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Beholding Men's Members:
The Sexualizing of Transgression
in The Book of Margery Kempe

Rosalynn Voaden

For a work which set out to be 'a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wher-in þei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and vnstry-stondyn þe hy & vnspacabyl mercy of ower souereyn Sauyowr Crist Ihesu',¹ The Book of Margery Kempe imparts a considerable amount of information about Margery Kempe's sexual life - her fantasies, her fears and her frustrations. We learn, for example, that she was tempted, and consented, to an adulterous liaison, and then was humiliatingly rejected.² We know that her husband John, who, like Augustine, agreed with the virtue of living chastely 'but he mgth not ȝet',³ insisted on his marital rights, and that Margery 'in hir ȝong age had ful many delectabyl thowty, fleschly lustys, & inordinat louys to hys persone'.⁴ We know that Margery wore a hair-shirt to bed and that John never noticed, which does make one wonder about the range of hislovemaking.⁵ Moreover, even though the couple eventually lived apart to establish their chastity, people still thought that they sneaked off 'to woody, groyys, er valeys to vsyn þe lust of her bodijs'.⁶ We are privy to Margery's enormous fear of sexual assault, to her conviction that all men wanted to defile her, and to the unsavoury image of the steward of Leicester struggling with a middle-aged Margery, showing her 'vn-clene tokenys & vnghodly cuntewnawns', and threatening to rape her.⁷ We are told that she was accused of having had a child while ostensibly on pilgrimage to Jerusalem,⁸ and that the mayor of Leicester accused her of being a strumpet as well as a Lollard.⁹ And finally, we know that for Margery, hell is beholding men's members.

¹ BMK, p. 1.
³ BMK, p. 12.
⁴ BMK, p. 181.
⁵ BMK, p. 12.
⁷ BMK, p. 113.
⁸ BMK, p. 103.
⁹ BMK, p. 112.
anything pat sche cowde do, of beheldynge of menny’s membrys & swech oper abhominacyons.10

Why this inordinate emphasis on sexuality? What was the purpose, and what was the effect of the text’s constructing Margery in such overtly sexual terms? Did it just reflect the unhealthy obsession of an attention seeker, or was it rather the result of the inability of Margery and the scribe to discriminate in their recording? How did Margery’s self-fashioning as a sexual being – or, as she might have it, as an ex-sexual being – reflect the Christian traditions of the time and prevailing views of women?

Considerable scholarly attention has already been focused on the relationship between Margery’s spirituality and her sexuality.11 However, in this essay I will argue that it was specifically and exclusively that aspect of her spirituality comprising her sense of sin which was mapped onto her sexuality. In Margery’s perception sin was always sexual, therefore her identification of herself as a sinner, albeit a reformed sinner, meant identifying herself as sexual. In addition, just as transgression was sexualized, so too was punishment. I will also consider the historical context of The Book of Margery Kempe, and argue that two of the models on which Margery shaped her spirituality intensified the emphasis on her sexuality. These are the model of Mary Magdalene and Margery’s quest to invite scorn and abuse in imitatio Christi.

The roots of Margery’s association of sin and sexuality were in her body. She was profoundly and consistently aware of herself as a physical, fleshly being, an amalgamation of appetites and sensations.12 Throughout The Book Margery demonstrates this awareness of her physical self in numerous ways. In her youth, her pride found its expression in fine clothes; pride, and awareness of the effect of physical presentation, is also manifested in her later obsession with white clothing. She wrote of food – of cakes and beer and good red herring. She was concerned with her safety on pilgrimage, especially on sea voyages. She was afraid of storms. At one point she prayed that she might

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10 *BMK*, p. 145.
12 Lochrie makes a valid and significant distinction between flesh and body in *Margery Kempe*, pp. 13–47. However, this distinction, while it is useful and does go some way to support my contention about Margery’s bodiliness, is not directly relevant to my discussion of her sexuality.
The Sexualizing of Transgression

not become seasick, at another Christ advised her not to look at the waves, a classic remedy for avoiding seasickness.\textsuperscript{13} She was upset, naturally enough, about catching ‘vermyn’ from the poor folk with whom she travelled.\textsuperscript{14} She was physically timid; although she felt she should welcome martyrdom, she confessed to fear of dying, and admitted choosing the least painful form of death she could think of: ‘sche ymagyned hyr-self þe most soft deth ... þat was to be bowndyn hyr hed & hir feet to a stokke & hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddy’s lofe.’\textsuperscript{15} When she was fettered at Cawood, she tucked her hands under her mantle to hide their trembling.\textsuperscript{16} She said that she would rather suffer cruel words than the pain of her chronic illness.\textsuperscript{17} As all these examples indicate, not only was Margery aware of her body, she was also protective of it. In this she presents an interesting contrast to the majority of late-medieval holy women, who actively sought physical suffering, in order to imitate Christ and to subdue the unruly flesh.\textsuperscript{18}

Because Margery was so rooted in her body it was inevitable that her sense of both sin and redemption would be located there. What is significant, however, is that it was not her body as a whole which generated her sense of sin, or presented a locus of expiation. It was her sexual self, located specifically in her genitals, which performed this function. It was not so much that she sinned sexually, as that for her sin was sexual; the consequence was that, as I stated above, for Margery transgression was inevitably sexualized, as was punishment.

This can be observed in Margery’s struggle for salvation, a struggle played out in her virtual obsession with chastity. Her sense of herself as a sinner was rooted overwhelmingly in her sense of herself as not-virgin. Her first vision of Christ occurred after her post-natal breakdown, when the consequences of her sexual activity would have made her acutely aware of her fissured, female body. His appearance at this time, sitting on the side of her bed, locus of that same sexual activity, helped to valorize her sexuality in its association with motherhood.\textsuperscript{19} When Christ himself informed her of a later pregnancy, her

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} BMK, pp. 232–3.
\item \textsuperscript{14} BMK, p. 237.
\item \textsuperscript{15} BMK, p. 30.
\item \textsuperscript{16} BMK, p. 124.
\item \textsuperscript{17} BMK, pp. 137–8.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Julian of Norwich, for example, prayed for illness, and for three wounds: \textit{Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love}, ed. M. Glasscoe (Exeter, 1976), p. 2. Bridget of Sweden dropped burning wax on her hands every Friday, and wore knotted cords tied tightly around her waist and knees: B. Gregersson and T. Gascoigne, \textit{The Life of Saint Birgitta}, trans. J. B. Holloway (Toronto, 1991), pp. 21–2. Such practices were \textit{de rigueur} for medieval holy women; many more examples can be found in Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast}. For a more general study of mortification of the flesh, see P. Camporesi, \textit{The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore}, trans. T. Croft-Murray (Cambridge, 1988).
\item \textsuperscript{19} N. Partner points out the centrality of the image of the marriage bed to the organisa-
equation of sin with sex was evident in her distress. ‘Lord, I am not worthy to heryn þe spekyn & þus to comown [have sexual intercourse] wyth myn husband.’ Christ replied that it was no sin but rather ‘mede & meryte’, and promised to ‘ordeyn for an kepær’ for the child – the practical kind of divine assistance for which many a harried mother prays. As in her first vision, Christ valorized Margery’s procreative sexuality. The most significant part of this episode, though, is Christ’s comment, ‘3a, dowtyg, rωwbow ryght wel þat I lofe wyfes also, and specyal þo wyfes whêch woldyn levyn chast, ʒyf þei myggytyn haw þer wyl . . .’.”

This equating of the will to live chastely with the act of doing so was a vital component in Margery’s re-construction of her chastity, the sealing up of her fissured body which influenced much of her self-fashioning.

Her first impulse to chastity came when she heard an unearthly melody while lying beside her husband. ‘Alas, þat euyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in Hevyn’, she exclaimed. The careful location of this experience – lying beside her husband in bed – with the immediate conjunction of her desire to live chastely, leaves the reader in little doubt that she had probably not just been holding hands with her husband. Her awareness of her own recent sexual activity accounts for the poignancy of her exclamation, with its implication that she would be excluded from the merriment of heaven. From that point on, she attempted to minimize her status as a married women. In effect, she tried to retrieve her virginity, to seal up her body, to become inviolate – and unviolated. She recounts Christ telling her ‘þu art a mayden in þi sowle . . .

...tion of The Book, and argues that ‘the narrative structure is governed by Margery’s entry into the bed, and her leap out of it . . .’ (‘Inordinate Love’, p. 257).

20 BMK, p. 48.
21 BMK, p. 49. My emphasis.
22 BMK, p. 11.
23 Margery would not be the first woman to have her virginity restored, either literally or figuratively. Medieval sources document several incidents in which the fissured body of a transgressive female is miraculously restored, generally after parturition. Accounts of two such incidents are translated in J. Boswell, The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance (London, 1988). One account is Aelred of Rievaulx’s mid-twelfth-century letter about the nun of Watton (pp. 452-8). When the nun was discovered in her cell, no longer pregnant but with no sign of a baby, the other sisters examined her thoroughly, not to say brutally. They squeezed her breasts, but elicited no liquid from them. Not sparing her, they pressed harder, but expressed nothing. They ran their fingers over every joint, exploring everything, but found no sign of childbirth, no indication even of pregnancy . . . they all found the same thing: everything restored, everything proper, everything beautiful’ (p. 457). The other text (pp. 459–60) is from a mid-twelfth-century Anglo-Norman collection of miracles of the Virgin. It concerns an unpopular abbess in England, whose pregnancy becomes known by the entire convent; the bishop is then informed. When the time for the birth arrives, the Virgin Mary intervenes: angels convey the child to a hermit for raising. The abbess’s enemies raise a great tumult. Eventually ‘the bishop ordered representatives to examine her uterus. They, marvelling, reported finding no sign whatever of what
& so xalt þu dawnsyn in Hevyn wyth opere holy maydnes & virgynes. The use of ‘opere’ implies that as far as Christ is concerned she is no different from the rest.

One symbolic attempt to retrieve her virginity can be seen in Margery’s determination to wear white clothes, a determination in which she stubbornly persisted despite the disapproval of numerous clerics. Indeed, one of her confessors accused her of causing the world to wonder at her by wearing white clothing, and this is, surely, exactly what she intended. White clothes, traditionally worn by virgins or widows, would signal her chastity to the world. Christ specifically promised her protection against ‘ony velany [shame] of þi body’ if she wore white clothes, a promise which endowed the clothing with even greater significance in Margery’s opposition of chastity and sin. In her perception, it seems, wearing white clothes guaranteed her chastity, and so her sinlessness.

For Margery sin was sexualized. Therefore, avoiding sin meant keeping herself inviolate. The rocky road to redemption was edged with briars, and all the thorns looked like penises. Once having achieved a chaste marriage, having established herself as a reformed sinner, Margery perceived threats to her chastity on all sides. On numerous occasions, she appeared to fear defilement more than any other punishment. In Hesle, when she was under arrest for Lollardy by the Duke of Bedford’s men and being taken to Beverley, the townspeople said she should be burnt as a heretic. This prospect did not seem to alarm her, yet she begged not to be put in prison with men. ‘The saide creatour preyde hym of hys lordschip þat sche xulde not be putte a-mongs men, for sche was a mannys wyfe.’ It is true that affirming her marital status in this way does have the effect of distinguishing her from vagrant women who were seen as threats to public order and in need of containment. However, it is also true that there is an undoubted emphasis on the preservation of her chastity in the wording of Margery’s plea. Ironically, her main weapon in

had been alleged’ (p. 460). It is not unlikely that Margery would have heard of these, or other, similar accounts.

24 BMK, p. 52.
25 BMK, p. 77.
26 G. Cleve suggests that Margery’s struggle over her white clothes actually does have the effect of chastening and purifying her. See ‘Semantic Dimensions in Margery Kempe’s “Whyght Clothys”’, Mystics Quarterly 12 (1986), 162-70.
27 BMK, p. 76.
28 BMK, p. 129.
29 BMK, pp. 132-2. See also p. 112 for a similar incident, in which Margery was arrested as a suspected Lollard in Leicester and pleaded not to be put in prison with men ‘pat I may kepyn my chastite & my bond of wedlak’. 
30 P. Riddell suggests that the problem of ungoverned women in English towns was of sufficient concern to have influenced some late-medieval conduct books and poems. See ‘Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text’, Speculum 71 (1996), 66-86 (p. 74).
defence of her chastity is her status as a wife, that is, as a sexually active woman under the authority of her husband.

That sexual violation was a materialization of the entry of sin into her body is made explicit in Margery’s account of her pilgrimage to Germany, when she was a widow in her sixties. Throughout the pilgrimage she could not sleep for fear of defilement, even when she had women or girls to sleep in the same bed with her.31

And on nyghtys had sche most dreed oftyn-tymes, & perauentur it was of hir gostly enmy, for sche was euyr a-ferd to a be rauischyd er defilyd. Scoure trustyn on no man; whedir sche had cause er non, sche was euyr a-ferd. Scoure durst ful euyl slepyn any nyth, for sche wend men wolde a defilyd hir.32

It seems abundantly clear that Margery feared a real-life reenactment of her experience of spiritual dryness, when God withdrew his presence from her, replacing it with visions of men’s members and her own damnation, in which the torment was located in the genitals and the punishment specifically identified as sexual.

Schey as hir thowt veryly dyuers men of religyon, prestys, & many ojer, bothyn hethyn & Cristen comyn be-for hir syght bat sche myyth not enchegen hem ne puttyn hem owt of hir syght, sche wyng her bar membrys vn-to hir. & þerwyth þe Deuyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle & sche must be comown to [have sexual intercourse with] hem alle. . . . & hir thowt þat þes horryblyl syghtys & cursyd mendys wer delectablyl to hir a-gyn hir wille.33

Men’s members were the tools of the devil, and Margery’s vagina the point where sin entered her body and her soul. To be violated meant to be without God, that is, to be damned.

Having argued that it was specifically and exclusively her sense of sin which was mapped onto Margery’s sexuality, I would like now to consider her mystical marriage.34 Although the fact of a mystical marriage suggests that Margery also experienced a positive form of eroticized spirituality in her relationship with Christ, in fact her mystical marriage was decidedly asexual. This is especially apparent when it is compared to the overt eroticism of depictions of mystical union by other late-medieval women visionaries, or to the graphic sexuality of Margery’s vision of damnation described above.35

31 *BMK*, pp. 236–7 and 240. Of course, neither age nor marital status protect a woman from rape. Margery’s fears, however, persisted even when she had taken every possible precaution, and could, I think, be judged excessive.
32 *BMK*, p. 241.
33 *BMK*, p. 145.
34 *BMK*, pp. 86–91.
35 There are numerous instances of erotic descriptions of mystical union by late medieval women visionaries. Among the most vivid are those by the mid thirteenth-
Despite her devotion to the manhood of Christ, her marriage was to the Godhead, that is, to the unincarnated person of the Trinity. The description of the wedding ceremony reads like a column in the society pages—it was public, not private. Her marriage was specifically located in her soul, and identified as the union of her soul: ‘pi sowle xal partyn fro pi body, but God xal neuyr partyn fro pi sowle, for þei ben onyd to-gedyr wyth-owtyn ende.’ The consummation of the marriage was conditional, not actual; God telling her what she could do, rather than Margery describing what she did do. The description of the union was not erotic. It was domestic, with the bond between them described in terms of a whole amalgam of family relationships: husband-wife, father-daughter and mother-son. God tells her:

... whan þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þi weddyd husband, as thy derworthy derlyng, & as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be louyd as a sone schuld be louyd wyth þe modyr &wil þat þu loue me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to loue hir horsbonde.

The bodily contact was specifically non-genital—a kind of cosmic cuddle: ‘þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi sowle & kyssen my mouth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wylt.’ For Margery, the fissured body, the sexual body, was a sinner’s body, and her marriage to the Godhead would, of necessity and desire, be as chaste as that which she eventually achieved with John.

Although the principal evidence for the sexualizing of transgression in The Book of Margery Kempe comes from Margery’s depiction of her own sexuality and sinfulness, transgression was also sexualized in her dealing with other

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36 BMK, p. 86, ll. 15–23.
37 BMK, p. 87, ll. 13–31. A similar description of a public mystical marriage which also uses the language of the marriage service and lists the heavenly guests in attendance is found in the prose legend of St Katherine of Alexandria. Her mystical marriage is pointedly not consummated—the divine spouse departs right after the ceremony. See St. Katherine of Alexandria: The Late Middle English Prose Legend in Southwell Minster MS 7, ed. S. Nevanlinna and I. Taavitsainen (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 81–3. I am grateful to Katherine Lewis for bringing this to my attention.
38 BMK, p. 87, ll. 14, 18 and 25.
39 BMK, p. 89, ll. 12–14.
40 BMK, p. 90.
41 BMK, p. 90.
people. For example, she castigated a monk for his lechery with married women. Christ thanked her for her charity to 'alle lecherows men & women', and for her prayers that they be delivered from sin. She made a point of warning her dissolute son 'kepe þi body klene at þe lest fro womanys feleschep', and urged God to punish him if he did not. The punishment came in the form of leprosy — or at least, something that looked like leprosy. 'Sone after [falling into lechery] hys colour chawneyd, hys face wexe ful of whelys & bloberys as it had ben a lepyr.' Thus the link between her son's transgression and his sexual activity was made explicit. It was a common medieval belief that leprosy was highly contagious, and that one of the principal methods of transmission was venereal. Fear of contagion led to lepers being ostracized from society, and having a variety of vices ascribed to them. From as early as the second century, doctors associated leprosy with heightened sexuality and satyrism, and this belief persisted into the late Middle Ages.

42 BMK, pp. 26–7.
43 BMK, p. 204.
44 BMK, p. 222.
45 BMK, p. 222.
46 Leprosy was also believed to be transmitted through other forms of physical contact, and through breath. There are numerous medieval medical, theological and scientific treatises which deal with leprosy. A useful example is Book 7, de lepra, of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De proprietatibus rerum, ed. M. C. Seymour, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975–88), I, 423–6. For a survey of medieval attitudes and writing on leprosy see Jacquart and Thomasset, pp. 183–93; see further L. Demaître, 'The Description and Diagnosis of Leprosy by Fourteenth-Century Physicians', Bulletin of the History of Medicine 59 (1985), 327–44.
47 In many ways leprosy functioned much as AIDS does in our own time. Both diseases have powerful sexual associations, provoke great fear in society, are seen as somehow uncontrollable and the sufferers are marginalized. Both diseases are articulated within a variety of discourses — medical, scientific and theological. In the latter discourse, both AIDS and leprosy are often constructed as divine punishments.
48 Jacquart and Thomasset, pp. 185–6, cite Rufus of Ephesus describing the stages of leprosy: 'when the eyebrows swell, when the cheekbones go red, and patients are seized by ardour for coitus, these doctors give the name satyrism to the disease ...'.
49 For further examples of the association of leprosy with sexuality see S. N. Brody, The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature (Ithaca, 1974), and S. R. Ell, 'Blood and Sexuality in Medieval Leprosy', Annales: Revue internationale de l'histoire des sciences, de la médecine, de la pharmacie, et de la technicque 71 (1984), 153–64. A common belief was that the blood of pure virgins was a cure for leprosy (Brody, p. 147). Interestingly, Hildegard of Bingen used menstrual blood as an ingredient in her cure for leprosy. Given that it was generally thought that intercourse with a menstruating woman was one of the causes of leprosy, Hildegard may have been applying the principles of homeopathic medicine here. See Cadden, Meanings of Sex Difference, p. 72.

In literature, lepers were frequently represented as utterly depraved. For example,
Leprosy was also frequently seen as a disease of the soul, a punishment for various kinds of immorality, but especially for lust. Margery’s son, a sinner whose principal vices seem to have been those to which she herself had been prone – vainglory, pride, vanity, and lust – was thus specifically identified as a sexual sinner through seeming to be stricken with leprosy. His transgression and his punishment were sexualized just as Margery’s were.

It is within this context that it is important to understand Margery’s choice of lepers as a special object of her pious devotion. Margery restricted her good works to female lepers – her extreme sensitivity to sexual implications prevented her from kissing male lepers, but allowed her to embrace female ones. One of these women was tormented by the devil. ‘And sche was labowryd wyth many fowle & horybyl thowtys, many mo pan sche cowde tellyn. & as sche seyd, sche was a mayde.’ There can be little doubt about the nature of the ‘fool and horrible thoughts’; in this case the punishment was sexualized even if it did not fit the crime. The fact that Margery saw fit to assert the woman’s virgin state suggests that she was aware of the usual association of lepers with sexual activity. It also suggests once again the pervasive association in Margery’s mind of sexuality and sin.

Having explored the sexualizing of transgression and punishment in The Book of Margery Kempe, I would like now to return to one of the questions with which I started this essay: why is there this inordinate emphasis on sexuality? To answer this I will examine two of the informing structures for Margery’s spirituality: the model of Mary Magdalene, and Margery’s desire to be slandered and abused in imitatio Christi.

In the mid twelfth-century Roman de Tristan, King Mark hands Yseut over to the lepers as a fitting punishment for her fornication with Tristan. Ivain, the leader of the lepers, urges the king: ‘Give Yseut to us and we will possess her in common. No woman ever had a worse end. Sire, there is such lust in us that no woman on earth could tolerate intercourse with us for a single day’ (Beroul, The Romance of Tristan, trans. A. S. Fedrick (London, 1970), pp. 73–4). Later versions of the prose Tristan also include giving Yseut to the lepers, although Beroul’s version is probably the most graphic. Although we do not know whether Margery had any knowledge of this romance, there is an interesting resemblance between this description and her vision of men’s members. In Henryson’s late fifteenth-century Testament of Cresseid, ‘Cresseid is punished with leprosy: Robert Henryson, ‘The Testament of Cresseid’, in The Poems of Robert Henryson, ed. D. Fox (Oxford, 1981), pp. 111–31.

Jacquart and Thomasset, p. 185; Ell, ‘Blood’, p. 154; Brody, Disease, p. 147. But see also Bartholomaeus Anglicus, who, despite the fact that this is a preachers’ encyclopedia, does not include punishment for immorality in his list of the causes of leprosy (Properties of Things, vii.64, ed. Seymour, I, 426).

BMK, pp. 176–7. Lepers were the object of good works and devotional exercises for many medieval holy women. It is possible that Margery modelled her behaviour on stories she heard of such figures as Angela of Foligno, who drank the bathwater of lepers. See Lochrie, Margery Kempe, p. 43. For the possibility that Margery may have known of Angela, see BMK, pp. iv and 295 (note on p. 73, l. 28).

BMK, p. 177.

BMK, p. 177.
Margery had a special devotion to Mary Magdalene. Considerable scholarship has been devoted to her knowledge of the legend of the Magdalene and her exposure to various depictions of the Magdalene in plays and devotional reading. It would appear that Mary Magdalene presented Margery with a model of the reformed sinner and non-virgin with which she could readily identify. In one of her visions, when she deplored her own unworthiness, Christ told her: ‘Haue merc, dowtry, what Mary Mawdelene was, Mary Eypcyen, Sent Powyl . . . for of vnworthy I make worthy, & of synful I make rythal’. It may seem strange that she did not construct herself to a greater extent according to the models offered by married women saints and holy women such as Elizabeth of Hungary or Bridget of Sweden, whose work she definitely knew. They, after all, presented lives closer to the reality of Margery’s than did Mary Magdalene. They were widows, having been respectively married and having mothered children, just like Margery, whereas the Magdalene was a reformed prostitute. The reasons for Margery’s devotion to Mary Magdalene can be suggested. I believe they lie, first, in the intensity of Margery’s perception of herself as a sinner, which, as I have argued, meant as a sexual being, and, second, in Margery’s competitiveness.

First, her perception of herself as sexual. Few other medieval holy women – or would-be holy women – demonstrate Margery’s preoccupation with sex. Bridget of Sweden, Elizabeth of Hungary, and the majority of married holy women constructed themselves as naturally and preeminently chaste. Their

54 Mary Magdalene was, after the Virgin Mary, possibly the most popular saint in the Middle Ages; cf. R. M. Karras, ‘Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend’, Journal of the History of Sexuality 1 (1990), 3–33 (p. 17). Margery’s parish church had a dual dedication, to St. Margaret and St. Mary Magdalene: see S. Eberley, ‘Margery Kempe, St. Mary Magdalene and Patterns of Contemplation’, DR 107 (1989), 209–23 (p. 210). However, familiarity alone cannot account for Margery’s devotion to the Magdalene; she was also very familiar with the works and life of St Bridget, to the extent of visiting Bridget’s one-time maid in Rome (BMK, p. 95). Although she did model herself to some extent on Bridget, the identification is not as ardent as it is with Mary Magdalene.


56 BMK, p. 49.

57 Margery’s scribe had read the treatise of Elizabeth of Hungary, and compared her crying with Margery’s (BMK, p. 154). R. Ellis considers the influence of Elizabeth’s treatise on the writing of Margery’s book in considerable depth in ‘Margery Kempe’s Scribe and the Miraculous Books’, in Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition, ed. H. Phillips (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 161–75 (pp. 164–8). Margery mentions St Bridget many times, and states that she has read (or heard read) ‘Bridis boke’ (BMK, p. 39).

58 D. Elliott considers the manner in which the institution of chaste marriage influenced the hagiographical construction of late-medieval holy women in Spiritual Marriage, pp. 193–265.
motherhood is made to appear almost accidental, its association with sexual activity remote if not non-existent. Chastity was portrayed as their natural state, a state to which marriage and motherhood were interruptions. Most holy women did not represent themselves as having to struggle, internally, to achieve chastity, though they may have undergone harrowing external struggles. Moreover, once achieved, chastity was solid, a given of their lives, not something which had to be vigilantly and continuously preserved.

Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, was identified preeminently as sexual and corporeal. Jacobus de Voragine (Jacob of Varazze) wrote of her in the *Legenda aurea*: 'As rich as Mary was, she was no less beautiful; and so entirely had she abandoned her body to pleasure that she was no longer called by any other name than “the sinner”.' She was a prostitute – for the pleasure of it, not the money. In some of the mystery play cycles it was as much her passion for luxury and sensuality as her overt sexual behaviour which condemned her. She knew about precious ointment. She loved fine clothes; she was depicted in stained-glass windows and church paintings wearing a luxurious red robe, and having long flowing hair. But, and this was the point, Mary Magdalene reformed. She sealed up her body, she reconstructed herself as chaste, she restored her virtue through her devotion to Christ, just as Margery wanted to. The Magdalene wept, she contemplated, she cared for Christ physically, she travelled, in some legends she preached, and she even resurrected a young mother who died in childbirth. The parallels with Margery are obvious. She too loved clothes and was vain; she had achieved chastity through her devotion to Christ; she certainly wept, and she contemplated; she travelled, she almost preached, and while she did not raise a young mother from the dead, she did restore one to her wits. Mary Magdalene offered Margery a model of an actively sexual being, at least as sinful as she saw herself, who reformed, lived chastely and loved Christ. This was far more

59 As an example of this, after her husband’s death, Bridget of Sweden removed the ring he had given her, saying that it reminded her of carnal pleasures (Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, p. 226).
64 Margery was several times accused of preaching. On one such occasion she replied: ‘I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpyt. I use but comowyncecyon & good wordys, & bat wil I do whil leue’ (BMK, p. 126). Cf. A. J. Minnis’s article, p. 130 above.
65 BMK, pp. 177–8.
engaging than the model presented by her closer contemporaries, asexual holy women such as Bridget of Sweden or Elizabeth of Hungary.

Margery’s competitiveness provided the second reason for her devotion to Mary Magdalene. She found the Magdalene additionally compelling because of her closeness to Christ. She was the woman Christ loved and allowed to be near him. Margery too yearned to be exclusive to Christ, and highest in holiness. There is a sense of triumph in the ways in which she demonstrated Christ’s esteem for her. In one vision, for example, Christ told her that although she was a wife, he loved her as well as any virgin in the world. At another point, after Margery had experienced a eucharistic miracle, Christ told her that “My dowtyr Bryde [Bridget of Sweden], say me neuyr in his wyse.” In yet another incident, with a widow of Lynn who had pretensions to visionary status, Margery reports being ridden by Christ to have a letter written to the widow stating that she would never have the grace that Margery had. Margery knew that Mary Magdalene was the woman closest to Christ after his mother, she was the woman whom Christ praised and protected. Margery also aspired to be Christ’s “trewe lover”, the position that Mary Magdalene occupied. Eventually, it would seem that she achieved it.

‘A, blysful Lord,’ seyd sche, ‘I wolde I wer as worthy to ben sekyr of thy lofe as Mary Mawdelyn was.’ Pan seyd owr Lord, ‘Trewly, dowtyr, I loue þe as wel & þe same þes þat I saf to hir þe same þes þe þe to þe.’

However, to identify with Mary Magdalene meant identifying herself as sexual as well as reformed. It was this re-inscription of sexuality on the body she had sealed with chastity which facilitated Margery’s quest for slander and scorn in imitatio Christi. The text fashions Margery in conflicting discourses, a conflict which encompasses her paradoxical presentation as simultaneously chaste and sexual. On the one hand she is constructed as holy woman, as visionary, intimate of Christ and channel for the divine word. Traditionally, this discourse ignores the body and privileges the voice of the visionary. The troublesome female body is erased from the narrative, leaving a disembodied voice uttering the word of God. On the other hand, in the particular enactment of a holy life to which Margery felt herself called, she is to be the despised and rejected of men as well as the intimate and instrument of the divine. Offering herself as an object of scorn and abuse, however, undermines her construction as a holy woman and a visionary. To be credible as a visionary she must conform, she must be beyond suspicion, she must be obedient to

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66 BMK, p. 48.
67 BMK, p. 47.
68 BMK, p. 44.
69 BMK, p. 176.
70 This issue is explored in depth in my dissertation, ‘God’s Words, Women’s Voices: Discretio spirituum in the Writing of Late Medieval Women Visionaries’ (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, York, 1994).
the power of the church. Conversely, in order to elicit abuse she has to be nonconforming, she has to be suspect, ultimately, indeed, she has to be outcast. These conflicting discourses resulted in an inherently unstable interpretation of her calling, condemning Margery to a life on the mystical margins.

At the beginning of this essay I commented on Margery’s physical timidity and disinclination for bodily suffering. Further evidence of this is offered by the fact that sooner or later in her devotional praxis, bodily chastisement—fasting, the hair shirt, even, eventually, her ‘krying & roryng’—was relinquished in favour of the spiritual chastisement of harsh words and verbal attacks which that relinquishing helped to provoke.

‘Dowtyr, I badde þe fyrst þat þu xuldist leeuyn flesch mete & non etyn, & þu hast obeyd my wyl many þerys & absteyned þe aftyr my counsels. Þerfor now I bydde þe þat þu resort a-getyn to flesch mete.’...Than had sche many a scorne & meche reprefe for sche ecte flesch a-getyn. 72

Christ always assured her that this kind of suffering was the most pleasing to him.

‘Dowtyr, it is mor plesyng vn-to me þat þu suffyr despitys & scornys, schamus & repreys, wrongys & disesyÞan if þip hed wer smet of thre tymbes on þe day euer in sevyn 3ere.’ 73

The mocking of Margery, the forms of her chastisement, fell into two principal categories: she was denounced for hypocrisy, as in the example just given, or she was charged with sexual misconduct. Sometimes she was accused of both together. 74 Certainly, for a woman deliberately courting abuse, the easiest, most certain route was to write herself in a way which allowed her to be read as not only sexual, but deviantly sexual. Traditional Christian views of women as essentially lustful and inferior to men meant that a woman’s place was under the control of men: father, husband, priest. A woman out of her place was a woman out of control, liable to the prompting of her nature. Margery flouted convention, and was insistently out of place: she travelled without her husband, she dressed in white like a maiden or a widow, she spoke in public and she continually drew attention to herself. Her unconventional behaviour reinscribed sexual activity on to her construction of herself as chaste. The result is that the reader is constantly reminded of Margery as sexual while being presented with Margery as chaste. This paradoxical con-

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71 The impetus for this paradoxical self-fashioning is found in one of Margery’s earliest visions, in which Christ both promises to send her revelations and tells her that he wants her to be ‘eyyn & knawen of þe pepul of þe world’ (BMK, pp. 161–18).

72 BMK, pp. 161–2.

73 BMK, p. 131.

74 An example of this is when Margery and her husband are accused of pretending to live chastely when in fact ‘þei vysyd her lust & her likyn as þei dedyn be-forn her vew makyn’ (BMK, pp. 179–80).
struction is explicit in the incident when Margery complained to her Dominican anchorite confessor that ‘He pat is my confessorw in 30wr absens is rygth scharp vn-to me’. The anchorite replied: ‘He knowyth wel ȝe han ben a synful woman, & þerfor he wenyth þat God wold not ben homly wyth ȝow in so schort tyme.’

One of the most telling examples of this reinscription of sexuality occurred when Margery had just returned from pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Rome, a time when her odour of sanctity should have been at its highest. Almost immediately upon landing, she went to visit an anchorite who had previously loved her well. He accused her of having conceived and borne a child – and, seemingly, of abandoning it – while she was away. Her response to such an outrageous allegation was curiously feeble, and, in fact, colluded in the anchorite’s re-presentation of her sexuality.

‘Ser, þe same childe þat God hath sent me I haue browt hom, for God knowyth I dede neuyr sithyn I went owte wher-thorw I xulde haue a childe.’

The oblique phrasing of her reply does nothing to assert her habitual chastity; moreover, it should be noted that this incident occurred two years after she and John took their vow of chastity. While righteous indignation would seem a more fitting response, and certainly one not beyond Margery’s capabilities, instead she chose ‘lowly & mekely’ to try to persuade the anchorite that God wished her to wear the controversial white clothes. The juxtaposition here of Margery as adulterous woman and unnatural mother with Margery as icon of chastity is a telling example of the text’s continual negotiation between chastity and transgressive sexuality.

Further instances of this reinscription of sexuality occur whenever Margery felt her chastity threatened. At these times she would assert that she was a man’s wife, thereby raising the spectre of her legally sanctioned sexual activity as a defence against defilement.

‘I neuyr had part of manny’s body in þis worlde in actual dede be wy of synne, but of myn husbondys body, whom I am bowndyn to be þe lawe of matrimony, & be whom I haue born xilij childeryn.’

75 BMK, p. 44. In the presentation of this incident there are, of course, echoes of the hostility and disbelief which greeted Christ’s intimacy with Mary Magdalene (Jacobian de Voragine, Golden Legend, p. 356).
76 BMK, p. 103. My emphasis.
77 BMK, p. 115. This is the only place in the text where Margery gives a tally of her children, and one of the very few places where her children are mentioned at all. Although it seems to have been fairly standard for married holy women not to dwell on their progeny, few write them out of the narrative to the extent that Margery does. With some, for example, Dorothy of Montau, children – or the deaths of children – became instruments of suffering: see R. Kieckhefer, Unquiet Souls:
Although her chastity may be thereby defended, she is yet again simultaneously defined as a sexual woman.

This same tension is reflected in Margery's account of the difficulties she and her husband encountered in persuading others of their chastity. Although she gave this account as evidence of the hostility she experienced in her community, it had the effect, nevertheless, of rewriting sexuality onto her sealed body. She recounts how they finally decided to live apart, in order to convince people of their chastity. Nevertheless, the blameless husband and chaste wife were still accused of doing it like rabbits, in the fields and ditches. However, it might be remarked that her subsequent reminiscence of the fleshly delights of their youth together does leave the reader wondering whether the spark was truly dead.

Traditional Christian views of women and their sexuality certainly influenced not only responses to Margery's behaviour, but also accounted for her need to reconstruct herself as chaste in order to claim her place in the heavenly dance. Yet she, and her scribes, did have available to them models of holy women such as Bridget of Sweden and Elizabeth of Hungary whose sense of transgression was not sexualized. Far from being rooted in their bodies as Margery was, these women wrote their fissured, fleshly bodies out of their narratives. The sexualizing of transgression in The Book of Margery Kempe reflected Margery's acute awareness of herself as a sexually active 'creature'.

_Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu_ (Chicago, 1984), pp. 22–8. For others, like Angela of Foligno, the death of children cleared the way for complete and utter devotion to Christ: see Angela of Foligno, _Complete Works_, ed. P. Lachance (New York, 1995), p. 126. For Bridget of Sweden, some of her children became extensions of her own sanctity, aiding in her construction of her own virtue; see _The Liber Celestis of St. Bridget of Sweden_, ed. R. Ellis, _EETS OS 291_ (Oxford, 1987), pp. 315–16. I would argue that the fact that Margery does not adopt one of these models is still further evidence of her identification of sex, even procreative sex, with sin. A similar argument applies to Margery's complete lack of emphasis on her eventual status as widow. It is evident that for Margery this kind of second class virginity is not enough. She wants to be a maid in Heaven.

Newman explores the maternal attitudes of medieval holy women in _Virtue Woman_, pp. 76–107.


79 This and other similar incidents have some parallels with the portrayal of Mary and Joseph in mystery cycle plays of Joseph's Troubles, which deal with perceptions of Joseph as a cuckold and Mary as an adulterous wife. The underlying concern of such treatments was, of course, the presentation of Mary as at once virgin and mother, as both sealed and fissured — which is how Margery was struggling to construct herself. For an analysis of Joseph's Troubles in mystery cycle plays, see T. Coletti, 'The Paradox of Mary's Body', in Lomperis and Stanbury, _Feminist Approaches_, pp. 65–95. For a survey of the medieval theological debate occasioned by Mary's simultaneous virginity and maternity, see C. Wood, 'The Doctors' Dilemma; Sin, Salvation and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought', _Speculum_ 56 (1981), 710–27.
always capable of being tempted by the joys of the flesh while desperately yearning for the harmony of heaven.

Margery's mapping of both sin and punishment onto her sexuality is neatly encapsulated in her meditation, towards the end of her life, while caring for her aged and incontinent husband: 'sche bethowt hir how sche in hir song, se had ful many delectably thowtys, fleshly lustys, & inordinat louys to ys persone. & perchors sche was glad to be ponischyd wyth ys same persone ...' In this episode can be found all the elements which constituted Margery's idiosyncratic devotion: her preoccupation with the things of the body, her yearning for union with Christ, her transmutation of sexual pleasure into awareness of sin. The body with which she transgressed — her own as well as John's — has become the instrument and site of her punishment.

The theme of the York conference in which this volume of essays originated was 'This Body of Death', a phrase from Romans 7. 22-5, in which St Paul struggles with his desire for good and his inclination towards evil. It is worth citing the whole passage.

For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.^

Paul's struggle is Margery's, and his despairing words could as well be hers.

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80 BMK, p. 181.
81 Here the Revised Standard Version is followed.