Reading the Book of Margery Kempe

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"I love wives also"

In John Donne's Holy Sonnet of 1633, "Batter my heart, three person'd God," the Soul longs for God in paradox ("That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow mee"), in oblique metaphors of siege warfare which make the Soul "like an usurpt town" held by its Lord's enemy, which give way before the ultimate conflict of rivals over love's battlefield, the body of the beloved:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved faine,
But am betrothed unto your enemie,
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

Supported and intensified by the formal constraints of sonnet form, the Soul may freely explain how she "would be loved faine" in that every time breath-taking crescendo of verbs: divorce, untie, break, take, imprison, enthral, ravish. Here is the essence of the Western tradition of mystical language—the Soul, female by universal conven-
tion, languishing and sick with desire, unblinkingly identifies direct knowledge of God with sexual intercourse. The Soul’s language is called metaphor by two thousand years of general consensus and thus is permitted every freedom, even the freedom to speak in prose. As when Jesus Christ and Margery Kempe, housewife of King’s Lynn, some time in the early fifteenth century, privately talked over the all too familiar complications of their kind of love affair:

Our Lord said to her, “Daughter, you are with child.”
She replied, “Ah, Lord, what shall I do about looking after my child?”
Our Lord said to her, “Daughter, don’t be afraid, I shall arrange for it to be looked after.”
“Lord, I am not worthy to hear you speak, and still to make love with my husband, even though it is great pain and great distress to me.”

In spite of Jesus’ loving assurances to her that her distaste for her husband nullified any sin involved in intercourse with him, Margery worried that only virgins really deserve the intimacies she enjoyed with God: “Because I am no virgin, lack of virginity is great sorrow to me.” “But rest assured,” Jesus told her, “I love wives also”—and especially if they do not want to sleep with their husbands. He agreed that virginity is the more perfect state for a woman, and widowhood better than marriage, yet Jesus insisted on his freedom to love whom he chooses for “no man can prevent me from loving whom I wish,” and he loved Margery. He begged her not to worry. He assured her that all his friends and relations in heaven approved of their love, including his mother. “When you please God, you please his mother and all the saints in Heaven.”

This conversation, one of many, in which Margery and Jesus rehearse the tensions and conflicts inevitable to the love affair of a married woman with several children and a sexually vigorous husband who repeatedly makes her pregnant, is plain prose enough. It couldn’t be any plainer. It is what makes scholars set Margery at the margins of the mystical tradition, worry about whether she was a “true” mystic, and apologize for her even when they defend her. Wolfgang Richle, in The Middle English Mystics, notes with un concealed distaste the “pathologically neurotic traits” of Margery’s piety which was incapable of “separating the sensual from the spiritual,” and (and this is the problem) preferred the sensual. That sort of open distaste is becoming increasingly uncommon as the field of women’s religiosity is taken over by scholars with feminist sympathies, and Margery is at last being rehabilitated. Susan Dickman’s article which places Margery plausibly in the context of the English devotional tradition represents the more balanced and less censorious approach to Margery’s life which characterizes current studies of her. Seen as part of “the late medieval search for an effective personal faith,” in a well-documented tradition of devotional practices which cultivated an emotional identification with the life and crucifixion of Jesus, the style of Margery’s religious life becomes comprehensible. Her tears, the frequency and duration of her violent fits of weeping, have found their own separate explanation and defence as an ancient, once familiar and highly respected, aspect of medieval piety. Recent scholarship has made Margery Kempe appear far less idiosyncratic, less extreme and eccentric than she seemed to the readers who first discovered her when Colonel Butler-Bowden published the translation of his unique manuscript of

1 The Book of Margery Kempe, trans. B. A. Windeatt (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 84. Because this new and easily available translation has already become a classroom staple in medieval history and literature courses, I am using it for all quotations; the corresponding page numbers in the Early English Text Society edition will also be given: The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 48. Margery Kempe, daughter of John Brunham and wife of John Kempe, was born in Bishop’s Lynn (later King’s Lynn) in Norfolk about 1375 and died about 1440. Although illiterate, she was interested in and well acquainted with books, chiefly selections of the Bible and devotional and mystical works; her determination to create a book of her experiences as a mystic and pilgrim overcame the technical obstacle of illiteracy by means of dictating her story to a scribe/confidant/editor. Her dictation, rendered into writing with some difficulty and some editorial intervention by the second of her two amanuenses, produced the first autobiography in English.

2 Book, 84–85; EETS, 48.


her *Book* in 1936. We now understand, so far as modern readers can understand, at least what kind of spiritual experience and pious devotion Margery Kempe exemplified, as well as the vocabulary of religious meaning Margery used to explain herself to herself, to those around her, and ultimately to her scribes, and thus to us.

It is Margery's situation as a woman who could not remain satisfied with her social role as wife and mother, and yet refused to conform to the only other acceptable alternative career, that of an enclosed religious life, which has attracted a more openly feminist scholarship. The relation between her inherited social position as a member of the urban patriciate (source of her confident manner and social entrée to high ecclesiastical circles) and her thwarted longings for social acceptance and respect in her chosen career as spiritual witness, has been very sensitively depicted in the one full-length treatment of Margery's life, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, by Clarissa Atkinson. Margery's brave, stubborn defiance of convention and her ability to defend herself when she was accused of heresy took courage, a courage which drew on the reserves of pride and confidence belonging to a daughter of the Mayor of Lynn.

Margery's steadfast courage in facing down or enduring repeated insults, rejection, suspicions and coldness, her unbreakable resolve to live a life guided by her own judgement and wishes, form the core plot of feminist studies which enter fully into Margery's view of her world and her persecutors. Our understanding of Margery's refusal to give up her own desires, our sympathy with her yearning for autonomy, is the modern version of the intuition which made her contemporaries accuse her of Lollardy. Margery was no heretic; the theological core of her belief was simple and orthodox, but her wilfulness, her self-judgement, even her knowledge of Scripture and ability to moralize about it had to seem Lollard-like at the time. Her style was Lollard. It seems to me that the disparity between her heterodox personal style and her orthodox religious message was what upset the people around her, and exasperated them so. In fact, I often think I detect in the strongest feminist defences of Margery a note of that same upset, betrayed by over-defensive, over-argued arguments. The vigorous modern effort to put Margery Kempe into context, to place her in a cultural, social, and religious company where she will show to advantage always does something subtly upsetting to the context itself. Of course, this was always Margery's problem: on her journey to the Holy Land, her fellow pilgrims grew so irritated with her tireless and tiresome piety that they made her eat her dinner at the end of the table, far from everyone. An echo of this impulse can still be discerned even in the voices of her most vigorous advocates.

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**Mystics and Metaphors**

*The secret of heaven is kept from age to age. No imprudent, no sociable angel ever dropt an early syllable to answer the longings of saints, the fears of mortals.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Swedenborg: Or, The Mystic.”

*(A review of the mystical writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg)*

Since Margery Kempe as a person, Margery's life and experience, are, for us, extrapolations from a book, the place to start any discussion of her should be with that book as a construct of language, though it seldom is. Margery's *Book* belongs, in one sense, with Donne's sonnet and all other writings which operate within the special coded language of mysticism—the traditional vocabulary of terms for

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5 The *Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and trans. William Butler-Bowden (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986). Herbert Thurston titled his review of Butler-Bowden's translation, “Margery the Astonishing,” in *The Month* 168 (1956): 446–56, and was quite sympathetic on the whole to a style of piety which was plainly not to his taste. He notes the clear precedents in Christian tradition for pious tears, 449–50.


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8 Book, 98; EETS, 62.
actions and perceptions which, by the laws of this conventional code, describe the soul receiving direct knowledge of God.  

The core or controlling concept of the mystical code is that of an event: the individual soul “knows” God in a direct, unmediated, private access of awareness, given by an objectively existing God in a form far beyond the limits of denotational language to describe. From antiquity to the present, and across cultures, there is considerable uniformity in this central concept. David Knowles’ definition from The English Mystical Tradition is carefully consistent with Catholic theological tradition and may be taken as normative within that system. It is also as clear as any such definition can be: mystical experience is “secret knowledge of God” obtained through direct experience “utterly different from and more real and adequate than all previous knowledge,” but which is “wholly incommunicable” though it brings “absolute certainty to the mind of the recipient.” The emphases here fall on privacy, immediacy, incommensurability, certainty, and, because the knowledge cannot be expressed in statement form or compared to knowledge which can be stated, incommunicability. The special word in English literary vocabulary for the inadequacy of sentences to express what the mind has received is “ineffable.” This self-defining blank at the center of the mystical experience, the ineffable or untellable quality of the experience, is not the failure of any person’s ability with words, but the failure of language itself to reach and match this special knowledge. It signals a massive switch from denotation to metaphor. The ineffable is never untellable in the sense that it should not be told at all, but that it must be told in a transposed language which is intelligible only to those who know the code and its key.

The meticulous standards of modern scholarship have given current students of mystical writings a virtuoso erudition in mysticism’s special code, a connoisseur’s ability to make distinctions among the traditions and varieties of mystical knowledge. The tradition of negative mysticism, strongly associated with the Pseudo-Dionysius, taught the practice of “vacating” or suppressing the self as part of an elaborate preparation for a mystical access which would not register in sensory perceptions at all. The rather less rarefied tradition of positive mysticism was willing to accept as genuine those experiences which might take sensory form in ocular visions, speeches and verbal commands— all of which fed the literary tradition of tours through the Other World. Beginning roughly with Augustine and continuing throughout the Middle Ages, the more fastidious arbiters of religious taste ranked mystical knowledge in the hierarchical categories of classical psychology which gave highest place to the pure access of enlightenment direct to the intellect without any mediation by the senses. Inevitably, and not surprisingly, instances of mystical insight in the form of sights, sounds, and bodily feelings were regarded as inferior gifts because of their entanglement with the carnality of the body. (Their potential for exciting narrative, however, guaranteed them a rapt popular audience.)

The effect of these traditions and tastes on modern students is a bit odd. No historian who bothers to write about the subject at all approaches mysticism with anything but a respect so earnest as sometimes to approach the reverential. (I refer here to work by scholars who are not themselves avowed mystics.) The general rule of good historical work—not to impose inappropriate and anachronistic standards on the past—shows itself in the scholarship of mysticism in a blandly undisguised presupposition that the core concept of mystical knowledge is, or is to be taken as, what medieval mystics said it is. Some scholars, especially feminist scholars who are very aware that sensory mysticism was a field of experience dominated by women in the later Middle Ages, may quibble with parts of the tradition and deplore the low valuation placed on this kind of experience, but I have yet to read an essay or book which did not accept as its working premise a definition of mysticism given by the objects of study themselves. Most studies begin with a sketch of quotations or paraphrases from the relevant theological authorities as a way of establishing the author’s credentials: to show that she knows what mysticism is. Since mystical writings, writings from within the tradition, offer the “ineffable” in a coded language, the core experience which is the key to the code determines the meaning of all the ancillary and associated linguistic

9 Riehle’s Middle English Mystics is excellent as an introduction to the language and imagery of Western mysticism; an interesting essay in classifying English mystical writing in categories of literary genre is by Roger Ellis, “A Literary Approach to the Middle English Mystics,” in The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, 99–119.


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willing to give private knowledge to individuals. To break the circle of self-defining language, one needs another language with its own definitions and presumptions. Interpretation is translation, not paraphrase.

The peculiar difficulty here is that mystical language is the language of sexual love as used by persons who are usually celibate; it would seem that such language would have to be metaphor. And it is, but in a very special way. It is nearly always forgotten that what we call the literal language of love, even now, is metaphor—metaphor for itself in an extraordinary way because there is no literal language which directly describes the union of associational thought and emotion with bodily sensation which is the complex experience of sexual love. This essential human experience can only be approached obliquely by metaphor. (For the sake of clarity we should remember that the most explicit terms for the various sexual acts, most in Latin still, describe behavior as though observed from a third-person distance, not experience.) The reader cannot help but notice that my argument for the inescapable metaphor in sexual language is analogous to the traditional religious arguments for mystical metaphor. Mystics may object to the parallel, but both mystical and sexual experience are private and ultimately unsharable regardless of the intimacy of contact between any two beings and their feeling for one another. Or, in slightly silly linguistic terms, no verbal sign can ever confidently be read as an exact equivalent for the mystical/sexual experience of two different persons since there is no way of establishing an exact shared code for wholly private experiences.

The inevitable, eternal result, for both cases, is that all attempts at expression and description must be approximate and impressionistic—hence the comparatively rich language of euphemism and the impoverished language of direct reference. The kind of language called figurative, a language of paraphrase, comparison, evocation, and displacement, is as close as language gets to simple denotation for certain special realms of experience. And so it may be that the language of mystical ecstasy—for example, that of the Song of Songs—not allegory at all, but as literal an expression of experience as language permits.

During the Middle Ages, the authorized devotional "metaphor" of erotic love standing for the love of God gave cultural permission to contemplate, arouse, and cultivate sexual feelings without sin to many persons who lived under sexual constraint, and permitted them free use of erotic language. If, as readers of this language, we cannot

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12 Riehle, chapters 3, 5, 7-10; on the use of raptus, or the related English verb, ravishen, 94-96.
honestly read the metaphors of religious ecstasy outwards to a universe of supernatural reality, then we must read them inwards, as the self-referring metaphors of inner reality. It might be seriously considered that the mystical "ineffable" is the orgasm, volatilized beyond sensation and projected into an objectified reality. But the language used by modern students of mysticism is curiously prim and vague and tends to echo the terms offered by the mystics themselves--union, ecstasy, rapture, strong but romantically hazy language, and the word "marriage" used as an all-purpose euphemism. The rather bodiless word, "erotic," is always used in preference to the blunter "sex" which I have never seen in scholarly use. Admittedly, Standard English is terribly limited in polite words for sexual behavior, but I have never even read the terms, "sexual intercourse," or "orgasm," in learned discussions of mystical "union" and "ecstasy." This misplaced gentleness befogs and muffles the subject of mysticism in all its manifestations, and certainly does no justice whatever to Margery Kempe, who was so candid with us about her longing for the God who would love her.

"It is Full Merry in Heaven"

Margery's experience was, by her own emphasis, peculiarly that of a married woman. Her book, and apparently her significant memory, began with marriage.

When this creature was twenty years of age or somewhat more, she was married to a worshipful burgess of Lynn and was with child within a short time, as nature would have it. And after she

had conceived, she was troubled with severe attacks of sickness until the child was born. And then, what with the labour-pains she had in childbirth and the sickness that had gone before, she despaired of her life, believing she might not live.\footnote{Book, 41; EETS, 6.}

In the interior logic of her memories (which does not conform to the usual sequence of holy lives), everything followed from marriage: sexual initiation, pregnancy, sickness, pain, fear of death, madness, and at last, the healing presence of God. She suffered an extended episode of insanity for months after the birth, six months and eight days as she remembered it with uncharacteristic precision, months of fear and hatred of everyone around her, and she had to be restrained from doing violence to herself. It is a compact, fraught plot, this story of sexual initiation (and perhaps pleasure) closely followed by sickness, pain, fear and despair. Margery's first vision of Jesus Christ as a beautiful and beautifully dressed young man sitting on the side of her bed restored her to sanity.

During the next several years, occupying the next several pages in her Book, she tried to achieve on her own the social standing she had enjoyed before marriage as daughter of a father who had been mayor of Lynn five times, member of parliament, and alderman of his guild. "She was come of worthy kindred," she told her husband when he objected to the extravagant fashionable clothes she wore to be "starred at and all the more esteemed."\footnote{Book, 41–42; EETS, 7–8.} Her husband scolded her; people must have stared but they only gossiped meanly about her, and she made herself wretched with envy of other people's nice clothes. Margery had not fixed on a superficial or insignificant form of self-assertion. Clothing was not a trivial concern, and not an especially feminine concern, in the Middle Ages. One's dress was a display of rank and wealth and a symbolic demand for whatever deference and privileges belonged to one's status. To dress "above" oneself was a serious affront to the social order. Louis IX's advice to his seneschal, Joinville, and to his own sons was:

do to dress well, and in a manner suited to your condition, so that your wives will love you all the more and your men have more respect for you.\footnote{Joinville, The Life of St. Louis, in Joinville and Villehardouin, Chronicles of the Crusades, trans. M. R. B. Shaw (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 171. The squabbly
Love and respect were quite reasonable rewards to be sought with an elegant wardrobe, but Margery made a critical error in thinking that she could remain the daughter of her father in her socially-defining dress, rather than the wife of her less wealthy husband. She could not “keep up the honour of her kindred,” as she defiantly put it, once her status was dependent on her husband, not her father.

Unsurprisingly, Margery’s assault on the symbolic codes governing social status and gender failed; she turned next, very intelligently, to a deeper level of social stratification—material wealth. She tried independent enterprise, first brewing beer and, when that business failed, milling grain in a horse-powered mill. But even the horse refused to work for Margery and her career in business ended in lost money, public failure, and more smug, nasty gossip. Telling her copyist about this period of her life, she called all these ambitions pride, covetousness, and worldly sin, but she also let slip a less-edited memory: “Her whole desire was to be respected by people.”

Next—so it follows in her book as it “follows” only in emotional logic:

One night this creature was in bed with her husband [this same marriage bed where her story began: getting pregnant, giving birth, lying sick and insane]. On that night she heard a melody and jumped out of bed, saying: “Alas that ever I sinned. It is full merry in heaven.”

Meaning: not here, not “full merry” in bed with my husband. And she enacted this sentiment by feeling, from this time on, disgust and revulsion at intercourse with her husband. She tried to persuade him to agree to a chaste marriage, arguing that they had already much displeased God by “their inordinate love, and the great delight that each

of them had in the other’s body.” He understandably refused. Margery never denied her pleasure in sex even when she no longer desired her husband, nor did she ever portray John Kempe as anything but the kind and affectionate man he obviously was.

By this time, an uncertain date some three or four years before John Kempe would agree to marital celibacy, Margery was already well advanced in personal mortifications, wearing haircloth, practicing frequent confession and prayer. Her loud weeping and sobbing in public devotions were beginning to bring on her the social contempt she would provoke and endure all her life. Worse, her new religious intensity and demand for celibacy coincided with the onset of terrible and uncontrollable sexual desires; although she continued to be repelled by her husband, she wanted other men. Three years of un governable adulterous urges seem to have culminated in a confusing, humiliating episode in which Margery responded to the advances of a man in Lynn, only to be cruelly rejected by him when she offered herself to him. Yet another demand on life had been met with denial and shame. The unnamed man had approached her first, but, when she went to him willing to make love, he said: “. . . he would not for all the wealth in the world; he would rather be chopped up as small as meat for the pot.” Years later, Margery contrived a moral revenge for this crude insult: her new lover, who knew all the thoughts of her heart, praised her for her great charity of feeling for all sinners living and dead because he knew: “. . . that you would be chopped up as small as meat for the pot . . .” if he would only spare them from damnation—a small triumph of transformed memory, but still poignant because the original shame so obviously lingered.

At last, after so many false starts and failures, as she prayed in the church of St. Margaret, Jesus “ravished her spirit” and commanded her: “boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love and shall be your love without end.” He gave her many instructions and promises concerning this world and the next, and specifically counselled her to spend less time saying the rosary and concentrate instead on interior contemplation, “such thoughts as I shall put into your mind” when

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17 Book, 44; EETS, 9-10.
18 Book, 44; EETS, 9.
19 Book, 46; EETS, 11.

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20 Book, 46; EETS, 12.
21 Book, 47; EETS, 12-13.
22 Book, 50; EETS, 15.
23 Book, 245; EETS, 204.
she lay still after prayer. Margery's career as a mystic had begun.

**Narrative, Plot, and Context**

All the motifs which inform the chronologically and emotionally condensed first five chapters of Margery's *Book* recur, with variations, throughout the rest of the narrative. The most important of these are, 1) sex associated with desire and gratification, and with revulsion and guilt, 2) her father and other men enjoying moral and social authority, 3) social acceptance and social rejection, 4) clothing as symbolic self-assertion. These clusters of associated ideas are made into narrative motifs by repetition, correspondence or analogue forms, and exemplum-like pointedness. Margery's life must naturally be assessed by historians in its social and cultural context. But Margery's life regarded as the thoughts and behavior of a person in the past is now the creation of our reading, abstracted and reified, of a book. I have no wish to deny Margery the dignity of her real past existence, but we have no share in that, regardless of how confidently and familiarly we speak of her, of her family, her town, her travels, her life and times. The Margery we know is the literary character, "this creature," and her creator was the author named Margery Kempe who, like the Creator she acknowledged, made a woman out of words.

I have no intention of adopting the precious and artificial purity of refusing to refer to Margery Kempe as a person who lived her life, but we always seem to need reminding that we do not have her life, but her *Book*. Margery's *Book* is an intensified and symbolized rendering of that life in words, and it requires special and pointed attention to language. Before Margery found the assistance she needed to render her life in writing, she had had many years of practice story-telling, of telling herself and all the listeners she sought during her travels the story of her experiences in forms they would find intelligible, convincing, and meaningful. She put enormous effort into selecting, explaining, creating herself, but an effort largely unconstrained by the conventions of narration that would have been acquired with formal literacy. The *Book* bears all the marks of memory-narrative in its associations, emphases, repetitions, and silences, lightly distorted by

the conventional editorial efforts of the second scribe. The historically knowable context-world of social and cultural life governs our understanding of the various people, secondary characters in her book, who saw and judged Margery: the preaching friar who praised her, people who shunned or condemned her, Dame Julian who tried to advise her, bishops, fellow pilgrims, neighbors. Margery's *Book* exists both inside and outside the context-world. It is a private record written, inevitably, in the contemporary language of religious meaning, the only available language which could make acceptable sense of her experience. But meaning cannot be confined to one historical code.

Interpretation requires translation languages, and a narrative of desire is surely a suitable place to bring the translation languages of poetics and psychoanalysis. Poetics, in the specific form of narrative analysis, brings into focus the narrative structures on small and large scale, the patterns of repetition, metaphor, condensation and emphasis, and storyness or plot. Psychoanalysis examines the same words for the motifs of self-confession: key associations, symbolic displacements, the formal repetitions of unresolved conflict, beginnings which determine outcomes. The techniques of literary analysis and of psychic analysis are inevitably very alike, for the self explains itself to itself in story form, in metaphor, in allegory.

Almost all readers have noticed that the first five chapters of the *Book* have a special quality of compression and intensity, the same special significance that Freud noted in the "first communications" of all his patients. This is not a peculiarly neurotic characteristic; the choice of what to tell first is always fraught with narrative significance,

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24 *Book*, 51, 52; EETS, 17; 18.

25 John C. Hirsch, "Author and Scribe in the *Book of Margery Kempe*," *M.E. 44* (1975): 145-50. Hirsch argues logically for the second scribe as aggressive contributor/editor who was responsible for giving Margery's account its sense of spiritual development and growth (149):

Because of him, the reader is not overwhelmed by detail, and is shown the spiritual growth of a temperamentally static human being.

Hirsch's conception of the second scribe as responsible for much of the textual reference to traditional devotional practice and literature makes Margery's own narrative patterns stand out even more distinctly.

Timea Szell offered a subtle, penetrating analysis of the *Book*'s non-linear narrative structure in a paper read at the International Congress of Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1989—"From Woe to Weal and from Weal to Woe: The Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*"
always overdetermined. The first five chapters move in a seamless sequence of emotional states issuing from key events, all of which have the compressed, exemplarizing effect of synecdoche. After Chapter 5, although there are many important episodes to come, including all of the pilgrimages, their meaning invariably refers back to that first crucial sequence. The chronology of chapters 1 to 5 is hard to make out. Although the narrative is studded with time linkages, some of them very precise, it is in reality a private chronology fixed by key events. Narrative time is drastically compressed or expanded in relation to calendar time. There seem to be about twenty years between Margery's marriage in Chapter 1 (1395) and Chapter 5 when Jesus first "ravished her soul" in, perhaps, 1412/13. Description is concentrated, however, on the first four years of marriage and the last four years before John Kempe agreed to a vow of marital chastity, permitting Margery to leave on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, both the vow and the pilgrimage taking place in 1413.

The intervening ten or twelve years are barely sketched in as a transition from one major narrative sequence to another. The two four-year sequences are formal analogues with reversals. The first sequence begins with 1) Margery jumping out of the bed in which her husband was lying, 2) repudiating marital intercourse as disgusting and repellent to her, but 4) seeking a lover of her own choosing and, after a disastrously wrong first choice, 5) (a new element and coda to the sequence) finding her "love without end.”

The narrative structure is governed by Margery’s entry into the bed, and her leap out of it—the repetition of the charged image of the marriage bed with the reversed parallel actions of entering and leaving it. This kind of formal repetition with a key element reversed, signalling a reversal of meaning, is characteristic of Margery’s associational memory, and thus of her dictated narrative style. It is exactly the same formal element which connects the man of Chapter 4 who would have been “cut up as small as meat for the pot” rather than make love to Margery, with the supernal lover in Chapter 84 who knew that Margery would let herself be “cut up as small as meat for the pot” rather than have sinners suffer the punishments of hell. The reversal of meaning is an emotional one: from Margery rejected and humiliated to Margery gracious and secure in love. Another example connects John Kempe, scolding Margery in Chapter 2 for her excessively fine clothes, with the Jesus of Chapter 32 who compares himself to “a man who greatly loves his wife: the more envy that other men have of her, the better he will dress her to spite his enemies.” These two reversed little scenes hold between them the many episodes of Margery’s virginal white clothes which she felt God had commanded her to wear, and her vacillating doubts over her right to wear the symbolic white. Her rich clothes of Chapter 2 were also associated with virginity, with the time before her marriage when her clothes signified that she was the unmarried daughter of the mayor. Just such repetitions, correspondences of phrase and image, formal parallels with significant reversals, are the structural elements of the narrative which otherwise moves forward in a spreading chronological drift. The meaningful repeated motifs are the elements of her private code, only lightly connected to the context-world scholars now reconstitute from texts and artifacts. The poetics of Margery’s Book is the private symbolism of her life.

The pairs and series of corresponding images and events, often rendered as mirror-image reversals, which govern the narrative structure of the Book also speak to us as the pattern of Margery’s inner life, a pattern of desire and conflict. The sequence of sexual initiation followed by pain, danger, and many forms of defeat, corresponds clearly with the sequence of rejection of sex followed by the search for and ultimate attainment of a higher form of gratification. It should always be kept in mind that Margery’s sudden revulsion against sex with John Kempe was not an ascetic renunciation of pleasure for the sake of self-command and sublimation. The rejection, while in formal terms a reversal of the marriage motif of Chapter 1, is not presented as self-castigation, sacrifice, or mortification of the body. Margery’s act is presented frankly as one of desire—desire in negative which is revulsion.

She would rather, she thought, have eaten and drunk the ooze

26 Even “sketched” may be an exaggeration of the one paragraph which links Margery’s early years of marriage and failed ambitions with the “one night” when she jumped out of her marriage bed. The line, “Then she asked God for mercy, and forsook her pride ... and did great bodily penance ...” seems to refer to ten or twelve years (Book, 45; EETS, 11).

27 Book, 117; EETS, 81.
and muck from the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of obedience. 28

The imagery is telling: eating and drinking, primary forms of assimilation and infantile gratification, symbols of interpenetration and union, are our inevitable natural symbols, by displacement, of sexual intercourse. These are central images of the Song of Songs and central to the imagery of mysticism. The eating of vile substances (and we might glancingly consider the contents of medieval gutters) approaches the core symbol with emotions filled with fear, guilt, or denial. 29 The entire story of Margery’s revulsion from marital sex, the years of temptation to adultery, the man who rejected her, the God who ravished her soul, is a story of libidinous desire, punished, thwarted, but indefatigably seeking its aim. The plot is not one of asceticism, that is, desire at war with itself. The plot of “this creature’s” story is desire seeking its satisfaction.

**Married Women**

The specific configuration of desire, guilt, and ambition which drove Margery’s life was hers alone, but her sense of herself, her place in the world, her possibilities for good or evil, were shared with other women. She, like every other woman, was expected to assimilate and conform to the complex set of rules governing behavior, attitudes, and feelings which comprised femininity—the cultural norms of gender considered appropriate for persons of female sex. Gender is a cultural category, open to variation and change over time, although each generation tends to regard its own ideas of masculine and feminine as constant and immutable, decreed by nature and God. During the Middle Ages, the model of feminine gender was particularly harsh and restricting. Margery’s story would probably not have been so dramatically conflicted had she not had to live it out in a world which so incessantly taught fearful lessons about female sexuality. Margery was emphatically (as we are told in the first line of her book) a married woman, a woman whose virgin purity was irretrievably lost and whose sexuality, released on herself and others, degraded her and made her an occasion of sin as long as she lived. It did not matter that she was illiterate and had not read the relevant works of Jerome or Augustine on sexuality; the steady, pervasive flow of misogynist ideas through medieval culture could not fail to reach her and every woman.

Except as royal and feudal consorts, names attached to dynasties and fiefs, married women rarely enter medieval history. Christina of Markyate’s wedding night in which she contrived to preserve her virginity, at first by the exertion of moral force over her bridegroom, and at last by hiding behind a wall tapestry, is an interesting exception. Whatever indecision or vacillating will had gotten her into the wretched situation of spending her wedding night trying to persuade her new husband not to touch her, Christina’s ultimate refusal to be initiated sexually and socially into a lower state is told with admiration and approval by her biographer. 30 Had she accepted her husband, there would have been no book.

There was only one plot for this story, and it informed the Lives, and quite probably the lives, of heroic virgins since Antiquity and well into the early Middle Ages. Such women (and of course their biographers) made physical virginity the literal equivalent of spiritual purity and often endured torture rather than accede to the state of permanent defilement which the act of sexual intercourse would bring upon them. They sometimes exacted terrible vengeance on the men who wished to penetrate them, and sometimes, most horribly, mutilated themselves to become sexually repellant. 31 Freud read the biblical

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28 Book, 46; EETS, 11-12.
29 Margery’s candid equation of sex with a man who repels her with eating disgusting substances must remind readers of the female saints who actually did eat vile substances, and who are the subject of Caroline Bynum’s Holy Feast, Holy Fast (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). The fact that in medieval culture the display of rigorous control over normal bodily impulses could work in its social function as a means to the attainment of respect, autonomy, and authority in society and thus have positive and desirable consequences does not change the essential psychic symbolism involved. Pathogenic behavior, expressing deep sexual conflict, can certainly, under the right cultural conditions, function socially in useful and advantageous ways; social function and psychic meaning do not cancel one another out, and should not be confused.

30 The Life of Christina of Markyate, ed. & trans. C. H. Talbot (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 43-55, for the lecture on the propriety of Christian marriage delivered to her by a prior, and Christina’s confident reply:

Nor do I think that virgins only will be saved. . . And if many mothers of families are saved, which you likewise say, and it is true, certainly virgins are saved more easily.

31 Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, “The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and
story of Judith beheading Holofernes as, in origin and essence, a story about the taboo attached to the defilement of intact virginity, even though the biblical Judith was a widow.52 The poet of the Anglo-Saxon *Judith* had the same compelling insight about the story: he made Judith a virgin who kills Holofernes before he violates her. All stories about female spirituality were also stories about sexuality. Marriage sank a woman to a sub-literary as well as a sub-spiritual state.

We know some interesting things about one married woman, the mother of Guibert of Nogent, the twelfth-century abbot who wrote extensively about her in his memoir (though not her name).53 Guibert's mother was a woman of the feudal nobility; she married young and was still fairly young when her husband died soon after she gave birth to Guibert. A prolonged labor and difficult birth passage very nearly killed both mother and infant. Guibert survived to be the favorite and confidant of his widowed mother who raised him at home with the aid of a resident tutor. He relates that in earliest girlhood she already was filled with the dread of sin (of unspecified kind, always amorphously sexual), so terrified of sin that her greatest fear was of sudden death, which would have meant damnation to her. It should come as little surprise to us that the youthful husband of this strong-willed, sin-obsessed girl found himself impotent for years after the marriage; intercourse with his wife was only achieved after the husband had restored his confidence with a mistress. When he was taken prisoner in battle by a feudal lord who was reputed never to take ransoms, but to hold his prisoners until death, Guibert's mother reacted strongly. (This is clearly a family legend told by Guibert as it must have been told to him.) She refused food and drink, was unable to sleep, and in this state was attacked in her own bed by the devil, "the Enemy himself," who lay on her, crushing her, until a good spirit, who happened to be perch on the bed watching the demonic rape, rescued her. Before the good spirit left, he turned to say in farewell: "Take care to be a good woman."54 And she stored up this equivocal advice until life gave her a chance to apply it. When Guibert's father finally did die (not in his captor's prison—that was a false alarm, or hope), his mother resolved to remain a chaste widow against great family pressure to marry again.

The connection between the ambiguous "good woman" advice and the widow's resolve never to remarry is not available to ordinary logic. The deeper logic of the emotions connects the husband's blood-guilt for violating virginity, the wife's demonic rape, and her eventual Judith-like triumph. His mother's logic seemed clear enough to Guibert who seems to have learned fundamental lessons about sexuality and sin from her. The punishment this woman conjured up to reply to her sinful triumph when she thought her husband was certain to die, was perfectly appropriate: rape in the marriage bed witnessed by a good but censorious spirit who allows the attack to happen before rescuing her, and then leaves her with a warning to be "a good woman" (now, presumably, that she was a free woman).

But out of this self-punishing tangle of emotion, Guibert's mother turned the spirit's advice to gratifying effect. It sustained her in her resolve never to remarry, and instead she "wisely ruled our household and our property"55—a household of celibate men: her chaplains, her son, her son's tutor, and the miserable soul of her dead husband for whom she offered frequent masses of intercession, enjoying many visions of his sufferings in Purgatory. Guibert celebrated his mother as a heroic woman who had endured and finally defeated the sin and social bondage that nature and worldly custom had forced on her by making her a married woman.

Sin presented itself in one essential form to the minds of sensitive women and yet precisely that behavior was urged on them as a duty to family and society. Andreas the Chaplain, whose text-book on love begins in suffering contracted by looking too long at beauty, ends it in classical vituperation on the theme of female sexuality: The Rejection of Love. Andreas accepts as medical fact that intercourse depletes and weakens men; sex inspired by love causes, in addition, loss of appetite and loss of sleep which lead to alterations in the brain, brooding, and premature senility, but only for men. Women are not endangered in this way because they never love or desire anything but money, and food and wine, and also sexual pleasure for which they

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54 Guibert of Nogent, 70.
55 Guibert of Nogent, 74.
are insatiable. Once Andreas starts listing the objects of female greed, he can't seem to stop.\textsuperscript{36} Walter, the naive object of all Andreas' contradictory teachings, is urged at the last to spurn women and save himself to be the metaphorical bride of the "greater nuptials" with the heavenly Bridgroom.

The endless controversy over Andreas' own beliefs, or which part of the book he really endorsed, is quite beside the point here.\textsuperscript{37} The treatise on love is culturally original and controversial. The epilogue or Rejection of Love is the wholly conventional, unoriginal, taken-for-granted part of his book; every idea in it is banal with centuries of repeated use. The sheer vulgar ordinariness of the diatribe against women, the open insults, the overheated language, are the point. It is this kind of unquestioned, endlessly reiterated, commonplace morality which finds its home, to some extent, in the Superego of each individual. Culture does impress its language on conscience, most emphatically through gender.

In this world of ancient, interlocking, reinforcing clichés about women and sex and salvation, the late twelfth-century voice of Bishop Hugh of Lincoln sounds startling in its generosity, tact, and spiritual clarity. When married persons, presumably women, complained to him about the religious impediments caused by their lives in the world, he would tell them: "the kingdom of heaven is not confined only to monks, hermits, and anchorites." He taught that married people were chaste and would be admitted to heaven equally with virgins and celibates if they were good Christians. The interesting thing about this humane good sense is how very nearly eccentric it sounds for his time, and for centuries before and after the twelfth.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courly Love, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1959), 190: "But I remember that I once found in certain medical books that because of the works of Venus men quickly grow old . . ."; see also page 201:
\item Furthermore, not only is every woman by nature a miser, but she is also envious and a slanderer of other women, greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant . . . a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets, too much given to wantonness, prone to every evil . . .
\item and so on throughout Book III.
\item \textsuperscript{37} The literature is large and ever expanding. Don A. Monson's careful examination of what various recent critics mean by imputing irony and unity to Andreas' book is helpful: "Andreas Capellanus and the Problem of Irony," Speculum 63 (1988): 599–72.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Adam of Eynsham, The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln, ed. and trans. D. Douie
\item The vast majority of post-reform celibate clergy were not so willing to relinquish the spiritual privileges which were attached to their celibate state, in high papal doctrine.
\item Conventional language about sex and sin encouraged men to externalize their anxieties and objectify them, with women as the objects: perpetual Adams tempted by sensual Eves. Women were taught to condemn themselves.
\item And so when Margery Kempe, never conforming and never tactful, jumped out of her husband's bed, announcing that it is far happier someplace infinitely far away, she spoke for all the generations of medieval women whose sexuality was condemned, self-condemned, and issued too regularly in painful and dangerous births which, under the circumstances, had to seem like punishments. Guibert's mother, with a more successful history of suppressing and despising sexual feelings, barely survived her last childbirth before she took her stand on celibacy and independence. She disbursed her emotions over a household of men who depended on her for food, shelter, and direction. Margery had no gift for self-suppression and sublimation, nor the financial and social resources of a feudal widow. She wanted the perfect lover who would satisfy all her thwarted desires: for pleasure here and hereafter; for freedom from pregnancy and pain; for respect, dignity, admiration and all the satisfactions which life denied—denied to nearly everyone, admittedly, but most censoriously to married women. It was some indeterminate time after her humiliating near fall into adultery with the man in Lynn that Christ ravished her spirit and urged her, "boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love," and promised her blessedness after death without any time in Purgatory.\textsuperscript{39} later he promised her that she would feel no pain at all during her death. (Pain was obviously a vivid and important fact of Margery's experience.) Once she arrives in heaven, all the saints will welcome her and "You shall be fulfilled with every kind of love that you de-
\item and Hugh Farmer, vol. 2 (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), 46–47. Hugh taught that married people who had sexual relations were to be considered chaste and equal to virgins and celibates with respect to salvation; his manners toward women were gracious, affectionate and respectful. Adam, Hugh's biographer, noted these traits precisely because they marked the unusual and unconventional nature of his character.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Book, 51; 87; EETS, 16–17; 51. Jesus' specific promises that Margery would spend no time at all in Purgatory are a recurrent motif and hint at unassuageable anxiety and a wish for punishment.
\end{itemize}
sire.” Margery’s heaven was constructed in glorious defiance of all the disappointing realities of marriage in narrow-minded Lynn where she met rejection, failure, and vicious gossip.

After yet another of her childbirths (there would be fourteen of them, but her book mentions only one of her children) Jesus told her “that she should bear no more children.” Margery’s Jesus was never ashamed to concern himself with such matters. The visions that Margery reported of Jesus assuring her that he must lie in her bed with her where she could love him as a son and as a husband, kissing his mouth, head, and feet, are what still slightly disconcert modern readers. The resolute lack of allegory leaves matters so very plain. What bothered contemporaries, who were not all made confidants to her visions, were the frequent, uncontrollable fits of loud weeping, sometimes in what seemed to be inappropriate or annoying places. Far worse was the unpredictable screaming which began during the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and continued back in England: when taking the Eucharist or listening to sermons or at the sight of young men and male babies. From the time when she jumped out of bed and proclaimed that joy was to be found in heaven, Margery’s devotion was expressed in “plentiful tears and much loud and violent sobbing,” much of it in public where it seemed absurd, frightening, or self-advertising to people who accused her of weeping at will “when in company for advantage and profit.” But the noisy prolonged weeping was a trivial annoyance to the people who distrusted it, and won over many defenders because copious tears were an ancient and revered sign of deep compunction of soul.

40 Book, 73; EETS, 38.
41 From their very first communing (excluding the post-partum vision which involved no words), Jesus encouraged Margery to expect his approach when she was lying down and thinking of her own thoughts, rather than reciting formal prayers. She seems to have lain on church floors during prayer, as well as at home, so it is often difficult to tell exactly where her mystical experiences took place, but they are often associated with lying down, ceasing formal devotions, and allowing her mind to move in its own train of associations and fantasies. Jesus’ primary instructions were those which Margery followed the rest of her life (Book, 52; EETS, 17):

And daughter, I want you to give up your praying of many beads, and think such thoughts as I shall put into your mind. . . Then you shall lie still and speak to me in thought, and I shall give you high meditation. . . .

42 Book, 48; EETS, 13.

On her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, at Mount Calvary, Margery first fell into the convulsions with screaming outcries which continued for many years after, in church and in the streets. These episodes, which were distinctly different from the prolonged weeping, brought social disgrace on her, inspired revulsion and persistent suspicions that she could control them if she wanted. Obviously she could not, as her account makes indubtable. Unlike the tears which detractors knew could be a source of “advantage and profit,” that is, reverence and admiration, there was nothing whatever to be gained by these exhibitions, or at least nothing apparent to the conscious mind.

And when they came up on the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but writhed and wrested with her body, spreading her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified . . . And this was the first crying that she ever cried in any contemplation. And this kind of crying lasted for many years after this time, despite anything that anyone might do, and she suffered much contempt and much reproof for it. The crying was so loud and so amazing that it astounded people . . . And as soon as she perceived that she was going to cry, she would hold it in as much as she could, so that people would not hear it and get annoyed . . . And therefore, when she knew that she was going to cry, she held it in as long as she could, and did all that she could to withstand it or else to suppress it, until she turned the colour of lead, and all the time it would be seething more and more in her mind until such time as it burst out. And when the body might no longer endure the spiritual effort, but was overcome with the unspeakable love that worked so fervently in her soul, then she fell down and cried astonishingly loud. And the more that she laboured to keep it in or to suppress it, so much the more would she cry, and the louder.

43 Book, 104–5 for description; EETS, 68–70. I see no reason to disbelieve or doubt her conscious efforts to suppress the screaming.

This was the dark, self-castigating side of her religious life, the implacable punishing reply to the wish-fulfilling amatory scenes. These episodes too, were wish-fulfilling but in a far more profound and conflicted way; these episodes, seen in connection with the whole of
her life as the Book reveals it, are what describe the outline of hysteria in the clinical sense, the syndrome of displaced forbidden desires. Not even the Jesus who assured her that he “loves wives also” could exorcise and relieve her of a complex of unconscious guilt-stricken desire for which no penance was ever enough.

Desire and Denial

We should remember that what makes medieval religious experience particularly not-modern is not so much what it asserts about itself, as what it takes for granted—about the universe, reality, the exterior sources of interior experience. If, moved by some misapplied notion of sympathy with the past, we artificially take for granted what they unself-consciously assumed, we still cannot become authentically “medieval,” and we also cannot interpret anything. We can only make new, analogous, “thicker” descriptions, forever placing historical events in the contexts they never, in any case, left. However impolite it might seem to persons who hesitate to put religion and sex in the same sentence, interpretation requires that we deliberately take things out of context to see if they will fit the patterns of a new code and become freshly intelligible.

The repeated narrative motifs of Margery’s Book are clues to the structure of an inner life: that of Margery/Author creating “this creature.” Unless it is deliberately ignored, the major theme is unmistakable. Margery Kempe was a highly sexual woman. Her sexuality was central to her sense of identity, central to her experience of longing, gratification, fulfillment, and to her conceptions of deprivation and loss. Her sexuality was the compelling force which governed her imagination and passions, and it was a lifelong force. Given the kinds of arguments and hesitations which provide the current scholarly discussions of her, I feel that I have to state that I do not mean to say by this that she was abnormal, immoral, incapable of genuine religious aspirations, or incapable of control over most of her behavior. The impression of Margery as a woman of strong and vital sexuality is, in many ways, the most lingering impression of her book. Margery seemed to experience her capacity for desire and sexual pleasure as a gift: a force which irresistibly and restlessly sought its object. That is what makes Margery’s Book so poignant and alive, and what makes readers today speak of Margery as a person, as if they somehow had encountered her outside of a book.

Margery confesses her great theme of desire both in positive (the delight she and John Kempe had had in “using the other’s body”), and in negative (she would rather have “eaten and drunk the ooze and muck of the gutter”). Indeed, the opening sequence of the book can be read as a confession of disappointment and rage that sex should entail such pain and terror. There was always some element of her visions and impulses which she suspected was not what she proclaimed it to be, as though there were some secret being meanly kept from her. Her frequent and increasingly longer journeys to men of authority, “God’s servants, both anchorites and recluses ... with many worthy clerics, doctors and bachelors of divinity as well,” were always for the same purpose: “to find out if there were any deception in her feelings.” But of course she already knew.

At the climax of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, at Mount Calvary, Margery first had the seizures of convulsions and screaming which persisted for years afterwards. As she so graphically describes them, her experience of these episodes was of complete loss of control. They occurred sometimes several times in one day, or once a day, or at intervals, with complete unpredictability. Her efforts to “hold it in” after a premonition or warning sensation only resulted in louder screams and more intense convulsions. Her own explanation, in mitigation of her behavior, was to compare herself to people who lament the loss of wealth or of love. What she could not do in life, she could attempt in literature: she tried to normalize her behavior by comparing it to more ordinary scenes of distress:

It is not to be wondered at if this creature cried out and made astonishing expressions, when we may see every day with our own eyes both men and women—some for loss of worldly wealth, some for love of their family or for worldly friendships, through overmuch study and earthly affection, and most of all for inordinate love and physical feeling, if their friends are parted from them, who will cry and roar and wring their hands as if they were out of their wits and minds, and yet they know well enough that they displease God.

The strongest associational link was with the grief of lovers being parted, suffering “most of all for inordinate love and physical feel-

44 Book, 60; EETS, 25.
45 Book, 105; EETS, 69–70.
46 Book, 106; EETS, 70 (my emphasis).
The punishment.\textsuperscript{47} This episode should signal to us that Margery's vow of marital chastity in 1413 did not dismiss the issue of sexuality from her life, or her Book, though apparently none of her defenders wants to deal with this material. The most important and revealing motif is that of loss of control opening the way to otherwise impermissible pleasures: "delicious to her against her will." It is a motif of psychic masochism and it connects this fantasy of limitless forced gratification with the mime-orgasm crises she could never suppress. Loss of control most significantly marks a loss of responsibility: imposition of this sort is a form of permission.

Such repeated and painful conflict points to a cause of deeper psychic terror than ambivalence about the enjoyment of marital sex. Several readers have pointed to the crucial role of John Brunham, Margery's father, in the crossroad moments of her life.\textsuperscript{48} Her Book begins not only with marriage but with the end of her primary legal and social identity as a daughter, a status she was reluctant to lose: she wanted "the honour of her kindred" for herself even after marriage connected her to her husband's status. Margery rarely mentions her father directly but her behavior, the social confidence of a woman "come of worthy kindred," the welcoming or at least careful reception she received from church dignitaries, and, not least, the money which enabled her to pay off her husband's debts and go on long journeys, all summon John Brunham silently but powerfully to the scene. In England, everyone she met saw her first as John Brunham's daughter, like the Bishop of Worcester who said, "Margery ... I know well enough you are John of Brunham's daughter ..." If they did not, she reminded them:

"Sir," she said [to the Mayor of Leicester], "I am from Lynn in Norfolk, the daughter of a good man ... who has been five times mayor ... and also alderman for many years; and I have a good man ... for my husband."\textsuperscript{49}

She made the relative importance of her two good men clear enough. In one momentous year, 1413, John Brunham died; Margery finally convinced her husband to take a vow of chastity after she paid his debts; and she left on the Jerusalem pilgrimage. As others have noted,

\textsuperscript{47} Book, 184; EETS, 145.
\textsuperscript{48} The most emphatic statement is that of Goodman.
\textsuperscript{49} Book, 146-7; 148; EETS, 109; 111.
the death of her father must have meant an inheritance, financial freedom, and probably another kind of liberation as well. That same year, 1413, which saw so many of her plans and wishes fulfilled, also saw the onset of the screaming seizes at Jerusalem.

Shortly after the first episodes of screams and convulsions, in Rome, one of the stops on her route home from the Holy Land, Margery experienced the most momentous and grave, yet most puzzling of her visions—the marriage to the Godhead or God the Father. The event is precisely dated at the Feast of St. John Lateran (9 November), 1414. God the Father approached her mind and praised her for her compassionate devotion to his son and as reward, "the Father also said to this creature, 'Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead...'"

Margery did not answer; she was afraid, for "all her love and affection were fixed on the manhood of Christ..." As evidence of her "feeling for the manhood" she recounted how her screaming and weeping were frequently brought on in the streets by the sight of infant boys and handsome men. Her implicit, silent rejection of the Father brought forth Jesus in the odd role of marriage broker to mediate on his Father's behalf: "What do you say to my father, Margery, daughter...?" The blending and transposing of roles here (my father, Margery, daughter) is a wonderful bit of theological and psychic overlap. Margery still would not accept the Father. Nonetheless, the Father took her hand and before the Holy Family and many saints and virgins as witnesses, did marry her in proper form: "I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler..." All the witnesses rejoiced and wished them joy. But then the scene which began in such homely specificity dissolves into a catalogue of supernatural side effects which occupied Margery's senses in later times: sweet smells, sounds and melodies, white specks in her field of vision, and the sensation of heat in her breast. The God who speaks to her becomes again "our Lord" who is always the incarnate son in "this creature's" narrative, and by the next chapter Jesus returns as before to assure her: "I must be intimate with you and lie in your bed with you" to be loved as a son and as a husband. The marriage with God the Father fades away from the narrative, never to return.

The only narrative motif which connects this marriage with the other supernatural visitations is the motif of "not of her own will"—

the Father took her hand and spoke the marriage vow though she had never agreed to his proposal. This creature never changed her first refusal and remained silent in the marriage ceremony, as Margery had certainly not during her marriage to John Kempe; a legal marriage could only be formed by the spoken words of consent of a betrothed couple. Unlike all the other key episodes in Margery's story, this one stands alone. It is not paired by structure or verbal reminiscence with earlier or later events; only the connecting thread of meaning, against her will, ties it to the rest of the narrative. The story-events which come after the marriage to the Father all reach back to the early chapters for the associations and narrative parallels which complete their meanings. Narratively, the marriage with the Father is a dead center, crossed and recrossed by tracks of other, more conscious narrative themes.

In the pattern-setting first five chapters of the Book, men displace one another in Margery's life: husband displaces father; the rejecting lover displaces husband; Jesus displaces the rejecting lover and all other unsatisfactory loves. The pleasures and privileges of Margery's familiarities with Jesus are admitted openly, are so paraded and exposed, extolled and boasted, that they offer no explanation for her continuous anxiety and tortures of self-doubt. In fact, such a garrulous, documented trail of clues might just as well be regarded as a distraction, a blind, an unconscious cover for the real center of this psychic plot. Just as in dreams in which the manifest meanings exist to expose and conceal the latent, Jesus may be a screen figure for the father, displaced by so many men in Margery's life, but never wholly replaced. Mount Calvary and thoughts of the crucifixion become, in rereading of the secret plot, the immediate but not the real occasion of Margery's crises of writhing and screaming. The death of her father is the underlying cause, the life event which threatened her conscious ego with knowledge of her incompletely repressed desire for him. The crises which began at Mount Calvary, combining punishment and pleasure with escape from moral responsibility because she could not "hold it in," announce in desperate mime the truth she knew and did not know. Margery's apparent indifference to the death of her father, which she never mentions in her book, was the kind of self-protecting, self-deceiving numbness of feeling at the death of the loved object which Freud often observed in cases of incestuous love in hysteric. Margery's blank response to God the Father's proposal of marriage (material which finds its narrative place just after the onset of the orgasmic crises) seems an approach to, and a turning away from, an
inadmissible form of self-knowledge.

Book I ends on a sad and indecisively anxious note:

Sometimes she was greatly depressed about her feelings—when she did not know how they should be understood for many days together, because of the dread that she had of deceptions and delusions…."52

The motif of perpetually recurring dread and doubt stands in painful contradiction to the express content of Margery's feelings: the unambiguous promises of God's love; the many variant scenes of divine reassurance. Her insatiable need of reassurances which never calmed her fears for long would be inexplicable except as an ineffaceable guilt which could not be reached by forgiveness from any source. The most fervent conception of love for Margery was the wrench of forced separation and deprivation.

In one of the final episodes of Book I, the Lord, as he did so often, told Margery her own thoughts: he knew that she had sometimes been so fond of a particular person that just because she needed him so, she had even wanted God to make this man turn against her and forsake her, as a test and proof of her love of God. "And so, with such doleful thoughts you increased your love towards me..."53 She and God were speaking here of a certain priest who believed in her visions and supported her against her detractors. This masochistic sense of love brought to its most excruciating and pleasurable intensity in the moment it is lost, is the same feeling that informs the little metaphor of lovers being parted which she had used to explain her seizes at Jerusalem. Throughout her life-in-narrative, with many variations and transposed onto many stand-in figures, the force of an inadmissible love, source of pleasure and self-punishment, connects love, loss, and grief with dread of shameful knowledge into a web of narrative motifs. Memory and evasion form the ground on which the Book was built.

**Inner Lives in Outer Worlds**

Psychoanalytic language is a language of cipher, of tropes of trans-

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52 Book, 261; EETS, 220.
53 Book, 258; EETS, 217.

ferred and displaced reference, of analogues and correspondences, ultimately of decipherment. It works to produce coherent meaning because narrative is a primary mode of making meaning, and the process by which we every day work our lives into life stories is the same process which makes books, and reads them. In any event, the language of psychic analysis produces interpretations, not paraphrases.

Historians are the custodians of the reputations of long dead persons, and many historians still regard psychohistory as an indignity to the defenceless dead. It is hard to refute this charge especially when, as so often now, it is expressed obliquely and evasively. I admit that I read it in every bland scholarly regret that psychoanalytic interpretation cannot be attempted in the absence of full information about the infancy and early childhood of historical persons. If the same degree of scruple were observed with respect to the fullness of evidence for other approaches to history, there would be very few books to read on any subject, and none at all on antique, medieval, or renaissance history. Entire fields like early demography and economic history would disappear. Something more and different is at work in accusations that psychohistory has nothing much to work on, than fastidiousness about sufficient evidence.54

Historians do not need full clinical information because they are not treating patients. Our psychic histories, our patterns of desire and defense, the marks of our compromises between wish and reality, leave their trail through all expression, all convention and ritual, all culture. Historians, like literary critics, are not engaged in therapy; they are making intelligible stories in a key transposed from that of the original story. They are making interpretations. These interpretations draw on the language of a powerful and coherent, and still evolving, account of the human mind created by Sigmund Freud, his contemporary analyst associates, and his many successors. The objection that we are making an unwarranted assumption in thinking that the human mind was essentially the same over centuries of changing culture is a counsel of utter despair. If the deep structure of human experience could change so rapidly and profoundly, altered by the comings and goings of institutions and beliefs, then there could be no discipline of history at all, and our human endowment of memory

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54 Peter Gay has encountered the standard anti-Freudian arguments made by historians head-on in his *Freud for Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and countered with patient and balanced arguments.
would be a cruel deception. As it is, every historian brings some notion of psychology to the understanding of persons encountered through evidence, and most of these notions are haphazard, half-understood derivatives of Freudian theory, passing now as commonsense. Historians would do better to understand the language they already use.

The idea that imputing passionate and complex inner lives to persons we know through historical sources is an insult to them seems astonishing to me, but I don’t think this can be argued rationally. A psychoanalytic reading follows the stresses and patterns presented by language and behavior, from the seen to the unseen, from the manifest to the implied latent meaning; it deciphers the tropes and replaces the displacements, using the same processes of inference and reasonable argumentation which move most other forms of interpretation forward. To say that psychoanalytic argument brings the disparate fragments of individual life stories into alignment with its own formal and generalized narratives of meaning is to say that it works in the way that all interpretation works.

I admit that the hysteria syndrome is particularly vexing and provocative since the word cannot slough off at our command centuries of condescending slights to women as unstable and hyperemotional, sex-driven in some debasing way. But erasing the powerful ancient term from modern vocabulary, or even exchanging it for the clinical modern blandness of “conversion symptom” does not strike me as an improvement.\(^55\) Rationality and historical sympathy would be best served if scholars now could refrain from using the word, \textit{hysteria}, in the vulgar, popular sense of hyperreactivity, irrational carrying on about nothing, weakmindedness, simple sexual deprivation, or a general tendency to fly out of control in inappropriate situations.\(^56\) Hysteria is not restricted to women. Readers of Ilza Veith’s well-known book, \textit{Hysteria: The History of a Disease}, should remember that \textit{male} hysteria was diagnosed as early as Galen.\(^57\)

In Freud’s understanding, the hysterical attack is a fantasy translated into the motor sphere and portrayed in pantomime. It is of the same nature as daydreams and night dreams which often substitute for and explain the attack, since they draw on the same unconscious wishes. The hysterical attack itself is not the disease. It is the symptom which expresses the defensive struggle of the mind against an impulse it does not wish to admit: hysterical symptoms are the compromise between the mind’s demand for satisfaction and its need for punishment. In many ways, hysteria is the exact opposite of weakmindedness; it displays the power of conscience, culture, and ideals over unresolved, infantile desires. The exact nature of what constitutes a desire so shameful that the ego refuses to acknowledge and incorporate it has been, over centuries, the chameleon element of hysteria, and has shaped the nature of hysterical symptoms into shifting cultural and social forms. Not every repressed wish has to issue in pathology, but a complex and oppressive frustration of wishes in adult life may bring a hitherto satisfactory psychic adjustment into crisis.

To accept that Margery Kempe’s experiences (or the demonic attack on Guibert’s mother, perhaps) were hysterical in origin is not to denigrate them or dismiss them, but rather to see clearly and with sympathy the extreme distress and thwarting of women’s lives, and the lengths to which they were sometimes driven for expression and relief. The fact that Margery thought of giving her life narrative form, casting her feelings and memories into the dramatized narrator, this creature, and that she insisted and persevered against intractable

\(^55\) The denunciations of the hysteria diagnosis for Margery Kempe which I have read or heard are most often directed against the casual use of the term by people like Herbert Thurston in his \textit{3966} review of Butler-Bowden, and neither side seems to have read any of the basic psychoanalytical writings on the disease. An important exception is the incisive essay by Hope Phyllis Weissman, “Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: \textit{Hysteria Compasso} in the Middle Ages,” in \textit{Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts} 700–1600, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 201–17. Weissman notes that Margery’s hysteria, like that of nineteenth-century women, was a reflection of social and sexual repression; she sees the core of the hysterical conversion in Margery’s desire to undo her sexual initiation and recover a Mary-like virgin state, rather than in suppressed incestuous desire linked to being a (virgin) daughter, as I do. An understanding of what hysteria means in psychoanalytic theory begins with the classic (but very preliminary) work by Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, \textit{Studies on Hysteria} (now easily available in \textit{Basic Books} 1982) or as a Penguin/Pelican paperback), and among Freud’s many writings on the subject: “The Aetiology of Hysteria” (1895), vol. 2; “Hysteria” (1888), vol. 1; “On the Psychical

\(^56\) The continuation of hysteria into modern life, although the classic physical or motor conversion symptoms seem to have virtually disappeared, is discussed in full detail drawn from psychiatric literature and clinical practice by Alan Kron, \textit{Hysteria: The Elusive Neurosis} (New York: International Universities Press, 1978).

\(^57\) Ilza Veith, \textit{Hysteria: The History of a Disease} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). The chapters on the Middle Ages are cursory and inadequate.
obstacles to make her book, shows more plainly than anything else her essential sanity, rationality, and self-protective drive. The book represented, as books so often do, self-command, intelligibility, creation. Her psychic structure became the characteristic anti-chronological structure of the narrative.

The Book of this creature is organized by three major levels of conflict and longing which are expressed first at the literal level of the text; next in tropes of parallel pattern and repeated motif; and finally in depicted pantomime behavior and expressive silences at crucial moments. The literal level of the narrative corresponds most fully to the social surface of life: here is found Margery's expressive dissatisfaction with her lowered prestige in passing from mayor's daughter to burgess's wife, and her compensatory urges for lavish, fashionable clothes, for more money, and success in business. (None of this is remotely pathological.) Told rather more obliquely, in a language rich in metaphor and tropological structures, is the revelation of her unhappiness in the privacy of sexual life: the relentless pain and danger which follow sexual pleasure inspiring her rebellion against incessant childbirths, eventually against marital sex; and her struggle with her consistent sexual drive and its various objects. Here belongs the amatory Jesus who justifies sexuality, soothes anxiety, promises that even death will hold no pain. And hardest to decipher, disguised by a narrative code of denials, condensations, screen figures and displacements, exposed in pantomimes of pleasure and punishment combined, the terrible conflict of incestuous desire plays out its irresolvable battles. These three levels are levels of life: the conscious levels of public and private life, and the unconscious work of the mind. They are also levels of language: literal, metaphoric, and the subtlest modes of confession through negation and displacement. By analysing the narrative, distinguishing among the layers of meaning, the layers of life of the expressive character, this creature, we are paying our most respectful and serious homage to the historical woman, Margery Kempe, who gave us this poignant, daring confession.

Hysteria was never a disease of the complacent, the unrebelling, the tepid or sluggish nature. In the nineteenth century, when it was first accurately diagnosed, hysteria afflicted the strong-minded and emotionally intense women who rebelled psychically against the contradictory demands of inner and outer life. Margery Kempe's guilt over unnameable sins and the relentless pressure of forbidden desire, heightened by her diffuse anxiety about herself as a sexually initiated woman, and her frustration and shame when all her projects to win respect for herself had failed, is her version, in broad bold strokes, of Everywoman's life in late medieval society.

The particular configuration of Margery's impetuous ambitions and thwarted desires, her failed attempts at self-suppression, issued in psychopathology. But this pathology links her with many others, probably with all mystics in a general sense, and with women in particular. She is notable in the saddest way for her failure to turn her private experiences into a foundation for social authority and prestige, as so many mystics had done, as Margery knew well. Her visions (as distinct from the attacks of screaming) were therapeutic in many ways and filled with potential for social achievement. Julian of Norwich is a perfect contemporary case of a successful negotiation from psychic crisis to the secure attainment of authority, inner and outer. Julian's famous conversation with Margery, if one reads Margery's account carefully, was not one of unequivocal praise and encouragement. Julian seems to have tried tactful reproof, advising Margery to conform to ecclesiastical and ordinary social standards of behavior, not to express so much self-doubt, and not to demand so much approval. Julian seemed to know that Margery's tactics were hopelessly self-defeating.

Peter Brown's descriptions of the styliite saints, the Holy Men of late antiquity to whom crowds of petitioners, even emperors, came for advice and guidance, are instructive here. Visionary ecstasies or self-mortification were never enough, by themselves, to achieve the public recognition and authority, the social and personal usefulness, of the successful mystic. I. M. Lewis' very enlightening book on Estatic Religion has a great deal to teach us about the delicate negotiation from inner crisis to successful assertion in the outer world in societies which recognize mystical experience. The anthropological approach cannot deny the psychic origin of mystical states; it simply focuses attention on the next stage, that of the social function of mysticism in some societies. 58 There always had to be an intermediary stage, a

58 I. M. Lewis's Estatic Religion (London: Penguin Books, 1971) is illuminating throughout, based as it is on anthropological fieldwork, but especially: his discussion of possession (his term for mystic experience of various kinds) as a form of oblique aggression by dominated women and "peripheral" categories of men (91–93); the possession syndrome among oppressed women who resent their subordination and use spirit possession to improve their situation in life (75–95); chapter
negotiation between private and public worlds, and nothing reveals that process in negative like Margery’s futile clamoring for what other people more adroitly managed to have forced on them. I am not calling successful mystics and ascetic teachers calculating manipulators of religious trust. The unconscious powers of the mind are self-protective, and very efficient manipulators of reality, and can shield the ego from its own projects.

Margery was a literal-minded woman in many ways, which is why she makes such a good cultural mirror. She accepted at face value the possibilities offered by life, and tried to grasp them. She had no talent whatsoever for self-promotion; she did not understand any of the subtle negotiations which were necessary to turn personal experience into an authorized source of respect, dignity, harmony with institutions. Margery proceeded in her mystical life just as she had done with her fine clothes: she went direct, without delay, intermediaries, or gradients of tact, flaunting her possessions to be stared at and admired. She was denied the approval she craved at least partly because her initial status as an ordinary married woman, a mother, gave her no ground on which to build authority. Private conflict, even to the point of pathology, can often be maneuvered into effective, sane, public respectability, when conditions allow. The attempt to do so is itself entirely reasonable, as reasonable as Margery Kempe’s original “whole desire”—“to be respected by people.”

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