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The Augustinian Subject, Franciscan Piety, and
The Book of Margery Kempe:
An Affective Appropriation and
Subversion of Authority

Brad Herzog

Margery Kempe and her book defy easy classification. Born about 1373 in Lynn, England, she lived an eventful and perhaps notorious life that ended circa 1440. Margery Kempe was a woman of contradictions. The wife of John Kempe and the mother of fourteen children, she procured permission from her husband and the Church to live a celibate life while her husband was alive. Whereas she initially took great pleasure in her husband's body, and even lusted after other men, she later gave herself wholly to Christ and the godhead. Originally a proud, vain, and worldly woman, Kempe later gave up her business enterprises and stylish clothing. On one occasion, she gave all her money to the poor, leaving herself destitute. Insane, due to what most experts characterize as post-partum psychosis, Kempe, by her own account, had her wits restored through divine intervention. Accused of being a Lollard,¹ she nonetheless maintained the orthodoxy of her faith at several heresy trials. A self-styled mystic, she professed a spiritual vocation and claimed to receive spiritual gifts, representing herself as having intimate, inward dialogues with God, Christ, Mary, and other saints. Notwithstanding her spiritual vocation, she did not confine
herself within, or affiliate herself with, a convent or anchorage. Instead, she freely wandered, teaching, reproving people for their wickedness, serving the needy, and making pilgrimages. Afflicted with uncontrollable bouts of crying and, after her Jerusalem pilgrimage, with fits of roaring and thrashing, Kempe interpreted her fits as spiritual gifts and signs of God’s grace. Some contemporaries, including confessors and influential church authorities, supported this interpretation. Denying the divine origin of her gift of tears, however, other contemporaries characterized Kempe variously as a false hypocrite, a Lollard, a drunkard, a demoniac, an epileptic, a madwoman, or a diseased wretch. As a result, she endured several heresy trials as well as much scorn and persecution.

Not to be outdone, modern critics have entered the fray, attributing Kempe’s perplexing behavior to anything from hysteria and post-partum psychosis to neurosis, paranoia, or epilepsy. More recently, however, scholars have identified Kempe’s spirituality with the tradition of Franciscan affective piety, a valued, legitimate tradition, especially on the continent. Likewise, some scholars take Kempe at her word when she claims to be unlettered, whereas others interpret her claims as either pretexts for involving scribes to authorize her account or safeguards against heresy charges. Using textual clues and historical research, these scholars make convincing arguments that Kempe, given her class, background, business enterprises, and religious instruction, may have been able to read and write in the vernacular, and perhaps even understood a bit of Latin (Tarvers 114-16, 120-22). Some scholars hail Kempe’s book as the first extant woman’s autobiography in English, whereas others insist that the account is an embellished, fictionalized exemplum, much like popular hagiographies and pious exempla adapted or invented by Friars to inspire penitence. These scholars argue that the rhetorically-savvy Kempe, or perhaps the clever scribe, engineered the persona “Margery” for various purposes, such as drawing the audience to God, challenging the church hierarchy, or defying traditional gender roles. In their view, it is a mistake to conflate the textual persona “Margery” with the historical author Kempe (Glen 54, 59-60, 67-8; Erskine 76-7, 84).

These conflicting interpretations of her erratic behavior illustrate why Kempe is so interesting. Of further interest is the startling rhetoric, philosophy, and theology of her book, including its implications for transforming the Augustinian Subject. A discussion of her book can be framed by relating it to an earlier, influential autobiography: St. Augustine’s Confessions. There is no evidence that Kempe read the Confessions or listened to the book being read aloud. Still, by the fourteenth century, Augustine’s thought and views had permeated Western Europe, and much of his theology was virtually canonical in the Roman Church. In fact, Augustine played an important role in establishing orthodox Catholic doctrine and in distinguishing it from the unorthodox or heretical. Margery Kempe certainly knew about Augustine, and she voices his name in one of her oft-repeated prayers. Thus, drawing parallels between the two autobiographies is instructive and provides the reader with a useful backdrop.

Like Augustine’s Confessions, Kempe’s book blends multiple genres and is at once a conversion narrative, a series of confessions, an apology, a model of conduct, a testament to the workings of God’s grace, and a communication with God. Just as the Confessions answered detractors who questioned Augustine’s appointment as Bishop of Hippo, so Kempe’s book functions rhetorically as a defense of her life and work against those who would impugn her. Though it deploys the Confessions’ rhetoric, her book transforms Augustine’s concept of the Subject by synthesizing it with medieval mysticism and Franciscan affective piety. This transformation challenges canonical authorities (such as Augustine) and the Christian Neoplatonic tradition.
Rhetoric, Authority, and Affective Piety

Authorizing Kempe's claims and defending her character, the book shows her following traditions of mysticism and Franciscan affective piety, legitimate spiritual traditions in the Middle Ages. Denise Despres argues that Kempe's meditations concerning Christ's life and family derive from Franciscan gospel harmonies, Biblical tales imaginatively adapted to inspire penitence in religious and lay audiences. In Kempe's day, the most ubiquitous gospel harmony was the Meditationes Vitae Christi, a late-thirteenth century gospel harmony written by a Franciscan author for a Poor Clare and translated into English by Nicholas Love, who renamed it The Mirror of the Blessed Lf of Jesus Christ. Despres asserts that the Meditationes Vitae Christi derives its "narrative form" from Bonaventure's Lignum Vitae (254). In contrast to the Lignum Vitae, however, the Meditationes Vitae Christi "legitimize[s] the re-creation of Gospel events, and even supplemental or fictional events, if imagination increases devotion and provides a better understanding of Christ's words and actions. The issue is not whether such occurrences actually happened, but whether they are morally 'true' and thus fulfill the primary function of meditation: to teach us how to live" (255). As the Franciscan author puts it to his reader, the Poor Clare,

You must not . . . believe that all which [Christ] himself said or did, upon which we may meditate, is known to us in writing. For the sake of greater impressiveness I shall narrate events as they occurred or might have occurred according to the devout belief of the imagination and the varying interpretation of the mind.

(Despres 255).

Addressing the most obvious omission in Biblical accounts of Christ's life, the Franciscan author speculates that the events of Christ's youth were excluded because he "intentionally appeared 'abject and foolish' . . ., a simpleton in his village, to make his own conversion as dramatically powerful as possible" (257). Arguing that "his meditations are valid even if textually insupportable," the Franciscan author maintains, "whatever the truth may be, I think that to meditate in this manner is very pious and very valuable" (Despres 257). Echoing the Franciscan author, Nicholas Love's translation encourages readers to "engage affectively with his material in order to become active in filling the affective gaps left blank by his text and the gospel accounts" (Renevey 203).

The adapted Meditationes Vitae Christi and other gospel harmonies provide clear precedents and models for Kempe's imitative and imaginative style of meditation. In one meditation, she imagines caring for the Virgin Mary during and after her pregnancy, procuring lodgings for the holy family, begging for food and clothing for them, and swaddling the baby Jesus (Kempe 18-19). In an embellished meditation on the scourging of Christ, she imagines "sextene men wyth sextene scorgys, & eche scorgo had vij bables of leed on the ende, & evey babyl was ful of scharp prekelys as it had ben the rowelys of a spor. & tho men wyth the scorgys madyn comenawnt that ich of hem xulde gewyn owr Lord xl strokys" (191). This pattern of scourging could inflict as many as 5,120 wounds, a number which, though hardly plausible, is consistent with medieval traditions concerning Christ's scourging, as expressed in "devotions and revelations" (Windaeat 326). In other meditations, Kempe imagines herself present at Christ's crucifixion, deposition, and resurrection. Far from being a passive observer reluctant to embellish Biblical accounts, she uses her imagination and resourcefulness to place herself in the middle of the action. In fact, in her meditation of the Passion, Kempe nearly upstages Mary in her mourning and grieving. After meditating on Christ's death, she imagines herself comforting Christ's mother and
The Augustinian Subject, Franciscan Piety, and Margery Kempe

offering her nourishment in the form of “a good cawdel” (Kempe 195). The details of this meditation suggest that Kempe may have heard or read a translation of Meditationes Vitae Christi, for the Franciscan author urges the meditator to “console the Virgin after the Deposition and minister to her hunger and weariness” (Despres 258). Thus, Kempe’s brand of spirituality, far from being aberrant, draws on legitimate and popular religious traditions.

Like the influence of gospel harmonies on her meditations, evidence in Kempe’s book suggests she was also influenced by hagiographies and pious exempla. Cynthia Ho contends that Kempe’s book contains two motifs common to many medieval handbooks and exempla: the negative consequences of incomplete confession and the “heartache” caused by “inadequate priest[s]” or confessors (144-45). Emphasizing the perils of incomplete confession, Caesarius of Heisterbach’s Dialogue on Miracles (1220’s) tells of a man who wishes to visit one possessed of a “truth-telling fiend” (Ho 144). As a precaution, the man goes to a confessors before the visit, but he shrinks from making a complete confession. Later, he is humiliated in public when his unconfessed sins are divulged by the demon. “Ah, my friend, come in,” mocks the fiend. “I am sure that you have whitewashed yourself excellently well” (144). Stung by embarrassment, the man promptly makes a full confession to his priest, whereupon the fiend cannot discern his sins (144).

Highlighting the importance of complete confessions, Robert Mannyng’s Handlyng Synne (1303) tells of a woman who conceals an unconfessed sin. When she finally musters the courage to make a full confession, “a large black thing emerges from her mouth [and] runs away” (144), freeing her from the burden of her transgression. Mannyng also tells of a man chained by a fiend, who after confessing a long-concealed sin, escapes the chain and eludes the fiend (Ho 144).

Besides emphasizing the importance of making a complete confession, exempla highlight the suffering caused by inadequate priests. Jacques de Vitry gives the account of a confessor who responds to confessions by holding his nose rather than by offering comfort. In another account, de Vitry tells of a priest who reacts to sinners by spitting upon them rather than by treating them with compassion (Ho 145). These exempla resonate with Kempe’s book, for it also tells of a priest who acts too harshly, responding so sharply to Kempe’s incomplete confession that she does not dare tell him her remaining sin. Afterward, she fears being damned for her unconfessed sin, a fear that drives her out of her wits. In her madness she sees “devely opyn her mouthys al inflamyd wyth brenyn[n]g lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in” (Kempe 7). Her madness also includes self-destructive behavior: “sche wold a fordon hir-self many a tym” (8). Furthermore, “sche roof hir skyn on hir body a-gen hir hert wyth hir naveys spetowsly, for sche haed noon other instrumentys, & wers sche wold a don saf sche was bowndyn & kept wyth strength” (8). Finally, Christ delivers her from her suffering and restores her wits. The account of Kempe’s madness, brought on by the uncharitable priest and her own unconfessed sin, parallels medieval exempla that emphasize the consequences of unconfessed sins and inadequate priests. Echoing medieval exempla, Kempe’s book lays claim to the religious authority attributed to such texts: Her book, far from being deviant or eccentric, draws on conventions of medieval religious literature.

Kempe also asserts her spiritual vocation by claiming her tears are a divine gift. Although her gift of tears manifested before her 1413 pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it intensified during her stay in the Holy land. Contemplating the Lord's Passion in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Kempe wept sorely. Later, at Calvary, Kempe “fel down that sche myght not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredehyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voyes as thow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in the cite of hir solewe sche saw veryly & freshely how owyr Lord was crucified” (68). Before this experience, Kempe did not cry in contem-
plation, but afterwards, her intensified manner of crying persisted for many years (68). In portraying Kempe's gift of tears, the book draws on popular Vitae, accounts written by church authorities of the lives of saints and other holy persons. For example, Kempe's book resembles Jacques de Vitry's *Vita* of Mary of Oignies and Thomas de Cantimpre's *Vita* of Christine the Marvelous. According to Cantimpre, Christine the Marvelous "cries hideously" following her frequent bouts of castigating her flesh (Kurtz 192). Furthermore, Cantimpre and Vitry recount that Christine the Marvelous and Mary de Oignies weep for the damned (192). Vitry reports that Mary, ingesting little other than consecrated host during her last illness, cries, "spit[s], and pant[s]" when Vitry feeds her some unconsecrated host for extra nourishment (192). Kempe's gift of tears establishes her spiritual vocation and identifies her with other holy women celebrated in popular Vitae.

Confirming that Kempe's tears are a spiritual gift, her second scribe, a priest, re-tells his "doubting Thomas" experience. After a highly esteemed preaching friar criticizes Kempe for disrupting his sermons with her crying, her priest avoids her and refuses to believe her feelings are authentic (Kempe 152). A short time later, the priest reads in Jacques de Vitry's *Vita* of Mary of Oignies about a woman who wept uncontrollably every time she contemplated the Passion, heard others speak of the Passion, or viewed a crucifix. Frustrated by her outbursts, Mary's priest asked her to leave his church service so that she would not disrupt it. Not long after that, the priest was inspired with "swiche deucycon when he xulde redyn the Holy Gospel that he wept wondyrly so that he wett his vestiment & ornamentys of the awter & myth not mesuyr hym wepyng ne hym sobbyng, it was so habundawnte, ne he myth not restryyn it" (153). Then the priest knew that Mary's sobbing was a gift from God. Kempe's priest, too, is moved by this story, and he accepts this account as evidence that: tears like Kempe's come as a divine gift.

Identifying Mary's tears with her own, Kempe envisions the Virgin Mary speaking to her soul: "My derworthly dowtyr, be not ashyamyd of hym that is thi God, thi Lord, & thi lof, no mor than I was whan I saw hym hangyn on the Cros, my sweate Sone, Ihesu, for to cryen & to wepyyn for the peyn of my sweete Sone, Ihesu Crist; ne Mary Mawdelyn was not ashyamyd to cryen & wepyyn for my Sonys lofe" (73). Here, Kempe is associated with Mary and Mary Magdalene, who also wept at Christ's Passion.

The monk who annotated an early copy of Kempe's manuscript recognized her gift of tears as a sign of her spiritual vocation. In fact, the main annotator of the manuscript held at Mount Grace identified "Kempe's expressions of piety, including her shreiks, convulsions, leaden colour and tears" with the "piety of Mount Grace mystics such as Richard Metheley and John Norton. There is no indication that these displays of religious fervor aroused anxiety or censure on the part of the Carthusians" (Stokes 49). Far from being idiosyncratic or aberrant, the affective piety featured in her book proves consistent with the spiritual traditions valued by the Carthusians.3 Ultimately, the Book evokes authority for Kempe, portraying her account in terms of popular religious traditions and texts such as exempla, hagiographies, gospel harmonies, and the gift of tears.

**Authority and Mysticism**

Kempe's book also draws on the tradition of continental mysticism. According to Patricia Deery Kurtz, Jacques de Vitry and Thomas de Cantimpre wrote hagiographies of female mystics in order to oppose Catharist heresies and to promote Catholic alternatives to the positions of power and authority offered to women in Catharist hierarchies; they believed that these positions might appeal to women, especially since women were denied authority in
the Catholic church (188). In the Catharist religion, women could become “perfects” or the “masters of the sect” (188). Before the establishment of the friars and their third orders, mysticism may have offered one of the few opportunities for female religious expression and authority in the Catholic Church. Among other things, Kempe’s book appears to be an attempt to validate her life in terms of the mystic way.

Like the recorded revelations and lives of mystics, Kempe’s book features characteristic steps of mystics’ development, such as spiritual awakening, purgation, illumination through contemplation, and union with the divine (Underhill 169-70). Some scholars argue, however, that Kempe lacks the depth, humility, contrition, intellect, awareness, and capacity of a true mystic. She never appears to suffer “mystical death” or “the Dark Night of the Soul” (169-70), which is the mystic’s experience of being abandoned by God, an experience that annihilates the ego, the Subject, the “I,” in preparation for union with the divine. By contrast, Kempe’s ego continues to assert itself to the end. Even so, the author betrays an awareness of mystics’ patterns of development and the structures of mystics’ experiences as recorded in accounts of their lives and revelations. The author is also aware of important mystic distinctions and hierarchies such as those between inner contemplation and the outward, physical senses; the precedence of the via negativa over the via positive; the spiritual dialogues and the physical or literal dialogues; implied blasphemies such as intimacy or equality with the divine. Even though Kempe’s book challenges some of these distinctions and hierarchies, her book validates her life through appropriating patterns and structures established by the lives and texts of mystics, attributing to her a degree of authority otherwise unavailable to women, especially uncloistered Catholic women in fifteenth-century England.

The Augustinian Subject Transformed: An Affective Resistance to the Authority of Western Metaphysics

In addition to its surprising debts to mysticism and affective piety, Kempe’s book also expresses a surprising view of the interior soul or the Subject. Her familiarity with Franciscan affective piety and the lives and texts of medieval mystics makes it possible for her to transform Augustine’s notion of the soul’s private inner space. Despite her status as a purportedly illiterate laywoman of the fifteenth century, it is unlikely that Kempe was able to avoid being acquainted with some of Augustine’s basic views concerning the soul. Since the fifth century, Augustine’s views concerning the soul’s inner space and the “inward turn” necessary for contacting the divine permeated Western culture and religion; they became commonplace and available to virtually every European Christian, including Margery Kempe, who arranged to have many religious texts and commentaries read to her.

To understand how Kempe transforms Augustine’s concept of the inner self, one must understand how Augustine develops it. Drawing on Plotinus’ Neoplatonism, the Western rhetorical tradition, and Pauline doctrine, Augustine forms the concept that the soul has a private, inner space. Plotinus contributes to this model when he compares the universe to three concentric spheres representing at the outermost Bodies, then the Soul, and at the center the Divine Mind, the One. Taking his cue from Plotinus, Augustine asserts that the soul must turn away from the outer world of bodies and turn inward in order to find God. However, Plotinus never suggests that the inward turn leads to a personal, private realm within the soul. Augustine uses Paul’s writings as the basis for this ideal (Cary 29, 48).

Addressing the Corinthian saints, Paul says: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16, KJV). Paul’s language is suggestive, and
Augustine draws on it for his concept of the soul (Cary 49). Paul also writes that Christ may dwell in the heart (Ephesians 3:17), an idea that Augustine conflates with Paul's affirmation that God's spirit strengthens the "inner man" (Ephesians 3:16; Cary 49). Paul's terms lend themselves especially well to Augustine's synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism, a synthesis that yields a Platonic inward turn to a Christian God. Moreover, Paul's words offer a tenuous scriptural precedent for conceiving of the soul as a temple, a sanctuary in which God dwells, an inner sanctum in which one searches for and finds God (Cary 49). Unfortunately, Paul's language is vague. He does not explain what he means by the "inner man" or the "heart," and he does not account for how God's spirit and Christ dwell there (50).

Other sources, namely Aristotle's topoi and the mnemonic devices promoted in the Western rhetorical tradition, lend themselves to Augustine's project of reconceiving the soul. To help speakers find good arguments, Aristotle compiled a list of common arguments which he called topoi or places. Aristotle's term suggests a connection between place and memory, a connection strengthened by classical rhetoricians' strategies for memorizing speeches. Rhetoricians were taught to memorize speeches by remembering a familiar place, such as a theater or the interior of a home. Once a rhetorician recalled a familiar place in his memory, he would visualize placing objects, which corresponded to the topics of his speech, in adjacent rooms or alcoves within the structure. Then he would imagine moving through the structure, viewing each object in the order in which he wanted to speak about its corresponding topic. A rhetorician typically would use the same remembered location for speech after speech, changing only the objects or their arrangement within the location. The rhetoricians' memory devices suggest an association between memory and space, an association that Augustine appropriated to conceive of memory as an interior space within the soul, a private inner realm capacious enough to hold images of physical objects, intellectual concepts, and God in his "eternal Wisdom," "Truth," and "divinity" (Cary 50, 127).

Due to the influence of Neoplatonism on Augustine, he identifies memory as the "place" to find truth and the divine (Cary 126), yet Christ is not physically present in human memory. Thus, God and Christ must exist in another way. One of Augustine's greatest challenges is conceiving of an alternative to physical existence. He does so by turning in, then up, and by examining, in order of increasing power and divinity, his own soul's faculties and operations. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the five senses that receive information about the physical world (Cary 65). The "soul's interior sense" occupies the middle position of the hierarchy, for it "correlates and unifies the diverse reports of the five external senses" (65). The highest position of the hierarchy belongs to the "soul's rational power, which sits in judgment over the data of the senses, determining their truth or falsehood" (65). Augustine reasons that the origin or cause of the soul's highest faculty can only be God, who is the light of truth by which the soul makes its judgments. Furthermore, Augustine presumes that the soul's highest faculty is the one most nearly divine, a faculty not constrained or determined by physical boundaries and limits. When one starts to understand that the soul exists without being extended in physical or corporeal space, one also begins to understand that God exists without being extended in physical space (Cary 64-6). Augustine's process of introspection yields what he considers a true understanding of the soul and God, an understanding available to those who probe the inner recesses of their own souls.5

According to Augustine, the key to recognizing God once we have found him is memory. If God was not in our memories, we could not recognize him (Cary 138-39). Like writing, memory allows for something to be present and absent at the same time.
Only if God is in our memories can he be inside us without our immediate awareness, just like something we have forgotten but are capable of remembering (Cary 126). Remembering or recollecting is the way to find something lost within us.

Owing to Augustine’s inescapable influence, Kempe portrays her soul as having a private interior where she can commune with God, Christ, and sundry saints. Drawing on the tradition of Franciscan affective piety, the texts of medieval mystics, and her own experience of home and family, she transforms Augustine’s unextended inward realm into a homely domestic space. Far from portraying the soul as a private way to the One who transcends sensory images, Kempe reforges the soul as a sensuous, mundane place graced by intimate, personal relations between the human and the divine. In fact, her communion and conversations with God and Christ add up to an insistence that the incarnation was not a temporary expedient, but a sign that humanity or manhood is an enduring characteristic of the Godhead.

During her stay in Rome, Kempe experiences a weddng ceremony in her soul, a ceremony in which she is married to the Father. Making his vows to her, the Father says: “I take the, Margery, for my weddwyf, for fayrar, for fowel, for richar, for powerar, so that thu be buxom & bonyt to do what I byd the do. For, dowtyr, ther was neyry childe so buxom to the modyr as I xal be to the bothe in wet & in wo,—to help the and comfort the” (87). While staying in Rome, Kempe also hears Christ urge her to treat him as her husband. Speaking to her in her soul, Christ says:

For it is conuenyent the wyf to be homly wyth hir hus-

bond, as thy derworthy derlyng, & as for thy swete sone, for I wyf be louyd as a sone schuld be louyd wyth the modyr & will that thu loue me, dowtyr, as a good <wife> owyth to loue hir husbonde. & therfor thu masts boldy take me in the amys of thi sowele & kyssen my mowth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wyght. (90)

These passages emphasize Kempe’s shocking intimacy with Christ and God the Father. Reaffirming this intimacy, the book later records Christ’s words of thanks for her tender care. “Dowtyr,” Christ says in her soul, “I thakne thyn for as many tymys as thu hast bathyd me in thi sowele at hom in thi chambre as thow I had be ther present in my Manhoc. . . And also, dowtyr, I thank the for alle the tymys that thu hast herberwyd me & my blissyd Modyr in thi bed” (214). The book portrays Kempe’s soul as an intimate domestic space, a place where she and Christ can interact as husband and wife, mother and son.

Kempe borrows vignettes for her soul’s drama from the Bible, Franciscan gospel harmonies, mystics’ texts, and perhaps from her experience as a wife and mother. Yet the authorities who composed these texts meant them as guides for meditation, as examples, moral lessons, and prompts to a virtuous life. In contrast, Kempe borrows scenes, characters, and relationships from these texts and portrays them as the inner reality of her soul.6 She commits the ingenious error of projecting a metaphysical reality from a semantic or experiential relationship.

Some argue that the book’s use of “in your soul” is merely a trope, a figure of speech not meant to portray or represent Kempe’s soul. Instead, she uses “in your soul” as a rhetorical device to distinguish between the literal experience of God’s presence and her communications with God through her meditations, an important distinction perhaps intended to keep her from landing in another
The Augustinian Subject, Franciscan Piety, and Margery Kempe

heresy trial. By the very act of making this distinction, however, Kempe conceives of a private, inner region of her self, separate from the public physical world, where she can be a homemaker for and an intimate companion to the world's Savior. Synthesizing Franciscan affective piety with an Augustinian notion of the soul, she fashions something different from either tradition.

Perhaps this is why so few treat Kempe seriously: she desecrates the "temple" of the Augustinian soul by transforming it from a pure, unextended realm into a homely domestic space, a home where God deigns to unite himself to his creature in the most intimate, husband-like way. By claiming such a relationship, Kempe verges on blasphemy or heresy. Her way of refiguring the soul does not fit the West's master narrative of the Subject, nor is it compatible with the Mystic Way. Though it is not unusual for mystics to describe the soul's union with the divine in terms of marriage or even of love's consummation, virtually all mystics betray an awareness that such figures are just that, figures or symbols pointing toward a transcendent truth or reality. Only Kempe seems to insist that the marriage is real, that she can take Christ in the arms of her soul and enjoy him as a wife enjoys her husband and that the soul is God's home, down to the most mundane particulars. Kempe's notion of the soul implies an inversion of the Platonic hierarchy, along with its ontology, epistemology, and ideology. Ultimately, her book offers a unique perspective from which the Augustinian Subject can be challenged or revised.

Notes

1 Initiated by the reformer John Wyclif, the Lollard heresy swept through the ranks of some of the English clergy and populace in the latter half of the fourteenth century. In fact, in 1393 two members of the Privy Council preached Wyclif's doctrines before Parliament (Boyd 112). Among other things, the Lollard heresy had to do with "Wyclif's teaching on the nature of the Eucharist and its relationship to the virtue of the consecrating priest" (Boyd 114-15). In addition, "Lollards were held to question the authority of the priesthood and the institution of religious orders, and to maintain that every Christian could discover for him or herself the true sense of the Bible and live by it" (Windeatt 306). Ultimately, Lollards "believed that any lay person could preach and teach the gospel and that all good people . . . were priests" (Lochrie 108). The Church and the state perceived Lollardy as a threat to their power and authority. If lay individuals can apprehend the truth on their own and apply it independently, then why do they need the Church or the state? It comes as no surprise, then, that "one of the charges brought against [Lollards] was that of reading scriptural texts in English" (Stokes 18). In fact, "records from the diocese of Norwich indicate that women Lollards were 'scattering the Gospel' in English translation" (Lochrie 108). To combat the Lollard heresies, Parliament passed laws in January 1401 making heresy essentially an act of treason, punishable by death on the pyre (Boyd 112-13).


2 Much ink has been spilled debating the authorship of The Book of Margery Kempe. Is Margery Kempe indeed the author, or do one or both scribes supplant her in exerting authorial control? Even if Kempe is the author, to what extent can her book be considered an "autobiography" in the modern sense?
Research suggests that the text is not uniform with regard to style or diction. According to Charity Scott Stokes, the second scribe wrote Book II in the third person, "which may perhaps suggest that he had professional experience recording the proceedings of an ecclesiastical court" (45). Other stylistic patterns, including homely diction and "the expression of movement, literal and metaphorical, by means of to+noun/pronoun/adverb+ward, exemplified for instance in the words of the Lord to her in time of trouble in Rome: ‘ther is gold to-the-ward’" (Stokes 46), appear in some parts of the text but not in others and do not seem characteristic of a highly literate, formally educated writer or author, such as the second scribe surely was.

Addressing the issue of authorship, Stokes concedes that "it is possible that the second amanuensis exerted a considerable influence" on Kempe's book (45). At the very least, the second scribe helped her "to choose which years, and therefore what material, to include" (46). Similarly, my article shows that Kempe's book resembles hagiographies or saints' lives, accounts which, though many represented women's lives, were adapted and appropriated by male church authorities.

Other critics and scholars offer varying interpretations and arguments regarding the authorship of Kempe's book. Lynn Staley Johnson argues that Kempe surely recognized the rhetorical value of using scribes to validate her account and life (837-38). Tarvers argues that she likely was literate, and that her claims of illiteracy are merely humility tropes or strategies for avoiding further heresy charges. After all, Kempe states that she "wrote" letters to her son, and she employs the word "wryten" to characterize her work on the book (Tarvers 116, 118, 121-2). If Kempe were literate, then she certainly would have been capable of dictating, and even writing, her own book. In that scenario, she presumably would have involved scribes merely to authorize her account. Some, like Cheryl Glen, argue that the savvy Kempe may have engineered the wacky persona "Margery" to achieve her own sophisticated rhetorical ends (54, 59-60, 67-8).


3 According to David Lawton, "Mount Grace is the priory from which the English translation of the pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations on the Life of Christ* proceeded; and there is evidence that many of its members practiced an extreme form of devotion to the body of Christ and the affective cult of the Passion, none more so than the Richard Methley cited in the marginalia as one who cried and swooned like Kempe" (112). Refer to: David Lawton's "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in The Book of Margery Kempe," in Margery Kempe: *A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire. New York: Garland, 1992. 93-115.

4 According to Diane R. Uhlman, Kempe's book "nominally subscribes to the view that the highest form of spirituality is found in the Dionysian tradition of the *via negativa*, a tradition represented contemporaneously in The Cloud of Unknowing, a work that eschews symbol, analogy, or sign as obscurations of God's divinity, or as ways of knowing that divinity. The supralinguistic, indeed, the supra-representational, is the mystical ideal, numinous and
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immediate, communion rather than communication” (Uhlman 57). Still, Clarissa Atkinson is quick to point out that “Margery Kempe was not a follower of the via negativa” (qtd in Uhlman 58). Refer to: Diana R. Uhlman’s “The Comfort of Voice, the Solace of Script: Orality and Literacy in The Book of Margery Kempe.” Studies in Philology 91.1 (Winter 1994), 50-69.

5 Asserting the significance of this move in the Western philosophical tradition, Cary writes: “As with modern versions of the ‘turn to the subject,’ of which Augustine’s project is the ancestor, it is not what the soul sees but the soul’s seeing that is the great clue for philosophers to follow” (65).


Furthermore, the New Testament uses the symbol of the bridegroom to refer to Christ; Paul likens the relationship between husband and wife to the relationship between Christ and the church.

In addition, the Franciscan author of Meditations Vitae Christi portrays Mary Magdalen as caring for Christ in an intimate, homely way. Describing the reunion of Christ and Mary Magdalen after Christ’s resurrection, the Franciscan author writes: “Although it seemed as if the Lord held back from her, I can hardly believe that she did not touch Him familiarly before He departed, kissing His feet and His hands . . .” (Staley 201). When Christ takes his leave of Mary Magdalen, the Franciscan author portrays her as saying, “I beg you not to forget me. Remember, Lord, the good things that you gave me, and the intimacy and love that you granted me, and remember me, O Lord my God” (Staley 201). Refer to: Meditations on the Life of Christ in “The Book of Margery Kempe”: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism, ed. and trans. Lynn Staley. New York: Norton, 2001.

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‘Sensitive Ears’: Crisis of Authority and the Contingency of Voice in the Praise of Folly

John C. Parrack

In light of the religious and philosophical implications of Erasmus’ works and the impending publication of his edition of the New Testament, his contemporaries in the sixteenth century were wary of the Praise of Folly, reading it not as a literary satire but as a religious tract.¹ Notwithstanding Thomas Chaloner’s enthusiastic 1549 English translation, the Praise of Folly generated what Maarten van Dorp described as “a good deal of [ill] feeling” among many sixteenth-century readers, especially the Louvain theologians (304:18-19).² What Dorp refers to so elliptically is that theologians refused to read the Praise of Folly as literature, instead appropriating the text into the realm of theology and then condemning it. The Louvain theologians questioned Erasmus’ credentials—or voice—as a theologian and subjugated him to the status of a mere humanist or philologist. The misreading of the Praise of Folly that results is significant because it both reveals the theologians’ preoccupation with Church authority and also foreshadows events that will split the Catholic Church in the years to come. At the same time, their misreading is ironic because it foregrounds the role of literary interpretation and reception even as they denied...