devotional life. Similar to the dependence on the major biblical events in the *Meditations*, Margery’s life revolves around Christ’s Passion. In her essay, “Margery Kempe’s *Imitatio*,” Sarah Beckwith makes an insightful point on the relationship that Margery’s life is continually organized according to the event of Christ’s suffering from the beginning to the end of her spiritual biography (Staley 287). Beckwith states that:

Kempe’s prolonged identification with Christ also organizes the very timing of the events of her book, most of which, as Atkinson has pointed out, take place on a

Friday, the day in which Christ's Passion is commemorated in ecclesiastical ceremonial. The rhythms and tempo of her life are governed by the time of the Passion in just the kind of mixing of past and present time recommended by Nicholas Love. (Staley 287)

Since the Passion of Jesus Christ takes place on Friday, Margery's devotional observance of His suffering always takes place on a Friday, or on Good Friday. The timing of Christ's Passion helps Margery to identify more meaningfully with His sufferings on a Friday because Jesus Christ suffered and died on this specific day. Consequently, this timing helps Margery to construct her life around the Passion. In this way, Margery is present at the time of Christ's suffering, as well as in her own. Thus, Margery's identification with the Passion is important to the expressive order of events in her book as they shape her spiritual devotion and all her life.

The *Meditations'* depiction of the Resurrection of Christ and how He first appeared to His mother also helps form Margery's devotional practices. While recounting the circumstances of His Resurrection, the author emphasizes St. Mary's role in the life of Christ as His mother. He reverses the biblical description of Jesus Christ, who first appears to Mary Magdalene, to his version in which Christ first appears to St. Mary, His mother, instead. In order to underline the importance of St. Mary's role as the mother of Christ, the author combines her sorrow in the absence of her Son with the joy of His return to life. Recounting the glorious radiance of Christ's sacred body, the *Meditations* recounts St. Mary's joyful reaction to His return. St. Mary says:

'Are you,' she said, 'my Son Jesus?' And she knelt, adoring Him. Her Son said, 'My sweetest mother, it is I. I have risen and am with you.' Then, rising, she embraced Him with tears of joy and, placing her cheek to His, drew Him close, resting wholly against Him; and He supported her willingly. (Ragusa 359-360)

The happy scene of St. Mary embracing Christ points to a close relationship between the mother and the Son on two levels, divine and human. As Christ reassures St. Mary that He is her Son, St. Mary naturally hugs her Son and expresses her human emotion of great joy in seeing Him.

Moreover, St. Mary's embrace of her Son, as the first person after His Resurrection, is also crucial to a more important point that she is also the "handmaiden" of the Lord by being the mother of Jesus Christ (Gibson 50). The scene stresses St. Mary's role in being the mother of God's *only* Son and His plan for the world's salvation. In this way, the *Meditations*' emphasis on the importance of St. Mary's motherly role provides Margery with a spiritual rule for her own personal devotion.

Margery, therefore, shows her spiritual devotion to Christ's Resurrection through her visionary contemplation on the significance of St. Mary's role as a mother. While accompanying St. Mary in her waiting for the return of her Son, Margery, like St. Mary in the *Meditations*' account, witnesses the appearance of Christ to His mother as the first person in her spiritual vision in a chapel. In reply to St. Mary's concern about her Son still feeling the pains of the Passion, Christ says to His mother, "'Dear Mother, my pain is all gone, and now shall I live for evermore. And, mother, so shall your pain and your sorrow be turned into full great joy. Mother, ask what you will I shall tell you.' [... T]hen he said, 'Mother, by your leave I must go speak with Mary Magdalene'" (Staley 144). Even though Christ says to St. Mary that He must leave to speak to Mary Magdalene, He stresses the importance of His mother by seeing her first. Moreover, Christ's reassurance of St. Mary that her "pain" will be turned into joy, as much as His "pain" has turned into everlasting life for Him, demonstrates the reward for the suffering that St. Mary went through as a mother as a result of the suffering of her Son. In this way, Margery's contemplative emphasis on Christ's gratitude for His mother's agony points to her own devotional experiences.

Margery's devotional emphasis on the mother of Christ is not the result of her own literary invention but rather the outcome of her following the conventions of the medieval model. Margery obeys the model by contemplating on the *Meditations*' prescription on her spiritual devotion to St.

Mary. Gibson argues the significance of St. Mary's role in the medieval model by pointing out her constant presence in the *Meditations* as a result of her importance in the Incarnation. Gibson states:

In fact, it might be argued that the primary devotional model offered by the *Meditationes vitae Christi* is *imitatio Mariae* instead of *imitatio Christi*; that is, although the text renders the humanity and suffering of the life of Christ in lingering and loving detail, the paradigm urged upon the reader is the life of she who had defined her paradoxical exultation by humility, by proclaiming at the moment of Annunciation, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord.' (Luke 1:38) (Gibson 49-50)

St. Mary's humble attitude of accepting the will of God when she was presented with His plan for her in being the mother of His Son is the deciding factor concerning her profound role in God's plan for the salvation of the world and her importance in the life of Christ. Thus, it determined the significance that the author of the *Meditations* assigned to St. Mary in his account of her experiences of the history of the Incarnation. As the experiences of Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ are all intertwined with those of St. Mary, her role as His mother is indispensable from the beginning to the end. Therefore, Margery's devotion to St. Mary exults as much in Jesus Christ as in St. Mary. In this way, Margery's devotion to St. Mary mirrors her devotion to Jesus Christ and she manifests it extremely effectively in her visionary contemplation.

Margery's voluntary suffering in her imitation of the Passion of Christ, *Imitatio Christi*, in response to the persecution she receives, is another instance when the *Meditations* provides her with precedents for self-modelling. While recounting the details in the suffering of Christ, the author stresses the importance in the meaning of the last few words that Christ speaks before His death on the Cross. He uses the time of His great agony to teach His followers to love even when He is hanging on the Cross in pain. The timing of Christ's suffering on the Cross in being the ninth hour and that He is just about to die both underline the importance of love and charity through the first word that He communicates in His final message on these virtues. The *Meditations* states:

From there He spoke the seven words that are found written in the Gospel. The first was during the act of His Crucifixion, when He prayed for His crucifiers, saying, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke xxiii, 34), which word gives a token of great patience and great love, and indeed came of indescribable charity. (Ragusa 336)

The Franciscan concern with love and charity is clearly emphasized in the prescription on the meditation of the first word. Jesus Christ completely disregards His own suffering and wrong and shows His love even to His crucifiers. He selflessly asks God, the Father, to forgive them for the evil that they are committing against Him in their ignorance. In this dramatic way, Christ encourages forgiveness as a resolution to wickedness that one may experience from others through His compassionate stance of pleading with His Father. Meditating on Christ's act of forgiveness points out its tremendous spiritual value as an effective weapon in dealing with any wrong that one may encounter in life. As Margery employs this Franciscan meditation in her devotion to Christ, she exhibits the love that the model prescribes in her own imitation of the Passion of Christ through her personal treatment of her own enemies.

Margery, therefore, demonstrates her imitation of Christ's Passion by applying the prescription in the contemplation on His suffering into her own life. As she follows the medieval model in meditating on the meaning of Christ's suffering, Margery bears Christ's Cross through the attitude of willful acceptance of her suffering in the persecution against her. While traveling on a pilgrimage to the sacred site of St. James of Compostela in Spain, Margery experiences some of the worst treatment from her fellow pilgrims at Bristol. The pilgrims abuse Margery as she is exercising her devotion to Christ by crying loudly, sobbing, and shrieking at a church on Sunday when He is visiting her mind with holy thoughts. She, in turn, takes a Christ-like stance in her response to the disrespect and mistreatment. The narrator states that both men and women

wondered upon her, scorned her and despised her, banned her and cursed her, said much evil of her, slandered her, and accused her of saying things which she never

said. And then wept she full sorely for her sins, praying God for mercy and forgiveness for them, saying to our Lord, ‘Lord as you said hanging on the cross for your crucifiers, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do,” so I beseech you, forgive the people all scorn and slanders and all that they have trespassed, if it be your will, for I have deserved much more and of much more am I worthy.’ (Staley 78)

Margery, like the crucified Jesus Christ on the Cross, is asking God’s mercy and forgiveness for her persecutors’ sins against her. Moreover, as she is being verbally abused, in her pious supplication to God, Margery admits her own sinfulness and justifies the weight of the abuse committed against her as being the product of the ignorance of the wrongdoers. She not only willfully accepts the suffering, but also sacrifices herself, like Christ, for the benefit of her abusers, so that God forgives them and her own sins. In this way, Margery’s personal attitude shows that she uses this prescription on Christ’s suffering in her own life.

Although Margery’s following of previous medieval models in her Christ-like attitude to her suffering demonstrates her Christian spirituality being put to practice, her piety is as misinterpreted by some critics as her vocation is underestimated. As she expresses her spirituality, Margery puts into practice the scriptural message of the devotional model in suffering, like Christ, in the experience of her own tribulation. Margery forgives her persecutors like Christ did on the Cross. Gibson argues that Margery’s sanctity depends upon her “deliberate” participation in Christ’s suffering as much as it concentrates on His legacy of forgiveness (Gibson 48). Pointing out Margery’s reasoning behind her attitude, Gibson criticizes some modern readers who “have been so quick to accept Margery Kempe’s own words uncritically that they have also thoughtlessly characterized her piety as aberrant and eccentric, and have thus underestimated the usefulness of her *Book*, not as historical fact, but as an indispensable guide to fifteenth-century English lay spirituality (Gibson 48-49). Gibson perceives much modern interpretation of Margery’s piety as inadequate, as it frequently misinterprets the latter’s practice of spiritual devotion to Christ, since

some interpretation often does not consider the important broader religious context of Margery's piety. In this way, the modern shortcomings in the perception of Margery's piety, combined with a reluctant attitude of some readers towards understanding Margery's "own words uncritically," which she uses to express her spirituality, makes it difficult for those critics to understand her complex devotion to Christ, especially within the context of the late medieval English lay spirituality.

Besides the impact of the earlier devotional models for Margery's behavior, the misogynist view of woman as an inadequate being in the religious context of the late Middle Ages influences Margery's enacting of her belief in the relationship with Christ as a mystical union with God. In her essay, "...And Woman His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," Caroline Walker Bynum makes a compelling argument about late medieval women's devotion to the human Jesus Christ, as a "female" theme, in being a much more common experience of women than of men (153). She articulates this idea further by associating mystical unions of women with God (155). Bynum uses various examples of medieval holy women, like Mechtild of Hackeborn, a thirteenth century Benedictine nun and a famous Saxon Christian female saint who was reassured about her mystical union with Christ by a vision in which He said that He favors married women equally to virgins (155). Bynum states that "the married are not further from Christ than virgins because the 'Word is Made Flesh.' Becoming one with God in mystical union was a more frequent aspect of women's devotional life than of men's in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (155). The female gender clearly played the deciding role in the belief about the mystical relationship between a holy woman and God. A woman's physical body was a focal point in her association with the physicality of Christ. While this conviction provided a laywoman, like Margery, with opportunities for her participation in the new role, it also helped her to embrace

God through her own body in a way that men could not do despite the doctrinal superiority of their gender in the context of the late medieval belief.

Margery's response to Christ's personal manifestation of His love for her demonstrates the importance of her body in their mystical union. Although the language of love in a mystical experience is limited by the conventions of medieval women's writing, the language still captures the expression of emotion and reveals the metaphorical meaning of love in a relationship (Bynum 156-157). Margery shows her devotion to Christ in her mystical bond with Him in her soul's complete satisfaction with His confession of His love in her vision. In response to Christ's reassurance about Margery's will and desire as being acceptable to Him, the narrator states that:

Then was her soul so delectably fed with the sweet dalliance of our Lord and so fulfilled by his love that, like a drunken man, she turned herself, first on the one side and then on the other, with great weeping and great sobbing, unable to keep herself in stableness, for the unquenchable fire of love that burnt full sorely in her soul. Then [...] as a creature all wounded with love and as reason had failed, [she] cried with a loud voice, 'The Passion of Christ slays me.' (Staley 72)

Margery's emotional response to Jesus Christ's expression of His love for her captures its overwhelming impact on her body and soul. The metaphorical description of Margery's soul as being "delectably fed" and "fulfilled" with Christ's love, which is combined with the description of her body as being like the body of "a drunken man," incapable of holding the balance and "unable" to control the "unquenchable fire of love," vividly communicates the explicit sexual content in her reaction to Christ's love. Hence, the metaphorical language in Margery's response expresses the reciprocal quality of love in the relationship between her and Christ. In this way, Margery's experience of Christ's love not only proves sexual, but it also demonstrates the functioning of their mystical union in her profound devotion to Him.

Margery's devotion to Jesus Christ is intricately connected to the late medieval Christian context in her mystical experience. The metaphorical language she uses also particularizes the

religious context of the experience. In her essay, “Did Mystics have Sex?,” Nancy F. Partner discusses the profound role of metaphorical language in relation to the sexual experiences between Margery and Christ in her visions (302). Partner argues that “this language is regarded as a metaphorical code for the supernatural by doctrinal fiat: a scheme of linked metaphor whose ultimate referent is outside the range of human perception and understanding, and thus can be approached only through figuration, paraphrase, comparison, and displacement” (302). Metaphor is a literary expression that helps with the difficulty or inability of explaining a mystical experience in human terms as such experience can never really be understood or explained in human terms. Therefore, as much as metaphorical language controls the meaning of Margery’s sexual response to the effects of Christ’s love, her encounter with Him proves the visitation as a mystical experience of union. Thus, it shows Margery’s personal experience as the driving force in her mystical bond with Christ.

The misogyny in the view of woman as a deficient being in the religious context of the late Middle Ages also empowers Margery’s personal conduct as a holy woman and a defender of the female gender against the medieval belief in the superiority of the male gender. In her discussion of the medieval belief in the female to male gender role reversal, Bynum points out that medieval woman’s view of herself in feminine terms was entirely opposed to men’s baseless understanding that women needed to become masculine in order to serve God (166-167). She states that “women themselves did not, by and large, see woman as a marked category, nor did they worry about themselves as exceptions or special cases of the general category ‘humanity.’ Women did not assume that their religious progress involved ‘becoming male’ (Bynum 167). Despite the overwhelming misogyny in medieval men’s belief about the capability of women to serve God, women remained steadfast in their own understanding of how their bodies really worked in their

experiences of being women and in relation to their service to God. This attitude allowed women to prove that they did not belong to any other invented category of “humanity” that would classify them as anything other than women. In contrast to men, and rightfully so, women believed that their gender served them. Women, like Margery, did not believe in the narrow medieval idea of advancing their religious progress via masculinity as it was a total invention of men, which they used to serve themselves and keep the clerical power in their own hands. Thus, while this notion presented Margery with great challenges relative to her male counterparts, it also created some new opportunities for her to prove her sanctity as a woman in the late medieval religious context.

Margery shows the importance of her gender through challenging the clerical power of her religious superiors. As ordinary medieval women often contended with the view of woman as a “weaker being,” they were equally fierce in defending their religious positions as holy women (Bynum 167). Margery preaches against the lawless living by rebuking the Archbishop of York and other clerics in his household for their transgressing of God’s laws against her as a religious person because she is a woman. The archbishop’s clerics verbally abuse and threaten Margery when she encounters them in his chapel. The narrator states that they are:

despising her, calling her ‘lollard’ and ‘heretic,’ and swearing many a horrible oath that she should be burnt. And she, through the strength of Jesus, said again to them, ‘Sirs, I fear you shall be burnt in hell without end unless you amend yourselves of your swearing of oaths, for you keep not the commandments of God, I would not swear as you do for all the good of this world.’ (Staley 91)

Margery condemns the archbishop’s and the clerics’ inability to abide by God’s commandments while serving Him by making her point about how wickedly they are treating her. As a religious authority, she rises above the archbishop and the clerics she argues with, saying that they should stop swearing oaths. Moreover, Margery maintains that they need to change their ways of being in order to avoid eternal damnation. Hence, she not only asserts her state of holiness as a laywoman

who proves it by living and preaching it to the archbishop and his clergy, but also and more importantly, Margery proves her fearless spirit by rebuking these unworthy male clerics along with their superior, which they deserve for their religious hypocrisy and disrespect that they show her as a woman and religious figure. In this way, Margery's encounter with the archbishop and his clerics proves her power and strength as a holy woman and a fearless defender of the medieval belief that women did not need to change their gender to serve God.

Margery's fierce encounter with the archbishop and his clerics also attempts to prove her sanctity as a laywoman. In her discussion of the effects of Margery's piety in her life and book, Beckwith points out that Margery's sanctity depends on her identification with Christ and grows as much as she identifies herself with Him, stating that

the book comes to read more and more like a trial, a test of her sanctity where sanctity is proved by the act of testing itself. She is of course tried as a Lollard, and catechized several times, in Bristol, Leicester, York, and Hull, and each of these tests forms the occasion for the enforcement of her identification with Christ as the object of persecution. (Staley 286)

Margery proves her sanctity by the very act of being tested because she is as righteous as the tests demand of her. As in the example of Margery's test with the Archbishop of York and his clerics, Margery's gender is the reason why she is being tested in the first place by the religious superior and his clergy. These religious males would not have the need to question Margery as rigorously if she were an aspiring male cleric, or any other religious male. Therefore, as her gender is the underlying factor in the test with the Archbishop of York and his clerics, and in all the other tests, which she passes along the way as an aspiring mystic, Margery's body clearly is the vehicle for her personal devotion and identification with Christ. As much as she is persecuted because of her gender, Margery uses her gender to effectively show her righteousness as a laywoman, as well as to present and defend her arguments.

Consequently, the medieval experience of misogyny also solidifies Margery's view of her own physicality as a link between her body and the body of Christ. In her discussion of late medieval spirituality, Bynum stresses that medieval woman's humanity, her physical body, literally was the medium for her close connection to Christ (172). Bynum states that "women saw the humanity-physicality that linked them to Christ as in continuity with, rather than in contrast to, their own ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability" (172). Women used the medieval perception of their gender to strengthen their position as women through their physical experiences, like the eating of the Eucharistic host, which was consecrated and changed into the body of Christ during mass through the process known as transubstantiation. Consequently, women's physicality was the defining feature that united them with Christ on the most ordinary level of their being. This conviction, therefore, determined woman's physical experience of God in her individual experience of being a woman and embracing His body in her own rather than following the belief in what the male-dominated late medieval world dictated about the female gender. In this way, as the physical experience of tasting Christ's body in the host helps a woman, like Margery, to maintain her close connection to God, it also demonstrates the importance of her own body in the context of the late Medieval religious belief.

Margery illustrates the importance of her body in her devotion to Christ through the practice of receiving the Sacrament of communion as a medium for the attainment of her redemption. As much as women claimed to achieve God through "both self-inflicted and involuntary suffering" in the late Middle Ages, they equally strongly believed in reaching God through food, like the Eucharist, or fasting (Bynum 172). Margery achieves her highest point in connection to Christ through the reception of His body on a weekly basis. Pointing out the tremendous amount of grace that the Lord bestows on Margery, the narrator states that He says:

‘Daughter, be not ashamed to receive my grace when I will give it to you, for I shall not be ashamed of you so that you shall be received into the bliss of heaven [...] though the people wonder why you weep so sorely when you receive me, for, if they knew what grace I put in you at that time, they would rather wonder that your heart burst not asunder. And so it should if I measured not that grace myself, but you yourself see well, daughter, that, when you have received me into your soul, you are in peace and quiet and sob no longer.’ (Staley 155)

Jesus Christ’s grace causes the ecstatic change in Margery’s body and soul when she receives His body in the Eucharist. This powerful mystical experience transforms Margery’s body from the state of sore weeping to her soul’s state of tranquility. She can move instantly from being sad to being happy. In her essay, “Late Medieval Eucharistic Doctrine,” Bynum points out that although the church authorities legislated against the reception of communion during ecstasy, late medieval women were still allowed to practice communion even daily (Bynum 297). Therefore, Margery’s weekly practice of the reception, as a physiological act of consuming the host in her mouth, is a necessary act of her body for her to experience the benefits of heavenly grace. Hence, Margery proves that receiving the host is an extremely important activity for her body to function as a woman in her devotion to Christ. In this way, Margery demonstrates that she uses her physicality for the purpose of manifesting her devotion to Christ and achieving her redemption as a Christian woman in accordance with the doctrinal convictions of the late Medieval Church.

Margery’s ecstatic Eucharistic piety depends on her profound love for Christ. In her essay, “The Willful Surrender of Eucharistic Reading in Nicholas Love and Margery Kempe,” Jennifer Garrison argues that Margery’s piety is Eucharistic since it is difficult to determine whether her piety is an “embodied” piety or a “contemplative” one, as many critics classify it in both categories. Pointing out the complexity in Margery’s various perceptions of Christ as her lover and the tremendous importance of communion in her spiritual life, Garrison states that she

loves Christ who is both her real and metaphorical lover and whose blood she really does physically drink on a weekly basis. The Eucharist does not ultimately demand

that believers reject either category, nor does it suggest that they are blurred together. Rather, the Eucharist holds these ideas in tension and their irreconcilability is part of what provides the sacrament's ultimate appeal. (Garrison 153-154)

As much as Margery's devotion to Jesus Christ depends on her perception of Him as her "real and metaphorical lover," Margery's belief in Christ's love of her is powered by her frequent reception of His body in the Eucharist. Therefore, being at the center of Margery's life, the Eucharist is fundamental in her devotion to Christ and her piety. In this way, just as the two categories are different but function alongside the Eucharist, Margery's reception of the host links her body to the body of Christ in their relationship. Thus, the Eucharist is the medium for the expression of Margery's love of Christ and, as such, uniquely shapes her piety.

Margery's devotion to Christ's Passion powers the text of her spiritual biography through the bodily signs that she encounters in the experience of imitating His Passion on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In her book, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Karma Lochrie makes a point about the signs of a religious pilgrimage that "the purpose of mystical recollection and of imaginative *imitatio* is the experience of suffering," which the mystic uses to construct a mystical text (34). Margery embodies her spiritual compassion for the suffering of Christ on the Cross through her own participation in the experience of His Passion, *Imitatio Christi*. She commemorates His physical suffering on the Mount of Calvary while visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the historic site of Jesus Christ's Crucifixion. The narrator states that

[Margery] fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder, for in the city of her soul she saw verily and freshly how our Lord was crucified. Before her face she heard and saw in her ghostly sight the mourning of our Lady, of Saint John and Mary Magdalene, and of many others who loved our Lord. And she had so great compassion and so great pain to see our Lord's pain that she might not keep herself from crying and roaring though she should have died from it. And this was the first cry that ever she cried in any contemplation. (Staley 50)

Margery's visual experience of the Crucifixion is as real to her as if she sees it with her eyes and as heavy as if she feels it with her heart. As she witnesses Christ's physical suffering, Margery shares in the physical pain of the nailing of Christ's sacred body to the Cross and His hanging on the Cross, as opposed to just passively contemplating it. She feels the pain in her heart and mind with Him as a result of subjecting her own body to physical torment and crying in her own form of self-crucifixion. Therefore, Christ's physical agony becomes Margery's own suffering through the experience of her bodily pain. In this way, she is involved in Christ's painful and raw experience of Crucifixion to the most literal extent of its meaning. As Margery performs the sacrifice of Christ on her own body, her painful experience propels the text more than effectively in her devotion through her authentic compassion for His ultimate sacrifice.

Margery's body, like the text itself, becomes the sign of Christ's suffering. Lochrie views the experience of pain on the mystic's body as a sign of Christ's suffering. She states that "A system of images and signs induce this suffering, while the suffering itself produces its own *insignia* in the body, thereby perpetuating a semiotic system of remembrance. The mystic's body itself is translated into *imago*, into sign of Christ's suffering and God's intentions" (Lochrie 37). As Margery sees the images of the mourning of St. Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, St. John, as well as Mary Magdalene and others who love the Lord, she suffers along with Christ by associating the images of those holy persons with Him. Margery's body itself becomes the sign of Christ's suffering and the instrument of God's intentions in her role as a mystic. In this way, these bodily signs are powerful agents. Thus, Margery's contortive pain, resulting from her feelings of love for Christ's Passion, ultimately produces a mystical experience, and the text of her spiritual biography.

While actively engaging in the pain of Christ's Passion, Margery, simultaneously increases the depth of her spiritual devotion to Him with every new act in her imitation of His Passion.

Beckwith argues that Margery's imitation of Christ's suffering on the Mount of Calvary is a profound marking point in the development of her ongoing memory of the Passion (286). Beckwith observes that "it is these cries, uttered for the first time at this moment of maximal identification, in the very pose of crucifixion on Calvary, the historic point of Christ's death renewed in the culmination of her pilgrimage, that reproduce and repeat that mimesis at every utterance" (286). As His identity merges with her own identity through her joined suffering with Him on Calvary, Margery imitates His Passion every time she utters her cries. Like the solemn observance of the Holy Liturgy on Good Friday, Margery's painful renewal of Christ's Passion resembles a Christian subject's annual renewal, except, it is a much more frequent experience for Margery as she renews it every time she cries for His suffering: Margery reproduces and repeats this renewal of Christ's painful death through all her subsequent cries. Margery's imitation of Jesus Christ's suffering demonstrates the gradual deepening of her spiritual devotion to His Passion as the deeply emotional pattern that she follows in her biography.

While Margery's spiritual identity is motivated by her religious beliefs, Margery's financial failures in business inspire her personal devotion to Christ and initiate her divine discourse with Him. Lochrie points out that a present and a dialogic discourse, which is described in Middle English as *dalliance* between the divine power and a mystic, is necessary in the writing of a medieval mystical text (63). Margery employs her personal failures in the business of beer brewing and corn milling to recognize God's punishment for her sins as an opportunity for the development of her spiritual dialogue with Christ. Pointing out the Lord's mercy in His call for Margery's abandonment of her wicked ways, the narrator states that:

then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, thought they were the scourges of our Lord that would chastise her for her sin. Then she asked God's mercy and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and the desire she had for

the worships of the world, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life, as shall be said afterward. (Staley 10)

Margery takes the spiritual lesson from her experiences of financial misfortunes very seriously. In order to find the answer to her spiritual struggles, she investigates herself and recognizes her personal weakness in her pride, covetousness, and desire for the material possessions of this world. Margery believes that the Lord punishes her for her excessive desire to make financial profit in both the brewing and milling businesses. In this way, as she abandons the wickedness in her ways of conducting herself, Margery begins “to enter the way of everlasting life” and thereby, enters her divine dialogue with Christ. The narrator calls this dialogue *dalliance*, when he describes it as Margery’s “wonderful speeches and dalliance, which our Lord spoke and dallied to her soul” (Staley 4). As it originates in her heart, Margery’s divine discourse shows her devotion to Him as much as it depends on her personal will to open herself and pursue her communication with the Lord to create the mystical text of her biography.

While engaging in her divine discourse with Christ, Margery alienates herself from her worldly desires through dispossessing herself of her authority as a businesswoman. In her discussion of the mystical discourse, Lochrie points out that mystical *utterance* plays a key role between the mystic’s “I desire” and “divine speech” (64). She states that “The lack or loss which makes divine speech possible is an alienation from the self, an emptying of the ego, a divestiture of worldly attributes and desires. Such an emptying can occur in many ways and over a period of time” (Lochrie 64). Margery’s consecutive financial losses constitute a specific point, which leads to the abandonment of her greed for material gain when she is a young woman. It is this crucial moment in the beginning of her biography that allows Margery to empty herself and to hear “divine speech,” as well as to invest in her spiritual hopes for this dialogue. In this way, Margery’s engagement in her divine conversations with Jesus Christ determines her mystical path in the

beginning of her book. Margery's whole being, her body and soul, becomes the medium in her continued spiritual dialogue with Jesus Christ throughout her biography. This ability to alienate herself and maintain her divine discourse is a necessary quality in her visionary experiences: Margery cultivates her personal growth and reinforces her singular devotion to Christ as she creates her mystical text.

As she engages in her spiritual dialogue, Margery employs the merging of her identity with Christ's to create the mystical text of her biography. In her essay, Beckwith argues that even though Margery plays her distinctive role as a woman in her communication with Jesus Christ, her identification with Him capacitates their joined identity (287). She states that "the identification with Christ then engenders a porosity of identity, and exchange between Christ and Margery, and it also enjoins a remarkable lability of social roles created by this very porosity. Kempe renegotiates her own cultural position by means of such identification and role playing" (Staley 287). As Margery's identity mixes with Christ's, her identification defines her social role as a woman, and Christ's as a man, in their dialogue. These socially constructed gender roles, therefore, determine the advantage of Margery's position as a woman. Accordingly, as the man, Christ is the one who initiates His dialogue with Margery, when He says, "I am in you, and you are in me. And those who hear you, they hear the voice of God" (Staley 18). The dialogue between Christ and Margery creates an unparalleled intimacy between them and, as such, bestows on Margery tremendous authority in receiving His word and the responsibilities of this powerful position as His counterpart. It is God's given mission of spreading His word and a good deed that Margery receives from Christ as a woman in her vocation. Thus, while using this power of the dialogue to advance her personal relationship with Christ, Margery establishes her position as the creator of the mystical text in her biography.

Margery herself authorizes the mystical word of her spiritual text. She uses her second and main scribe's story of Marie d'Oignies's devotion to Christ as a means of authorizing her spiritual biography for the scribe's purpose, rather than to satisfy her own need as the author. In her discussion of the influence of various Latin works on Margery's life, Lochrie points out that "Jacques de Vitry's life of Marie allows the scribe to accept Kempe's tears by means of comparison" (119). The story of the Belgian Beguine woman, Marie d'Oignies, a revered figure of female piety who practiced passionate devotion to Jesus Christ through her tears, life of poverty, and her service of taking care of the sick in the early Middle Ages, convinces the scribe that Margery's tears are authentic and show her authorial credibility (Staley 112). After turning away from Margery as a result of hearing evil accusations against her in St. James's Chapel at Lynn, the scribe reassumes his position as Margery's personal scribe. The narrator states that:

[O]ur Lord drew him again in a short time, blessed may he be, so that he loved her more and trusted more to her weeping and her crying than ever he did before, for afterward he read of a woman called Mary of Oignies and of her manner of living, of the wonderful sweetness that she had in hearing the word of God, of the wonderful compassion that she had in thinking of his Passion, and of the plenteous tears that she wept, which made her so feeble and so weak that she might not endure to behold the cross [...]. (Staley 112)

The scribe's awareness of Marie d'Oignies's devotion to Christ shows that he needs to prove that Margery's tears are genuine in her story. The love and trust that Margery earns from the scribe's reevaluation of her tears legitimizes her as a credible devout woman and author. Margery is the same holy woman as she was before in exhibiting her fervent devotion and so, too, are her tears. Therefore, she does not need to authenticate her tears to authorize her spiritual text for her own good as the scribe does. Thus, he uses Marie's story to authenticate Margery's tears and to authorize her spiritual text to fulfill his own purpose of verification as her scribe. Thereby, the scribe testifies to Margery's authorial credibility.

While reinforcing the authenticity of her tears, the scribe's use of Marie's story and other Latin sources in Margery's spiritual text also addresses Margery's reading and her spiritual antecedents. Margery's reference to Richard Rolle's Latin text, *Stimulus Amoris*, causes the scribe to believe in the genuineness of Margery's tears even more profoundly when he reads, "A, Lord, of what shall I more noise or cry? You tarry and you come not, and I, weary and overcome through desire, begin to madden" (Staley 113). Rolle's reference to the mystic believer's emotions demonstrates Margery's power as the author of her spiritual text. Lochrie summarizes Margery's control in her text by pointing out that she resolves the reader's uncertainty as much as the scribe's (120). Lochrie states that "while she never privileges this Latinity, she nevertheless inscribes it in her text in order to guide and direct readers, to jar their lapsed faith and renew their reading" (120). Margery shows her authorial skill by using these references, which she does not even need for her story to make sense, to emphasize the directional-performative functioning of her body and to prove her understanding of her instructional responsibility to her readers as the author of her spiritual text. In this way, Margery highlights the importance of the physical functioning of her own body to the literary function of her spiritual text in her biography.

Consequently, while demonstrating genuine effort between Margery and her scribe to present her story accurately, Margery's spiritual text accomplishes her literary intentions as a female author of the book. In her essay, titled "The Dialogics of Margery Kempe and Her Book," Sandra McEntire points out that the guiding qualities of Margery's spiritual text result from her perseverance over lifelong struggles with the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and in Margery's abilities to fight, which ultimately allows her to triumph as a believer (195). McEntire states that:

Despite her misgivings and her fears, Margery Kempe intended her book to be read, whether as a teaching instrument for the instruction and edification of pious people, clerical and lay, or as a carefully crafted vehicle for celebrating her own sanctity.

She would certainly have realized that the reading audience of her book would be largely clerical, but the aural audience was potentially unlimited. (McEntire 195)

McEntire's point on the dual intentions of Margery's spiritual text in being a teaching guide on piety for the lay and religious population, as well as a compelling story of her mysticism, captures Margery's prudence in producing her book as a joined effort between her and the main scribe, her male counterpart. While fearing the religious and secular authorities of her time, Margery, ironically, uses the available resource of male scribes, especially her main scribe's help, to write the book. Although the first and the third scribes attempted the task of transcribing Margery's story, they ultimately did not succeed due to their lack of commitment to Margery's cause. Therefore, as the main scribe assists Margery in presenting her case of sanctity as a religious woman against the male-dominated world of the late Middle Ages, he also helps Margery to win her argument and express her dual authorial intentions in writing her spiritual biography. In this way, despite the ineffectiveness of both the first and the third scribe in transcribing her story, the main scribe's successful task of assisting Margery in recording her mystical experiences and in adjusting his own subordinate position to her discourse and authorial voice, proves Margery's spiritual authority and her superiority as a female author of the book.

As one of the most original female mystics of all time in her ability to maintain traditional spiritual qualities while exhibiting fervent personal devotion to God in her status as an ordinary laywoman, Margery establishes a new model for spirituality by reaffirming her religious authority as a mystic and the author of her spiritual biography even though her behavior is not usual or congenial in the view of her contemporaries; moreover, she struggles against the power of the male religious authorities and depends on the writing skills of the male scribes for the recording of her spiritual biography. Margery exemplifies the virtues of the four different holy women, such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Brigitta of Sweden, Dorothea of Montau, and Julian of Norwich in her

personal conduct of a traditional Christian woman saint and a laywoman. While preserving the Christian values in her search for prestige as a visionary, Margery uses the female qualities of chastity, emotional release through shedding tears of compunction, and pilgrimage by seeking the advice of a female mystic for spiritual reassurance about her own visions, to manifest her profound love of Christ in her personal devotion to Him and to show the importance of this love to her mysticism. She advances her close relationship with Jesus Christ and St. Mary in her self-governed spiritual contemplation on the humility and poverty of Jesus Christ and His mother in the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection events. As she shows the significance of her self-governed contemplation, Margery proves her innovative quality as a holy woman by individualizing her spiritual experiences. Thus, the combination of Margery's traditional and innovative qualities allows her to determine the course of her mystical vocation. While helping her to carry on the beliefs and values of the Christian tradition, these characteristics are some of the very qualities that testify to Margery's own criterion for the spiritual authority in her mystical legacy. She also sets a new standard in mysticism using her inventive bodily devotion to Christ in her mystical union with Him to show the importance of her gender as a woman. Margery employs her visionary participation in Christ's Passion, as well as her own physicality as a woman, to assert the literary authority of her spiritual biography. As she engages in her bodily devotion to Christ, Margery shows her love of Him, thereby helping to standardize the importance of body and gender within the context of the Christian religious tradition. Just as she effectively uses her bodily devotion to assert her own power as a woman against the clerical power of her religious superiors, she equally effectively authorizes her individual mysticism. Margery's love of Christ in her personal imitation of His Passion is also the medium for the empowerment and creation of the text of her spiritual biography. Margery's skillful use of her scribe's need for the authentication of her story serves the

purpose of asserting her authority as a mystic and the author of her spiritual biography. As she secures her authorial power by verifying the credibility of her story, Margery also embraces the late medieval standard for mystical authorship, and thereby testifies to the great spiritual value and validity of the Christian belief in a personal relationship with God via the expression of her individual devotional lay spirituality. Margery's example demonstrates that women from all walks of life are capable of excelling in male-dominated professions that have historically restricted them and still continue to do so in society.

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