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Margery Kempe: A Mirror of Change in Late-Medieval England

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Janet Tuthill

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Janet Tuthill

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the

Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this dissertation.

Patricia Belanoff
Professor Emerita, Department of English

Clifford Huffman
Professor, Department of English

Bente Videbaek, PhD
Lecturer, Department of English

Michael Boecherer
Associate Professor, Humanities, Suffolk County Community College

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber

Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

Margery Kempe: A Mirror of Change in Late-Medieval England

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Janet Tuthill

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Often considered the earliest autobiography written in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* expresses social and religious commentary. This dissertation discusses Kempe's life story as it mirrors the religious and social changes occurring in late-medieval England. I view Margery Kempe as a real person who was very involved in the production of her book, that the scribes who assisted her played an important part in shaping the text, but that we mainly hear Kempe's voice. My view is that the work is neither a straightforward presentation of lived experience nor pure fiction, but based upon the real-life experiences of an atypical woman of the time.

A contemporary of Chaucer and Langland, Margery Kempe details late-medieval life on the verge of change. People were building cathedrals, monasteries, and cloisters. They were adopting new ways of devotion including a devotion to a human Christ, the Eucharist, Mary and the Saints. New forms of religious piety emerged as books were imported, along with the creation of religious art. There are new ways of fasting, and new characteristics of domestic life. Kempe writes about her lived experiences in the midst of all these changes, often anticipating the changing times in England.

Written at a time when literature shows little or no character development, *The Book of Margery Kempe* reflects how Kempe develops to attain a certain degree of self-awareness. By the end of her book, Kempe becomes an example of active piety for others. She speaks for contemporary lay men and women who were seeking to validate their lives against dominant religious norms. Kempe demonstrates, through her autobiography, that it is not necessary to follow traditional religion in order to achieve holiness. She rarely relies on the advice of clergy even though she occasionally meets with them for guidance. Kempe follows her own advice which she reports as coming from God speaking to her directly.

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My husband Bill Tuthill, and my family, continued to believe in me even when I was not so sure. This dissertation is for all of them.

Introduction

The quotations from the text are from Lynn Staley's Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages (TEAMS) edition (Kalamazoo, Mich.: 1996) and Barry Windeatt's translation (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

The Book of Margery Kempe, written in the late 1430's, is a narrative of a woman's life and spiritual development. The *Book* is significant because it is considered to be the earliest existing autobiographical writing in English and gives insight into the life of a woman living in late-Medieval England who is moved to create a very untraditional life style for herself. Written at a time when literary figures were often flat and/or allegorical Kempe demonstrates character development in her *Book.* It describes the hostility she received because of the changes she makes, at times putting her own life as well as her scribes' lives in danger, as she attempted to live as an outspoken holy woman in the world instead of living at home or enclosed as an anchoress or nun, which were the lifestyles available to lay religious women in England at this time. This was also a dilemma for other men and women in the emerging middle class who desired to live a spiritual life in the active world.

Kempe's narrative reflects the conflicts of trying to negotiate her bourgeois life with spiritual vocation. Preoccupation with wealth, status and material goods as characteristic of urban life is also depicted by contemporary writers Chaucer and Langland. *The Canterbury Tales* is filled with the language of commerce and marketplace. Kempe expresses social and religious commentary in her *Book* as her life story mirrors the changes occurring in late-medieval England when it was in the midst of major economic, religious and social transition. In some areas, the

Black Death had reduced the population up to half, increasing opportunities for employment as the population decreased. As a result the middle class began to grow. Kempe reflects late medieval English society and culture going through changes, as well as a change in herself.

Kempe was born in East Anglia around 1373 and died sometime after 1438. She was from a prosperous urban mercantile family in Lynn, Norfolk, England. She was the daughter of John Brunham, a burgess, who was mayor of Lynn five times, (1368, 1376, 1379-1380, 1382-1383 and 1384). He was alderman of the influential Trinity Guild in the town, coroner, justice of the peace and chamberlain. His son Robert, Kempe's brother, was a member of parliament in 1402 and 1417. The Guild of the Holy Trinity was a self-governing merchant guild and an important part of Lynn. The Guild consisted mainly of men, but women were admitted either by inheritance or by paying a large fee. Margery Kempe was admitted on April 13, 1438 (Windeatt 10). Kempe's family and background played an important role in her narrative. As the daughter of a burgess, she would have led a privileged life, exposed to cultural and religious trends of the period. Kempe would have had access to books, communities, and funds that could help live and write about the life style she chose.

Book I consists of eighty-nine chapters of her life and visionary materials written by memory, at about age sixty, between 1436 and 1438, twenty years after the events in the narrative. Her memories were driven by strong emotions as she recorded her feelings as well as the events in her life. *Book II,* which picks up when Kempe was probably in her mid-sixties, consists of ten chapters and describes her life into old age. Kempe's birth, childhood and death are not mentioned. *Book II* was written shortly after *Book I* was completed and fifteen days after Kempe was admitted to the Trinity Guild. *Book II* is very different from *Book I.* It is temporally ordered and reads more as a romance, with a series of prayers at the end. *Book I* is not written as

a linear narrative but skips around as if Kempe were remembering parts of the story as she recites it. The Proem and Preface to the *Book* reveal that it is not written in temporal or spatial order, but as example for others to follow:

> Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherin theimay have gret solas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and unspecabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu. (Proem, lines 1-3)
>
> Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan thyngys befellyn. (Proem, lines 99-102)
>
> A schort tretys of a creature sett in grett pompe and pride of the world, whech Sythen was drawyn to ower Lord be gret poverté, sekenes, schamis, and gret reprevys in many divers contres and places, of whech tribulacyons sum schal ben schewed aftyr, not in ordyr as it fellyn but as the creatur cowd han mend of hem whan it wer wretyn. (Preface, lines 113-116)

Chronology is not as important to Kempe as recording her inward life, yet the *Book* does follow a form of chronology, as Kempe goes through change in an attempt to create new life for herself. Lack of chronology is a challenge at times when following a narrative, for instance some parts of the *Book* ask the reader to read a later chapter first before continuing. In many instances Kempe presents herself as an image of repression in order to critique social and religious norms. The repressive nature of some of the incidents she relates increase exponentially as she tries to live her own life, especially in the chapters where she records her pilgrimages and heresy trials.

Throughout the *Book* Kempe reports speaking directly in conversation with Christ, but readers of this dissertation need to resolve for themselves, just as they must in reading the book, whether this is so or whether these conversations are in Kempe's imagination. It seems as if Kempe really believes that Christ is speaking to her, but it doesn't mean that we as readers have

to accept this. She reports these highly affective conversations as occurring during meditation and contemplation, sometimes after being in church for many hours.

Kempe's autobiography does not completely resemble what we call an autobiography today, which is an account of a person's life written by that person. *The Book of Margery Kempe,* for the most part, is not about her life and family in Lynn. She rarely mentions anything about her own children and family other than her husband and one grown son and a reference to an infant she may have had on her pilgrimage. The *Book* could be considered an autobiography though, because she reconstructed her own life into a text, from memory, although at times Kempe does not provide details of some incidents she remembers making the narrative somewhat difficult to follow. She frequently records how she feels rather than what is said or done. The *Book* does not quite fit the genre of contemporary hagiography, a written study of the life of a saint. Kempe was not a saint. Unlike most contemporary hagiography, Kempe changes. A typical hagiography begins with the saintly childhood and follows the holy person's life through death. Kempe's book is the only source of information about her, unlike many of her religious contemporaries who have many surviving accounts of their lives written by male clerics. There is little public record regarding Kempe, and she had no followers. She was never made a Catholic saint, but is honored in the Anglican Communion on November 11, coinciding with the day of her mystical marriage to the Godhead. There is no record of her death.

Kempe and her scribes aspire to the hagiographical model, but Kempe remains uncloistered and an active participant in a society for life, even though she has been described as an ancress. The *Book* is her own story, not only a religious treatise, but a combination of various genres: historical, hagiographic and romantic. Throughout most of the *Book,* Kempe does not use first person narrative but instead refers to herself in the third person as "this creature," which was

fairly common medieval language. By the end of her *Book,* we learn her name as Kempe switches to first person narrative after going through a radical personal change. She is no longer a "creature," but attains personhood and her voice when she responds "I am that person," defending herself to a group of people who call her a liar and a hypocrite. The final chapter of the *Book* contains a series of prayers also written in first person narrative. The prayers are related in Kempe's voice, uninterrupted by Christ's voice:

> 'The Holy Gost I take to witnesse, owr Lady, Seynt Mary, the modyr of God, al holy cowrte of hevyn, and alle my gostly faderys her in erth, that, thow it wer possibyl that I myth han al knowyng and undirstondyng of the prevyteys of God be the tellyng of any devyl of helle, I wolde not. And as wistly not knowyn, heryn, seen, felyn, ne undirstondyn in my sowle in this lyfe mor than is the wil of God that I schulde knowyn, so wistly God mote helpyn me in alle my werkys, in alle my thowtys, and in alle my spechys, etyng and drynkyng, slepyng and wakyng.' (10:670-676)

Kempe reports that she is told by Christ to be a mirror to her fellow Christians: "I have ordeynd the to be a merowr amongys hem for to han gret sorwe that thei schulde takyn exampil by the for to have sum litil sorwe in her hertys for her synnys that thei myth therthorw be savyd, but thei lovyn not to heryn of sorwe ne of contricyon" (78:4409-4412). Kempe reflects Christ's suffering in her own life as the hostility she receives because of her devotional piety which includes the gift of tears, a loud, roaring type of crying causing ridicule and hostility from many people. As the narrative continues, the hostility and actions toward her become increasingly perverse and her suffering increases. In this way Kempe identifies with Christ through her suffering.

Chapter One discusses Kempe's life and marriage. Kempe's narrative shows a change in character from a life as a bourgeois woman practicing religion according to traditional norms to a woman living on her own, aspiring to holiness according to her own beliefs through living in the world. Kempe lived an extraordinary life. She writes about her marriage, pregnancy and illness,

visions leading to her conversion, and struggles for celibacy. She reports suffering hostility from much of the clergy and community as a result of her traveling on pilgrimages abroad and heresy trials as a result of traveling in England trying to get letters of approval for a chaste marriage. She reports having fourteen children, although she only writes about one grown son and mentions one child she had on one of her pilgrimages. When a disapproving anchorite asks what has become of the newborn (he had seen her pregnant), Kempe replies that God has provided childcare for the infant. She eventually returns to living at home again, after her husband was paralyzed by a fall in 1431, taking care of him when he was an incontinent invalid in poverty and poor health. She spent much of her life trying to confirm that her behavior was not the work of the devil as she struggled to develop into an autonomous person.

Kempe's mysticism and how late medieval mysticism empowered her to speak with authority is the focus of Chapter Two. Kempe considers herself a mystic and writes about what it is like for her to be a woman and mystic in late fourteenth to early fifteenth century England. It is her personal response to what she learned from her interactions with Christ and as she felt driven to have her stories and experiences told as an example to others who may desire to live outside of traditional norms. She lived a spiritual life with the Holy Family as if in the present which she describes in detail. Many people, both lay and clergy, called her heretic, hypocrite, and insane. People thought she was possessed by the devil while others supported her. Kempe believed she had direct communications with God.

Chapter Three addresses questions regarding Kempe's illiteracy. Complicating authorship of the autobiography is that the *Book* was most likely related by memory, at least twenty years after the events, to scribes. It is often assumed that Kempe was illiterate and that she could not read or write, but that may not be true. It was not uncommon to use scribes when

writing a book because writing materials were difficult to obtain and expensive. Despite the book being written down by a number of different scribes, Kempe's distinctive voice is heard over the edits of the scribes. My view is that the *Book* is a collaboration between Kempe and her scribes and while at times the edits of the scribe is heard, we mainly her Kempe's voice.

Chapter Four considers the significance of Kempe's pilgrimages to her development. Kempe was called by Christ to weep and pray for the souls of her fellow Christians, but not secluded in a convent or cell. Kempe leaves her marriage and domestic life and assumes an active devotional lifestyle that takes her on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome, and around England and Germany which goes against the social codes of obedience and silence. Wherever she went she was shunned and even spit upon by many of the people she encountered including clergy, neighbors, and townspeople, because of her behavior of crying and screaming, her dress and that she traveled with men who were not her husband.

Chapter Five examines Kempe's trials and problems with authority and how she confronts her accusers. Kempe did not fit into any socially acceptable role for medieval women. She was not "saintly." She wept and roared in church, argued with just about everyone, from the Archbishop down, and was generally found annoying by many people. Yet, Kempe did have her supporters in lay and clergy, and for the most part, she won these arguments and trials. Kempe was arrested and imprisoned several times. She was never convicted of heresy or Lollard activities at a time when heretics and Lollards were imprisoned, drawn and quartered, and burned.

The Manuscript

The manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, acquired by the British Library in 1980 as B.L. Add. MS 61823, wasa lost until the twentieth century. It had existed as a single copy in the library of the Yorkshire Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace, where it had been annotated by four readers interested in mystical experiences. The annotations, in red ink, correct omissions, comment on some of Margery's mystical experiences, show little drawings of hearts and pillars, and underscore the reader's attention to certain ideas. The copyist put the name 'Salthous' on the last leaf of the manuscript and was possibly a monk at Mount Grace. One of the readers added his own comments and edits in red ink. Prior to the discovery of the manuscript in the library of Colonel William Butler-Bowdon in 1934, the book had only been known through a selection of devotional material in a seven page quarto pamphlet of extracts, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, including *A shorte treatyse of contemplacion taught by our lorde cryste, taken out of the book of Margerie Kempe of Lynn* (Windeatt 9). Copies of this pamphlet exist in the Cambridge University Library and the Huntington Library. In 1521, Henry Pepwell reprinted this redaction in a selection of mystical pieces, describing Kempe as "a devoute ancres." Early modern readers would have been familiar with Margery Kempe since the pamphlet was printed twice over a twenty year period, but these readers would have had a very different impression of Kempe than if they had access to the full manuscript. Pepwell's treatise identifies Kempe as an anchoress and removes all of the controversial material, such as her loud, boisterous, and outspoken behavior. It presents Kempe as a passive figure more in line with acceptable behavior for women in early modern devotional literature. Kempe was not an anchoress; the original manuscript describes a medieval woman very much in the world (Foster, A. 95).

The full text of the manuscript was discovered when its owner, Colonel William Butler-Bowdon, descended from an old Catholic landed family, found it in his library. He believed that when the monasteries were destroyed, the monks sometimes gave valuable books and vestments to families in the hope of preserving them. The manuscript had lain in a bookshelf in his library as long as he could remember. Butler-Bowdon took it to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1934 where Hope Emily Allen identified it as Margery Kempe's lost autobiography. Butler-Bowdon published his own modernized version of the book in 1936, relocating the two prefaces, prayers and thirteen chapters of Kempe's conversations with Christ to an appendix. Ironically, Butler-Bowdon's 20th century version relegates the devotional material related to Kempe's spiritual growth to the back of the book, where mystical devotion had been the focus of Pepwell's 16th century version. As an indication of changing times and culture, Butler-Bowdon explains that a "great amount of mystical matter would probably prove wearisome" (Butler-Bowdon 16). In 1940, Hope Allen collaborated with Sanford Brown Meech in editing *The Book of Margery Kempe* for the Early English Text Society (E.E.T.S., O.S. 212, 1940). They believed that the original text was probably copied before 1450, not long after Kempe's death (Windeatt 1-2). No one knows what became of the original text.

Early Critical Reviews

After a lull of about fifty years, from the 1980's to the present, there has been renewed interest in the *Book,* not only in Medieval Studies, but also in the areas of Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Performance, and Queer Studies, where the focus is on gender and sexuality, and where the interconnection between sexuality and spirituality is seen as measure of Kempe's

queerness. A number of books and articles about the *Book* focus on topics including women's bodies, literacy, authority, women's excluded and marginal status, temporalities, and Kempe's struggles with misogynistic clergy. A close reading of the *Book* reveals that the focus is in fact her lifetime of conversations with Christ and her life of spiritual development; and yet many of the narrative trajectories are very much of the world, medieval and modern, as Kempe is able to legitimize herself through the figure of Christ, who tells her how to act and speak through her visions and dalliances with him.

Early critical reviews written shortly after the *Book's* rediscovery in the 1930s were mainly negative and derisive. Disappointing reviews of the modernized version reflect twentieth century perceptions of the *Book,* describing Kempe's personality as neurotic and fanatical. Modern readers responded to her in a way similar to Kempe's own contemporaries: she was attention-seeking, tiresome and unreasonable. Readers tend to be either 'for' or 'against' Margery. In the introduction to Butler-Bowdon's translation, R.W. Chambers describes the discovery as being of 'the greatest importance for the history of English literature,' and goes on to describe Margery as a "difficult and morbid religious enthusiast" (Butler-Bowden 6) Fr. Herbert Thurston's review of the Butler-Bowdon edition in *The Tablet* writes that it is "impossible to forget the hysterical temperament revealed on every page of the narrative portions," and that compared to Julian of Norwich "if she had really been an ancress, living secluded in her cell, these peculiarities would not have mattered. But she insisted on going everywhere, following, as she believed, the special call of God" (Thurston 446). Thurston's response echos that of the Friar who, disgusted by Kempe's violent sobbing and crying, told her: "I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" (13). The two clerics, separated by hundreds of years, have the same opinion of Kempe.

The book was discovered in a time of awareness of abnormal psychology. Allen explains Kempe's deviation from traditional piety as "terrible hysteria." Allen begins what she hopes would be a two volume series on Margery Kempe. Volume I appeared in 1940. Allen explains Kempe's emotional style of religious experience as "hysteria," and that "neuroticism" accounts for her beliefs and behavior. Allen changes her view of Kempe after reading works written by or about Continental religious women, in a way similar to some of the clerics in Kempe's *Book*, especially after reading the lives of St. Birgitta of Sweden and Dorothea of Montau. She realizes that Kempe's form of piety resembles the Continental mystics more than the English. Allen's second volume was to include Middle English translations of Continental religious writings. She never finished Volume II before her death in 1960 (Atkinson 198).

English mystical writer Evelyn Underhill responds, "The discovery of the long-lost book of Margery Kempe of Lynn is an event almost equally important to students of mediaeval manners, and disconcerting to students of mediaeval mysticism" (Underhill 642). Underhill continues in the same article that "there is very little in Margery Kempe's book which can properly described as mystical" (Underhill 642). Since she was mistakenly described as an anchoress, readers may have thought they would have a text similar to Julian of Norwich's *Revelations.* The "unflattering and unwinnable" comparison to Julian of Norwich demoted Kempe in the mystical canon to an historical source and case study (Knowles 148). Kempe is often compared to Julian of Norwich because they were contemporary women who wrote about their mystical experiences. Julian's theological reflections were more highly regarded than what some critics describe as Kempe's rambling memory of her experiences. Early reviewers discount the *Book's* spiritual worth and focus on its romantic aspects, viewing it as a representation of its times with Kempe as a historical witness.

New Translations

As a result of negative early reviews the book fell into neglect, or was read as anecdotal material for other studies. In the 1980's that there was renewed interest in Margery Kempe studies. Clarissa Atkinson took up Hope Allen's project. New translations into modern English made the book accessible to a wider reading public. Now it is included in English literature education, produced as a gay novel (Gluck); an historical novel, *Skirting Heresy: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe,* by Elizabeth MacDonald; Eva Figia's radio play: *The True Tale of Margery Kempe;* a play, *Creature,* by Heidi Schreck; and even has a website.

Feminist Criticism

The late 20th century saw an impact of modern feminism on literary studies with the growth of interest in women's writing. Since Margery Kempe is considered to be one of the earliest women writers in English, interest in her book has grown. Feminist approaches include topics such as maternity, patriarchy, the body, sexuality, and gender transgression. Cloistered women's writing also inform feminist issues, but because Kempe lived in the world and was not cloistered, her book informs feminist issues in her own unique way.

Feminist critics present a variety of feminist readings. Sarah Beckwith offers a critical reading of the book arguing that Kempe was concerned with the construction of femininity and subjectivity. Lynn Staley Johnson believes that Kempe establishes her literary authority through the use of narrative strategies and that the figure of the scribe might be a trope. Thus she reads

The Book of Margery Kempe as not a factual account of Margery's life, but a construction written by "Kempe" with *Margery Kempe* as a fictional character. According to Staley, the use of the scribe provides "Kempe" the freedom to present a social critique within the convention of sacred biography. Wendy Harding focuses on the representation of Margery Kempe's maternal body, and Karma Lochrie explores the extent to which Margery Kempe challenged prohibitions that silenced women in the Middle Ages.

Liz Herbert McAvoy focuses on femininity, maternity, sexuality, and virginity, comparing the writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. McAvoy, like Staley Johnson, shifts the analysis of the *Book* from Margery as a persona in a narrative to author of the text. Sarah Salih examines the construct of virginity in the Middle Ages and how Margery Kempe~~,~~ defined herself as a virgin despite being married and having fourteen children. Carolyn Dinshaw argues that "feminism" is a modern ideology that could not have been known in late fourteenth century England and that it is simplistic to read Margery as a protofeminist, but that her book has "informed modern and postmodern feminist preoccupations with gender, empire, translation, textuality and embodiment" (Dinshaw 24). Dinshaw, concerned with Queer Studies, reads the *Book* with the focus as "queer." She finds Margery's confrontation with the Mayor of Leicester, the paradox of wearing white clothes, and family relationships (spiritual and bodily) as a "perversion within the normative" (Dinshaw 149).

A Queer Studies reading would state that Kempe lives in a queer temporality: a queer time and queer space in a queer history, thinking about queerness as an "outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (Halberstam 1). In Foucault's understanding, queerness is detached from sexual identity and exists in relation to time and space. "To be 'gay,' I think, is not to identify with psychological traits and visible

masks of the homosexual, but to try to define and develop a way of life" (Foucault 138). Kempe's way of life encompasses "subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam 1). Understanding that Foucault and Halberstam apply these ideas to the postmodern age, these ideas regarding queer temporalities might also apply to Medieval and all ages, since it concerns the individual, not sexual preference.

In Kempe's narrative, the past and present are collapsed in the now. She lives in multiple times, out of time, and multiple places, out of place. She lives in the time and place of the mystic, operating in the multiple temporalities of queer history: "a history that reckons in the most expansive way possible with how people exist in time, with what it feels like to be a body in time, or in multiple times, or out of time" (Dinshaw 109).

Chapter One: Margery Kempe's Life

Kempe begins her book with her marriage at age twenty and the birth of her first child. Contemporary religious biographies Kempe that would have known about often depicted a saintly childhood with devotion starting at a young age, but there is no reference to Kempe's own childhood or anything about her life before age twenty. Kempe possibly omits references to her childhood due to an unconfessed sin she hints at because her story begins after her conversion vision of Christ.

She marries John Kempe in 1393 at about age twenty. John is from a lower social and economic status, something that Kempe reminds him of from time to time. Kempe depicts her marriage with John with conflicting descriptions. He is presented as companionable, kind and affectionate in some chapters and as sexually oppressive in others. Their marriage reflects the two conflicting models of medieval marriage. One is based on St. Augustine's twelfth century sacramental marriage passage in *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, which defines marriage not necessarily as consummation, but as "affections of the mind" (Lipton 1). Marriage, in this model, was virtuous and based on consent and mutual love between the couple, but does not require sex. The second model is based on a hierarchal model of marriage, where arranged marriages are common and defined as the rule of the husband over the wife. In a hierarchal marriage the doctrine of marital debt required couples to engage in marital sex if the other partner requests it. In an aristocratic family, it is important to have heirs. The growth of the middle class leads many to adopt the hierarchal model (Lipton 2). When Kempe wishes to remain chaste, she is conflicted because she is still required to submit sexually to her husband under hierarchal model of marriage. After she persuades him to also remain chaste the problem is

resolved. Kempe adapts the idea of marriage possibly in order for her *Book* to be considered as hagiography and her for sainthood. Having a chaste marriage would allow her to enter a mystical marriage with God, something usually reserved for virgins or widows.

Much of Kempe's spiritual development is based on experiences related to being a wife and mother, yet her understanding of marriage and family are only seen in the text in the context of her interactions with the Holy Family. Kempe's perceptions of ideal relationships come from contemplation on the life of Christ. Her own family relationships in the human world are unsatisfying and for the most part not even included in the text. Kempe chastises and curses her son as written about in *Book II,* and he is the only child she writes about. She does not approve of his way of life because he turns to a life of lechery. The son thinks Kempe had prayed for God to take vengeance on him. She prays to God for healing and eventually the son comes to Kempe promising to be obedient to God and her. The son later marries a woman in Germany and has a child. The daughter-in-law, later in the narrative, shuns Margery when she tries to become involved in her life.

Images linking birth and death become apparent early in the narrative. Kempe's story becomes one of rebirth into selfhood and one of finding her own voice. Kempe's narrative begins with childbirth, pain, and believing she would die in delivering her first child, a very real concern at this time. The crisis becomes a turning point for Kempe. Instead of entering into motherhood, she has a complete breakdown. Kempe is expected to be a model of the late-medieval woman who is married, living at home with her husband, and having children. She should practice a traditional form of religious devotion where the priest is intermediary between God and individuals. Early in the narrative Kempe expresses discontent with her role as wife, mother, and Christian. She breaks from the traditional norm when she resists revealing a past sin to her

confessor. Kempe conceals from him that she has been confessing and doing penance by herself without a priest as intermediary. She would have been considered a Lollard and heretic, a follower of John Wyclif, who believed that the penitent could confess to and do penance directly with God. As a result of Kempe's deceit she believes that she is menaced by devils for almost a year. She listens to these devils and is kept bound and confined by her family so that she would not kill herself. Kempe believes that God is punishing her for lying and holding back from her confessor.

Her family believes her behavior is caused by the devil and so bind her and lock her in a room for her own safety. In a story occurring later in the *Book,* Kempe visits a woman clearly suffering from madness after childbirth. This woman is also bound and locked away as "treatment." Kempe is able to reach this woman and help her get through her crisis due to her own previous experience.

A vision of Christ stabilizes Kempe. She is grateful to God for restoring her sanity, but is not yet changed. She continues her pride, which would have been considered "sinful," and her showy style of dressing in the latest fashion. Kempe's own account of her vanity and fashionable clothes, references money, as she tries to shed the importance of wealth and status. Kempe continues to be very proud, though her husband tries to get her to end her "proud ways." Kempe reminds him that she married beneath her status because she comes from a more respectable family than his. Unlike her husband, Kempe is very ambitious and wants be a successful business woman out of "covertness" and "pride." She wants people to respect her and be envious of her.

Always scorned by her neighbors, Kempe was chastised for wearing sumptuous clothing and gold. At a time when the Sumptuary Laws were in effect, it may be because she was dressing

above her class. She was wealthy and she came from a wealthy family. She wanted to be envied by her neighbors and desired to be worshipped by them. She was an entrepreneur and she tells of her running businesses in her community. Increased opportunities for employment arose, evident in Kempe's attempts at brewing and milling and other opportunities for women. As her businesses started to fail, no one was willing to work for her. She took up brewing and for about three or four years was very successful. Then the business failed due of lack of experience. The ale would start out well and then failed continually. Her servants were ashamed to work with her and left. Kempe stopped brewing because she believed that God was punishing her for pride and sin. She apologized to her husband for not following his advice. Next Kempe decided to run a horse mill. She hired two good horses and a man to lead them. Again, as with the brewing venture, the horse mill failed when the horses refused to pull in the mill, so the man took his horses and left. The townspeople said Kempe was "cursed" since "neither man nor beast would serve the said creature."(2) After this, Margery gave up her "pride, her covetousness, and the desire that she had for worldly dignity."(2) She dressed so that people would stare at her and admire her. Standard clothing for medieval women was dark attire. At this time England was in transition from the landed wealthy to a mercantile economy. Social status was distinguished by clothing, but a successful merchant could imitate aristocracy in dress. Throughout the *Book* Kempe makes references to clothing in order to present an image of herself and others. The first time Christ appears to her, he is sitting on her bed dressed in purple silk, the color and fabric of royalty. Her first vision of Christ reflects her own conventional values and ideas of how Christ would appear and what he would say. He is dressed as royalty and quotes the Bible.

Kempe turns to Christ for help, and asks for his mercy as she as she gives up her pride, covetousness, and desire for worship from the world. She goes to church daily at 2:00AM and

spends all day there crying, yet her neighbors believe that all of Kempe's violent and continuous weeping is because she is a hypocrite and crying for worldly things. They believe Kempe weeps because of her own wickedness. Kempe cannot control these outbursts and she has little understanding of what causes them. She is clearly the center of attention wherever she goes. Because most people do not know what to make of her, they believe that she is either possessed by the Holy Spirit or by the devil. When a large stone and beam falls down on her back in Church, the congregation is divided whether she is being punished by God because she is evil, or protected by God because she escapes serious injury as if by a miracle. Kempe's confessor, who is present when the stone falls, claims that it is a sign or miracle from God, but the congregation is not so sure.

Kempe communicates directly with God and decides her own penance. She reports hearing a sweet melody and desires that her penance should be that she becomes chaste and withdraws from her husband. This would have been an unlikely form of penance and probably not one given by a priest. Penance is usually performed as an act of prayer. Since Kempe's first communication with God is after nearly a year of suffering torment from her "devils" after childbirth, and as she tells of having had fourteen children by her husband, the "penance" of withdrawing from him and becoming chaste, most likely is a result of her own experience.

Up until this point, Kempe's depicts her marriage as a typical late medieval bourgeois marriage. John is described as companionable, affectionate and compassionate. Kempe's husband is not happy with her self-imposed penance and desire for chastity, so she prays to God for her husband to make a vow of chastity as well. Kempe reports having had fourteen children. It would mean that she spent a large part of her life pregnant and delivering children. Yet she is drawn to men sexually and at times refers to herself as an adulterer. Even during her early

relationship with God, Kempe communicates with Christ, as a man, with no reference to the Trinity, but as a physical, bodily, "seemly" man. If Kempe desires chastity, it may mean only with her husband, because she is conflicted about her own sexuality regarding Christ, the man, and other men she meets during her pilgrimages.

Kempe's confusion over her own sexual feelings is in direct conflict with her desire for chastity. Kempe suffers three years tempted with lechery. Trying to understand her feelings, Kempe believes that lust comes from the devil. Even though she wears a hair shirt, she continues to bear children. She weeps, does penance, and has no lust for her husband, yet she desires another man. A man that she likes approaches Kempe telling her that "he wold ly be hir and have hys lust of hys body, and sche schuld not wythstond hym, for, yf he mygth not have hys wyl that tyme, he seyd, he schuld ellys have it another tyme, sche schuld not chese" (4). The man says this to test what Kempe will do, but she thinks he means it. She cannot fight the temptation. Kempe goes to this man, who, shaming her, rejects her saying "he had levar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to the pott" (4). At this point Kempe believes that God has forsaken her. She does penance and cries for about two hours a day for one year. She asks God for forgiveness. While she is weeping Kempe reports that Christ comes to her, tells her she is saved, will never enter hell or purgatory, and should take off the hair shirt. He tells her to refrain from eating meat and instead she will receive the Eucharist every Sunday. Communion was typically given only once or twice a year, probably less to women. Since belief was in transubstantiation, that the Eucharist was the actual body of Christ and that the wine was his actual blood, it was thought that if communion were given more frequently it would reduce the significance and desire for it. Christ also promises Kempe a hard life of scorn and derision saying, "Thow schalt ben etyn and knawyn of the pepul of the world as any raton knawyth the stokfysch" (5). This is interesting

imagery because Christ first tells Kempe that she will eat his flesh every Sunday, which is considered an act of piety and reverence. He then tells her that, like him, she will suffer the scorn and derision of the people and continues with the image of rats eating dried fish. Kempe is identified with the Christ figure in the hardship she will need to endure. Yet Christ's act of generosity in giving his body and blood becomes an act of perversity and disgust when translated to Kempe. Her desire to be worshipped by the people of the world turns into the image of them eating her alive. Christ speaks directly to Kempe which would have been considered heresy if not through a priest as intermediary. She goes to see an anchorite, who asks her to tell him when she receives these thoughts so he can say whether they come from God or the devil. Kempe rarely relies on the advice of clergy even though she occasionally meets with them for guidance, so she follows her own advice which she reports as coming from God speaking to her directly.

Kempe has a form of freedom that would have been unusual for women living at this time. She meets two widows in her travels who would possibly have been allowed financial and physical freedom to move around on pilgrimages, but Kempe is not a widow. By the end of the first book, Kempe ends up back with her husband, spending the rest of her life taking care of him when he is ill. While this may sound like a step backward for Kempe since she wants to serve Christ alone, Christ assures her that there is spiritual value through the active life and that service in the world is an important way to serve him and fellow Christians.

Chapter Two: Mysticism

Margery Kempe is generally considered an English mystic. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines mysticism as "an immediate knowledge of God attained in this present life through personal religious experience. It is primarily a state of prayer, and as such admits various degrees from short and rare divine 'touches' to a practically permanent union with God" (p 952). Kempe is a mystic according to this definition. She reports that converses at length with Christ as if speaking with him personally, takes direction from him, and participates in the events of his life as if present. Kempe's mystical marriage makes her spouse, sister, and daughter of God.

Christian Mysticism

A brief understanding of Christian mysticism helps locate Kempe regarding her mysticism. Early history followed the Dionysian tradition. Mystical union was through the "via negativa" approach, where the senses are stripped away, leaving the mind empty and available to receive the divine by purging the self of distraction (Underhill 176). Clerics were trained in the Dionysian tradition, which was considered a higher and purer form of mysticism. They were trained in what were considered to be intellectual, meditative techniques as a part of their religious education, leading to the belief that communication with Christ could only happen through a cleric. Mystics and anchorites who were laypeople, especially in the later Middle Ages, rarely had access to the education and religious training in academic, meditative techniques.

Around the year 1000 the figure of Christ changed from a majestic to a suffering Christ. Cultural changes in Western religion 1050-1200 focused on individual experience and self. Anselm of Canterbury's (1033-1109) *Cur Deus homo* (1098), states that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to atone for humanity's sins. Anselm concentrates on the passion of Christ in order to elicit his own compassion. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a fellow Cistercian writes that human emotions could become spiritual love (Baker 21-2). Bernard writes numerous sermons on the Song of Songs. He applies the biblical account of two lovers to the relations between God and the devout soul (Milhaven 25). English Cistercian, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167) writes the triple meditation rule for recluses for his sisters.

Following Anselm and Bernard, St. Francis (c1181-1226) went through a rapid conversion and was noted for his poverty, humility, and weeping for Christ's Passion. Unlike Kempe's roaring and screaming form of weeping, St. Francis wept floods and rivers. The change in medieval consciousness was a result of responding emotionally to the humanity of Christ. Affective spirituality is the emotional concentration on the Passion of the Christ. Kempe's mysticism is one of affective spirituality. Compassion, the affective suffering with Christ, can be achieved through either devotional meditation or visionary experience. Walter Hilton's *Prickynge of Love* identifies a literal reenactment of Jesus' physical pain as an appropriate initial response to meditation on the Passion. Intense compassion often manifests itself somatically. The stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi are the most famous physical evidence of a visionary experience initiated by intense compassion. Kempe experiences a "gift of tears" from Christ as physical evidence of her union with God. In affective spirituality compassion for Christ's suffering, achieved through either vision or meditation, evokes contrition, for the realization that his pain was caused by human sinfulness increases the individual's guilt and

regret. The bodily pain that is an imitation of Christ's suffering is also a penance for the sins that made such suffering necessary and a reciprocation of divine love.

Mystics learned divine truths through visions and revelations delivered by God. As a result they found that they could experience a union with God through their bodies, using forms of ascetic discipline such as self-denying and self-injurious behaviors. Some found that they could reach a mystical experience through suffering disease and illness. Kempe reports illness, such as pains in the stomach lasting eight years, at the height of her mystical experiences.

An understanding of the incarnation of Christ changed from the Platonic, intellectual idea of the early Middle Ages to a more emotional mystical union with Christ in his human form. By the late Middle Ages, as increasingly more people desired a closer relationship with God, ways were found of achieving this relationship by suffering bodily along with the Christ figure. As a result, female mysticism was widespread from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries when women were more likely to be mystics than men. Women found a legitimate way of access to the spiritual through devotion to the human Christ.

The mystic may achieve transcendence and fusion with God through experiencing the blood, violence, and death of Christ, although, they recognize that there was official disapproval of the extreme measures some ascetics took. Critics, both medieval and modern, of heroic asceticism have asserted that altered states achieved by self-injury are not true mystical states, believing that the practice is either used for manipulation of public sentiment or evidence of psychological disturbances. Prayer and meditation are the preferred routes to closeness with God (Kroll 21).

The *Ancrene Wisse* takes a stand against harsh asceticism without guidance from the anchoress' confessor:

> Let no one belt herself with any kind of belt next to the body, except with her confessor's leave, nor wear any iron or hair, or hedgehog-skins; let her not beat herself with them, nor with a leaded scourge, with holly or briars, nor draw blood from herself without her confessor's leave; let her not sting herself with nettles anywhere, nor beat herself in front, nor cut herself, nor impose on herself too many severe disciplines to quench temptations at one time. (202:22)

Mystics learned divine truths through visions and revelations delivered directly by God without clerical intervention. As a result, these holy people achieved a degree of autonomy and subjectivity unavailable to most medieval people, but with that came the suspicion of heresy. Because they were lay people, their behavior placed them outside the confines of the system that ruled late medieval society. They were not directly connected to any particular religious order and did not fit into any mercantile group. They thought differently and acted differently from most of the rest of the society and culture in which they lived. We often read their narratives as a struggle to find meaning in what God has revealed to them through conversation and vision.

These holy lay individuals were primarily considered as being different because they often received knowledge of God outside of the traditional church teachings and structure, and because their behavior lay outside the structure of society. As a result they found that they could experience a union with God through their bodies using forms of ascetic discipline such as self-denying and self-injurious behaviors. They were often seen, at the least as being eccentric, at worst heretical. Kempe was visited by this form of mysticism and practiced ascetic forms of penance until Christ instructed her to stop.

The negative, Dionysian model of mysticism was considered by the traditional church to be superior to affective spirituality, as noted by Clarissa Atkinson (40). Twentieth century Benedictine scholar David Knowles's comments reflect both modern and fifteenth century views of late medieval English mysticism:

> This stream [of pure spirituality] continued to flow till the reign of Henry VIII, but there is some evidence that from the beginning of the fifteenth century onwards it was contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion, manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behavior, deriving partly from the influence from some of the women saints of the fourteenth century, such as Angela of Foligno, Dorothea of Prussia and Bridget of Sweden. The most familiar example of this type in England is Margery Kempe. (Knowles 222-223)

English author and mystic Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as “the science or art of the spiritual life,” (Underhill x) and “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order” (Underhill x). In an article for the *Spectator* written in 1936, shortly after the discovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Underhill finds “very little in Margery Kempe's book which can properly be described as mystical--unless we dignify her romantic dreams of Christ as the soul's husband, and similar emotional phantasies, by this name—but a wealth of material stirs the study of imaginative religion of the late-medieval type” (Underhill 642).

Always controversial, Kempe received criticism in her own time as well as in modern times regarding just about every aspect of her life. Unfortunately, modern assessment often discounts Kempe’s visions as schizophrenia and overlooks the main purpose of writing the *Book* which was to record her lifetime of conversations with Christ as a model of devotion for others.

According to Underhill, mystics approach God in stages of purgation, illumination and union. First is the awakening of the self to the transcendental consciousness of divine reality, frequently defined as a vivid, ecstatic, experience outside the self or the familiar world. This event is known as conversion. The true goal of the mystic is union with the transcendental order. “In this state the absolute life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the self, but is one with it.” (Underhill 169). As unconventional as Kempe is, she does fit the definition of a mystic. No

matter how difficult her life became, Kempe did not waver from her vocation. She lived her life as Christ instructed her.

Margery Kempe's Mysticism

Kempe's knowledge of God was immediate and attained through personal experience. She remembers the occurrences of the feeling of Christ in her life manifested through profound weeping. Her detailed narrative crosses temporal and spatial boundaries as Kempe interacts with Christ by using the knowledge gained through these communications in order to carry out God's directives.

Kempe received divine instruction about prayer and aesthetic practices through direct, lengthy colloquies with Christ and the Virgin. She did not "think" about Christ, but actually participated in the life of the Holy Family as if in the present. She asked questions and attained immediate knowledge as if talking to a friend. Yet she maintained her own unique style while going through the mystical process. For Kempe, identification with Christ enabled her to speak as herself. She retained her own strong will and was an active participant in her spiritual conversation, commenting on and questioning in ongoing dialogue with Christ and the Holy Family as if they were friends. In fact Kempe identifies so much with Christ that she believes that her voice is his voice saying "Thei that worshep the thei worshep me; thei that despysen the thei despysen me, and I schal chastysen hem therfor. I am in the, and thow in me. And thei that heryn the thei heryn the voys of God." (10:513-515)

Kempe's claim that she represents Christ's words and delivers them to her community is not unique to mysticism or devotional literature, but she claims that her voice and text represents

Christ's actual speech. This claim has provoked critical debate questioning her identity, authenticity, and authority (Staley 36). The blurring of boundaries between Kempe's speech and Christ's speech continues to be an area of criticism regarding the *Book's* narrative voice. Christ's voice is heard through Kempe's voice. By writing down her conversations and "dalliances" with Christ in a book, written in the vernacular, Kempe provides a way for her "fellow Christians" to access and learn about her devotional experiences. By using this narrative strategy, Kempe is a spiritual heroine. Kempe and her scribes assert she is authorized by Christ. Modern critics are not so sure. There is no evidence that Margery's *Book* was ever read by her contemporaries during her lifetime. The only evidence of the *Book's* existence before the discovery of the manuscript in 1934, is in the extracts printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, reprinted by Henry Pepwell in 1521. She is mistakenly identified as an anchoress. The extracts contain only Margery's quieter colloquies with Christ and omit any reference to her life in the world (Meech and Allen xlvii).

Christ's Colloquies

Kempe was most concerned with recording her lifetime of conversations and "dalliances" with Christ. There is no need for conventional chronology because Margery's spiritual life has no spatial or temporal boundaries. Margery exists both "in" her time and "out" of her time (Dinshaw 22). Kempe records her conversations with Christ, reported as if verbatim and in present tense, as if it is happening "now" (Windeatt 7).

Even though we are told in the *Proem* that the book is not written in chronological order, a closer look at Kempe's prayers reveals a type of chronology or progression in the *Book* as the colloquies with Christ become more frequent and intense. Kempe's first experiences and

communications are related to seeking and understanding divine guidance. Her prayers and meditations progress to prophetic revelations and contemplative visualizations. Finally Margery has extended colloquies with Christ which continue to the end of the book (Windeatt 8). The boundaries between Kempe's life in the temporal world and her spiritual world are thin and easily crossed. Even though narrative events in Kempe's worldly life are randomly written as remembered, her recollections of interactions with Christ in her spiritual life progress with intensity and frequency. Kempe remembers Christ's speeches and instructions and records them verbatim, except when the feelings become so intense that she cannot put them into words.

Kempe's first mystical experience and first report of madness occurs during her first direct encounter with Christ during her illness after the birth of her first child. Christ appears to her after a more than eight month recovery from the difficult birth. Kempe reports that she goes "out of her wits," is shackled to her bed, and locked away from the household during this period. She is tormented by devils and wants to kill herself.

> This creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days. And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt,develys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng hir bothe nygth and day duryng the forseyd tyme. And also the develys cryed upon hir wyth greet thretyngys and bodyn hir sche schuld forsake hir Crystendam, hir feyth, and denyin hir God, hys modyr, and alle the seyntys in hevyn, hyr goode werkys and alle good vertues, hir fadyr, hyr modyr, and alle hire frendys. And so sche dede. (1:149-160)

She bites her own hand so violently that the scars are evident for the rest of her life. Modern psychology would identify this as post-partum psychosis. Kempe describes the experience as demonic possession.

> Sche slawndred hir husband, hir frendys, and her owyn self; sche spak many a repreuous worde and many a schrewyd worde; sche knew no vertu ne goodnesse; sche desyryd all wykkydnesse; lych as the spyrytys temptyd hir to sey & do sche seyd & dede. Sche wold a fordon hirself many a tym at

> her steryngys & a ben damnyd with hem in Helle, & into wytnesse therof sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently that it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And also sche roof hir skyn on hir body agen hir hert with hir nayles spetowsly. for sche had noon other instrumentys, & wers sche wold a don saf sche was bowndyn & kept with strength both day & nyght that sche mygth not haue hir wylle. (1:157-165)

Christ appears to her in the form of a beautiful man dressed in purple silk robes, the color and fabric of royalty and speaks to her, and Kempe is restored to sanity and health. She sees him rise up in the air. Her husband, at this point, is described as always having tenderness and compassion for her. In opposition to the advice of their servants, he has her resume her household duties, symbolized by giving her back the keys to the pantry.

> And, whan sche had long ben labowrd in thes and many other temptacyons that men wend sche schuld nevyr a skapyd ne levyd, than on a tym, as sche lay aloone and hir kepars wer fro hir, owyr mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, evyr to be trostyd, worshypd be hys name, nevyr forsakyng hys servawnt in tyme of nede, aperyd to hys creatur, whych had forsakyn hym, in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, and most amyable that evyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde, lokyng upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere that sche was strengthyd in alle hir spyritys, seyd to hir thes wordys: 'Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?' And anoon, as he had seyd thes wordys, sche saw veryly how the eyr openyd as brygth as ony levyn, and he stey up into the eyr, not rygth hastyli and qwykly, but fayr and esly that sche mygth wel beholdyn hym in the eyr tyl it was closyd ageyn. And anoon the creature was stabelyd in hir wyttys and in hir reson as wel as evyr sche was beforn. (1:165-179)

After his appearance, and the first instance of Kempe reporting that Christ communicates with her directly, Kempe becomes calm and regains her wits.

Kempe's first vision of Christ comes unexpectedly. She remembers Christ's exact words, how he appeared to her, what he wore, and how he left the room, floating up into the sky. Kempe does not respond, in contrast to later visions. Kempe's vision is one of a Christ that might be seen in the stained glass windows of her church, something Kempe would have been familiar

with. Christ speaks to her in a scriptural quotation from the Bible, authorizing Kempe's narrative voice in her *Book* as something familiar to her intended reading audience and putting Biblical language into everyday language that people might perhaps understand better.

Kempe knew she was saved from madness by holy intervention:

> And sche toke hyr mete and drynke as hir bodyly strength wold servyn hir and knew hir frendys and hir meny and all other that cam to hir to se how owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst had wrowt hys grace in hir, so blyssyd mot he be that evyr is ner in tribulacyon. (1:183-186)

At this point in Kempe's life the vision of Christ stabilizes her. She constructs madness as one of her tests of sainthood, similar to Christ's temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Kempe is grateful to God for restoring her sanity, but has not yet changed. Kempe returns to her worldly ways when she continues seeking the attention and admiration of her neighbors. She continues her pride and showy style of dressing in the latest fashion.

The next encounter changes her life:

> On a nygth, as this creatur lay in hir bedde wyth hir husbond, sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradyse. And therwyth sche styrt owt of hir bedde and seyd, 'Alas, that evyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in hevyn.' Thys melody was so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr myght be herd in this world wythowtyn ony comparyson, and caused this creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to have ful plentyuows and habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon wyth greet sobbyngys and syhyngys aftyr the blysse of heven, not dredyng the schamys and the spytys of the wretchyd world. (3:241-248)

Melody commonly accompanies mystical experience. The lives of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, and Richard Rolle indicate this. After hearing this sweet melody, Kempe undergoes a radical change. She attempts to free herself from the feelings and habits of her world and tries to adopt the spiritual path of poverty, chastity and obedience. She has no sexual desire

for her husband, who has the right to have sexual intercourse with her as part of the marital debt, and prays for abstinence:

> And so sche seyd to hir husbond, 'I may not deny yow my body, but the lofe of myn hert and myn affeccyon is drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys and sett only in God.' He wold have hys wylle, and sche obeyd wyth greet wepyng and sorwyng for that sche mygth not levyn chast. (3:259-263)

After hearing this melody, sounds she would hear for the next twenty-five years, Kempe did great bodily penance. She wore a hairshirt, fasted, prayed, and was shriven three times a day.

Shortly after her conversion Kempe is given instruction by Christ to give herself over to him completely and follow his direction. Christ tells her he will help and protect her. He asks her to give up praying and think thoughts he will put in her mind. He advises her to go to the anchorite at the Preaching Friars for counsel and advice.

She has two kinds of experiences: her meditations and her visions:

> 'And dowtyr, I wyl thow leve thi byddyng of many bedys and thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in thi mend. I schal gevyn the leve to byddyn tyl sex of the cloke to sey what thow wyld. Than schalt thow ly stylle and speke to me be thowt, andI schal gefe to the hey medytacyon and very contemplacyon.' (5;389-392)

While in meditation, Kempe has visions. She tells of the Virgin speaking to her, sometimes St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Katherine, or whatever saint she was devoted to at the time. The conversations are so sweet, holy and devout that sometimes she cannot bear it and falls down as if mad, and twists and wrenches her body, makes faces and gestures with vehement sobbing and tears, saying "Jesus, mercy" and "I die."

Afterwards, when Kempe asks God what she should think, the revelation comes as a dream or vision where Kempe reports interacting and speaking with Holy Family figures such as Mary, Joseph, John, and Anne. Kempe reaches beyond her own temporality into the spiritual

world in order to form meaningful, personal relationships. Earthly relationships are unsatisfying. Human relationships are disappointing and cannot compare to Kempe's spiritual relationships. Even though Kempe writes that she appreciates John's goodness, his eventual agreement to a chaste marriage, and his support "when all others failed," when asked by the Virgin who she would want in heaven with her, Kempe says her confessor, not John. The Virgin adds that he will be saved anyway with her father and all her children. She looks back on her marriage with disgust, "And aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyens." (3)

Divine Injunction and Reassurances by Christ

Early in the narrative, Christ answers Kempe's prayers with instructions and reassurances. Throughout the *Book,* Kempe continually seeks guidance through these inward dialogues with Christ. She is fearful and uncertain about her instructions from him because at times they seem contradictory. Christ tells her not to be afraid. He tells Kempe to fast on Fridays (9), then tells her to how to negotiate eating with John again in exchange for chastity (11). Christ answers her in direct speech how to reply to the Bishop Repington of Lincoln (15). He instructs her to introduce herself to Richard Caister at Norwich (17), and gives her instructions for her return from Jerusalem (30). He tells her to be governed by a certain Norwich anchorite (43). Christ tells her to wear white clothes (44), and her to visit Denny Abbey (84). Christ tells her to stop eating meat (5) and resume eating meat (66) (Windeatt 8). Kempe questions the reasons for

some of Christ's instructions. She is concerned that people will call her a hypocrite if she wears white clothes since she is not a virgin, which they do. Kempe puts her trust in Christ and always follows his directions even if she questions their purpose.

While weeping in St. Margaret's church, during Christmas time, Christ "ravishes her spirit and speaks to her." (5) This divine injunction by Christ establishes his plan for Kempe. Christ speaks directly to her telling her that she will never go to hell or purgatory, but go straight to heaven. He asks for Kempe to call him "Jesus," remove the hair shirt, and stop eating meat. Christ tells her not to be afraid, he will help and protect her. He asks her to give up praying on her beads and think thoughts he will put directly in her mind. Christ tells her to pray until six o'clock and then lie still and speak to him in thought, and he will give her high meditation and true contemplation.

Christ assures Kempe that God is always with her, and angels are around her soul to guard her. He tells her that she is daughter, mother, sister, wife, and spouse to him:

> 'Therfor I preve that thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse, wytnessyng the gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dyscyples, 'He that doth the wyl of my Fadyr in hevyn he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me.' Whan thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytés, than art thow a very syster; and, whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens. (14:712-721)

Kempe's relationship with Christ transforms her identity as daughter, mother, sister, wife and spouse in the physical world to one in the spiritual world. As a result, her relationships in the world are transformed. She withdraws from her immediate earthly family and becomes mother, sister, and wife to all God's creatures "So be processe of tyme hir mende and hir thowt was so

joynyd to God that sche nevyr forgate hym but contynualy had mende of hym and behelde hym in alle creaturys. (72)

Participation in the Narrative of Christ's Life

Kempe gives herself to meditation and asks Christ what she should think about, and he answers in her mind. To speak directly could be considered Lollardy. Christ tells her to think of his mother, Mary. Kempe, as if physically transported back in time and space, has a vison of St. Anne, pregnant with Mary. She envisions herself as St. Anne's maid and servant, looking after Mary until she is twelve years old. Kempe imagines raising Mary, feeding her and clothing her. She even preempts Archangel Michael by telling her that she will be the mother of God.

> Another day this creatur schuld geve hir to medytacyon, as sche was bodyn befor, and sche lay stylle, nowt knowyng what sche mygth best thynke. Than sche seyd to ower Lord Jhesu Crist, 'Jhesu, what schal I thynke?' Ower Lord Jhesu answeryd to hir mende, 'Dowtyr, thynke on my modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that thow hast.' And than anoon sche saw Seynt Anne gret wyth chylde, and than sche preyd Seynt Anne to be hir mayden and hir servawnt. And anon ower Lady was born, and than sche besyde hir to take the chyld to hir and kepe it tyl it wer twelve yer of age wyth good mete and drynke, wyth fayr whyte clothys and whyte kerchys. And than sche seyd to the blyssed chyld, 'Lady, ye schal be the modyr of God.' The blyssed chyld answeryd and seyd, 'I wold I wer worthy to be the handmayden of hir that schuld conseive the sone of God.' The creatur seyd, 'I pray yow, Lady, yyf that grace falle yow, forsake not my servyse.' (6:402-413)

Kempe sees herself present when the three Kings arrive at the Nativity and even travels along with Mary and Joseph from Bethlehem to Egypt where she finds lodging for the family. She travels with Mary to Bethlehem, arranges lodgings, begs cloths for swaddling, and when Christ is born, arranges the bedding. Kempe travels with along with Mary and Joseph bringing flasks of wine. She meets with Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, and they both live together for

twelve weeks. Kempe is midwife to Elizabeth at St. John's birth, telling Elizabeth he would be a holy man and blesses him. Kempe begs for Mary and weeps when she thinks about the painful death Christ will suffer. This occurs during the period of Advent, traditionally believed to be the time of Christ's birth.

Kempe's visions and feelings place her at the scene of Christ's crucifixion as if she were, in fact, present at the time it occurred. She comforts Mary and even offers her a hot drink. Kempe's visions take her to a place in time where her imagination removes her from the everyday life of hostility to a life where she is elevated to "handmaiden" of Mary. Her interaction with the Holy Family puts her in the same station as the most worshipped figures known at the time.

Mystical Marriage

When she is in church in Rome, God comes to Kempe and tells her she will wed his Godhead. She receives knowledge of the Trinity in a wedding sacrament where she envisions that God weds her to the Godhead before Jesus, the Holy Ghost, Mary, the twelve apostles, and angels:

> The Fadyr of Hevyn seyd to hir, 'Dowtyr, I am wel plesyd wyth the inasmeche as thu belevyst in alle the sacramentys of Holy Chirche and in al feyth that longith therto, and specialy for that thu belevyst in manhode of my sone and for the gret compassion that thu hast of hys bittyr Passyon.' Also the Fadyr seyd to this creatur, 'Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn the my prevyteys and my cownselys, for thu schalt wonyn wyth me wythowtyn ende.' (35:2000-2006)

Kempe is afraid to answer him because she has no knowledge of the Godhead. All of her love has been fixed on Christ. She has so much feeling for the manhood of Christ, that when she

sees women in Rome carrying boy children, she would cry, roar, and weep as if she had seen Christ in his childhood. If she sees a handsome man, the same would happen. People in Rome are astonished because they do not know why she behaves this way, but unlike her travel companions, they accept her.

Kempe does not answer God about his marriage proposal, so Christ comes to her on his behalf. "Than the Secunde Persone in Trinité answeryd to hys Fadyr for hir and seyde, "Fadyr, have hir excused, for sche is yet but yong and not fully lernyd how sche schulde answeryn."(35) The exchange is presented as if she were a young bride going to marry an older man. Kempe is probably in her forties at this point.

Then God takes her by the hand before the Son, the Holy Ghost, Mary, all twelve apostles, and St. Katherine, St. Margaret, and many other saints and holy virgins, as well as a multitude of angels, saying:

> 'I take the, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayrar,
> for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so that thu be buxom and bonyr to do
> what I byd the do. For, dowtyr, ther was nevyr childe so buxom to the modyr
> as I schal be to the bothe in wel and in wo, to help the and comfort
> the. And therto I make the suyrté.' (35:2030-2034)

This mystical marriage represents the spiritual reality of union with God in terms available for Kempe to understand. She uses the language of a contemporary English wedding ceremony, combined with common imagery of a mystical wedding that might be seen in paintings or glass images in church

Christ assures Kempe that he will never forsake her no matter how much shame she endures saying, "Dowtyr, for thu art so buxom to my wille and clevyst as sore onto me as the skyn of stokfysche clevyth to a mannys handys whan it is sothyn, and wilt not forsake me for no schame that any man can don to the." (37)

Kempe reports that Christ speaks directly to her saying that fasting is good for beginners and praying on beads is good for those who can do no better, but best is thinking, weeping and high contemplation. Additionally, he tells Kempe that it is appropriate for them to act as husband and wife. God then tells her to lie in bed with him as if he were her husband and take him in her arms and kiss him. She uses the language of intimate physical love and sexual ecstasy to describe her experience:

> 'Therfore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt. And, as oftyntymes as thu thynkyst on me er woldyst don any good dede to me, thu schalt have the same mede in hevyn as yyf thu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body whech is in hevyn, for I aske no mor of the but thin hert for to lovyn that lovyth the, for my lofe is evyr redy to the.' (36:2103-2111)

For Kempe the mystical union is described as a physical union and as a highly sensory experience. She says she smells sweeter smells than she has ever smelled. She hears sounds and melodies every day for twenty-five years, when the *Book* is being written. She sees white things flying around her, even at night, and feels a hot flame in her breast and heart that lasts sixteen years. Kempe also had various manifestations of God's love in her hearing the Holy Ghost One sounded like a bellows that changed into the voice of a dove, which afterwards turned into the voice of a redbreast.

Mutual love between God and humans has been a common feature of Christianity since its origins. The biblical *Song of Songs*, which praises the virtues of husband of wife, is echoed by Kempe. Imagining mutual love between God and his creature as two lovers erotically enjoying

each other was a revolutionary step in Western religious thought (Milhaven 16). Kempe feels so close to Christ that one time she reports taking his toes in her hand and feeling them as if flesh and bone:

> the seyd creatur beyng in a chapel of owr Lady sor wepyng in the mynde of owr Lordys passyon and swech other gracys and goodnes as owr Lord ministryd to hir mynde, and sodeynly, sche wist not how sone, sche was in a maner of slep. And anon in the syght of hir sowle sche sey owr Lord standyng right up ovyr hir so ner that hir thowt sche toke hys toos in hir hand and felt hem, and to hir felyng it weryn as it had ben very flesch and bon. And than sche thankyd God of al, for thorw thes gostly sytys hir affeccyon was al drawyn into the manhod of Crist and into the mynde of hys passyon unto that tyme that it plesyd owr Lord to gevyn hir undirstondyng of hys inundirstondabyl Godhed. (85:4948-4956)

Kempe thanks God for this comfort. These are all tokens given by God. Another token which lasted about sixteen years was the flame of fire of love (i.e. Richard Rolle). God reassures Kempe that she feels the love of God.

Contemporary Mystics

By the fifteenth century there were works by several Continental holy women who were or had been married, moved about in the world, and wrote accounts of visionary experiences, but there are no known models in England at this time. Kempe identifies with these women, but maintains her own unique style of devotion. She uses examples of the lives of these familiar women as parallels to her own life in order to authorize her visions. Priests who were familiar with the lives of these holy women understood Kempe's vocation. The ones who were not familiar with the model of affective devotion criticized her. This may explain one reason why Kempe had so much resistance when trying to find a cleric to write her *Book.*

Kempe mentions Hilton's book (*The Scale of Perfection),* Brides' book (the *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden, the *Stimulus Amoris* of the pseudo-Bonaventura, and the *Incendium Amoris,* of Richard Rolle. Other women Kempe mentions are Elizabeth of Hungary~~,~~ and Marie d'Oignies. Kempe tells how she spent seven or eight years listening to a priest read her the Bible plus "Seynt Brydys Boke, Hyltons boke, Bonevenure, Simulus Amoris, Incendium Amoris, & swech other." Kempe lists the books she has heard read twice, in chapters 17 and 58, indicating that these books are important to her and her form of devotion. Kempe would have been aware of these holy individuals because they were very popular, however, Julian of Norwich is the only one mentioned in her *Book* whom she knew personally.

St. Bridget (1303-73)

A role model for Kempe was St. Bridget who was also a mystic and a pilgrim. The Middle English translation of St. Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations,* "Seynt Brydys boke," was very popular with both religious and lay women in the fifteenth century. She came from a noble family, was married at thirteen, and had eight children, although she lived chastely from her husband for a short time. She travelled to Santiago with him. After his death, she devoted her life to Christ and dictated her revelations and visions. Bridget founded the order of Bridgettines, whose English house at Syon abbey~~.~~ Kempe visited on pilgrimage as described in Book II.

Kempe has a complicated relationship with St. Bridget. During one of her visions, Kempe describes seeing the sacrament "flickering to and fro":

> On a day as this creatur was heryng hir messe, a yong man and a good prest heldyng up the sacrament in hys handys ovyr hys hed, the sacrament schok and flekeryd to and fro as a dowe flekeryth wyth hir wengys. And, whan he held up the chalys wyth the

> precyows sacrament, the chalys mevyd to and fro as it schuld a fallyn owt of hys handys. Whan the sacre was don, this creatur had gret merveyle of the steryng and mevyng of the blyssed sacrament, desyring to se mor sacreys and lokyng yf it wold don so agen (20:1078-1084).

Kempe wishes this would happen again, but Christ tells her she would not, saying: "Thow schalt no mor sen it in this maner, therfor thank God that thow hast seyn. My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse" (20). Instead Christ tells Kempe that this is vengeance and prophesizes an earthquake. The earthquake is not explained and does not occur, but might be Christ giving an example of his potential power. He does not explain what the vengeance is for, but instructs Kempe to tell people in order to save them. One way to interpret this passage is that Christ's power is like an earthquake toward sinful people and that if they listen to Kempe they may be saved. Christ further tells her that this is an honor not given to St. Bridget, saying, "Rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to the, dowtyr, and I telle the trewly it is trewe every word that is wretyn in Brides boke, and be the it schal be knowyn for very trewth" (20). The construction of this incident is a maneuver to elevate Kempe above St. Bridget, and reinforce Kempe's self-construction as a possible saint.

When Kempe went to Rome, she looked for places associated with St. Bridget. There was even a wealthy woman in Rome who wanted Kempe to be godmother to her daughter, who was named for St. Bridget. St. Bridget left Sweden for Rome in 1349, spent the rest of her life there, and died in 1373. Her canonization was being considered while Kempe was there in 1391 and confirmed in 1415. Kempe spoke with St. Bridget's former maidservant in Rome, but they could not understand each other so they got a man to translate for them. The maidservant told her that St. Bridget was kind and meek with everyone and that she had a 'laughing face' (39). In an effort to feel close to St. Bridget, Kempe visited the room where St. Bridget died and heard a German

priest preach of her revelations and life. On one of St. Bridget's days Kempe knelt on the stone where God told her what day she would die.

Marie d'Oignies (d. 1214)

St. Bridget is not the only holy woman to whom Kempe parallels her life in order to support her visionary authority. Marie d'Oignies was born in Nivelles in Brabant and like St. Bridget, she was born of wealthy parents. Marie was married against her will at age fourteen, but persuaded her husband to live chastely. The couple spent their lives nursing lepers. Marie had visions and ecstasies and eventually spent the rest of her life as an anchoress in a cell near the monastery at Oignies (Windeatt 19).

Much of what Kempe records about her own life parallels the life of Marie. Like Kempe, who wears a hair shirt until Christ tells her to remove it, Marie mortifies her flesh and persuades her husband to live chaste. She weeps and cries out uncontrollably at the Passion, and when she sees a crucifix. She does not eat meat, hears sweet melodies, and wears white clothing. Like Kempe, she is told by Christ that when she dies she will go straight to heaven without going to purgatory. She has a vision of the sacrament at mass. Marie also lives in "mystical" time which has no temporal boundaries. She tells a tale to clergy about a tree, similar to Kempe's tale of the pear tree. Yet, though Kempe parallels her life after Marie, their books are very different. Marie's biography starts at infancy, where Marie is already displaying saintly characteristics. Kempe records being a sinner who is converted through a vision of Christ, who records her story as she remembers it. By contrast, Marie's story is well written and moves in chronological order (Atkinson 34).

Kempe is evidently aware of Marie's weeping as part of her devotion and she wants to validate her own weeping by giving her priest an example of a holy woman who also had the gift of tears. Kempe has her priest read the Latin version of Marie's biography written by Jacques de Vitry, which is also translated into Middle English. Then demonstrating of how uncontrollable the weeping is, God visits the priest at mass who begins weeping and sobbing so much that when he reads the Gospel in church his vestments and altar are soaked. The priest realizes that Kempe's weeping is not unusual when he learns that other holy people have had the same experience, and when he experiences it himself.

Dorothea of Montau (1347-1394)

Dorothea of Montau was a Continental holy woman who was closest to Kempe as contemporary and most likely had a direct influence on her (Allen lix). Unlike Kempe, but similar to most other saints, Dorothea was saintly her entire life, starting at a young age. She married at age sixteen and had nine children, most of whom did not survive childhood. Kempe reports having fourteen children, but makes no mention of whether any but one survived. At age thirty-one, Dorothea began to experience ecstatic states and visions, possibly influenced by St. Bridget's relics which were carried through Danzig on the way to burial. She achieved a chaste marriage, was permitted frequent access to the Eucharist, and went on pilgrimages. Unlike Kempe who did not choose enclosure, Dorothea became a recluse at age forty-three, in a cell attached to the cathedral at Marienwerder after her husband died. Canon John of Marienwerder wrote four versions of her *Life* and revelations (Atkinson 80). After several unsuccessful

attempts by the church, the canonization process stopped and was later resumed in 1955. Dorothea was canonized in 1976.

Kempe is similar to Dorothea in having the gift of tears. Dorothea's *Life* devotes four chapters to her tears. Both women describe weeping with "compassion, compunction, and devotion," and see the tears as a gift from God. Kemp's gift begins after hearing a "sweet melody" which "caused this creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to have ful plentyuows and habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon wyth greet sobbyngys and syhyngys aftyr the blysse of heven, not dredyng the schamys and the spytys of the wretchyd world. (3)

Kempe's tears were uncontrollable and lasted for ten years, sometimes continuously up to ten hours a day.

Richard Rolle (1290/1300-1349)

Kempe's *Book* was influenced by the model of affective devotion exemplified by the English mystic and hermit Richard Rolle, known to Kempe as "Richard Hampole, hermyte." Rolle was one of the most popular promoters of inwardness in late medieval England. His texts were written for both religious and lay women. Rolle is classified with Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in a group called "the fourteenth-century mystics" (Atkinson 144). There are about one hundred surviving manuscripts of Rolle's texts written in Latin and every Middle English dialect. Rolle's mystical experience was revealed though sensory impressions defined as *fervor, canor*, and *dulcor,* heat, song, and sweetness.

Rolle's best known book is *The Fire of Love.* He opens with a sense of surprise at his feelings:

> 'I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth, too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast to make sure there was no physical reason for it! But once I realized that it came entirely from within... I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater.' (Wolters, trans. Prol.)

Kempe reports having a similar experience following her mystical marriage to the Godhead:

> Owr Lord gaf hir an other tokne, the whech enduryd abowtyn sixteen yer and it encresyd evyr mor and mor, and that was a flawme of fyer wondir hoot and delectabyl and ryth comfortabyl, nowt wastyng but evyr incresyng, of lowe, for, thow the wedyr wer nevyr so colde, sche felt the hete brennyng in hir brest and at hir hert, as verily as a man schuld felyn the material fyer yyf he put hys hand or hys fynger therin. Whan sche felt fyrst the fyer of love brennyng in her brest, sche was aferd therof, and than owr Lord answeryd to hir mend and seyde, 'Dowtyr, be not aferd, for this hete is the hete of the Holy Gost, the whech schal bren awey alle thi synnes, for the fyer of lofe qwenchith alle synnes.' (35:2059-2067)

Rolle experiences sweet bird-song as well as heat:

> 'When first I was converted, and became single-minded, I used to think I would be like the little bird which pines for love of its beloved, but which can rejoice in the midst of its longing when he, the loved one, comes. While it sings its joy, it is still yearning, though in sweetness and warmth. It is said that the nightingale will sing her melody all night long to please him to whom she is united. How much more ought I to sing, and as sweetly as I can, to my Jesus Christ, my soul's spouse, through the whole of this present life.' (Wolters, trans. 42)

Kempe also hears sounds:

> Thys creatur had divers tokenys in hir bodily heryng. On was a maner of sownde as it had ben a peyr of belwys blowyng in hir ere. Sche, beyng abasshed therof, was warnyd in hir sowle no fer to have for it was the sownd of the Holy Gost. And than owr Lord turnyd that sownde into the voys of a dowe, and sithyn he turnyd it into the voys of a lityl bryd whech is callyd a reedbrest that song ful merily oftyntymes in hir ryght ere. And than schuld sche evyrmor han gret grace aftyr that sche herd swech a tokyn. And sche had been used to swech tokenys abowt twenty-five yer at the writyng of this boke. (36:2113-2120)

Rolle's English works focus heavily on the emotions of joy, desire, and love, as the defining features of an inward spiritual life. For Rolle the inner life heightens and personalizes sensory and affective experience. The outer life is full of hypocrisies, distractions, and persecutions. Rolle condemns worldly extravagance such as women's fashion, but his teachings let people take responsibility for their own souls. Love is the only criterian for holiness, and God is the only judge. Women were some of Rolle's earliest disciples and an important audience for his vernacular works. Some imagined themselves enclosed spiritually and physically. Apparently, at least for some of them, enclosure did not exist just in the imagination. These women went into physical enclosures such as the cloister and anchorhold. An enclosed world also focused speaking and to be properly inward often meant to be silent, not just enclosed in a cell. For example, *Ancrene Wisse* has an elaborate "inner rule" for keeping the anchoress's heart sealed in battle against the flesh.

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1416)

Margery Kempe is most often unfavorable compared to Julian of Norwich, her English contemporary and acquaintance, whose reflections and life have been regarded as more theological than Kempe's. Norwich is the only holy woman that Kempe mentions meeting in her *Book.* She may have known that Norwich wrote a book, but she does not mention it. We know little about the life of Julian of Norwich. Almost everything we know about Julian of Norwich comes from her writing and from some record various townspeople supporting her financially while she was in the anchorhold. She experienced sixteen "shewings" that she recorded in two versions, a short one and a long one. One record, the short one, was possibly written soon after

the initial event. Norwich presumably wrote the longer, more mature, and meditative version, twenty years later while she was an anchoress at St. Julian's Church in Norwich.

Norwich was a devout woman recluse who wrote about her visionary experience. We know through the writing of Kempe that Norwich was well respected for counseling and advice. Norwich would have been about seventy years of age when Kempe visited her for *discretio spirituum,* the discernment of spirits. The doctorine of *discretio spirituum* was very important for women during the Middle Ages because they were likely to be "relegated to the grey area between orthodox thinking and heterodox subversion" (McAvoy). These women needed "authoritative endorsement of any prophetic or visionary activity" (McAvoy).

Kempe reports traveling to visit Julian of Norwich to find out whether her visions are deceitful or not. As far as we know, Norwich is the only holy woman Kempe knew other than from books. After they spend many days together, Norwich assures Kempe that she should follow the will of God, and that if the spiritual voice she heard was not against God and her fellow Christians, then it is a good spirit speaking to her. Norwich speaks from within an enclosed tomb-like cell attached to the side of a church as part of her vocation as an anchoress.

Kempe repeats the conversation with Julian in some detail. It is not known if Kempe ever knew of Norwich's 's writings, but interestingly, Kempe sounds, in tone, style, and theological sophistication, very much like Norwich in her own book. Norwich assures Kempe that when God visits a creature with tears of compassion, he believes the Holy Ghost is in her soul. She tells Kempe to set all trust in God and "feryth not the langage of the world, for the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world the mor is yowr meryte in the sygth of God." (18)

Additionally, Norwich advises Kempe to follow Christ's instructions. "The ankres, heryng the mervelyows goodnes of owyr Lord, hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hys visitacyon, cownselyng this creatur to be obedyent to the wyl of owyr Lord God and fulfyllyn wyth al hir mygthys whatevyr he put in hir sowle yf it wer not ageyn the worshep of God and profyte of hir evyn cristen" (18). By visiting Norwich for validation, Kempe demonstrates that her visions and feelings and demonstrates are authentic.

Meditations on the Life of Christ

Many of Kempe's visions of the Passion of Christ may be attributed to an influential group of documents produced in the affective devotion tradition during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. The *Meditations on the Life of Christ,* erroneously attributed to Bonaventure, popularized ideas about meditation and compassion on the life of Christ to the laity. *Meditations* focuses attention on Christ's humanity by turning attention to the pain Christ suffered at the Passion and on details of the Holy Family. Artists changed their depictions of Christ to show a human, suffering figure of Jesus. Many of the themes, including the weeping and sobbing, were found in *Meditations.*

Nicholas Love's translation in the early fifteenth-century *Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* (1410), from Latin into English, with emphasis on the visual and affective, encouraged the act of meditation to lay audiences as well as religious. Love's work was approved by Archbishop Arundel as part of his stance against Lollardy because it explained transubstantiation in an explicit way.

Kempe identifies with continental holy women and authorizes her mystical experiences by paralleling her own life with theirs. In addition, reporting that she responds directly to Christ's injunctions, gives her the ability to speak with authority, which may be viewed as undermining clerical authority. It should be noted that Kempe did not receive hostility because of her mystical experiences. Her visions were validated by clergy and anchorites. It was the weeping and crying that caused people to think she was mad or possessed by devils. And even though Kempe provided models of other holy women who wept, there was no place in English society for her "roarings."

Chapter Three: Literacy and Reading

A certain amount of ambiguity surrounds Margery Kempe's ability to read and write. Although it is assumed, because her book was written down by three different scribes, that Kempe was unable to read and write herself, nowhere in *The Book of Margery Kempe* does is it state that this is the case. Books, reading, and writing play important roles in Kempe's narrative of how she demonstrates her faith. Yet, modern criticism often ironically portrays Kempe as an illiterate woman who wrote the first autobiography in English. Clarissa Atkinson calls the book "a most unusual autobiography, not in the least because the writer could not read or write" (Atkinson 18). Barry Windeatt writes "Margery could neither read nor write, as indicated on a number of occasions in her *Book"* (Windeatt 9). A close reading of Margery's *Book* indicates that by modern standards this may not be true.

In the late Middle Ages, literacy meant having at least a minimal understanding of Latin. Even if one could read and/or write in the vernacular, but not in Latin, the individual was considered illiterate. In medieval society men and women, *litterati* and *illiterati,* clerics and laity, educated and uneducated, seemed capable of acquiring knowledge, even scriptural knowledge and sacred learning. But they often proceeded along different routes: seeing and hearing as opposed to schooling and learning. Knowledge was seen as Latin book learning, scholastic thought, and the study of the Church Fathers. A person in Middle English described as *lewed* or *unlettryd* was assumed to be illiterate, but research has shown that the terms rarely mean illiteracy in the modern sense. When Middle English authors described themselves as being *lewed,* it usually indicated that they were illiterate in Latin, rather than the inability to read or write in the vernacular (Tarvers 114). Julian of Norwich displays a sense of humility in her

writing that would not have been uncommon for the Middle Ages. In the opening of the Long Version of the *Showings,* she describes herself as a "symple creature unletterde" (51). It could be that Norwich did not know Latin, not that she was illiterate.

Women and non-clerical people probably learned Latin texts through oral communication, imitating behavior, listening to stories and observing images. Kempe's recorded instances of seeing and knowing theological information compatible with that learned from books raises the question of how she acquired knowledge. Kempe claimed that she had direct knowledge of Christ. The knowledge of seeing and knowing, delivered directly by God, was considered to be the highest form of acquiring knowledge.

Formal education and Latin literacy were a mark of status and gender. Upper class and religious men had the privilege of learning Latin, while only some religious women had access to a formal Latin education. There were quite a few literate nuns in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly in the northern Irish-established monasteries. Women were unlikely to receive any Latin education outside of the convent (Jenkins 115). Because women were excluded from the clergy, they were automatically barred from the cathedral, school, and university. Some women turned to experiencing mystical visions and revelations as a way of getting closer to God.

Since lay men and women had no academic training and did not have these skills, it cannot be assumed that they had no knowledge. They were sometimes seen as different or "possessed" and susceptible to emotional outbursts. Yet there is evidence that some women *were* trained and educated in theology, what Nicholas Watson calls "vernacular theology" (882). Just because Kempe says she could not read or write in Latin does not mean she was not influenced

by texts or that she could not read. Modern approaches of literacy applied to medieval literacy go beyond the definition of an individual's ability to read and write.

Some critics, including Lynn Staley, contend that Margery Kempe was able to read and write and that "Margery" is a self-construction in her own book. These critics refer to Kempe as an author, who presents herself as an illiterate "Margery." As the daughter of a prosperous burgess in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England, Kempe would have come from a class where women were taught vernacular reading. They would be able to read correspondence, keep business records, and read books. As the owner of two businesses, Kempe most likely would have acquired a certain degree of vernacular literacy. Writing was seen as separate from reading, as it involved expensive materials such as parchment and inks in order to produce a manuscript. It was not uncommon for wealthy individuals to employ scribes to produce their writing even if they were able to write themselves.

Lollardy and Literacy

In the time of John Wyclif and the threat of Lollardy, certain individuals, especially women, posed a threat to the established religious position that states that no woman could preach or teach religious tenets, and no one could write the Bible in the vernacular since it was dictated in Arundal's *Constitutions* that God's words needed to be mediated by a priest. The priest was the only acceptable interpreter of God's words. Anyone going against these teachings could be excommunicated by the church and even burnt at the stake as a heretic. Kempe reports being accused of heresy several times because her form of devotion was unconventional and her knowledge of the Bible questioned. Women who used their learning to teach others, as Kempe

did, were subject to suspicion. Kempe possibly describes herself as illiterate in order to avoid accusations. She was placed in a dangerous situation when the Steward of Leicester spoke Latin to her to hear what she would say. It was considered heresy if Kempe, as a middle-class laywoman, admitted to knowledge of Latin. She replies to the Steward that he should speak English, because she does not understand what he is saying to her. Kempe even delayed her *Book,* for twenty years, until the 1430s, when there was a lull in anti-Lollard persecutions (Tarvers 118).

Books were very important within the Lollard movement. There was a demand for the Bible written in the vernacular. Archbishop Arundel, whom Kempe met prior to her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, forbid owning or disseminating devotional and mystical texts written in the vernacular. Kempe admits owning books in the vernacular, including St. Bridget's *Revelations* and Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection,* were not usually suspect, but if one were suspected of heresy, owning any book in the vernacular could increase the case against them (McAvoy 180).

Devotional Literature

Books and reading were important to Kempe. A medieval woman of Kempe's class would have owned a number of devotional texts even if she could not read them. In fact, Kempe describes her desire for reading as a hunger as she begs Christ to send her a priest who will read to her:

> On a tyme, as the forseyd creatur was in hir contemplacyon, sche hungryd ryth sor aftyr Goddys word and seyd, 'Alas, Lord, as many clerkys as thu hast in this world, that thu ne woldyst sendyn me on of hem that myth fulfillyn my sowle wyth thi word and wyth redyng of

> Holy Scriptur, for alle the clerkys that prechyn may not fulfillyn,
> for me thynkyth that my sowle is evyr alych hungry. Yyf I had gold inow,
> I wolde gevyn every day a nobyl for to have every day a sermown, for thi
> word is mor worthy to me than alle the good in this werld. And therfor,
> blyssed Lord, rewe on me, for thu hast takyn awey the ankyr fro me
> whech was to me synguler solas and comforte and
> many tymes refreschyd me wyth thin holy worde.' (58:3360-3368)

The rise in the popularity of vernacular, devotional literature inspired Kempe. These narratives detail the affective experiences of lay holy men and women in their experiences of feeling God, via the human form of Jesus Christ, through their own bodies during a heightened state of emotions. Increasing numbers of narrative accounts of these experiences, similar to Kempe's, move away from traditional clerical teaching and the political structure of the church, transcend temporal, spatial, and gender boundaries and focus on the mind and body of the subject.

Affect, emotions, and feeling play a major role in Early Modern English Literature, especially regarding the role of emotion in bodily sensation and in the processing of images, memory and creativity. Emotional response to the passion and suffering of Christ is an aspect of literature written by or about medieval mystics and anchorites in England lasting until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538. Visions and divine revelations were experienced directly through the body, either through illness or injury as a way to become closer to Christ. Margery Kempe begins her narrative and life-long self-contemplation following a near-death illness after which begins a series of divine revelations.

Anchoritic Literature

Early English devotional enclosure literature plays an important role in the development of English vernacular literature. This literature addresses lay audiences and is written about

biblical, historical, and ahistorical figures, often with contemporary themes. Readers found spiritual guidance for self-reflection, identification and imitation by being taught ways for improvement through meditation and contemplation. In addition, devotional texts provided readers with themes which became popular in vernacular literature, including literary romance narratives, the use of dialogue, and narratives on marriage and contemporary social situations. English solitaries, especially anchoresses, comprised the earliest audiences for vernacular devotional texts, leading the way to the rise in readership, authorship, book production, and book ownership that followed.

Men and women in medieval England often chose being walled up in a tomb-like cell for life in order to achieve a high level of spirituality through meditation, contemplation, and penance. These individuals were usually lay rather than religious and may not have had an understanding of Latin language religious texts.

As a result, literature written in the English vernacular developed in order to aid these people enclosed in their choice. The texts written by men for female anchorites or by women dictating to male scribes, play a significant role in the development of English vernacular literature. Some of the texts "describe mystical experiences by those enclosed. Others are written about figurative exiles and the mystical experience encloses them and separates them from the surrounding community. The anchorite figure can be a type of paradox because the physical isolation might be in the middle of an urban setting. Kempe mentions anchorites on several occasions who were located in urban areas. Literature of advice is directed toward men and women entering a life of enclosure and literature written by those living an anchoritic life style.

The earliest written records of anchorites became available by the beginning of the twelfth century. One of the earliest is poetry the Anglo-Saxon anchorite and saint, Guthlac (673-714), found in the tenth century *Exeter Book.* Devotional literature written in the vernacular and the translation of religious authoritative texts into the vernacular by lay people were both seen as dangerous by clergy, but gave wide availability of the texts to new audiences. But even a hundred years before the printing press, writers such as Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and Julian of Norwich, who might have previously written books in Latin or French, were now writing in English. The texts were no longer restricted to the Latin-literate, allowing lay men and women access to self-interpretation of the texts, an underlying theme to Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*.

Much of the early literature directed towards monastic women from ca. 500 to 1100 concerned the need of enclosure as protection for women. Monastic life would afford a woman possible physical protection within the high, thick walls of the cloister. Pope Boniface VIII delivered *Periculuso,* the papal bull for the enclosure of cloistering women in 1298. Kempe would probably have also been aware the decree as well as the anonymously written *Speculum Inclusorum* as an anchoritic guidance text in addition to *Ancrene Wisse* and Aelred's *De Institutione Inclusarum.*

English solitaries, especially anchoresses, comprised the earliest audiences for vernacular devotional texts. In English towns anchoresses became familiar fixtures. They were also the original audiences for most vernacular writing. Rolle's and Hilton's works were written for women, as were *Ancrene Wisse,* and the 'Wooing Group" texts, *The Chastising of God's Children, The Myroure of Oure Ladye, The Orcherd of Syon, Speculum Devotorum,* and many others (Warren 18).

Ancrene Wisse, an anonymous text written for anonymous readers between 1225 and 1240, and the earlier version, *Ancrene Riwle,* were texts written as guidance for female recluses who had themselves enclosed as anchoresses. The author wrote the work for religious instruction for three sisters of noble birth who were probably lay-religious who requested a book to help them cope with a life of enclosure.

At this time thirteen rules for anchorites exist in England from the *Liber confrontatorius,* dated c. 1080, to Walter Hilton's *Epistola ad quondam solitarium;* written c. 1350. Most of these texts were written by men for women. The Katherine Group contains five texts composed for anchoresses, including *Sawles Warde, Seinte Juliene, Seinte Margarete,* and Se*inte Katherine*, and *Hali Meiðhad*. *Ancrene Wisse* is part of the *Katherine Group,* the lives of three virgin martyrs, St. Katherine, St. Margaret, and St. Juliene written in Middle English. The texts in the *Katherine Group* praise the virtue of virginity and usually in the gruesome death of the saint protecting her virginity.

Medieval readers were encouraged to be aware of their emotions, moods and preferences. In their encounters with devotional literature, the readers paid attention to taste and feeling in order to produce more effective personal responses. The figure of the religious recluse became more important in the English devotional imagination. The solitary life was going through a shift from the desert saints living isolated in caves to that of religious recluses living in a small room attached to a church. This life style was no longer seen as punishment but a way of getting closer to God.

English Passion meditations were often violent, graphic, and erotically charged in order to elicit an emotional response. The mystics take joy in the spiritual union with God. They

willfully submit to the violence and eroticism of the Passion and produce joy out of pain. For anchorites and aesthetic denial of the flesh leads the way to spirituality. Emotional response to the passion and suffering of Christ is an important aspect found in the writings of medieval mystics and anchorites because they experienced visions and divine revelations directly through their bodies, often through illness or injury instead of through passive meditation. The popularity of these texts became an important motivator for writers to continue writing in the English as the reading public increased demand for reading about the lives of the enclosed. Silent reading became popular and architectural changes in houses included private rooms or closets for reading and meditation. Not all reading was silent, as seen in Kempe's situation.

The period between the mid-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries saw changes in the interactions between English readers and books, even before the arrival of the printing press in the 1470s. The ability to read in English became more common. Text production moved out of the monasteries and into the hands of scribes. Books became cheaper due to the introduction of paper and eventually print. Exchange of books became easier as lending libraries, aristocratic women's reading circles, and informal networks of book exchange increased. Michael Alexander estimates that by the 1540s between forty and fifty percent of Caxton's first editions were religious and devotional (Alexander 94-96).

Many laypeople mixed their active and contemplative lives. Tiny, elaborate books of hours helped them imitate the prayer routines of the abbey. Some went to convents or took vows of chastity, leading to the bourgeois dilemma of how to achieve spiritual validation while remaining an active member of mercantile society. Chaucer gives us the example of the Wife of Bath. Her understanding of the spiritual principles is at odds with her social behavior. Bryan argues that Margery Kempe's rise in spiritual status seems to compensate for her failure to

improve her social standing through marriage and business ventures. Devotional literature was a crucial genre for a society trying to envision the proper relationships between self and community in a “mixed” world (Bryan 24).

Margery Kempe’s Readers

Margery Kempe increased contemplation and holy meditation through listening to books. Books ranging from simple instructional texts to graphic passion meditations blurred the boundaries between the active and the contemplative lives, as these texts were read by lay and religious alike. This literature taught the English readers how to “see themselves” and reflect on what they saw. Vernacular works of spiritual guidance show a concern with the processes of self-envisioning, self-knowledge, and affective and rational self-transformation through identification and imitation. Vernacular devotional writing documents the interior life.

Kempe reports praying for a cleric to read to her and soon meets a priest on the street, who asks if she would come speak with him and his mother. The priest feels that she is a good woman and reads books to her, including the Bible, the *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden, Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection,* and Richard Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris,* and others. The priest read to Kempe for seven or eight years. In this time Kempe directed much of what was read to her so that the priest who read to her benefited from the readings as well. The priest read books that he might never have read except that Kempe requested that he read them to her. She may have been aware of these books, or even owned and read them herself. “The same preyste lovyd hir and trustyd hir ful meche and blissed the tyme that evyr he knew hir, for he fond gret

gostly confort in hir and cawsyd hym to lokyn meche good scriptur and many a good doctowr whech he wolde not a lokyd at that tyme had sche ne be. (58:3386-3389)

One of Kempe's mentors was the Vicar of St. Stephen's, Richard of Caister, who became her friend and confessor. At one point in her narrative, after delivering her fourteenth child, Christ tells Kempe she should have no more children and commands her to go to Norwich to visit Caister. She feels weak, but Christ tells her he will make her strong. She meets with the Vicar in the afternoon, tells him her whole life from childhood, how proud and vain she had been, her conversing with Jesus, her tribulations and temptations, and how she is "fed" and comforted by Christ. While conversing on the Passion of Jesus, she hears a melody and falls down. She then tells the Vicar of her revelations about the living and the dead. Kempe tells him of conversing with Three Persons in Trinity and one Godhead, better than anything she had heard in a book read to her. She mentions Hilton's book (*The Scale of Perfection),* Bride's book (the *Revelations* of St. Bridget of Sweden), the *Stimulus Amoris* of the pseudo-Bonaventura, and the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle (17). Kempe not only cites these texts as validation of her holiness, she frequently refers to the lives of holy people in order to authenticate her superior position to these religious. Not only are Kempe's life and spiritual experiences similar to theirs, but she believes that she actually surpasses them as being more favored by Christ.

After Richard of Caister died, the priest who was Kempe's reader got ill, and she thought he would die. Kempe travelled about forty miles to Norwich, to St. Stephen's Church where he had been recently buried. She went to the churchyard and cried and wept, feeling the "fire of love burn in her heart." (60) In what Kempe considered a miracle performed by weeping and crying at Richard of Caister's, grave, Kempe returned to Lynn to find the priest who was her reader completely recovered.

Kempe was relieved because she needed all the supporters she could get. Not many clerics supported her. The popular friar who preached in St. James Chapel preached against Kempe, not mentioning her name, but people knew whom he was speaking about. The friar excluded Kempe from attending his sermons because of her loud crying, although many people felt sorry for her. When he got angry people drew back from her, including the priest who later wrote her book. By influencing him to read to her, Kempe was able to persuade the priest to continue writing her *Book*, and that the tears was uncontrollable. Christ had the priest read Vita *Maria,* the biography of Mary d'Oignies, the thirteenth-century beguine, who also wept and sobbed for Christ's passion. The priest also read Richard Rolle's *The Prick of Love,* in *Incendium Amoris,* and writings about Elizabeth of Hungary who also cried in a loud voice (62).

Iconology

We know from the many studies on medieval women, such as Margery Kempe, that they were educated, but in a non-academic manner. They used different ways of acquiring and transmitting culture and knowledge. Medieval people learned through oral communication and by imitation, by imitating good behavior, and listening to stories of virtuous deeds. They learned by observing images. Pictures, sculptures, mental images, metaphors, words, liturgical celebrations, bread and wine, all these could open the spectators' eyes to faith and allow them to experience what they represented. Julian of Norwich reports seeing a picture of the crucifixion. Augustine claimed that the highest form of knowledge of divine truth was an inner form of seeing, a natural continuation of outward seeing with the eyes, and distinguished three forms of seeing/understanding of divine truth as corporeal, spiritual, and purely intellectual or imageless understanding.

Gregory the Great's statement that "a picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books," (Chazelle 144) should be understood from the standpoint that those looking at the pictures already have a point of reference for understanding them. The pictures are read to deepen knowledge, to gain new insight rather than new knowledge. Images were used to recall the Passion of Christ and the Saints and stir devotion in the people who saw them. Kempe writes of being stirred to devotion by images which acted as rememorative signs. She was reminded of the passion of Christ by a crucifix she saw in Leicester which "was petowsly poyntyd & lamentably to be-heldyn' (46). The role of images in the middle ages was to remind the viewer that Jesus died for them, and that his death was necessary for their redemption (McAvoy 35).

Artistic representation of the crucifixion became increasingly affective during the late middle ages. Denise Nowakowski Baker gives an example of a wall painting from St. Faith's priory in Horsham, near Norwich. The fresco presents an image of the suffering Christ, evoking empathy on the part of the viewer. It shows the crucified Christ, eyes closed, head bowed, between Mary and John, their postures expressing grief. Blood flows from the nail wounds in Christ's hands and feet, and the lance wound in his chest. Blood also comes from a green band around his head instead of the crown of thorns. The bones of his torso suggest emaciation of the body. The painting is large; it begins about ten feet above the original floor level and the sixteen-foot cross extends into the gable. The figures are double life size. Baker suggests that the imposing size serves to enhance its evocative power and that while the depictions of the Passion and Crucifixion shaped what people saw, it was the narrative provided by the meditative

exercises and the visualization induced by such meditation, rather than devotional art, that was the "catalyst for visions" (Baker 42).

Kempe saw the suffering Christ as a way to understand his Passion through her own visions, and as a way to inform her fellow Christians and deliver Christ's message of love to all. Suffering along with Christ helped Kempe understand its purpose as a way to achieve his bliss in heaven. The Trinity is an abstract, concept and depicting it is theologically and technically difficult (McAvoy 38). Kempe would have been familiar with images of the Trinity because Norwich Cathedral was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. She would have seen the image, which received a steady income of donations, standing to the north of the High Altar. In 1401 a jewel was bought for the body of Christ to be displayed at the feasts of the Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi. In the fourteenth century, these were the largest annual donations, amounting to over thirty pounds in 1386. Kempe offered money at the Trinity in Norwich as part of her preparations for the pilgrimage to the Holy Land "and sythen sche went to Yermowth, and offeryd at an ymage of owyr Lady, and ther sche toke hir schyp." (26) She also offered money in worship of the Trinity as thanksgiving when she returned.

Writing *The Book of Margery Kempe*

The Book of Margery Kempe itself is framed by the acts of reading and writing. The Proem describes how some clerics encouraged Kempe to write down her feelings and colloquies with Christ, but how "sche was comawndyd in hir sowle that sche schuld not wrytyn so soone" (Pr.) Twenty years went by before Kempe had her feelings and revelations written. She spendt much time trying to find a scribe to write down her life. Kempe dictated her life from memory to

a series of scribes who, for the most part, were reluctant to write. She finally found an Englishman, possibly her son, living in Germany, who would write for her, but the text is so badly written that no one can read it. The argument against the scribe being her son though, is that he died within two months after returning home to England, which most likely would not have been enough time to write the early chapters. The first draft was picked up by a beloved priest and he discovered that the manuscript was an illegible mix of English and German and he could not decipher it. The priest agreed to rewrite the text, but after waiting four years he declined because so many people had spoken badly about Kempe due to her constant weeping in church. Another scribe attempted to take up writing the book. After a delay of four years Kempe's beloved priest returned, putting himself and his reputation at risk, and decided to reconsider and rewrote the book aided by Kempe's memory after Kempe paid him a large sum of money. Even though the writer who wrote the first copy of the book had passed away, but the second writer, through input from Margery, was able to complete the book. *Book I* ends with Kempe describing how she was at home with her scribe when it was being written. Christ wanted her to have the book written and preferred her to write rather than be in church praying. Sometimes during the writing, Kempe reports being so overcome with tears and fire in her breast that her amanuensis would also weep. Even Christ, Mary, and the saints appeared and thanked her for writing the book. Kempe also heard sweet melodies and birds singing. Sometimes she was ill and hoped to be well so she could continue writing. The scribe/priest explains that *Book II* was written in 1438, as additional material to the first book.

The recent discovery, by Professor Sebastian Sobecki of the University of Groningen, of two pieces of evidence relate to the questions regarding authorship of the *Book.* One item is the discovery of a letter prepared for Kempe's son in Danzig (Gdansk) in 1431. The letter

corroborates the theory that the son was Kempe's first scribe. A second document strengthens the idea that Robert Spryngolde, who Kempe's parish priest and principal confessor, was the clerical second scribe behind much of the *Book* (Sobecki 258).

Kempe's use of scribes and clerical readers was conventional for the late Middle Ages, especially considering her social status. Kempe was persistent in recording her personal vocation of affective piety for the benefit of her fellow Christians. Dismissing Kempe as "illiterate" diminishes her and her message.

Chapter Four – The Pilgrimages

Pilgrimage was an important aspect of Margery Kempe's vocation. Many of the narrative events in the *Book of Margery Kempe* focus on her travels. Yet she had a unique approach. This is where she made the transition spiritually and physically to a new life, and where she elicited the most sympathy and hostility. She left her husband and family, and her life in Lynn as wife and mother, to dedicate her life to Christ as his spouse. Travel is where Kempe "remakes" herself and changes her social role. Not only do Kempe's travels take her out of the domestic sphere, but they also enable her to assert a certain degree of freedom, autonomy and identity. Kempe traveled where she wished and with whom she wished, and we see how Kempe's travel accounts develop into a critique of English society. She presents religious men who are lechers, gluttons, swearers, and cheaters, and her English travel companions as hostile.

Kempe first traveled around England, then to Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago, and back again through England and Germany. She went on pilgrimages for several reasons: in order to visit shrines containing the relics of saints, to redeem her sins, and to identify with Christ's humanity by visiting the places where Jesus lived and died. Kempe traveled to visit holy people who could validate her spiritual experiences. Like Chaucer, Kempe also uses the trope of pilgrimage in her narrative as a way of presenting a picture of society by underscoring the hypocrisies and inadequacies within a community. And, like many medieval pilgrims, Kempe also went out of curiosity. She was curious to travel to foreign places and visit the sites associated with Christ's humanity. Kempe had a desire to visit holy places and then the lord ordered her to go:

> Thys creatur, whan owyr Lord had forgovyn hir hir synne as is wrete beforn, had a desyr to se tho placys wher he was born and wher he sufferyd hys passyon and wher he deyd, wyth other holy placys wher he was in hys lyve and also aftyr hys resurrexyon. As sche was in these desyres, owyr Lord bad hir in hir mend two

> yer er than sche went that sche schuld gon to Rome, to Jherusalem, and to Seynt Jamys.(15:721-726)

At first, Kempe was able to travel because she could afford to do so. References to financial transactions occur throughout the narrative. In the beginning of her travels Kempe has enough money, possibly from her business enterprises of brewing and milling. She pays off her husband's debts, and buys bedding and wine for the trip. When she is abandoned by her company in Venice, Kempe is able to pay William Weaver to accompany her. In Jerusalem, she pays the Saracen who carries her to the top of Mount Quarentine (30). Once Kempe reaches Rome, this all changes when Christ commands her to give away all of her money. Kempe describes the difficulties of a woman travelling alone with little or no money at a time when it was unheard of for a woman, or any pilgrim, to travel alone, additionally, she had little or no understanding of foreign languages.

Pilgrimage became increasingly popular by the late fifteenth century, furthermore, middle class people travelled with an increasing number of women pilgrims. The journey was seen as a spiritual renewal and as a re-enactment of the last days of Christ's life on earth became an act of spiritual redemption. The pilgrims' reasons for travel were highly affective, emphasizing Christ's humanity. By suffering along with Christ, sinners also hoped to reduce punishment in purgatory.

Theoretically, pilgrims were all equal, giving both men and women the ability to write about their experiences, although it should be noted that out of over five thousand travel books written from the Middle Ages to 1800, less than one percent were written by women (Bowers 27). Unlike many of her contemporaries however, Kempe says little or nothing about the places she visits. Instead, Kempe ignores the physical cities. She says nothing about the relics and churches; but focuses on her own personal relationships and concerns, such as her difficulties

with her travel companions. Kempe believes that the worse they treat her, the more Christ loves her.

Indulgences

In Kempe's time, the Catholic Church increased the role of purgatory, the state where the human soul would spend many years waiting for final judgement, while sins were being assessed. The outcome would decide whether the soul was saved or damned. However, those on earth could bring remission by purchasing prayers, masses, and by going on pilgrimages. As Kempe's reputation as a holy woman grew, there were times that she received payment for prayers of intercession, which helped pay for her travel (McAvoy 97).

Kempe is sent to many different places worship by Christ including one monastery where she is welcomed by the abbot and many of the monks. While seated at dinner with them Kempe "seyd many good wordys as God wold hem puttyn in hir mende" (12). One monk despised her and thought she was a hypocrite but changed his mind after listening to her. He asks Kempe to tell him if he was saved or damned, and what his sins were. Christ instructs Kempe to tell the monk that he "han synned in letchery, in dyspeyr, and in kepyng of wordly good."(12) Repentant, the monk "toke hir be the hand and led hir into a fayr hows of offyce, made hir a gret dyner, and sythen gaf hyr gold to prey for hym" (12). Realizing that Kempe knows his sins, the monk believes that she is a holy woman who can help shorten his stay in purgatory if he pays her money to pray for him. The monk changes his ways only after he thus exposed, additionally, he has enough money to "buy" his way out of purgatory.

Commercialization of the redemptive process grew in the fourteenth century. Plenary privilege extended from the churches on the continent to the churches in England, with full remission of sins available to those who could afford it (McAvoy 191). In *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer presents his pilgrims the Pardoner and the Summoner as corrupt, greedy, and abusive. The Pardoner is a hypocritical figure who tricks sinners into giving him money for remission of sins, which he then pockets. He sells supposed relics of saints and precious stones, which are actually pig's bones, and pieces of metal (Chaucer lines 344-365). Chaucer's Summoner tells a tale about a Friar who bribes people by writing false citations, threatening excommunication if they do not pay him (Chaucer lines 1709-1760). In a similar way Kempe presents her travel companions as hypocritical Christians, who travel for spiritual redemption, yet behave in a very unChristian manner.

Controversy of Travel

The idea of travel itself was a controversial activity in early modern England for a number of reasons. Travel is a self-initiated act enabling individuals to go where they please and pursue their own desires without oversite of the church. In addition, travel was dangerous. Legislation was enacted restricting the movement of people, which is why Kempe was required to get letters of approval from the Bishop of Canterbury before going on pilgrimage. Freedom of movement conflicted with traditional concepts of the society, which viewed the social order as consisting of various degrees and estates, from high to low (Bowers 5). Kempe came from a class where she had the means and status to travel, but she was still viewed as transgressive against the social norm for home, wife, and mother. When Kempe travels to Beverly the

townspeople disapprove of her lifestyle, telling her to "forsake this lyfe that thu hast, and go spynne and carde as other women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo" (53).

Even though pilgrimage was supposed to be for religious reasons, travel posed some disadvantages for the Church. Pilgrims, like Kempe, chose where they wanted to go and whom they wanted to travel with, undermining the power of the priests. Pilgrims could direct their own religious experiences at the sites they visited without being under control of their parish priests (Bowers 6). Pilgrims were often not governed by the rules that applied to society. Much of the time Kempe wandered where she pleased and when she pleased, alone, ill and poor, finding comfort where she could. She was uncomfortable, yet she had achieved a degree of autonomy not possible at home in Lynn and not available to women regardless of class (Bowers 7).

Kempe was often left on her own while travelling due to her unusual dress and behavior. A married woman travelling on her own was something unheard of at this time. She was constantly afraid of being robbed and raped and sought assurance from Christ that he would protect her. Her fears were not unfounded. While traveling in England, she was questioned and/or arrested seven times, most likely because she was suspect as a woman travelling alone. Kempe was not troubled by highwaymen, but robbed by her fellow travel companions and nearly raped by the Steward of Leicester when he detained her for questions of faith. She did not react to this behavior by her companions or authorities, but accepted that Christ would protect her. He always assured her he would and she had faith in him.

Kempe began her pilgrimages in the Fall of 1413, when she was about forty years old. The travels in *Book I* lasted about eighteen months. After a period of about twenty-six years, when Kempe would have been well into her sixties, she traveled again in Norway and Germany. A brief chronology helps understand her movements since the *Book* does not follow

chronological order. Kempe's movements are difficult to trace because the narrative jumps from place to place, out of order. Chronology is unimportant to Kempe. She is mainly concerned with recording her spiritual growth and pilgrimage is where Kempe grew spiritually.

At first Kempe and her husband visited local holy anchorites and clergy in York in order to validate her visions and feelings as coming from the Holy Spirit and not a demon. Her husband did not accompany her outside of England. Soon Kempe was drawn to visit Rome, Jerusalem, and Saint James. The longest trip she took was to the Holy Land by way of Constance and Venice. In January 1414, Kempe arrived in Venice. She left Venice in April of the same year and arrived in Jaffa in May. In September 1414, Kempe reached Rome. On October 7, 1414, Kempe visited the chapel of St. Bridget in Rome. On November 9, 1414 she experienced a mystical marriage to the Godhead in the Apostles' Church in Rome. She left Rome for England at Easter 1415. Mid-May 1415, Kempe reached the North Sea coast of the Netherlands. Two days later she returned home to Lynn. In July 1417, Kempe embarked at Bristol for Santiago de Compostela. She returned to Bristol from Santiago in early August where she faced accusations and trials for heresy as well as detention in Leicester. Kempe visited York and London in 1417. In *Book II,* Kempe embarked at Ipswich for Norway in April, 1433 (II, 3). She traveled to Danzig (II, 4) in May, and visited the exhibition of the four holy relics at Aachen. In July, 1434, Kempe arrived at the Monastery of St. Bridget of Syon. Soon afterwards (1438) she began to revise *Book I,* with a Priest scribe, and began to dictate *Book II,* in 1438 (Windeatt 29-30). Her travels were extraordinary considering how extensive they were and the hardships she endured. She must have spent little time at home during these years, separated from her husband and home.

Kempe is moved to travel to Jerusalem when Christ tells her, “My servants desire greatly to see you.”(10) At a time when it was unusual for a woman, especially a married woman, to travel on pilgrimages to the Middle East and mainland Europe, God tells Kempe she should go and directs her how she should go about it. Still conflicted with issues of chastity, her husband asks whether she would choose to have sex with him or have his head chopped off. Kempe tells him she would rather see him slain:

> It befel upon a Fryday on Mydsomyr Evyn in rygth hot wedyr, as this creatur was komyng fro Yorkeward beryng a botel wyth bere in hir hand and hir husbond a cake in hys bosom, he askyd hys wyfe this qwestyon, ‘Margery, if her come a man wyth a swerd and wold smyte of myn hed les than I schulde comown kendly wyth yow as I have do befor, seyth me trewth of yowr consciens -- for ye sey ye wyl not lye --whether wold ye suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth yow agen as I dede sumtyme?’ ‘Alas, ser,’ sche seyd, ‘why meve ye this mater and have we ben chast this eight wekys?’ ‘For I wyl wete the trewth of yowr hert.’ And than sche seyd wyth gret sorwe, ‘Forsothe I had levar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne agen to owyr unclennesse.’ And he seyd agen, ‘Ye arn no good wyfe.’ (11: 519-528)

John Kempe is only known through Kempe’s writing. His manner of speaking sounds natural and reasonable considering the situation and the time and place he is living in with his wife. What starts out as a homely passage as Kempe remembers what the weather was like and what they ate, turns into a disagreement. A medieval wife was taught to be obedient to her husband so John’s reaction to her request for celibacy does not sound unreasonable, but Kempe managed to run her own affairs by believing internal voices coming from God. If the history of medieval women is in part “a history of the constraints of economic disadvantages, familial duty, and prescribed roles, it is also in part a history of women’s agency within and against these constraints” (Bennett 6). As Kempe’s colloquies with Christ increase through the *Book,* she is able, to some extent to shape her own experiences.

Finally her husband gave in to her idea to go to Jerusalem but asks that they lie in bed together, that she pay his debts before leaving, and that she eat and drink with him on Fridays.

Using a dialogue of commercial enterprise, a discourse found throughout Kempe's pilgrimages, she reports that Christ tells her to make a bargain with her husband by saying to him:

> 'Sere, yf it lyke yow, ye schal grawnt me my desyr, and ye schal have yowr desyr. Grawntyth me that ye schal not komyn in my bed, and I grawnt yow to qwyte yowr dettys er I go to Jerusalem. And makyth my body fre to God so that ye nevyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr this day whyl ye levyn, and I schal etyn and drynkyn on the Fryday at yowr byddyng.' (11:566-570)

Kempe will agree to pay her husband's debts and will eat with him on Fridays, but he cannot come to her in bed. According to Kempe, Christ taught her how to manipulate her husband when he told her that it was his intention all along to have her fast on Fridays in order to use it as a bargaining chip in order to achieve another desire. By conceding to eat and drink with her husband on Fridays, Kempe has gained marital chastity and a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Kempe prepared for her pilgrimage by settling her husband's debts and leaving him, her family, and her confessor. She remakes herself in to something other than a wife and mother.

During her pilgrimages, Kempe encountered hostility and hardship. When she stopped at Canterbury, the monks accused her of being a heretic and a Lollard and wanted to burn her in a barrel. Upon departing by ship for Zierikerzee, Kempe was terrified. She thought the boat would sink and that she would drown, but she reports that Christ reassured her that she, as well as anyone traveling with her would be safe. The journey over land from Zerikerzee to Constance, then to Bologna and on to Venice was long and arduous. Conditions got progressively worse, as Kempe's confessor and her traveling companions became angry with her because of her weeping and sobbing. They said they would not put up with it as her husband did, furthermore, she was labeled as a "strumpet" because she was travelling without her husband. They took her maidservant away from her so that she would not be "prostituted" by her. The person holding her

money gave her a noble and told her to find her own way. (27) Her companions abandoned her as they did at various times during the travels.

Kempe was a controversial woman. Her travel companions may not have wanted to be associated with her in the event she is accused of Lollardy, although Lollards preached against pilgrimage because they viewed it as a type of image worship or idolatry. Yet, they did believe that lay people, especially women, should preach. The fact that Kempe is spoke about the gospel put her and her travel companions in a treacherous position but, Kempe continued speaking because she never believed that her way of devotion was wrong. She was never afraid to live her life according to what she reported as Christ's direction.

Jerusalem

Kempe left Venice for the Holy Land. Her account of Jerusalem was more detailed than of some of the other sites. It was not an easy trip, as suffering was central to the Jerusalem pilgrimage. By enduring hardship, pilgrims reenacted Christ's suffering, which made possible redemption for all humankind (Bowers 18). The last two days of the trip pilgrims rode on donkeys. Kempe was so overwhelmed when she saw the city that she almost fell off her donkey. Two Germans assisted her thinking she was ill (28). Visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and travelling the Via Dolorosa up to the Mount Calvary was a turning point for Kempe in her vocation. At this time Kempe began her many years of violent crying. This response happened on Mount Calvary, in a highly affective passage, where she sees Christ hanging on the cross as if present. Kempe cries and writhes on the ground with her arms outspread in imitation of Christ on the crucifix:

> And theforseyd creatur wept and sobbyd so plentyuowsly as thow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey sufferyng hys Passyon at that tyme. Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, and that cawsyd hir to have compassyon. And whan thei cam up onto the Mownt of Calvarye sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hlr armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr, for in the cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucified. (28: 1568-1575)

Previously the crying was less violent. Now she wept and sobbed violently in the places where Jesus suffered his passion. She fell to the ground, her body writhing around. She started screaming. At first the cryings and roarings were a rare occurrences, after visiting Jerusalem they increased to seven or fourteen in a day. She identified so intensely with Christ that she fell down so often that people thought she was ill. Kempe's memory of her experiences in the Holy Land focus on her emotional response and identification with Christ.

While most medieval pilgrims focus on the physical hardship of pilgrimage, Kempe stresses the psychological and social pain (Bowers 18). She would try to suppress the screaming for as long as she could, turning the color of lead until she could no longer endure it. Because of her extreme emotional outbursts, people thought she was possessed by an evil spirit or drunk. Some wished she were in a "bottomless boat," other more spiritually inclined people loved and esteemed her more. Kempe tried to suppress these outbursts for as long as she could, but could not endure it. Whenever the Friars led her to a holy place she wept and screamed with great compassion for Jesus' passion. She received communion at Mount Calvary, where she again fell into crying and screaming.

The pilgrims visited the hills where the guides told Kempe the Lord carried the cross on his back. Kempe visited four holy places with great devotion, 'plenteous tears, and with violent sobbings.' One was Mount Zion, the location of the Last Supper, another was Mount Calvary,

the third was the marble stone over the Lord's grave, and the fourth was where the holy cross was buried. But Kempe's travel companions go to the River Jordan and did not want her to come with them. She prayed to God who told her to go. It was so hot the ground burned her feet. Afterwards she went to Mount Quarentyne, where the Lord fasted for forty days. She could not make it up the hill and her companions would not help her. When she was abandoned by her fellow pilgrims at the base of Mt. Quarentyne, Kempe hired a "comely" Saracen to carry her up. She gave him some money and the man took her up the mountain. Echoing Christ's words from the cross ("I thirst," John 19:28), Kempe was very thirsty, but got no sympathy from her fellow pilgrims. Their treatment of Kempe replicated the actions of Christ's persecutors. Again, it is the Grey Friars who comforted her when her companions would not acknowledge her. The Friars were welcoming to her, and the Saracen escorted her wherever she wanted to go. Kempe found people who are good to her, except for her own countrymen. Kempe points out the hypocrisies of pilgrims, both lay and religious from her own country, who behave in a very un-Christian manner towards her. The Saracens, who are Muslim, treat her better than fellow Christians.

Kempe identified with grieving Mary at the scene as she re-experienced the Christ's Passion. However, most contemporary descriptions of Mary's grief depict a controlled, socially acceptable suffering in contrast to Kempe's uncontrollable sobbing and wailing (McAvoy 53). Kempe's description of her crying is similar to that she experienced during childbirth as described at the beginning of her *Book* during her conversion experience. Kempe linked her own spiritual journey with Mary Magdalene's. She visited the chapel where the Lord appeared to Mary on Easter Day, and the place where Mary Magdalene stood when Christ asked her why she wept (30). Kempe sees Mary Magdalene in one of her visions while on Calvary (28). Kempe identifies with Mary Magdalene as a converted sinner, like herself, who is redeemed. At one

point, Jesus tells Kempe that he loves her as much as he loves Mary Magdalene (74). In order to demonstrate how Christ prefers her to other holy women, authorize her voice, and validate her status as holy, Kempe often uses examples where she can.

Rome

Kempe's visit to Rome was a turning point in her spiritual growth and a turning point in her vocation because this was where the mystical marriage took place after her return from Jerusalem. (35) She lived about seven months in Rome, most of the time without her travel companions, and for the most part, the people of Rome did not, as in other cities, harass Kempe. In 1414, Rome was in a shambles.

In Kempe's contemplation, the mystical marriage placed her at the same level of importance as the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. For Kempe, the marriage was a very physical experience. She felt the "fire of love" for sixteen years after the marriage and received the gifts of smell and sound for twenty-five years. Kempe saw white things flying all around her and heard a voice that said, "God is in the and thu art in hym" (35).

While traveling from Jerusalem to Venice many of Kempe took care of many of her companions who were ill. Nevertheless, after they all arrived safely in Venice, they abandoned her, some saying they would not go with her for a "hundred pounds." When they had gone, Kempe reports that Christ spoke to her, telling her that he would bring her safely to Rome and home to England.

Before leaving on her travels it was prophesized by an anchorite that Kempe would suffer along the way, but that a "broken-backed" man would escort her to safety. After she was

abandoned by her fellow travelers she met a poor man named Richard with a hump on his back and remembered the anchorites prophesy. Afterwards he became her travel companion. Shortly, they met two Grey Friars and a woman who came with them from Jerusalem on an ass carrying a chest with an image of the Lord. Richard encouraged Kempe to go with them so he could go beg, saying he would meet up with her later. None of the group could understand Kempe because they did not speak English, but they provided her with food, drink, and lodgings every day. The woman who had the image, in the form of a doll, took it out of the chest, dressed it up, and kissed it as if it was Christ himself. Kempe, who saw Christ in the image of the doll, is seized with "sweet devotion and sweet meditations, so that she wept with great sobbing and loud crying."

When Kempe left her own children behind in England, her maternal feelings were redirected toward Christ and the image of the Christ-child in the doll. Kempe had given herself to Christ, substituting her husband and family for Christ. Having abandoned her own husband and children, Kempe's affection for Christ is for Christ the man. She describes being reminded of Christ's Passion in all human situations:

> And sumtyme, whan sche saw the crucyfyx, er yf sche sey a man had a wownde er a best whethyr it wer, er yyf a man bett a childe befor hir er smet an hors er another best wyth a whippe, yyf sche myth sen it er heryn it, hir thowt sche saw owyr Lord be betyn er wowndydlyk as sche saw in the man er in the best, as wel in the feld as in the town, and be hirselfe alone as wel as among the pepyl. (28:1585-1590)

When she saw women in Rome with male children, she cried and wept as though she had seen Christ in his childhood. If she saw a handsome man she would again weep and sob because she thought of Christ. Once when she came to a poor woman's house, the woman's little son was

suckling on her breast causing Kempe to burst out crying, thinking about Mary and her son. The woman begged her to stop, not knowing why she wept. Kempe does not say whether she ever missed her family in Lynn, but it may be that if she did miss them, she redirected her feelings to focus on Christ instead.

Because she was abandoned by her fellow travelers again Kempe's companion Richard, made arrangements for her to accompany a wealthy Italian woman, Margaret Florentyne, who came to Rome with many knights and gentlewomen. Not much information is reported regarding Florentyne other than that she was a great woman. When they arrived in Rome they met Kempe's fellow pilgrims who were surprised she was with this woman. Kempe was dressed all in white. Her new clothing was accepted by the noble Italian woman, but not by her fellow pilgrims. They thought she was a hypocrite. She was taken in at the Hospital of St. Thomas of Canterbury in Rome, a hospice for English travelers. After receiving communion with "great weeping, violent sobbing and loud crying" Kempe was highly regarded by the Master of the Hospital, but slandered by the priest who was one of her companions and countryman. Because of this, she was put out of the hospital.

When Kempe had nowhere to stay, she spoke with Richard who went to the church across the street and asked if she could confess and receive communion there. The priest agreed, but could not understand English. He received her as if she were his mother or his sister and said he would support her against her enemies. He was eventually defamed by Kempe's enemies as well, especially by the priest in her group of fellow pilgrims, as Kempe's travel companions continued to abuse her and anyone associated with her in an attempt to isolate her.

Eventually, Kempe was welcomed back to the Hospital of St. Thomas, where she was previously refused. The Brothers are sorry they had barred her and now received her warmly.

Kempe also found her maidservant living in the hospital. Kempe was sorry that they were separated, but the girl never wanted to be with her again.

A priest ordered Kempe to serve a poor, old woman for six weeks as part of an undefined penance. The woman was full of vermin and suffered a lot of pain. Kempe begged for the woman and gave her good wine. It is interesting to note that in this case Kempe's charitable act is not voluntary and it is unclear why the penance is imposed.

In the fifteenth century, the practice of charity was considered an important part of religious observance, especially for lay people. Charity was one area where lay people could express the active rather than contemplative form of piety (Cullum 179). Kempe however, was often the recipient of charity during her pilgrimages, especially in Rome. Kempe went from wealth to poverty during her travels in Rome. She gave away all her goods including those belonging to Richard which made him angry with her. Kempe began a life of increasing hardship, now she depended on Christian charity in order to survive.

Kempe found compassion in the Italian people while traveling in Italy. Margaret Florentyne, the woman who brought her from Assisi to Rome, had Kempe eat with her and gave her money. A man in Rome named Marcel had her eat with him two days a week. His wife was having a baby, so he wanted Kempe to stay with his family and be godmother to his baby. Another woman gave her food on Wednesdays. Kempe begged from door to door on the days she was not provided for. Swiss and Italian women let her sleep in their beds and a woman in Calais took her home, cleaned her and gave her new clothes to wear. Kempe was accepted and protected by individuals who were not her fellow travelers, underscoring the lack of Christian charity of the English pilgrims.

Continental Models of Pilgrim Saints

As an effort to explain her form of devotion and why she traveled, Kempe modeled herself on certain Continental saints. A major influence on Kempe's vocation of pilgrimage was St. Bridget of Sweden, as well as several Continental women saints who had been married women and wrote accounts of their experiences. By examining the behaviors of other saintly women, such as St. Bridget and Dorothy of Montau, Kempe's pilgrimages can be placed in the context of their lives and travels.

Kempe replicated St. Bridget's pilgrimages as well as her visits to Brigittine houses, the Hospice in Rome where Bridget wrote much of her *Revelations,* to the Norwegian Brigittine convent of Munkaliv, the convent of Marienbrunn at Gdansk, and the English Brigittine Syon and Carthusian Sheen (Holloway 203). St. Bridget's first pilgrimage was to St. James accompanied by her husband. When he died soon after, Bridget was free to dedicate her life to her vocation. Kempe did not wait for her husband to die, but her travel experiences were very different from St. Bridget's who went on to found a religious order as a result of her travels. Kempe helps legitimate her own life style by imitating St. Bridget. But Kempe did not found an order so she imitated St. Bridget only in certain ways.

St. Bridget left Sweden for Rome in 1349. She spent the rest of her life there and died in 1373. Her canonization was being considered while Kempe was there in 1391 and confirmed in 1415. Kempe not only imitated St. Bridget, but linked her life to St. Bridget within her own pilgrimages. For example, a wealthy woman in Rome wanted Kempe to be godmother to her daughter, who was named for St. Bridget. Kempe spoke with St. Bridget's former maidservant in Rome, but they could not understand each other, so they got a man to translate for them. The maidservant told Kempe that St. Bridget was kind and meek with everyone and that she had a

"laughing face." Kempe went to the room where St. Bridget died and heard a German priest preach of her revelations and life. On one of St. Bridget's days, Kempe knelt on the stone where God told her what day she would die. While Kempe was there God sent storms and winds as indications that the saint's day should be holy (39).

Travels in *Book II*

Book II, written in 1438, as additional material to the first book, describes Kempe's travels to Germany, Poland, and back to England. When Kempe's son returned home to England with his wife he became ill and died after one month. Kempe's husband died soon after her son. When her daughter-in-law wanted to return home to Germany, Kempe reports speaking to Christ saying that she desired to go with her. Christ told her she should go but not tell her confessor she's going to Germany, just taking her daughter-in-law to the ship. She paid a hermit to take her to the ship who became upset when he realized that she was leaving on it as well. Kempe goes to Germany without secular or ecclesiastical approval, which was illegal. Kempe wanted to stay in Germany but her daughter-in-law wanted her to leave. Christ told her to go back home to England. (II, 4)

Kempe's return to England was a difficult one. She would have been in her sixties at this time and not in good health. She went with a man to Straslund and Wilsnack on pilgrimage. Travel was tiring and dangerous because of the war going on between Poland and the Teutonic Order. (II, 5) They went toward Aachen where they met some monks who persuaded Kempe's companion to leave her. They abandoned her and gave her back her money and gold. Priests came to where she was staying speaking foul language and ridiculing her, calling her an

“Englishwoman with a tail.” (II, 6) She was afraid she would be raped and asked to have two maids sleep with her. Because she had no one to travel with she joined a group of poor people who took off their clothes at night to pick vermin off each other. Kempe did not do this so she was covered in vermin. (II, 6)

Kempe eventually paid a Friar to travel back with her to Calais so that she could find a ship to England. When she reached Dover she found a man who took her to Canterbury. (II, 8)

London

Kempe’s treatment by her countrymen continued to worsen when she returned to London feeling humiliated. She went wearing a canvas sack cloth and holding a handkerchief to her face so that she would not be recognized. Some people recognized her anyway and taunted her saying, “Ah, you false flesh, you shall eat no good meat.” (II, 9) A story was circulating around London about “Mar. Kempe of Lynn,” saying that she passed up a less valued fish for a more expensive one. This is the first time Kempe’s name is mentioned in the *Book.* She no longer referred to herself as “creature.” Kempe was at dinner at a wealthy widow’s home where there were people saying it as a joke. They did not realize who she was. When Kempe asked who they were speaking about they tell her it was said by a false, pretending hypocrite from Lynn. Kempe told them that she was who they were talking about saying “God forgeve it yow, for I am that same persone to whom thes wordys ben arectyd, whech oftyn tyme suffir gret schame and repref and am not gylty in this mater, God I take to record," (II, 9: 590-592 Kempe spoke out as herself

against the vicious people but she continued to suffer hostility in London from the priests in church because of her weeping and sobbing (II, 9).

After visiting Syon Abbey, Kempe met the hermit who had taken her to the coast when she went to Germany. He was angry with her because he received the blame for her leaving without telling her confessor. She offered to pay him and he finally consented to bring her home to Lynn. (II, 10). Kempe's travels end abruptly in Lynn, where her narrative also ends. Ultimately, her spiritual and psychological journey is an uneven one. On her return home, Kempe fits into no proscribed social role. *Book II*, like *Book I,* focuses on ill-treatment by her countrymen, as their behavior becomes increasingly perverse.

Kempe's experiences as a traveler were astonishing for a woman in her time, or any time. Her attempts at remaking herself spiritually and socially led to a certain degree of selfhood and autonomy that remain a mirror for those who chose this path. Margery Kempe is often labelled as a "hysteric" troublemaker. Yet, she does win the right to speak, her representations of travel critique English society, and for Kempe as travel is where she changes. Kempe's hardships and suffering lead her to a certain degree of selfhood, fashioning for herself a new role for women; but there is no model for a woman like her in English society. The closest might be the beguines who lead independent lives in Northern Europe. Kempe was similar to them because she desired to live an independent life, but different because Beguines were chaste lay religious who lived in Northern Europe together in a semi-monastic community. Beguines did not travel and were eventually suppressed during the Protestant Reformation, as were pilgrimages.

Chapter Five: Trials and Problems of Authority

The *Book of Margery Kempe,* has often been read as challenging religious, social and cultural norms in late Medieval England. Kempe records being charged, tried, and imprisoned for heresy on a number of occasions, although she does not usually provide details such as the reasons for the charges. Further complicating matters is that the *Book* is not written in chronological order making it difficult to follow at times. But why is she arrested and interrogated so often by so many important clerics? What purpose does it serve? Why does the church let her go? The *Book* clearly displays society's hostility towards heresy, but was she ever really considered a threat? Kempe was orthodox in her beliefs, but unorthodox in her behavior as she reports being questioned more often, during the trials, about her white dress, her preaching, and traveling without her husband, than on her religious beliefs. Secular authorities usually were the ones who harassed and charged Kempe with heresy, while upper clergy such as abbots, archbishops, and bishops found her beliefs orthodox. In order to appreciate the seriousness of these charges, it is important to understand the cultural and historical context of the period.

Lollardy

Kempe lived at a time when England was prosperous, but sometimes suffered plague, revolts, and conflicts within the Church. Kings Richard II and Henry V were prominent, but the book does not mention historical events in her narrative such as Henry V's victory over the French at Agincourt or the Peasant Revolt, maybe as a result of scribal editing in order to protect her. The Peasant Revolt (1381) was a serious uprising in large parts of England against the

King's poll tax, which was levied to fund his wars against France. The Black Death had decreased the population; this decrease led to a shortage of workers and higher wages paid to workers in order to fill the demand. As a result taxes were increased to raise money for the King. Geoffrey Litster led the revolt against this tax in East Anglia which is where Kempe lived. A group of academics and theologians who were opposed to the revolt and tied it to heresy rather than to taxes, including the Bishop of Lincoln, Philip Repingdon, who would later meet Kempe, linked the rebellion to Wyclif's beliefs and heresy (Arnold 78). Kempe would have been aware of Litster's revolt because it was located in Lynn where he was confronted and defeated by Bishop Henry Dispenser. Litster was later executed.

Oxford theologian John Wyclif's teachings and vernacular Bible were a prelude to the Reformation and to serious disruptions in the Church. In the 1370s, Wyclif developed controversial positions by placing emphasis on the "literal sense" of scripture and making it accessible to lay people through vernacular translation. He called for the disendowment of the Church, criticized the cult of saints, and doubted that the Eucharist was the actual transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. The sect that formed after Wyclif's death was called Lollardy. They spread their beliefs through preaching and books and were considered heretics and a threat to secular power. The Lollard reform movement foreshadowed sixteenth-century changes. Wyclif died in 1384, and years later his body was dug up and burned (Arnold 78). On the continent, Marguerite Porete was burned in 1310, and Joan of Arc was burned in 1431 as a result of heresy charges against them.

The Lollard movement was concerned with the morality of the Church, its greed, avarice and wealth, as well as with its doctrine. The movement was also against Church beliefs such as transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, Friday fasts, images, pilgrimage, special prayers for the

dead, and the belief that confession to a priest was necessary for salvation. Contrary to Lollard practices, Kempe's vocation included fasting, pilgrimage and frequent confession (Atkinson 105). Lollards read Bibles translated into English and held meetings away from the church. Their leader was a Lollard knight, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham. In 1401 the statute *De haretico comburendo* was passed which sentenced Lollards to death. That year Archbishop Thomas Arundel, a person who would later meet with Kempe, had William Sawtre burnt for heresy. Kempe would have known about Sawtre even though he is not mentioned in her book. He was a parish priest from St. Margaret's in Lynn, Kempe's church, and the first person burned at the stake for Lollardy. Arundel drew up *Constitutions* in 1407 with an aim to ban Wyclif's works, police religious discourse, and suppress vernacular religious writings. In 1410 John Badby was burned at Smithfield for holding arguably Wycliffite views. Oldcastle's attempted revolt in January 1414, was put down, but he was not captured. Approximately, 250 people were arrested, 150 tried for Lollardy and/or rebellion, and 38 executed. Between 1428 and 1431 at least sixty men and women were tired for heresy in Norwich (Arnold 78). Oldcastle, who was pronounced a heretic by Archbishop Arundel in 1413, escaped from the tower, was recaptured in 1417 and hanged and burned as an outlaw, heretic and traitor on December 14, 1417, in the presence of the Duke of Bedford, another figure Kempe meets during her own trials for heresy (Windeatt 6). It was during this period that Kempe was faced with her own trials. Kempe encountered her most serious problems in 1417, but she would have been aware of the Norwich trials at the time of writing her *Book,* which was written about twenty years later, when there was a lull in Lollard activities. Kempe may have delayed writing her *Book* until she felt it was safe to do so.

Kempe was called a Lollard for the first time in 1413 in Canterbury where "sche was gretly despysed and reprevyd for cawse sche wept so fast" (13) all day long; her accusers

included monks, priests, and secular men. Even Kempe's husband abandoned her as if he did not know her. As usual, Kempe provided few details, but the charge of heresy seems to be related to the weeping in Canterbury Cathedral, not her religious beliefs. The loud weeping and roaring drew the attention of an old monk, a treasurer to the Queen, who questioned her orthodoxy based on her unorthodox behavior. When Kempe tells the monks a story from scripture, something Lollards are known to do, the monks accuse her of Lollardy and want to burn her. The old monk tells her "I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston that ther schuld no man speke wyth the." (13) He stated that he would like to see Kempe enclosed as an anchoress, imprisoned, or dead where her behavior would not influence others. Kempe was faced with a dilemma. She was in a vulnerable position as a medieval woman unaccompanied by her husband or a male companion. The monk who despised her could possibly have her imprisoned for Lollardy, since she claimed to have direct access to speaking with God, and the crowd at Canterbury were ready to burn her. Kempe denies being a Lollard or heretic.

> Than sche went owt of the monastery, thei folwyng and crying upon hir, 'Thow schalt be brent, fals lollare. Her is a cartful of thornys redy for the and a tonne to bren the wyth.' And the creatur stod wythowtyn the gatys at Cawntyrbery, for it was in the evenyng, mech pepyl wonderyng on hir. Than seyd the pepyl, 'Tak and bren hir.' And the creatur stod stylle, tremelyng and whakyng ful sor in hir flesch wythowtyn ony erdly comfort, and wyst not wher hyr husbond was become. Than prayd sche in hir hert to owyr Lord, thynkyng on this maner, 'Hedyr cam I, Lord, for thi lofe. Blyssed Lord, help me and have mercy on me.' And anon, aftyr sche had mad hir prayerys in hir hert to owyr Lord, ther komyn tweyn fayr yong men and seyd to hir, 'Damsel, art thow non eretyke ne no loller?' And sche seyd, 'No, serys, I am neythyr eretyke ne loller' (13:648-658).

Even though the confrontation leaves Kempe terrified, alone, and shaking, she stands up to the monk when she tells him a tale about a man who paid people to despise him as a form of penance. She confronts the crowd and thanks them for despising her free of charge.

Vow of Chastity

Kempe set off on her travels in England with her husband, although sometimes out of fear he left her on her own. A woman traveling alone, especially in a foreign country, raised serious questions regarding her sexual activities. Her husband always returned though because he felt sorry for her when all others abandoned her and accused her of things she never did, threatening her with burning. Kempe's husband took her to speak with the Bishop of Lincoln, Philip Repingdon where they are made to wait three weeks before they could speak with him, because he was not at home. They were determined to wait and meet with him in order to take the vow of chastity. When Kempe finally met with the Bishop in private and confided in him, he told her that her feelings were orthodox. Kempe does not report what she told him, but Repingdon encouraged her, and advised her to write down her feelings. Kempe said it was not God's will to write them down so soon. Kempe may have felt that it was not the right time for political reasons as well in case whatever she wrote might be interpreted as heresy since she recently had faced some charges.

After confiding in him, Kempe asks the Bishop of Lincoln for the mantle and ring, an indication of taking the vow of chastity. The Bishop asks for her husband's consent to the vow of chastity, and John Kempe agrees. She also reports that Christ asked her to dress in white which would have been considered controversial because Kempe is a married woman and white is for virgins. Members of the Bishop's household wonder what is wrong with Kempe when she starts loud weeping. The Bishop listens to the concerns of his household and hesitates to give her the

mantle and ring, referring her instead to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel. Even though Repingdon cannot find fault with Kempe, he does not feel comfortable approving her dress. Repingdon would recognize the controversy surrounding Kempe wearing white clothes. Kempe reports that Christ intervenes telling her: "Dowtyr, sey the Bysshop that he dredyth mor the schamys of the world than the parfyt lofe of God" (15). Kempe says this to the Bishop, nonetheless, Repingdon hesitates approving her wearing white, saying that she should wait until she returns from her pilgrimage, but gives her money to buy the white clothing for when it is approved and to pray for him.

Kempe and her husband go on to London, to Lambeth, to Archbishop Arundel's residence to obtain approval. Arundel was the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the most powerful men in England. A woman there reminds Kempe that a priest from Lynn was burned as a Lollard, saying: "I wold thu wer in Smythfeld, and I wold beryn a fagot to bren the wyth; it is pety that thow levyst" (16). The townspeople hostile towards Kempe. They do not understand her emotional outbursts or her behavior and are ready to burn her as a heretic.

Kempe speaks with the Archbishop, asking to receive communion every Sunday, which he grants. She tells him of her life, her weeping, and her conversing with the Lord. As usual Kempe does not provide the details of what she told him. After he finds no fault at all and approves of her manner of life, Kempe speaks boldly to the Archbishop about the swearing and sinful behavior going on in his household. She criticizes the Archbishop's clerks, squires and yeomen for swearing and "other synnes that thei usyd" (16). He allows her to speak and indicates that he will correct his servants. Kempe is not intimidated by the powerful and dangerous Archbishop once she gains his approval and when she believes she holds the moral high ground, but she waits until after gaining his approval before criticizing him.

Harassment and interrogations lead her to question her vocation and to doubt her feelings but she receives validation from a number of prominent people, such as the Vicar of St. Stephen's Church at Norwich, Richard Caister, who is one of Kempe's confessors and always takes her side and supports her, as well as other religious men who assure her there is no delusion in her manner of living. Caister even goes with her and advocates for her during her interrogation. Kempe's principal confessor, the anchorite of the Preaching Friars in Lynn, assures her that feelings come from God. The only religious woman Kempe reports visiting and spending many days with Julian of Norwich for validation of her feelings and visions. No details of the conversation are recorded, but Julian reassures Kempe saying "Settyth al yowr trust in God and feryth not the langage of the world, for the mor despyte, schame, and repref that ye have in the world the mor is yowr meryte in the sygth of God. Pacyens is necessary unto yow for in that schal ye kepyn yowr sowle." (18) Others, who only know Kempe through her outward behavior speak very badly of her based on her unorthodox method of devotion. An anchorite tells Kempe he does not believe her feelings and laughs at her saying that she had been a sinful woman so he does not think God would be so familiar with her in such a short time. Kempe's confessor advises her to leave Lynn due to the hostility.

Suspicion of Adultery

Kempe settles her debts, makes an offering at Trinity Church in Norwich, leaves her husband, family, and confessor and begins her pilgrimage in 1413. Kempe travels with a friend Thomas Marchale, who gave her money to pray for him when she arrived at Santiago and also paid for her ship passage. Before embarking, Kempe admonishes a rich man who did not want

her to sail on the ship with him because he felt she is an adulterer since she is traveling with a man who is not her husband. She would be suspected of lechery and adultery. But his admonishment seems to have more to do with wealth than the possibilities of adultery. Kempe tells him that "Owr Lord Jhesu hath no deynté of a ryche man les than he wil be a good man and a meke man" (45 but before ship sailed Kempe is summoned to appear before Thomas Peverel, Bishop of Worcester, who is staying three miles outside Bristol. He was responsible for the conviction on a charge of heresy of the Lollard John Badby, who was burned in 1410. It is not clear whether Kempe was summoned because of heresy, or because she is a woman traveling with a man who is not her husband, because of the loud weeping and crying in church, or because she spoke out against the wealthy man. Clearly, Kempe's unorthodox behavior drew attention, leading people to think her religious views were also unorthodox.

Kempe continued to be outspoken when she met the Bishop's men in the hall. Kemp tells them they look like the "devil's men" because they are dressed very fashionably. They were annoyed and rebuked her, but when afterwards Kempe spoke to them about sin and misconduct, they listened to her. When she met the Bishop, she spoke boldly and wanted to know why he summoned her. Kempe complained that it was very inconvenient for her since she wanted to sail to Santiago. The Bishop said he had not summoned her and the *Book* does not make it clear who summoned her or why she was summoned. Peverel knew she was John Brunham's daughter and begged her not to be angry with him, possibly making class a bargaining chip in dealing with him. Perevel wanted her to eat with him, but Kempe told him she had plans to eat with a good man in town. The Bishop asked her to pray for him because he had been warned by a holy man that he would die within two years. When Kempe was ready to leave, he gave her gold and his blessing. His household escorted her to the ship, and the Bishop asked her to come back again

when she returned from Santiago. Kempe used her social position as daughter to a prominent man to her advantage when it was convenient to get her out of danger.

Charges of Heresy

The first clear charge of heresy is in Leicester in 1417 (chapters 46-49). After returning from Santiago, Kempe went to Leicester with Thomas Marchale. They went to church where Kempe broke out in a loud voice weeping and sobbing at the sight of the crucifix. The men and women wondered what was wrong with her, but she said she would not tell them. Kempe asked Thomas Marchale to write a letter to her husband, asking him to come and take her home. While he was writing the letter, the innkeeper came and ordered her to speak with the Mayor of Leicester. The Mayor wanted to know where she was from. When she said she was from Lynn in Norfolk, the daughter of a man who had been mayor five times and an alderman, and she had a husband who was a burgess in Lynn, the Mayor made a link between Kempe and St. Katherine, a fourth-century virgin martyr and an important religious figure in the late Middle Ages who also debated with authority concerning her religious beliefs, but he says she and Kempe are not alike, "Seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet ar ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl, and therfor I schal have the in preson" (46). He ordered her to prison. The accusation of prostitution might be because she was not with a husband. She was a woman out of place. It is not clear why the Mayor wanted Kempe in prison, except that as evidenced in previous ordeals, the accusations of heresy followed Kempe's noisy bouts of affective piety. The Mayor insulted her for a long time, but Kempe was able to hold her own. When he called for the jailer to put her in prison, the jailer told him he only has a place for

men. Kempe begged him not to put her with men because she was afraid of being raped. The jailer offered to keep her at his house until the Mayor wanted to see her again. He took her home with him and gave her good accommodations. He locked the door to her room, but let her go to church when she wanted to and she ate at his own table with him and his wife (46). Kempe was put in prison for heresy by the Mayor, but there were people such as the jailer and his wife who supported her and believed she was a good woman.

When the Steward of Leicester sent for Kempe, the jailer's wife tried to protect her and refused to let her go without the jailer being with her. The jailer came home and took her to the Steward, who was the first person to question Kempe. He spoke to her in Latin in front of priests, testing her to see what she would say. Understanding Latin did not necessarily make a woman a Lollard; she could have been a nun, but when Kempe asked him to speak English because she did not understand him, the Steward accused her of lying. He asked the questions in English, which she answered so reasonably and well that he had no case against her. As usual, Kempe does not report the conversation between her and the Steward. Then when he took her hand and led her to his private chamber, it seemed to Kempe that he intended to rape her. Kempe begged for mercy. The Steward threatened her saying, "Thu schalt telle me whethyr thu hast this speche of God er of the devyl, er ellys thu schalt gon to preson" (47). Kempe's "speech" could mean her answers to the interrogation or her public preaching. He frightened Kempe so much that she told him "how sche had hyr speche and hir dalyawns of the Holy Gost and not of hir owyn cunyng" (47) The Steward was astonished and left her saying; "Eythyr thu art a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman" (47). He does not release her but delivered her to the jailer who took her home with him instead of to prison. In keeping with the rest of her *Book,* people are either for Kempe or against her.

As usual, Kempe does not provide the details when she reports that her pilgrimage companions, Marchale and a man from Wisbech were then put in prison because of her. She was upset over them being imprisoned, and says that Christ came to her and told her they would not be in for long because he would send thunderstorms to demonstrate his displeasure. When these storms actually did arrive, the townspeople were so terrified that they did not know what to do and thought that it was because the pilgrims were put in prison. The authorities released the two pilgrims who were examined by the Mayor about Kempe. When they swear that as far as they knew she was a good woman so the Mayor let them go. They tell Kempe that they thought if the Mayor could have his way he would burn her. (47) Kempe not only elicits either hostility or support from those she encounters, she also evokes a sense of uncertainty of how to react towards her, from people who are not sure whether she good or wicked.

The official inquiry began on the following Wednesday in All Hallows church in Leicester, where Kempe was brought before the Abbot of Leicester and the Dean of Leicester for examination. In fact there were so many people present that “thei stodyn upon stolys for to beheldyn hir and wonderyn upon hir” (48). Kempe was down on her knees praying to God that she might have the “grace, wytte, and wysdam so to answeryn that day as myth ben most plesawns and worschep to hym, most profyth to hir sowle, and best exampyl to the pepyl” (48). Kempe was put under oath and questioned on her beliefs. She was asked about the articles of faith. First they asked her to say what she believed about the sacrament, trying to expose her as a Lollard. Her answer that she believed in transubstantiation was orthodox. She continued to answer all the articles with orthodox responses. The Abbot and Dean were pleased, and the trial ended.

The Mayor was unwilling to let Kempe go, saying that she lied and did not mean what she said. He questioned her sexual behavior, her manner of dress, and her motive for speaking to women. She told them that the only man she has had sexual relations with was her husband, with whom she had fourteen children and that she loved God above all. Then Kempe told the Mayor that he was not worthy to be Mayor and that he caused her shame for something she was not guilty of. This is the first time in Kempe's narrative that she mentions her children. She most likely referred to them in order to stress that she was a conventional wife and mother, even though the rest of her narrative shows that this is not the case. Again, Kempe shrewdly brings in facts of her life when she knows they will be effective.

In accordance with what she claims Christ told her, she had begun to wear white clothes. The Mayor of Leicester was suspicious of her because in 1399 Richard II prohibited the entry into England of a new sect of people dressed in white clothes pretending to be holy. The Mayor suspected that Kempe came to lure away the wives and lead them off with her. She refused to tell him why she wore white, saying he was not worthy to know it, but that she would tell it to the priest in confession. When the mayor left, Kempe knelt before the Abbot, the Dean of Leicester, and a Preaching Friar and told them how God, through revelation, had her wear white clothes before she went to Jerusalem. Kempe did not want the Mayor to know that through revelation, Christ directed her to wear white, so the clerics went to the Mayor and told him that her confessors had asked her to wear white clothes. Kempe did not consider it a lie because she said that she did tell her confessors, who approved of her wearing white. The Mayor still had his doubts about her and said he would not let her go unless she got a letter from the Lord Bishop of Lincoln, who is the higher authority, since she is in his jurisdiction. She left to get the letter (48).

There is a clear distinction between Kempe's treatment by the enlightened higher clerics and the repressive secular authorities. The Dean and Abbott in Leicester listened to her with patience and respect. The Mayor judged her by outward appearance. Kempe went to Leicester Abbey to get a letter from the Abbot to the Bishop of Lincoln, recording her interrogation in Leicester. When she saw the Abbot and his brethren she felt as though she saw God and the apostles. She reports being ravished with sweetness and devotion and cried and wept bitterly. Both the Abbot and Dean of Leicester treated her well and believed her to be a good woman. These actions that upset the general populace, seemed not to affect clerics adversely. The Abbot gave her the letter to give to the Bishop of Lincoln.

Kempe continues to be tested, but remains strong. Shortly after the exchanges with the Mayor of Leicester, Kempe was arrested and brought before the Archbishop of York, Henry Bowet. As in other instances, nature of the case against Kempe in York was unclear, but could be related to the ban on women preaching. A cleric asked her how long she would stay in York. Kempe replied that she planned to stay fourteen days. One priest took her by the collar and said, "Thu wolf, what is this cloth that thu hast on?" (50), probably referring to Matthew vii. (15) "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Kempe stood still and would not answer in her own defense. Children passing by innocently said, "Ser, it is wulle" (50). The priest swore at her, but Kempe was not afraid and admonished him for breaking God's commandments. He argued with her for a long time and slipped away before she noticed. As on previous occasions, it is not always clear why Kempe is so severely criticized and insulted. The Biblical references to her as a "false prophet" and "sheep in wolf's clothing" suggests that Kempe may have been preaching and pretending to be a holy

person. The children, being innocent, simply saw Kempe as a person dressed in wool, without attaching negative religious or cultural connotations to her dress.

Soon after, a cleric asked Kempe if she understood the words: *crescite et multiplicamini.* Genesis I, 22, "Be fruitful, and multiply," trying to trick her because some heretics may use the quote to justify free love. Kempe answers that it not only applied to bearing children, but also to gaining virtue. The priest was pleased with her answer. Kempe had friends in York, but after fourteen days of listening to her weeping, violent sobbing, and loud crying, they ask when she will leave. Even her friends found her difficult.

It was after breaking her deadline for leaving that Kempe's troubles in York began. Kempe is not arrested, but was summoned to the Chapterhouse of the Minister to answer questions. It is not clear who questioned her, but like the Mayor of Leicester, they wanted to know what she was doing in York and if she had a husband. Kempe informed them that she was on pilgrimage to St. William Fitzherbert, Archbishop of York's shrine where miracles were reported at the tomb. She told them that she had permission from her husband by mouth, no letter, and asked why they were bothering her and not the other pilgrims. The clerks examined her on the articles of faith, which she answered well. They had no reason to harm her, but a judge summoned her to the Archbishop of York and wanted her in prison before she met with him. As usual, Kempe does not specify the reason for the judge wanting her in prison. The townspeople rose up and said she should not go to prison (51). In this case, she had the support of the public, but not the support of the clerics.

Kempe was summoned to appear the following day before the Archbishop of York. This time the interrogation was quite unpleasant. During the interrogation, he asked why she wore white clothes and if she was a virgin. When she answered that she was a married woman, he sent

for fetters, saying that she should be fettered for being a heretic. Kempe prayed to God to help. She was shaking and trembling and burst out crying. The Archbishop asked why she wept like that. After he put her to the Articles of Faith, he could not criticize her. She answered well, but he did not want her to stay in York because he was afraid she might lead people astray. The Archbishop told her that she was a wicked woman who would not get to heaven unless she mended her ways. Kempe answered, telling him that she heard that he was a wicked man who would not get to heaven unless he mended his ways. The Archbishop wanted Kempe to leave as soon as possible, but Kempe wanted to visit friends. The Archbishop gave in to her, but wanted her to swear she would not preach to people. Kempe would not swear, but said that the Gospel says she can speak of God (Luke xi, 27-8). The clerics said that she had a devil in her because she spoke about the Gospel, as a Lollard woman would do. A cleric quotes St. Paul (I Corinthians xiv. 34-5), saying that no woman should preach. Kempe answered, "I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I use but comownycacyon and good wordys, and that wil I do whil I leve"(52). The charges against Kempe seem to be related to her speaking in public or something other than her religious views.

At times, Kempe resolved serious problems by telling tales to her accusers, possibly to prove that she was not preaching, but telling stories with morals. Kempe told a long tale to some priests about a bear who ate pear blossoms. The doctor who had examined her told the Archbishop that she told the worst tale about priests he ever heard. Archbishop Bowet asked her to repeat it, and Kempe told the tale of a priest who went astray in the woods and slept under a pear tree. A bear came and ate all the blossoms from the pear tree, then turned to the priest and discharged them out of his rear end. The priest in the story was disgusted and did not know what this meant. He met a pilgrim who explained that the priest represented the pear tree, who babbled

on without devotion, and acted as a man of the world, bartering and selling, and breaking God's commandments. Through misconduct the priest was like the bear, devouring and destroying the flowers of virtuous living, needing to mend his ways.

Interestingly, the Archbishop liked the tale. The cleric said "this tale smytyth me to the hert" (52). Kempe explained that she spoke out against the misconduct of people. By telling this tale Kempe possibly gave Bowet an innocuous example of what she "preached," not gospel, but morality tales. As a result Kempe was able to escape serious charges of heresy. The cleric asked Kempe for forgiveness and to pray for him.

Kempe asks to go to Bridlington to her confessor, a man named Sleytham, but she would not stay because of the Archbishop of York. She went on to Hessle in order to cross the Humber, but Kempe and a man who travelled with her were arrested as they went to board the boat. The men who arrested her would receive a bounty of one hundred pounds to bring her to the Duke of Bedford because they claimed she was a suspected Lollard. They brought her back to Hessle where people ran from their houses wanting to burn her as a "false heretic." Men from the district advised her "to forsake this lyfe that thu hast, and go spynne and carde as other women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo. We wolde not suffir so meche for no good in erthe." Again, the charges against Kempe seem to be about her way of life rather than religious doctrine. She was locked in a house, and her companion put in prison. At each place she visited in an attempt conform to local authority by getting the letters of approval she needed, she was either arrested, locked up or accused of Lollardy. But again, there were those who came her aid such as a woman who put herself in danger by breaking into her own house to provide wine for Kempe.

Kempe was brought again to the Chapterhouse of Beverly where she met the Archbishop of York and many men. The Archbishop told her he thought he was rid of her. He told all present that he had already examined her and found no fault. Kempe's gold, silver, beads and ring were taken from her. When the Archbishop asked if anyone could say something against her. A number of individuals came forward and accused her of Lollardy and lying. And finally, the two men who arrested her said she was Cobham's daughter, a reference to Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, she had not been on pilgrimages, as Lollards did not approve of pilgrimages, and that she lied. Kempe accused them of lying. She begged him not to be put in jail with the men for fear of being raped. The Archbishop made sure she was safe until he saw her again. When he sent for her again he said that he had been told worse things than ever about her. Kempe leaves out certain details of her arrests, but made it obvious again that she was more likely to be believed by clerics than by non-clerics.

One reason Kempe was arrested and brought before the Archbishop of York was not related to her religious beliefs, but because she was charged with influencing women to leave their husbands. Kempe was seen as challenging the roles of women when a friar came forward accusing her of advising Lady Greystoke, to leave her husband, John de Greystoke. Lady Greystoke was related to the Duke of Bedford, which could explain why the Duke of Bedford wanted Kempe arrested. The friar said this was enough to have her burned, but when Kempe told them that she had not seen Lady Westmoreland in over two years, the clerics wanted her put in prison while waiting to hear from Lady Westmoreland if the charges were true. One cleric said, "Putte hir forty days in preson and sche schal lovyn God the bettyr whyl sche levyth" (54).

The Archbishop asked Kempe what she had told the Lady of Westmorland. Kempe replied that she had told her a cautionary tale about a lady who was damned because she did not

love her enemies, and a bailiff who was saved because he forgave his enemies. The Archbishop liked the tale. After hearing the tale and he approved her and wanted Kempe let go. The clerics said that if she ever came back they would burn her themselves. The Archbishop says, 'I leve ther was nevyr woman in Inglond so ferdwyththal as sche is and hath ben' (54). He said that he did not know what to do with her.

Kempe asked for a letter from him saying, "I pray yow late me have yowr lettyr and yowr seyl into recorde that I have excusyd me ageyn myn enmys and no thyng is attyd ageyns me, neithyr herrowr ne heresy that may ben prevyd upon me." (54) The Archbishop gave her the letter, returned her purse, ring, and beads, had his man take her to the river Humber so she could go home. Kempe, again, avoided serious charges by telling a tale. When she crossed the river, she was immediately arrested again as a Lollard and led towards prison, but there was someone who had seen what happened before the Archbishop of York, so she was released. No details are provided about who arrested her, but Kempe demonstrates how trials and problems with authority escalate with each attempt to prove she is not a heretic.

When Kempe came to West Lynn she met three people, her husband, her confessor, Master Robert Spryngolde, and Carmelite Friar, Master Aleyn, a good friend of hers. She told them of her tribulations and that she could not come into Lynn until she had a letter and seal from the Archbishop of Canterbury. She went with her husband to London, got the letter, and went home.

Kempe's return home to Lynn was filled with humiliation and shame as hostilities from those who were against her increased. One man threw a bowlful of water on her head. Afterward Kempe had many illnesses. She had dysentery for a long time and thought she would die. Then she had an illness and thought she would lose her wits. A pain in her right side-afflicted her

periodically over a period of eight years. Kempe still wept and sobbed so loud for the Passion of Christ that the priests gave her communion in a private chapel rather than in church.

Unorthodox Behavior

Kempe was orthodox in her beliefs but unorthodox in her behavior. Kempe's charges of heresy were more concerned with her unorthodox manner of public speaking, her white dress, and her behavior in church rather than with unorthodox beliefs. She was a self-proclaimed mystic, who claimed to take instructions directly from Christ without a priestly intermediary. Kempe's claims could have been considered heresy, but when questioned by clerics about church doctrine, she answered those questions satisfactorily. Thus, the clerics were unsure of how to respond to her.

Kempe gives the appearance of winning all the trials and arguments with important clerics, but it is interesting that some of the arguments come only after she has been acquitted of heresy charges. She does not argue with the clerics during the trails. The *Book* avoids going into detail about the narratives, so that many of the charges remain unclear. The reader can only make assumptions based on the details Kempe chooses to share. Kempe is understandably submissive when she is arrested by Bedford's men, yet she is usually fairly shrewd when interrogated. She becomes submissive, responds to questions of faith carefully and tells stories that seem to please those who are condemning her. When relating the story she tells to Lady Westmorland, the details are brief. Whatever she may have said during her interrogations, Kempe obscures the details, but eventually is released.

The *Book* has often been read as challenging social, cultural, and political norms of gender roles, normative piety, and legal jurisdiction by presenting Kempe as an image of repression. Kempe was a mystic who made a display of herself by her extreme form of affective spiritualism. She was a woman out of place during a time when a woman's place was in the home or a convent. From what can be gathered by the trials it may be evident that instead of heresy, Kempe's form of dissent was her desire to live her life according to the "self" she created.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Book of Margery Kempe has been read and studied and written about in modern times ever since the manuscript was rediscovered in the 1930's. Margery Kempe is such a vivid personality, and her *Book* is such a mine of information, that there is still room for additional analysis. Kempe lived out her vocation "ordained to be a mirror" for others to follow.

Kempe was born in the late fourteenth century to a prosperous family in Lynn, England. As the daughter of a burgess, she would have led a privileged life, exposed to cultural and religious trends of the period. Kempe would have had access to books and was most likely taught to read. Modern critics tend to identify her as "illiterate," when the term could quite possibly mean she could not read or write Latin. Kempe's *Book* is written in English, probably by scribes. Recent evidence has identified Kempe's son as the first scribe. Even though no one will ever know for sure if it was written by Kempe or scribe, or Kempe and scribe, her distinct voice is heard. Evidence in the text points to Kempe's familiarity with vernacular books that were in circulation at the time. In a tradition where authors such as Chaucer rely on scribes, it is dismissive to label Kempe "illiterate" and not Chaucer.

Kempe would have been raised according to upper-middle class traditional conventions where a woman's role was in the home. She had business opportunities in brewing and milling, but was not interested in "housewifery." She did not accept these conventions. Traditional religion would have directed her to a convent or anchoress's cell, but she chooses to leave her family and live in the world, with visions of the holy family replacing her worldly family.

Kempe begins her *Book* with self-negation and feelings of insanity. Kempe is not only dissatisfied with her domestic role as wife and mother, relegated to the home, she is dissatisfied

with the religious norm. Kempe makes the transition from the traditional, constrictive life she leads in Lynn, England, to a self-constructed life as a mystic and pilgrim. She goes from being voiceless and terrifies, subject to the 'debt of matrimony' and abuses of her priest, to someone whose voice inspires those around her to either love or hate her. Kempe's particular vocation includes the "gift of tears," a loud, roaring, sobbing that she believed marked her as a "chosen" soul. Despite what others, lay or cleric, say about her she states that she has been told by Christ that she has grace and will not go to purgatory, but straight to heaven when she dies.

Kempe fashions a new sense of identity based on what she claims is her unique access to Christ. She draws upon established models of female piety unfamiliar in Lynn, England, but similar to those of Continental women saints. Kempe had models of women in her own time who left home, lived chaste even though they were married, had visions, communicated with Christ, and wrote about their experiences. She also had models from past saints. While there are similarities to the saintly women Kempe would have her reader identify her with, there are also differences. References to St. Bridget, Elizabeth of Hungary, Julian of Norwich, and Marie d'Oignies as well as Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, help Kempe's attempt for sainthood by locating her with these holy women, not by directly imitating them.

Kempe does imitate holy women who felt compelled to travel. She travels where she wants and when she wants. Kempe experiences affective spirituality as she relives Christ's Passion during which she first experiences her holy "tears." Kempe travel experiences also function as a critique of English society in that her travel companions are depicted as cruel and hostile toward her throughout the journey.

Kempe is a mystic who not only claims that she has extended colloquies with Christ, but claims that her voice is "his" voice. She reports physically embracing Christ and describes

feeling Christ's body and holding his toes. Kempe travels on dangerous, arduous, pilgrimages to the holy land. Her journeys are significant considering that she travelled as a woman alone for much of the time, something unheard of at this time. Kempe's chaste marriage from her husband to her mystical marriage to the godhead, while in Rome, completes her transformation. Her identity shifts from the physical world to the spiritual world. Kempe clothes herself in virginal white and identifies as wife, mother, and sister of Christ. This new identity gives Kempe the confidence to assert herself when accused of heresy.

For the most part, Kempe gets along well with the clergy. She reports about several priests and anchorites who approve of her vocation and find her visions and colloquies with Christ valid. However, not everyone accepts Kempe's vocation or lifestyle. She lived at a time of cultural and religious change. Late-medieval England was on the verge of the Reformation and there was heightened anxiety about anyone who acted in an unorthodox manner. Kempe is arrested several times on the accusation of Lollardy. Even though the charges are never proved because of Kempe's theological orthodoxy and social position, the detailed descriptions of the arrest and trials are terrifying. Kempe raises for us and her concerning why she is arrested so many times and why she is then released. Clerics are concerned more with Kempe's untraditional lifestyle and dress than with her religious orthodoxy. Of more concern, however, is Kempe's desire to preach, which would be considered a Lollard activity. Clerics fear that Kempe would influence other women to leave their husbands and family to follow Kempe's lifestyle. Once Kempe is released, however, she argues with religious leaders and clerics about their lifestyles, including Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury; Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln; and Henry Bowet, Archbishop of York. She reprimands them for being greedy, lecherous, and hypocritical.

There are limits to where Kempe can practice this life style because there is no social role for her when she returns home. As a result, Kempe returns to Lynn to care for her ailing husband. Nevertheless*, The Book of Margery Kempe* reflects the social, cultural, and political concerns of Kempe's world. Historicizing Kempe helps modern readers understand the motives and reasons for Kempe's dramatic personal transformation as well as the motives and reasons for writing her *Book.* Kempe lived and wrote about her life as an unorthodox holy woman.

The Book of Margery Kempe reflects how Kempe develops to attain a certain degree of self-awareness. Through her mysticism and travels, she achieved a certain degree of selfhood and autonomy unusual for this time. By the end of her book, Kempe becomes an example of active piety for others. She speaks for other contemporary lay men and women who were seeking to validate their lives against dominant religious norms. Kempe demonstrates, through her autobiography, that it is not necessary to follow traditional religion in order to achieve holiness. She follows her own advice which she reports as coming from God speaking to her directly. While it is possible that others had attempted her lifestyle, Kempe is the only one who leaves a manuscript behind. Hers is the only surviving record of its time.

Further research:

There are a number of areas for further research on this manuscript and its author. One area of research is on the subject of narrative at this time and the way it serves to validate the story, saying that you have to know something about the author's life in order to understand the story. Chaucer does this in *The Canterbury Tales,* when some of his pilgrims tell their stories, but present their lives in the *Prologue.* Reading each pilgrim's *Prologue* before reading the *Tale,* helps understand the story. And I see Kempe asserting this even more strongly.

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