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The Queer and the Bodily: Explorations of Power in Women's Visionary Writing  
in the Book of Margery Kempe

by

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of Arts in English

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MA Thesis

*The Queer and The Bodily: Explorations of Power in Women's Visionary Writing in The Book of Margery Kempe*

The provocative *Book of Margery Kempe* is a seminal text in the history of female authorship. Claiming to be the first written autobiography, *The Book* serves as a literary representation of womanhood during the late fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries when Margery was writing, and also speaks to circulating medieval discourses of religion, pilgrimage, and sexuality. Participating in medieval women's visionary writing as a genre, Margery's visionary power is a tool by which she is able to emancipate herself from the limiting roles of wife and mother. Additionally, by working within the conventions of visionary writing, Margery is able to exercise forms of private, public, and literary power that otherwise may have not been available to her as a woman in her historical milieu. By using queer theory to interpret *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery's often challenging and subversive behavior is privileged as a method of critiquing boundaries of her role as a woman, her place within the Church's hierarchy and the mediation of Christ's desires, as well as the boundaries of an appropriate and acceptable sexuality. Thus, the queer in *The Book of Margery Kempe* reveals tensions in the text that contest dominant ideologies and values in the Middle Ages that are pertinent to the changing tides in institutionalized religion, women's roles, and genre in the fourteenth century.

Discourses of sexuality can reflect cultural values that are important to constructing and understanding a historical moment. In the essay "Michel Foucault, Homosexuality and the Middle Ages," Ross Balzaretti discusses the problematic history of sexuality in the medieval queer. Using Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Balzaretti explains that that sexuality is culturally

kept private until it is made public by an outside pressure. During the Middle Ages, this pressure derives from the power of the Church, whose confession is an attempt to repress the body and bodily sexuality, and was likened to a torturous device as a means of establishing truth (Balzaretti 3). Because sexuality in the Middle Ages is private, attempting to inquire into hidden sexualities is a challenge to critics. However, the history of sexuality is presented as “not a history of morals, behavior, social practices...but rather the way in which desires, pleasures, and sexual behavior is problematized, reflected upon and conceived in relation to an art of living” (Balzaretti 2). In this statement, Balzaretti is constructing a methodology of attempting to understand sexuality not by its specificity, but rather how it complicates understandings of heteronormativity. Balzaretti’s article is important to understanding queer studies because it explains that a history of sexuality is a history of subversive behavior rather than a private homosexuality specifically. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery’s sexuality is problematized because it poses a clear and direct challenge to the Church authority, and Balzaretti’s Foucauldian dynamic of language and authority directly comments on Margery’s role within her cultural context, as Margery’s power is constructed through her verbal proclamation of her relationship with Christ and His teachings.

The notion that the queer uncovers historical and cultural nuances that provides insight into larger discourses of sexuality, normativity, and gender boundaries is further explored in Amy Hollywood’s article “The Normal, the Queer, and the Middle Ages.” Hollywood states that “there is always [a]...never-perfect aspect of identification’ that engenders both historical difference (and at times pleasure in that difference) and ‘partial connections, queer relations” (173). In this statement, the importance between history and identification is yoked into a queer propinquity. Additionally, “new pieces of history...that queers can make new relations, new

identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality” (Hollywood 173). The potential for queer studies to create new opportunities for creating identity as well as an alternative historical perspective is significant to analyzing Margery Kempe’s position of authorship. Additionally, the concept of normalcy is important to establish in queer studies, and Hollywood defines it as “a kind of ideal, a position devoutly to be wished [that] marks a paradoxical shift from earlier conceptions of the ideal as impossible and unattainable”; it is a “dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be” (175).

Through Hollywood’s historical insight, it is first important to first note that the writing of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a subversive act itself, for her book “is often considered the first extant autobiography written in English” (Kempe 604). However, although it is notable that arguably the first autobiography written in the English language is written by a woman, Kempe’s testimony doesn’t go uncontested, for her the writing of her autobiography is quickly problematized. As Kempe is illiterate, she employs two scribes to write her testimony, although the first scribe dies and her story is finished by the second. Of the twenty lines given to the history of the book’s transcription, Kempe is referred to twice as a “creature,” which nods towards Margery’s extraordinary relationship with Christ and as well as her abnormalcy (Kempe 606). The second priest, however, notices that the first transcription of Kempe’s book “was so badly written that he could do little with it, for it was neither good English nor German, and the letters were not shaped or formed as other letters are” (Kempe 606). This is significant to note because Kempe’s story was entirely illegible; in fact, it didn’t seem to be written in any kind of coherent language at all. The second scribe continues by saying that he “fully believed that no one would ever be able to read it, unless it were by special grace. Nevertheless, he promised her

that if he could read it he would with good will copy it out...better,” which suggests that Margery’s text is queer and challenging to scribal authority (Kempe 606). The introduction to the role of the scribes within *The Book of Margery Kempe* presents a few immediate problems with the narrative: first, Margery Kempe is named primarily as a creation of Christ, which also puts her in a direct and immediate relationship with Christ. Secondly, the transcription by the first scribe usurps Kempe’s attempt to preserve her narrative in textual form, which additionally is an usurpation of a queer history in order to preserve the dominant historical discourses in the fourteenth century. Lastly, Kempe is ultimately “saved” by an authoritative male figure who has the superlative power of not only writing Kempe’s story but has the insight to be able to *rewrite* her history—he can interpret foreign languages and create new narratives.

The male scribes both attempt to try to write and rewrite Margery Kempe’s account, and in doing so, are attempting to maintain a heteronormative historical narrative; yet once again, Margery resists authority: “Then there was such ill spoken of this creature and of her weeping that the priest, out of cowardice, did not dare speak with her often, and would not write as he promised...And so he avoided and deferred the writing of this book...” (Kempe 606). Margery Kempe is referred to for the third time as a creature, and this time her non-normative behaviors, such as weeping, directly affect her history and her identity, as the scribe postpones his writing. Then something astounding happens: the scribe, in his fear of Margery Kempe’s queer potential, renounces his ability to translate the first scribe’s writing: “At last he said to her that he could not read it, and so he would not do it. He would not, he said, put himself in danger from it” (Kempe 606). The second scribe takes an additional step to relinquish Kempe’s story by encouraging her to seek a friend of the first scribe: “Then he advised her to go to a good man who had been well acquainted with the man who first wrote the book, on the supposition that he would be best able

to read the book” (Kempe 606). God intervenes and gives the scribe good vision, as he then “could see as well, it seemed to him, as he had ever done before, by both daylight and candlelight” (Kempe 607). *The Book*’s transcription is problematic because of Margery’s reputation and queer behavior: “there was such ill spoken of this creature and of her weeping that the priest, out of cowardice, did not dare speak with her often, and would not write as he had promised” (Kempe 606). Ultimately, the scribe writes the book, for he “was troubled in his conscience” (Kempe 606). Since the book is actually written by the scribe, Margery’s authorship of her *Book* is often contested, although it represents an important female voice in the fourteenth century.

Authorship, in *The Book*, is problematized by the male scribe’s authority over Margery’s female voice. In the article, “Gender, Creation and Authorship in the Late Middle Ages,” Annette Kern-Stähler explains that this tension between creator and creation, male and female, refers to the “Aristotelian identification of the male with form and the female with matter, which had consequences also for the medieval understanding of the nature of man and woman,” in which the male, ““provides the ‘form’ and the ‘principle of movement,’” and the female, ““provides the body, in other words, the material”” (27). Furthermore, the “metaphor of the hammer or pen as form- or shape-giving agents clearly posits the sexual act the moment of male penetration as central to the act of generation” (Kern-Stähler 27). Although *The Book* is purported as the first female autobiography, Margery’s text is not actually written by her, for she is unable to write as well as to read. However, the matter of Margery’s role in writing the text is not only an issue of authorship, but of the problematic female body and its power in medieval society. Because *The Book of Margery Kempe* is authored by both female and male, the historical undertones of male dominance over female texts and women’s bodies becomes quite

complicated. In the analysis of *The Book* as a textual body, Margery's role, although attempting to claim her status as an author, is contested by the scribe's authorial power over her text. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is not written in first-person, conventional of an autobiography, but is rather in third-person, and Margery is often referred to as "creature" by the narrator. Although the scribe's choice of the word "creature" may initially signal negative connotations, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that "creature" also has positive resonances. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "creature" as, "a created thing or being; a product of a creative action; a creation" (c1300), "the created universe" (c1384), "a human being; a person, an individual with modifying word indicating a type of person, and esp. expressing admiration, affection, compassion, or commiseration" (c1300)" (1-2). These definitions of the term gesture towards both the creative act of writing as well as to the creation of Margery Kempe as a character, a text, and as a body. Thus, the use of creature reflects the historical and medieval notion that the male scribe creator controls the female creation. Additionally, the narrator's use of "creature" to name Margery reflects her Christian beliefs and relationship with Christ, for she is a creation made in God's image. The narrator's use of "creature" objectifies Margery, but also reflects her position in relation to her text and to the Christian doctrine.

Yet what is at stake within Kempe's subjectivity or objectification is her relative power in the creation of the text. As the "sense of 'the author' as an owner of a text, as somebody being granted, and asserting, the right to their text, is generally regarded as a post-medieval one," and "the notion of the author in medieval times...when...literary works were often circulated anonymously and when questions such as 'from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?' were not being asked," the analysis of authorship from a twenty-first century perspective may be unfruitful (Kern-Stähler 28). As



Kern-Stähler reiterates, “[w]hile Margery was able to recall, structure and comment on her experience, for the recording of these experiences she was depended upon her scribes’ orthographical skills” (34). The scholarly debate over whether Margery’s scribe or herself is the authentic writer rests in the “middle ground between these two positions [that] leans towards the view that the scribe was a co-author rather than merely a copyist and that the priest, ‘no less than Margery, should be regarded as the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe*’” (Kern-Stähler 34). In Kern-Stähler’s analysis of the etymology of the term ‘author,’ Kern-Stähler demonstrates that “[t]he term *auctor*, then was reserved for the ancient poets and rhetoricians, like Virgil, Ovid, and Quintilian, and learned commentators... whose compositions possessed true authority by virtue of the antiquity and language,” and that for “contemporary writers and for vernacular writers,” such as Kempe, “it was difficult, if not impossible, to acquire authorial status” (28-29). In the Middle Ages then, authorship was not merely associated with the labor of writing but also involved forms of power and cultural control. However, with the challenge of transcending cultural and social hierarchies and the seemingly insurmountable rise to authorship, Kern-Stähler explains that, “while Middle English writers did acknowledge the inferior status ascribed to vernacular texts, a number of them seem to have found ways to confer authorial status upon their writings” (29). Kern-Stähler argues that one of the ways Margery Kempe is able to gain authorship is by a transgendered role from female to male (31). Because the act of authoring a text implies that one has the power to create, the power that Kern-Stähler notes as “the moment of male penetration,” Margery Kempe’s attempt to claim authorship of her text is simultaneously an attempt to claim the power ascribed to the male. Authorship in the Middle Ages is noted as “a literary activity [that] has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing... with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which

these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine” (Kern-Stähler 31). So then, “if literary creativity was understood as a masculine performance, how could women ever hope to assume the status of ‘author’?” (Kern-Stähler 31). As seen in *The Book*, Kempe’s claim to genre and the text as being self-written, although vis-à-vis scribal transcription, participates in “the gendered structure of literary activity [that] seems to have been so deeply ingrained in medieval society,” it however offers her a path to power by the “transformation” from creature to creator (Kern-Stähler 31). This transformation offers a way “in which women could undermine male dominance” by a metaphorical “sex change,” and that in becoming the writer, Kempe is participating in the metaphorical “development as an act of becoming male” (Kern-Stähler 31). This transgendered act serves as a vehicle in which women in the Middle Ages claim power over their own textual bodies.

The second method that Kern-Stähler describes in her article for women to seek authorial power is through religious experience. The role of the scribes in working on *The Book* is one level of co-authorship that works on a physical and bodily plane, and reminds the contemporary reader that ““medieval literary authority was produced less by individuals than by collaborative relationships”” (Kern-Stähler 34). Additionally, the scribes’ role also “seem[s] to underlie a host of medieval women’s visionary writings...[that] were mediated and verified by scribes, confessors or translators” (34). Hence, the scribes’ bodily and physical participation in the creation of the text validates Margery’s metaphysical and religious experiences. *The Book of Margery Kempe* therefore is co-authored by the mortal male as well as the masculine, Christian God, as the scribe’s vision is restored by divine intervention; Kempe, in her authorial ascension, works through both a physical and metaphysical dimension in her attempt to claim some kind of

cultural and social power. In Medieval literature, “women’s writings claimed the status of authority on account of their heavenly source. ‘In this way...the visionary’s act of writing represents itself not as an arrogant assumption of power but as an act of submission in keeping with the female ideal of obedience” (Kern-Stähler 36). Kempe’s role as author is therefore paradoxical, for she must accept the scribes’ penetration on her textual body as well as work through a religious vein, both of which are forms of textual, bodily, and spiritual control. Kempe belongs to a series of medieval women who “appear to have gained the opportunity to work as authors by humbly disavowing authority and by entering a literary realm that did not openly contest” authorial power, but differs by openly challenging and subverting authority and conventional behavior of women in the Middle Ages (Kern-Stähler 39).

Margery’s performance of gender in the act of authorship, and within the more traditional role of mother and wife, provides a vehicle to critique women’s cultural and social boundaries in the fourteenth century. In her article, “Chaucer’s Queer Touches/ A Queer Touches Chaucer,” Carolyn Dinshaw asks important questions of what happens when gender is de-essentialized and how, once the hierarchical power structures define normative gender are exposed, we then determine queerness (2). According to Dinshaw, queerness itself resists definition, and in doing so denies any pre-existing essential beliefs of gender roles (4). Dinshaw also focuses on the significance of performance, and explains that when queer touches “robust femininity, it exposes femininity as itself a pose, as something theatrical, and an act, it nonetheless makes it clear that...she does in some sense already function as a token of the inessentiality of heterosexual subjectivity” (2). Performance also “insists on the constructedness of this body and its detachability from conventionally defined desire and gender behavior...[that] nonetheless makes it clear that...she does in some sense function as...the inessentiality of heterosexual subjectivity”

(Dinshaw 2). Additionally, sexuality is defined as a performance or function within a large cultural structure that locates the individual to their sexual desire (Dinshaw 8). In her article, Dinshaw represents queerness in medieval texts as a performative act that exposes medieval and contemporary cultural paradigms.

Also significant is Dinshaw's queer theory is the notion of queer touches. In the article, the "touch of the queer" is a "force of denaturalization" that can "work powerfully towards historization and location of particular sexualities," and that "the field of sexuality is denaturalized by the queer"; "it invites us to see how such a sense of the sexual norm has been constructed...in various ways, in various times and places" (Dinshaw 2-4). Dinshaw's queer touch allows an alternative interpretation of Margery Kempe as merely a "creature," a term that evokes a strangeness and ineffability— as her performances of weeping have literally stopped the writing of her narrative— but rather offers a display of a woman who resists the touches of her husband in order to be properly touched by Christ. In *The Book*, Margery "often...lived chastely, advised her husband to live chastely...and continually prayed to God that she might live chastely" (Kempe 610). Kempe's touches throughout her text are precisely "forces of denaturalization" because they recover an estranged narrative— Margery's sexual desire for Christ is marked by her religious pilgrimage away from the heteronormative place as wife and mother and towards an intimate relationship with Christ. Margery "did such great bodily penance...for she desired many times that the crucifix should free His hands from the Cross and embrace her as a sign of love" (Kempe 611). Analyzing these queer touches within the text "[provoke] an inquiry into the ways that 'natural' has been produced by a particular discursive matrices of heteronormativity," and Margery Kempe's queerness "relates as queer to the particular structures of power around...her" (Dinshaw 4).

In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the touch of the queer exposes the cultural paradigms that Margery is resisting. Margery's marriage presents a challenge to her spiritual journey, for she cannot begin her pilgrimage without written consent by her husband. What is most interesting is that it is the inspiration of Christ that causes Kempe's resistance to the heteronormative requirement of her marriage debt; Kempe's sexual desire strays from the confines of conventional marriage and is portrayed as greatly subversive. It is, in fact, Margery's "[negotiation of] the conflicts between her personal desires and the internalization of social proscriptions" that Margery is balancing in her *Book* (Manter 43). After her divine inspiration that causes "abundant tears of sincere devotion," the text states that "she never wished to have intercourse with her husband, for the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that it seemed to her she would rather eat or drink slime... than to consent to any bodily intercourse" (Kempe 610). Kempe offers her husband some consolation, as she says to him that she "cannot deny you my body, but the love of my heart and my affection is drawn away from all earthly creatures and set only on God" (Kempe 610). Hence, Kempe's subversive sexual desire directly threatens her carnal relationship with her husband, and in turn, the subjectivity of marriage as well as her husband's masculinity. However, Margery's husband affirms his masculinity and the convention of marriage, and Margery's marriage debt must be paid: "He would have his will, and she obeyed with great weeping and lamenting because she could not live chastely" (Kempe 610). Her husband asserts himself sexually and against Margery's will, but cannot rape her for duty demands that she continues to have intercourse with her husband. However, Margery does take pleasure in sexual intercourse with her husband, as she admits "that they had often displeased God by their excessive love and the great enjoyment that they both had in sleeping together" (Kempe 610). As Dinshaw states, the queer touch denaturalizes notions of normalcy, and in

analyzing Margery Kempe, complicates her sexual desire. Despite desiring to be chaste, Margery not only takes great pleasure in having sexual intercourse with her husband, as she says, “she knew well that they had often displeased God by their excessive love and the great enjoyment that they both had in sleeping together,” but during her three years of temptations, she also wishes to extend her pleasure outside of the confines of her marriage, as exemplified by her temptation to have intercourse with “a man she loved well” (Kempe 610). The problem of clearly defining what Margery desires and resists reflects the slippage of the queer; it “moves around, is transferable, is no one’s property” (Dinshaw 5).

This man who tempts Margery, even after she has expressed to her husband that she desires to live chastely and believes to have overcome her lechery, “said to her on the eve of St. Margaret’s Day, that come what may he would lie by her and have his bodily pleasure, and she would not withstand him” (Kempe 611). Although “he did it to test what she would do,” “she thought he meant it entirely in earnest at that time” (Kempe 611). Again, Margery’s carnal desires take precedence in the text and presents a queered function of sex because it challenges the dominant cultural definition of acceptable female desire. Kempe was “continually thinking about the other man and about sinning with him...at last she was overcome by the pressure of temptation and lack of control, and she consented in her mind, and went to the man to see if he would consent to her” (Kempe 611). However, when Kempe approaches this man “and said that he should have his desire, as she thought he has wished, but he dissimulated so that she did not know what he meant, and so they parted from one another for the night” (Kempe 611). As Kempe continuously challenges the notions of normativity, her effects of her body behavior causes her to “[fall] half into despair. She thought she was in hell, she had so much sorrow. She thought she was not worthy of any mercy because her consent was so willingly given” (Kempe

611). Kempe's queer sexual desire painfully resists normalcy, and Kempe is thrown back into a state of spiritual upheaval. As Dinshaw states: "Queerness works by contiguity and displacement, knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange; it works in this way to provoke perceptual shifts and subsequent corporeal response in those touched" (2). Kempe's queer body functions by detaching itself from conventionality and subverting the expectation of heteronormative bodily behavior.

However, it is Christ who once again saves Margery from her religious uneasiness, and she seeks Him directly for guidance. For, although "she believed He had forsaken her and dared not trust in His mercy," she prays to Him: "Now, blessed Jesus, make Your will known to me unworthy, that I may follow it and fulfil it with all my might" (Kempe 612-613). Christ responds to Margery by direct discourse, which validates the intimate relationship between Christ and Margery. Christ substantiates Margery's desire for chastity by responding that her husband "shall have what he desires. For, my most worthy daughter, this was the reason that I told you to fast, so that you should sooner obtain and get your desire, and it is granted you" (Kempe 613). Kempe is finally given the validation of her desire that was required in order for her to ultimately break from the normative expectations of her sexuality, and her husband acquiesces, as he says, "May your body be as much at God's disposal as it has been at mine" (Kempe 613). Up to this point in the text, Margery had been accompanied by her husband in their travels, but now Margery is given the freedom to travel without her husband.

In *The Book*, Margery's pilgrimage is problematized by her sexual obligation to her husband, which, with the help of Christ, she is able to liberate herself from. Perhaps more interesting, however, is Sue Niebrzydowski's mention of sexual dalliance, in her article, "The Middle-Aged Meanderings of Margery Kempe: Medieval Women and Pilgrimage."

Niebrzydowski explains that Kempe's sexual desire is aimed towards Christ—a sexually deviant act as a married woman and mother—and Margery journeys “simultaneously towards her ultimate metaphysical destination: mystical marriage to Christ and acceptance of her spirituality as orthodox by her peers” (Niebrzydowski 267). Additionally, Niebrzydowski explains that pilgrimage in the fourteenth century was taken by both men and women as long as they could afford to travel (265). This includes the monetary ability to travel as well as the freedom from familial obligations, and as required in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it was “required to obtain both papal and spousal permission to embark on such travel, [although the] equality of opportunity [between men and women] is deceptive” (Niebrzydowski 268). For, “[e]ven if a woman's husband granted her leave to travel, attitudes to female pilgrims and their motivation for travel were subject to gender constraint in ways that male pilgrims did not experience,” and such gender bias can be considered in Margery Kempe's subversive behavior (Niebrzydowski 268). Ironically, there was much “[c]riticism of the noise and unrestrained behavior of pilgrims,” and this larger criticism of pilgrimage is clearly a complaint against Kempe (Niebrzydowski 269). Compounded with the sheer noise of pilgrims, the “medieval attitudes towards women in general [renders] female pilgrims [as an] easy target for misogynistic satire,” since “female pilgrims earned a specialised kind of frustration and mistrust,” and “wives [were accused] of using pilgrimage as an excuse for sexual dalliance” (Niebrzydowski 269). Kempe's pilgrimage presents a particular kind of mistrust, as she is accused of leading the townspeople away from the teachings of the Church by her own interpretations of Christ's teachings.

By the beginning of Chapter 50, Margery has already traveled to York, and also goes “to an anchoress who had loved her well before she went to Jerusalem” (Kempe 613). Margery's open challenge to the Church's orthodoxy causes the most problems with the communities where



she travels. Margery's pilgrimage is subversive because it queers the purpose of the pilgrimage itself: where others seek pilgrimage to gain Christ's guidance, Margery has already heard from Him directly. For Margery, her pilgrimage is rather a journey to speak the message of Christ, yet her message directly challenges the authority of the clerks and Archbishops. Additionally, Margery's ability to quote the Bible adds to the accusations imposed on her by the Church, as they say that, "here we truly think that she has a devil in her, for she speaks of the Gospel" (Kempe 616). According to the anthology, "[r]eading from the Scriptures in English was one of the major points of debate in the Lollard conflict. The Catholic Church did not wish the Bible to be made available in the vernacular for anyone other than the clergy to engage in Biblical interpretation" (Broadview 616). It's Margery's knowing of "the articles of the faith," but the clerks determine that they "will not allow her to remain among [them], for the people have great faith in her conversation, and perhaps she might lead some of them astray" (Kempe 616). So, the implication of the Archbishop that Margery is a "very wicked woman" isn't a comment on her moral character, but rather her queer potential to challenge patriarchal authority. The Archbishop then says to her, "You shall swear that you will not teach or scold the people in my diocese," but Margery refuses, for she claims that she "shall speak of God and rebuke those who swear great oaths wherever I go" (Kempe 616). In Chapter 54, Margery is again accused of lollardy and heresy, as the Archbishop of York appears at the "chapterhouse of Beverley" where Kempe travels, and says, "[n]evertheless, I gave one of my men five shillings to lead her out of this area to keep the people quiet" (Kempe 619). Additionally, the friar "came forth and said that she led everyone astray from Holy Church," and Margery is portrayed as taking power from the Catholic Church (Kempe 619).

During her pilgrimage, not only is Kempe accused of taking the people away from the

Church, but is also accused of leading women away from their husbands. The bishop, in accordance to the demand of the Archbishop, says to Margery that “My lady herself was very pleased with you and liked your words, but you counselled Lady Greystroke to leave her husband...and now you have said enough to burn for it” (Kempe 620). In the accusation that Margery offers a polemic against the convention of marriage, Kempe’s body behavior once again problematizes and complicates the boundaries of the dominant cultural pedagogies and turns such pedagogy on its head, for in Margery’s “martyrdom of slander,” the bad-mouthing that Kempe experiences during her pilgrimage, can be considered as “blasphemy, [which is] one of the worse iniquitous sins of the tongue” (Mongan 27-28). In response to the blasphemous slandering of Kempe’s person, she takes the opportunity to correct them, as she states that, “for as long as you swear such horrible oaths and knowingly break the commandment of God...you will be damned” (Kempe 621). Margery collapses the accusations and reverses the role of authority; it is she who challenges the interpretation of Scripture and therefore the authority of the clergymen.

The reorientation of boundaries by Kempe, exemplified by her critiquing of the clergy for their sins, is explored in Richard Zeikowitz’s article, “Befriending the Medieval Queer: A Pedagogy for Literature Classes,” and what he names “boundary pedagogies.” In the article, Zeikowitz claims that the term “‘queer’ retains its power to disturb the status quo,” and that “‘queer’ can thus signify and nonnormative behavior, relationship, or identity occurring at a specific moment. It may also describe an alternative form of desire that threatens the stability of the dominant norm” (67). Margery Kempe’s pilgrimage queers conventionality because it gives her a subversive voice. What is also particularly interesting in Zeikowitz article his discussion of the cultural boundaries of queers, for “dominant ideologies relegate queers to marginal or

ostracized position” (68). In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is clear that Margery is marginalized by the Church, but enlightens some of the people she comes into contact with. Additionally, “queerness articulates not a determinate thing but a relation to existent structures of power...that denaturalizes normativity...that is tied to power structures” (Zeikowitz 70). Margery’s queerness challenges fourteenth century conventions of marriage and ecclesiastical hierarchies.

Margery Kempe’s performance in the text also offers an important analysis of a queer touch that materializes as an odd phenomenon of weeping, laughing, choice of clothing, and teaching. Margery’s “intensely visual, even bodily meditations suggest a role-playing that, through repetition, powerfully revalues her whole bourgeois life” (Dinshaw 157). Margery “would weep and sob so much that many people were greatly astonished, for they little knew how much at home our Lord was in her soul” (Kempe 606). Margery’s blatant weeping thus aids her purpose in teaching Christ’s word and brings her closer to Christ, as it serves as proof that she embodies Christ. Again, Kempe’s “weeping was so plenteous and so continual that many people thought that she could weep and stop weeping at will, and therefore many people said she was a false hypocrite and wept for show” (Kempe 610). Yet, although Margery claims that her weeping is genuine and authentic evidence of her and Christ’s relationship—it shows her excessive love for Christ as well as His presence within her physical body—the accusation that her weeping is performative shouldn’t be discredited, for it does quite a lot of work within her narrative. Margery uses other things to show her passion for Christ and uses her persecutions and indictments as further performances of her and Christ’s relationship. The tribulations that Kempe encounters throughout her pilgrimage actually make her “much happier, for she had something to test her patience and her charity, by which she hoped to please our Lord Jesus Christ” (Kempe

615). Kempe's happiness turns into laughter, as she says, "Sir, I have great reason to laugh, for the more shame and contempt I suffer, the merrier I am in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Kempe 621). Kempe's performances throughout her narrative function as her queer agency to substantiate her bodily and spiritual desires.

Almost as controversial as her weeping, Kempe's wearing of white clothing during her pilgrimage also estranges her from the conventional. When the Archbishop asks her, "Why do you wear white? Are you a maiden?" it's "Margery's white clothes [that] point to the disjunction in an orthodox Christianity which establishes marriage as a sacrament yet always maintains its taint, maintains that it is a perversion from the ultimately perfect perfection" (Dinshaw 149). The separation between Margery's marriage to her husband and desired marriage to Christ becomes blatantly obvious by her white clothing, and it shows her own taintedness and perversion of the perfect marriage to Christ. Margery responds by "kneeling on her knees before him," and saying, "No, sir, I am no maiden; I am a wife" (Kempe 615). Thus, "we perceive a creature that itself is not clearly categorizable in her community's bourgeois heteronormative terms... We perceive a creature whose body does not fit her desires. We perceive, that is, a queer" (Dinshaw 149). Kempe's choice of white clothing is a queer performance that claims both an earthly attachment and heavenly goal, for although she wears white as a wife—a role that she cannot entirely escape—her purity in the eyes of Christ is of central importance. "Margery's clothes function as a signal of this unlivable difficulty of contradictory imperatives and the resulting disjunctiveness between her body and her desire" (Dinshaw 148).

In pursuing an analysis of Margery Kempe through a queer lens, new methods to investigating forms of power—particularly sources and forms of power for medieval women—emerge from traditional methodologies. Partly developed from feminist scholarship, medieval

anthropology, and more conservative literary theory, Margery's limited role within medieval society is expanded by her queerness and subversive behavior. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski describe in their introduction to *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* that medieval women's strategies to power include the use of their bodies as well as escaping the conventional public/private dichotomy. Furthermore, medieval women utilize genre and writing to gain influence and power, often through religious writing and visionary experience. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery uses several of Erler and Kowaleski's strategies to power, which touch upon bodily, social, and narrative methodologies and queer medieval religious, cultural, and literary conventions.

In the introduction to *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski explain that, "[t]raditionally, power has been equated with public authority," and this "limited view of power as public authority carries two corollaries: it assumes that women were largely powerless and thus marginal, and it discourages investigation of women's actions in society as seemingly inconsequential" (1). In "[m]edieval society, with its wars, territorial struggles, and violence, [it] seems particularly hostile to the exercise of female initiative and power," and "the prevailing cultural attitudes of the Middle Ages considered women...intellectually and emotionally inferior to men and thus incapable of wielding authority effectively" (Erler and Kowaleski 1). Women in the Middle Ages "could not vote or run for public office, nor could they participate fully in other power structures such as the Church, the military, or the guilds," and they were also "[d]enied access to institutions of higher learning and handicapped by legal systems" (Erler and Kowaleski 1). Yet, although "medieval women had few opportunities to enjoy public power," women actually wielded much social and cultural authority, often through subversive bodily behavior (Erler and Kowaleski 1). The need,

therefore, is to redefine power and to “reconsider the traditional view of power as public authority,” which “broadens the conventional understanding of power to include new forms of power and new areas for its exercise (Erlar and Kowaleski 1). So if Margery’s scope within *The Book* is expanded past the traditional forms of political authority to embrace a definition of power “which encompasses the ability to act effectively, to influence people or decisions, and to achieve goals,” she can be seen as a woman who carries great social and literary agency, for Margery has great textual, sexual and religious influence (Erlar and Kowaleski 2). It is Kempe’s influence and agency that modifies pilgrimage as a genre, for her narrative strays from merely a telling of one’s religious journeys. In fact, the text uses pilgrimage as a way to explore the challenges Margery poses to conventional sexuality and religious beliefs in the fourteenth century. Pilgrimage, as genre, is discussed in Tison Pugh’s book, *Queering Medieval Genres*. Pugh defines genre as “the historically attested codification of discursive properties...[that] represent narrative patterns that solidify over time into recognizable body of forms...that arise from historically specific cultural discourses and ideologies” (1). Sexuality also follows similar patterns of Pugh’s definition of genre, for defining conventional sexuality consists of “construct[ing] and conscript[ing] agents as normative and non-normative: the heterosexual is rewarded with cultural appropriation while the queer is punished with societal opprobrium” (Pugh 1). In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Pugh’s implications of subversive genre and sexuality are substantial: Margery Kempe both defies the expectations of pilgrimage and defies normative sexual behaviors, and she is often out-casted for her queer behavior and often finds herself “being escorted...[to] the edge of town” (Kempe 618).

Another way that power in the fourteenth century is exercised, outside of the conventions of genre and sexuality, is through the public/private dichotomy. As Erlar and Kowaleski explain,

“the public sphere [is] the domain of men, [and] encompasses the worlds of politics, legal rights and obligations, and the market, and is thus the sphere of ‘real’ power, prestige and authority” (Erlor and Kowaleski 3). In the “private or domestic sphere, to which women are confined by virtue of their role as wives and mothers, encompasses the family and immediate household” (Erlor and Kowaleski 3). Kempe is also able to move past this binary that defines her limitations as either public or private, for she wields both types of power in her narrative.

Margery’s strategies of power form a linear movement of private to public and finally to literary authority. Beginning with her private power in its nascency, Margery’s sexuality and marital duty to her husband is a hierarchy within the private sphere. Medieval women were expected to have intercourse with their husbands and sometimes did so against their own will. This is the case of Margery’s marital relationship, as she did not have the autonomy to declare herself free from sexual obligations to her husband. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the narrator states that Margery “never wished to have intercourse with her husband, for the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that it seemed to her she would rather eat or drink slime, or the muck in the gutter, than to consent to any bodily intercourse” (Kempe 610). Margery deeply desires to abstain from marital relations with her husband, and *The Book* reveals that it takes nearly four years until her husband grants her wish for chastity. The narrator continues to say that, “this creature lived chastely, advised her husband to live chastely...and now it was right that they should, by the will and consent of both of them, both punish and chastise themselves deliberately by abstaining from their bodily lust,” but her husband, “would have his will, and she obeyed with great weeping and lamenting because she could not live chastely” (Kempe 610). Yet Margery’s problematic sexuality is not limited to the boundaries of matrimony, for Margery is tempted to have intercourse with another man outside of her marriage. Although for the first year

of the four years it takes for her to be granted chastity, Margery, “had no desire to have intercourse with her husband, but found it very painful and horrible,” but yet she is tempted by “a man she loved well...[who] said to her...that..he would lie by her and have his bodily pleasure, and she would not withstand him” (Kempe 611). In response to the man’s demands, Margery, “went to the man and said that he should have his desire, as she thought he had wished” (Kempe 611). Yet as soon as Margery agrees to fulfill this man’s sexual desires, something very strange happens, and “he dissimulated so that she did not know what he meant, and so they parted from one another for the night” (Kempe 611). In this very private scene, Margery is saved from having to have sexual intercourse by seemingly magical intervention, and in the moment where she almost loses all power over her body and sexuality, an authority intervenes and rectifies her power so that the man is not able to understand Margery’s speech. Similarly to this scenario that requires divine intervention, Margery is not able to gain bodily independence from her husband until “God wished him to” (Kempe 610). Finally, after four years of suffering sexual temptations, God comes to Margery in a vision and tells her that she may have her wish to be chaste. In the final scene with her husband in *The Book*, Margery’s husband, in an emancipating phrase, says, ““May your body be as much at God’s disposal as it has been at mine”” (Kempe 613). Hence, in all these situations of private power, Margery is able to wield private power through her relationship with God, who is a publicizing force in the *The Book*, as Margery’s movement from private forms of power to public power is assisted through her religious devotion and fervor. It is necessary for Margery to first gain power over her private, “domestic sphere,” in order for her movement into “the larger [public] community” (Erler and Kowaleski 10). In this motion towards power and autonomy, Christ is a queering influence that facilitates Margery’s movement in the text. The boundaries of matrimony and sexual obligation



and temptation are expanded by the liberating force of the queer, which here facilitates the power to escape expected bodily behaviors.

As Margery's power moves from private to public through the mobilizing and queer force of her connection with Christ, Margery's physical movement leads her to experience many trials and tribulations. As Erler and Kowaleski explain, the "public sphere [is] the domain of men...and is thus the sphere of 'real' power, prestige, and authority," and in *The Book*, Margery's migration away from the private and domestic sphere and towards the public assertion of her faith and relationship with Christ brings her into direct confrontation with the Church's authority, and hence the "sphere of men." The trials that Margery faces are an integral part of Margery's establishment of power, for she is able to prove herself and her scriptural knowledge to the Church and challenges patriarchal authority. Additionally, Margery's challenge to ecclesiastic authority participates in the tensions between the Church and laypeople during the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the movement of private to public and her ascension towards literary and textual authority, the queer acts as a force that gives Margery agency, both physically and spiritually. The queer is a vehicle in which Margery can challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies, and many of the people she comes in to contact with in her pilgrimage sense her queerness, for she is, upon her immediate arrival to the York Minster, problematic and threatening to the Church. In the text, once Margery is able to gain power domestically and leaves her husband sexually and geographically, she finds herself in conflict with the church's patriarchy. When Margery was in Minster at York, the laypeople "made her warmly welcome and were very glad to hear her conversation, marveling greatly at the fruitfulness of her speech" (Kempe 613). However, the clergy find Margery threatening, as "she also had many enemies who slandered, scorned and despised her, of whom one, a priest, came to her while she was in

the said minster and, taking her by the collar of her gown,” demanded that Margery answer questions about her clothing (Kempe 613). When Margery wouldn’t answer the priest’s questions, he “began to swear many great oaths” (Kempe 614). In response to the priest’s swearing, Margery, “spoke on God’s behalf; she was not afraid. She said, ‘Sir, you should keep God’s commandments and not swear so carelessly as you do’; Margery commands authority and chides the priest’s behavior (Kempe w 614). While appearing on trial before the Archbishop, Margery also condemns his household’s behavior when she says that “Sirs, I fear you will be burned endlessly in hell unless you improve yourselves with regard to your swearing, for you do not keep God’s commandments. I would not swear as you do for all the goods of this world” (Kempe 615). Margery doesn’t only correct behavior, but she also wields power through her ability to interpret and speak scripture. For example, in Chapter 51 of *The Book*, “a great clerk came to her asking how these words should be understood, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ to which she provided an elaborate and insightful answer (Kempe 614). However, Margery’s ability to cite the Bible is problematic and threatening to the Church’s authority, and the clerks say, “we truly think that she has a devil in her, for she speaks of the Gospel” (Kempe 616). As the footnote explains, “[t]he Catholic Church did not wish the Bible to be made available in the vernacular or for anyone other than the clergy to engage in Biblical interpretation (Kempe 616).

This tension between the Church’s authority and the community is also represented in regards to their response to Margery’s queer behavior and commandment of power. When Margery is “summoned...to appear before [the clergy],” and sentenced to stay in prison while waiting for her trial by the Archbishop, “the secular people spoke for her and said that she should not go to prison, for they themselves would take responsibility for her and go to the Archbishop with her” (Kempe 615). In this scene, there is a clear division between the beliefs of the clergy

and the people, and the people are willing to defend Margery even though she is named as a Lollard and a heretic by the church and also suggest that she should be burned at the stake (Kempe 615). These examples of her confrontation with the Church reflects the late Middle Ages' need for reformation in the Church and society. *The Book of Margery Kempe* speaks to a larger historical moment in which dominant cultural ideologies of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are being challenged by everyday people such as Kempe. Judith M Bennett's text, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, supports Margery's historicity, and her role as a religious visionary in the Middle Ages. Although Margery is not considered a mystic, and cannot be due to the limitation of marriage, her direct, visionary relationship with Christ provides similarities with mystics and their experiences with Christ. The similarities between mystics and Margery's experience can be seen when Bennett explains that:

[O]ther Christians were devoting their lives to spiritual practices that were individualistic, mystical, and challenging to the ecclesiastical structure. These three trends were related, since by stressing the spiritual relationship between an individual and God, mystics tended to de-emphasize the role of clergy and sacraments as channels of divine grace. Mystics were usually orthodox in their beliefs and practices, but they dwelt on the indescribable ecstasy of a mystical union with God for which no priests, no popes, and no sacraments were needed. (Bennett 341)

In *The Book*, we can see many examples of the intimate and direct relationship between Margery and Christ. Margery's beliefs are not mitigated through priests, popes, or sacraments, but rather represented through Margery's desire and Christ's direct communication represented

by direct discourse in the text. Although Christ does mention Margery's communion, Christ speaks that, "...there is nothing that you could do on earth, daughter, that would please Me better than allowing Me to speak to you in your soul, for then you understand My will and I understand your will," so although Margery takes the sacrament, it is Christ's embodiment through her that makes Margery powerful and visionary as well as subversive. The "[d]esire for ineffable union with God was not new to Christians in the Later Middle Ages," and Margery may have been familiar with the historical figures such as Meister Eckhart of the thirteenth century, who "linked asceticism with mysticism, teaching that mystical union with God could be achieved by purging all desire from the soul," and whose theological followers such as St. Catherine of Siena "stressed adoration over speculation, inner spiritual purity over external good works, and direct experience of God over sacramental avenues to divine grace" (Bennett 341). Margery follows many of these developing theological tenets of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, including her intense spiritual need for chastity, her love for Christ even while being persecuted, and her immediate reciprocity with Christ. Furthermore, these historical mystics often "spoke with great frankness to powerful men...[and] challenged the authority of their priests" (Bennett 341). During her trial by the Archbishop, he says to Margery, "I hear bad reports of you; I hear tell that you are a very wicked woman," to which Margery "said back to him, 'Sir, so I hear that you are a wicked man. And if you are as wicked as men say, you shall never get to heaven unless you mend your ways while you are here'" (Kempe 616). This is a significant moment in *The Book*, for it exemplifies Margery's arrival as a force and power capable and worthy of challenging authority and asserting her own beliefs and identity. Margery's development of public power is premised on and strengthened by newly emerging discourses of papal authority

that challenges conventional religion of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as well as reflects a historical shift that later results in the Protestant Reformation (Bennett 341).

Margery's movement in *The Book* reflects a development of power, for she moves from the domestic space and private power to the public arena, where she challenges the Church's religious authority. The transition from private to public is culminated in the power of *The Book* as a text, in which Margery's visions substantiate her religious and literary authority. In her article, "Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power," Elizabeth Petroff explores the use of religious visions as a source of power for women during the Middle Ages. In medieval society with limited avenues to explore one's capacity, "[v]isions were the necessary credentials for a medieval woman whose abilities and strengths demanded that she take an active role in a larger world" (34). In *The Book*, Margery clearly struggles against the limitations of domesticity, motherhood, and within her relationship with Christ. Although "all her desire was to be admired by people," Margery's failure at her attempts to be a successful business owner made the town suspect that 'she was cursed, [and] some said God took open vengeance on her" (Kempe 609). In every scene in which Margery is transitioning to a higher form of power, Margery becomes queer to her surrounding community, either it be in her domestic space by her husband or the community at large. It is in these moments that her queerness disrupts Margery's stasis, and in all of these situations, it is a vision of Christ, whether it is delivered visually or auditorily, that emancipates her from marginalization. When Margery is assumed to be cursed after her business attempts fail, "it was the divine mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that called and cried to her from the pride and vanity of the wretched world" (Kempe 609). As Petroff explains, "[b]ecause of [a woman's] visions, she could claim power; and since the visions were a manifestation of her inner growth, the power she gained from visions was power she had the wisdom to use intelligently

and creatively” (34). In the analysis of visionary power, Petroff suggests that visions of Christ are a tool which women could use to wield power, not only public or private, but over a woman’s general agency. Furthermore, “[v]isions gave these women direction and the freedom to act, for the transformative process mediated by visions created a transformed self that was not vulnerable to social structures and conventional behavior,” or in other words, visionary power is the power to be queer, and to challenge normative behavior and dominant ideologies (Petroff 35). As a literary figure, Petroff explains that the visionary woman drew inspiration from female “[s]aints and mystics [who] are almost always rule breakers: unconventional and unpredictable people” (35). The woman saint’s journey parallel’s much of Margery’s journey as represented in *The Book*, as “their path to visionary selfhood began with their total internalization of the cultural stereotype of the good woman...But by the time they reached their middle years, they had transcended fully both the stereotypes and the limitations of being female” (Petroff 35). In Margery’s case, the power of Christ is the power to transcend her limitations, and like many visionary women of the Middle Ages, it is because of “their visions, they had grown from quiet, sad little girls into happy laughing, wise women,” except instead of happily laughing, Margery is loudly weeping, a queer performative tool that Margery uses to validate her visions and religious authority (Petroff 35). The Archbishop’s response to Margery’s claiming of power is to send her away, and says, “I believe there was never a woman in England who was so much feared as she is and has been” (Kempe 620). This “ambivalence which derived from the mistrust and awe that all religions feel toward their mystics, combined with the deep fear of a female power—a power that the medieval world strove to contain” verifies Margery’s position in the genre, for the Church recognizes Margery as a threat to their authority and consistently sends her to the outskirts of town (Petroff 35). Since “these visions were believed to indicate divine approval of a

visionary's life and actions, the female visionary became free to act and to criticize in ways that were not open to ordinary women," and by openly criticizing the papal authority, Margery is directly participating in the genre of women's visionary writings in the Middle Ages.

One of the preoccupations with queer theory is to make the past and present touch and release them from the confines of historical stagnation that places sexuality in a marginalized and disadvantaged position. Thus, queering medieval texts calls for the contemporary reader to examine the power structures that define our own notions of identity. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the traditional jurisdiction of sexual desire by the Church is challenged by Margery's desire for Christ, and her pilgrimage provides her with the agency to pursue that desire. Margery's sexuality paradoxically proves to be a challenge to the attainment of her spiritual goals and yet is legitimized by the presence of Christ. Her pilgrimage functions as a means to challenge and participate in the dominant cultural pedagogies that simultaneously problematizes her sexuality and endorses it. Ultimately, Margery Kempe offers a narrative that queers the confines of religious conventions and encourages boundaries to be rethought, redrawn, and reimagined.

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