Sex is never far from Margery Kempe’s mind. In 1436 she creates *The Book of Margery Kempe*, one of the first English texts by a woman and perhaps the first autobiography in English, in order to chronicle her transformation from middle-class married businesswoman to traveling spiritual figure.¹ However, sex remains a persistent feature of her thoughts and experiences throughout this transition, which paradoxically seeks both to leave behind and to build on her identity as wife and mother. One of the first things Margery tells us in her *Book* is that she wants to stop having sex with her husband. In fact, she says, “the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar [rather], hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose [ooze], the mukke in the chanel.”² Her revulsion is the result of a spiritual awakening, but Margery soon reveals that she has not lost her sexual passion: sex becomes more significant in her spiritual life than it was in her earthly one. In most medieval devotional texts, sexual imagery expresses spiritual longing, and scholars have generally agreed that Margery’s use of sex is inappropriately literal (or insufficiently figurative). However, they have dismissed this as a minor element in the *Book* and a somewhat clumsy maneuver by a woman

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whose desire for sainthood outstrips her qualifications. This essay will argue that Margery’s sexual imagery is not a misstep but instead a conscious authorial strategy, the capstone of her effort to fashion a distinctive form of spiritual authority that is modeled on the Virgin Mary but incorporates the material of Margery’s worldly life in order to surpass even Mary’s level of intimacy with Christ. Margery does not misuse or misunderstand devotional traditions; she modifies them to suit her purposes.

There is a long-standing debate over the degree to which Margery controls the text and whether she can be considered the author of her Book. Early critics saw her as simply dictating her memories to scribes (in between bouts of her famous weeping) and credited those men for any narrative structure or devices. Lynn Staley challenged this assumption in *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, distinguishing the narrative persona Margery from the authorial presence Kempe and viewing the text as a largely fictional construct. A. C. Spearing also sees the text as a construct but stresses the scribe’s role in shaping the representation of Margery, calling the book, “The Diary of a Nobody.” As a recent pair of essays by Nicholas Watson and Felicity Riddy illustrates, the fundamental issue of authorial responsibility remains unresolved. Watson carefully separates out which features of the text are attributable to Margery and which to the second scribe, finally concluding that Margery is primarily responsible for the shape of the narrative. Riddy, on the other hand, argues that the text must be read as the result of a collaborative effort and that it is neither possible nor desirable to assign responsibility for its effects.

While Riddy’s reading is persuasive, and we must not discount the mediating function of the scribe, I see the connection between the sexual and devotional as a principal element of Margery’s innovative vision for her spiritual life and a testimony to her control as author. Her literal

3. Caroline Walker Bynum negotiates this problem more carefully than most, admitting that Margery “takes such [sexual and maternal] images to heights of literalism” but rejecting the view that her “cuddling with Christ in bed is simply a case of an uneducated woman taking literally metaphors from the Song of Songs” (Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* [New York: Zone, 1991], 41, 44). For Bynum, however, these images from affective piety reveal Margery’s conventional interest in the humanity of Christ; they are not original or strategic because “Margery, for all her fervor, her courage, her piety, her mystical gifts and her brilliant imagination, cannot write her own script” (41).


deployment of sex in a spiritual context is not wholly unprecedented, as scholars have demonstrated; Virginia Burrus has shown in her study of ancient hagiography, *The Sex Lives of Saints*, that an “exuberant eroticism” was an important part of saintly discourse, often imagined in definite and material ways. It is unclear whether Margery would have known those ancient texts, but Burrus demonstrates that embodied eroticism is an inherent quality of hagiography. And, although most medieval devotional texts use sexual imagery metaphorically, some female mystics do engage in more literal descriptions of an erotic connection with Christ. While the image of Christ as lover is conventional in mystical texts, then, Margery’s use of maternal imagery in combination with concrete sexual imagery complicates what might otherwise be traditional metaphors. She uses her mixed imagery to a specific end: to enhance her authority as a religious figure in the image of the Virgin Mary.

Margery’s spiritual life begins too late for her to be a holy virgin and too early for her to be a chaste widow, but she builds on her earthly roles as a wife and mother to create unusually firm connections to her model, the mother of Christ. Although a few female saints had also

7. Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1. Burrus does suggest that this eroticism was the product of particular historical circumstances, perhaps explaining why Margery’s case is uncommon among medieval devotional writers: “The ascetics of late antiquity cultivated purposeful disciplines of embodiment and textuality, pedagogy and prayer, which freed desire from the constraining and often violently oppressive structures of familial, civic, and imperial domination” (161). It is also worth noting that none of Burrus’s texts was the product of women; perhaps it was easier for men to use this kind of concrete sexual imagery.


been wives and mothers (most notably St. Bridget, an early fourteenth-century saint who was a favorite of Margery’s), they defined their devotional lives as a departure from those roles rather than—as Margery does—an extension of them. While scholars have frequently connected Margery’s text to *imitatio Christi*, I want to suggest that the more significant devotional model in the *Book* is the lesser-known *imitatio Mariae*. This *imitatio* might focus on various iconic traditions—the immaculate virgin, the nursing madonna, the suffering mother, or the sympathetic intercessor—but Margery chooses to concentrate on the primary ground of her identification with Mary: motherhood. Margery’s transition from physical to spiritual motherhood mirrors Mary’s transition from biological mother of Christ to spiritual mother of humanity. Margery carefully shapes her *imitatio* to take advantage of Mary’s authority to instruct and intercede for others while negotiating the divergent challenges posed by her own lack of both virginity and humility.

So where does sex fit into *imitatio Mariae*? For Margery Kempe, everywhere. She continually insists on the connection between motherhood—whether physical or spiritual—and sexuality. While the experience of childbirth recalled Eve’s original sin and resulted in the sexual impurity of the mother, and Mary’s motherhood remained pure because of her virginity, *sponsa Christi* tradition did attach sexual imagery to her. Like Mary Magdalene and other female saints, the Virgin Mary was sometimes imagined as the bride of Christ; Song of Songs–type language might be used to portray this relationship, but it was preserved as only a figure for spiritual desire and intimacy. Other female religious figures made use of similarly figurative language but sometimes fell into a more literal eroticism as well. Margery, however, concretizes the image of the divine bride of Christ and then appends that earthly eroticism to her *imitatio*, creating an intimate role for herself that combines the sexual and the maternal and draws on her secular roles. She also has parallel familial-yet-erotic relationships with the rest of the holy family. This conflation increases both the authority of her religious teachings and their potential for heterodoxy. In her intimacy and authority, Margery eventually seeks to exceed the Virgin Mary herself.

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Carolyn Dinshaw observes that Margery Kempe is “a creature that itself is not clearly categorizable in her community’s bourgeois heteronormative terms . . . a creature whose body does not fit her desires.” Yet, as Dinshaw’s shift in pronouns from “itself” to “her” might signal, Margery manipulates those terms—and that body—to fulfill her singular desires. In the Middle Ages, mothers were expected to be loving and nurturing figures who provided early religious and moral instruction for their children within the home. Margery reshapes this concept of motherhood by drawing on a wide variety of maternal experiences and images while exploiting the relationship between physical and spiritual motherhood. Scholars have overlooked the abundance and importance of maternal imagery in this text, focusing instead on issues of authorial versus scribal control and on the questionable orthodoxy of Margery’s devotional practices. Clarissa Atkinson, whose 1983 Mystic and Pilgrim marked the beginning of a resurgence of interest in Margery, downplays the significance of motherhood in the Book: “Kempe used few maternal images and metaphors, and she rarely mentioned her children or her experience of motherhood.” Anthony Goodman’s recent observation is a typical extension of this view: “The Book does not dwell on her role as mother, or on her children, because these subjects were largely irrelevant to its purposes.” On the contrary, motherhood and maternal imagery are prevalent and pervasive in Margery’s text.

15. For an exception, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (Cambridge: Boydell, 2004), chap. 1. She notes the importance of motherhood in the Book but does not examine how Margery uses her own physical motherhood to create authority for herself nor how she mixes maternal with sexual imagery (although McAvoy separately discusses images of prostitution in the text).
The *Book* begins by drawing attention to her status as a physical mother. Margery’s claim to this form of motherhood is indisputable: she has fourteen children. Although we hear little about those children, she frames the *Book* with depictions of herself as a mother; the story of her life begins with the birth of her first child—the impetus for all that follows—and ends with her interactions with her adult son. Opening not with Margery’s birth but with a sentence briefly describing her marriage and first pregnancy, the *Book* then describes how, “aftyr that sche had conceived, sche was labowrd wyth grett accessys tyl the chyld was born, and than, what for labowr sche had in chyldyng and for sekenesse goyng beforne, sche dyspered of hyr lyfe, wenyng sche mygth not levyn” (21). The experience of labor leads to sickness and later madness—a progression that highlights the connections between motherhood, fleshliness, and sinfulness by focusing attention on the weaknesses of Margery’s body—and brings on the divine intervention that changes the course of her life. Margery becomes a mother and spiritual figure almost simultaneously. The language of the description closely associates the two events of becoming a mother and of going mad (as the result of an unconfessed but probably sexual sin). She returns to the term “labowryd” to describe the struggle she has with the spirits. Margery’s experience as a mother is the foundation for all of the experiences with which the rest of the text is concerned; her first difficult childbirth leads to her first vision of Christ and ultimately to her life as a spiritual figure and author.

The associations between maternity and spiritual uncleanness could be remedied through the ritual known as churching, which followed the precedent Mary set after Christ’s birth. The *Book* later describes another mother’s churching, but Margery’s extreme case, with the additional peril of madness, demands a more individual solution. In the


midst of her postpartum struggles, Christ appears, sitting on her bed. Her insanity is so enduring and disturbing that she requires this divine intervention to recover—and she is apparently so special that she deserves it. This episode signifies a privileged relationship with Christ and emphasizes the connection between Margery’s sexual body and her spiritual experience, even suggesting that the first is somehow integral to or carried over into the second. Christ appears to her as an attractive young man, saying, “Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?” (23). He invokes his role as her father and crucified savior but appears in the guise of a lover.

The erotic presence of Christ in the bedroom was not anomalous. In his Letter to Eustochium, St. Jerome exhorted the virgin to “Let the seclusion of your own chamber ever guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within.”21 Here, as elsewhere in the Book, however, it is the context of Margery’s earthly life and her conflation of the maternal and the sexual that make the difference. She is not in virtuous “seclusion” but has recently become a mother and still bears the sexual stigma, even though she is now figured as Christ’s “dowtyr” in this bedroom tryst. Her sinful physicality is prominent in this moment, and the appearance of Christ like a lover in her bedroom underscores this in the act of resolving it. Despite her condition, Margery is in a position of power: Christ seeks her out, states his devotion to her, and addresses her in the same words he spoke to God the Father from the cross. By invoking the Passion, Christ suggests that her suffering, like his own, may have spiritual significance. This suggestion conforms to a common trope in hagiography. Other female spiritual figures such as Margery’s contemporary, Julian of Norwich, also suffer in the modes of Christ or Mary; however, while Julian’s pain, for instance, is deeply physical, it leads to disembodied spiritual experiences and lacks the worldly sexual and maternal undertones that make Margery’s postpartum suffering distinctive.22

Proving more effective than churching, Christ’s words immediately return Margery to her sanity. She resumes her normal life and daily activities, asking her husband “that sche myght have the keys of the botery to takyn hir mete and drynke as sche had don beforn” (23). Her keys are a symbol of her return to the very domestic world that caused her trouble, but they are also, as Staley points out, signs of female


22. Bridget of Sweden does experience a difficult childbirth, but Mary appears and takes away the pain so that Bridget’s experience of giving birth mirrors Mary’s own painless labor. See Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations, ed. Marguerite Tjader Harris and trans. Albert Ryle Kezel (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 76.
power. However, the keys signify that Margery’s power is still limited to and by her earthly roles as wife and mother; she will later adopt symbols of spiritual power, including her white clothing and engraved ring. Margery remains a mother and wife, but she will redirect her domesticity and sexuality into an intimate relationship with Christ. The text sets him up as a figure for whom both sexual and familial imagery is appropriate, but, at this point, Margery is beginning that spiritual relationship while maintaining its earthly equivalents with her human family. The visions of the two religious figures closest to her, Bridget of Sweden and Julian of Norwich, began in childhood and during a near-fatal illness, respectively, but Margery’s spiritual career originates from this first encounter with Christ and childbirth.

In the only other example in the Book of a woman’s experience immediately after childbirth, the text makes it clear that the suffering of childbirth and motherhood is not an avenue that all mothers can follow to a religious life. Here madness again follows childbirth; the woman’s husband explains, “Sche knowyth not me ne non of hir neyborwys. Sche ror-yth and cryith so that sche makith folk evyl afeerd. Sche wyl bothe smytyn and bityn, and therfor is sche manykyld on hir wristys” (170). In this case, Margery, rather than Christ, heals the mother, emphasizing Margery’s spiritual power—she can perform the same act for another that Christ performed for her—and her unique status—she merited direct divine intervention. After Margery intervenes, the new mother stops raving and is “browt to chirche and purifiid as other women be” (171). If Margery’s ability to circumvent churching reveals her special status, then this episode shows that her spiritual power works within the established religious structure: her intervention facilitates the mother’s churching rather than replacing it. In other words, although Margery’s spiritual experiences may have been outside of the Church, she used her authority for orthodox objectives.

Before Margery could claim such authority, she had to perform a careful balancing act, overcoming the obstacles of physical motherhood in order to transform it into spiritual motherhood while still preserving the physical as a precondition for the spiritual. Her experiences of motherhood are not confined to her children, however; they begin again when she becomes a mother to her husband, John, after he suffers a head injury. She notes the commingling of her familial roles during this period, explaining that she “had ful mech labowr wyth hym, for in hys last days he turnyd childisch agen” (173). The word “labowr” connects this episode with her experiences of motherhood and madness at the beginning of the text. Her husband’s childishness is not solely a mental condi-
tion but also a physical one: he “cowd not don hys owyn esement to gon to a sege . . . but as a childe voydyd his natural digestyon in hys lynyn clothys” (173). Margery’s experience with his newly childlike body reminds her of the sexual pleasure they shared before Christ first appeared to her, when she had “ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinat lovys to hys [ John’s] persone” (173). Here again motherhood mingles with sexuality, which is in turn complicated by the familial relationships involved. Margery’s husband is a passionate lover and a helpless son to her, while she is his wife and mother. It is her responsibility as his wife to become his mother in this situation; the people of Lynn believe that “yf he deyd, hys wyfe was worthy to ben hangyn for hys deth, forasmeche as sche myth a kept hym and dede not” (172). Christ reinforces Margery’s wifely responsibility, instructing her to “take hym hom and kepe hym for my lofe” (173). Both her community and Christ pressure her to care for her husband in this peculiarly dual role. Christ argues his point by asking Margery to do so for the “lofe” of her spiritual lover, a further mingling of spiritual, familial, and erotic elements.

By the time of his sickness, however, Margery’s sexual relationship with her husband is in the past. Immediately after setting forth her credentials as a mother (and proving that motherhood can coexist with a sexualized spirituality), she distances herself from physical motherhood by portraying her withdrawal from earthly sex. Physical motherhood remains important; Margery sets it up as a prerequisite for spiritual motherhood, establishing it as the indispensable ground for the spiritual metaphor. In doing so, she follows the model of the Virgin Mary, whose status as the human mother of Christ led to her role as spiritual mother to humanity. However, physical motherhood is also a potential impediment to its spiritual counterpart. From a philosophical standpoint, physical motherhood is an incontrovertible sign that a woman is not a virgin (with Mary as the sole exception); from a practical standpoint, the responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood deplete the time, energy, and resources that a woman might otherwise devote to pursuing a spiritual life. Because Margery is crafting an authority based on her human roles as wife and mother, she cannot simply leave the physical behind; the physical—and the sexual—remain as the foundation of her relationship with Christ.

Once again, Christ directly intervenes. He helps Margery overcome the philosophical and practical obstacles, and, once again, she mixes maternal and sexual imagery to create spiritual intimacy and authority. She cannot recapture her virginity, but she distances herself from the fleshly and sinful connotations of motherhood by establishing a chaste marriage. Her husband is initially reluctant to agree to an arrangement that would turn sex into a deadly sin. Eventually, with Christ’s mediation, the spouses strike a deal: Margery will pay her husband’s debts and eat
with him on Fridays, and he will assent to a chaste marriage. She figures her request for chastity not as an end to sexual intimacy, however, but as a redirection of it, saying that her husband, by agreeing to the new terms, would “makyth my body fre to God.” He consents and says, “As fre mot your body ben to God as it hath ben to me,” a reference to their previously active sex life (38). This language suggests that Margery’s body is being exchanged between her husband and God; she renounces “fleschly comownyng” (26) in favor of a more spiritual but scarcely less sexual communion. Having achieved her “desyr” (38), she goes on to visit “many other of owyr Lordys loverys” (39), confirming that she has moved from being John’s lover to being the “Lordys.” The confluence of Margery’s spiritual and sexual experiences is unusual; the closest case is that of Bridget of Sweden, whose marital sexuality was much more controlled (she and her husband observed periods of chastity in their marriage) and was safely in the past by the time her spiritual life began in earnest during her widowhood. In her Revelations, Christ stresses this divide to Bridget: “And when at your husband’s death your soul was gravely shaken with disturbance, then the spark of my love—which lay, as it were, hidden and enclosed—began to go forth . . . you abandoned your whole will to me and desired me above all things.”

For Margery, a chaste marriage is not only about keeping her body pure but also about ceasing to bear children. The text explains that this resolution conforms to a direct command from Christ. Although Christ consistently downplays to Margery the value of virginity, assuring her that he does not love her any less because she has an earthly husband, Christ makes a specific declaration against her continuing role as mother: “Whyl thys creatur was beryng chylder and sche was newly delyveryd of a chyld, owyr Lord Crist Jhesu seyd to hir sche schuld no mor chyldren beryn, and therefor he bad hyr gon to Norwych” (50). This is not only an exhortation to chastity but also a specific imperative against further reproduction. It comes after she already has many children; Christ does not want her to be childless but to prevent her from having “mor chyldren.” The command is notable because it responds to Margery’s experience as a mother, an experience that most female religious figures lacked. It also distinguishes her from male religious authorities; priestly celibacy required a renunciation of biological in favor of spiritual

24. Birgitta of Sweden, 148 (see also 77–78).

25. Bynum suggests that the dangers of marriage and motherhood were serious enough in themselves to explain some women’s desire for chastity and continence. See Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 226. Dyan Elliott terms the impulse toward chastity “a revolt against the reproductive imperative” (Elliott, Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock [Princeton University Press, 1993], 5).
fatherhood, but Margery is able to experience and utilize both forms of motherhood while exploiting the figurative relationship between them. As she embraces chastity, Margery replaces—or, more accurately, supplements—her marriage to John with a relationship with Christ that proves to be more intimate, more exclusive, and more productive.

Christ follows his instruction to stop having children with a significant rationale: since Margery had complained that she could not travel because her recent childbirth had left her too weak, she must renounce motherhood in order to continue her teaching. Christ presents her trip to Norwich as an alternative to or replacement for motherhood, but this new task also conflates the spiritual and the sexual. Christ tells Margery to meet with a vicar and “schew hym thy prevytés and myn cownselys swech as I schewe the” (50). “Prevytés” is a suggestive term that could denote “genitals” as well as “divine secrets”;26 while the latter meaning is clearly primary here, the former still hovers behind it. Her “prevytés” and Christ’s “cownselys” are structurally equivalent in this passage—which binds the two together and raises the value of the first. Christ has replaced the traditional vocation of women, motherhood, with teaching, a spiritual vocation. The circumstances surrounding this shift also endow Margery with spiritual authority; her activities may appear to violate scriptural and societal strictures against women as preachers, but a higher power has licensed her.

Christ makes teaching more suitable for her than bearing children, but Margery herself makes motherhood the basis for her authority, using her identity as a mother to warrant her actions and speech as a teacher. She advances this claim when a clerk questions her about God’s imperative to be fruitful and multiply, a command that seems to conflict with Christ’s injunction to her to stop having children. Margery glosses the phrase in a way that eliminates the apparent contradiction: “Thes wordys ben not undirstondyn only of begetyng of chyldren bod-ily, but also be purchasyng of vertu, which is frute gostly, as be heryng of the wordys of God [and] be good examplwyn geyng” (121–22). Figurative interpretation of this passage is hardly an original move,27 but Margery’s adaptation is. She emphasizes the connection between physical and spiritual motherhood; the scriptural words are not simply figurative, as in most other interpretations, but refer to both forms of fruitfulness (one should “not . . . only” have biological children “but also” become a virtuous example for others, thereby producing spiritual chil-

26. Middle English Dictionary, s.v. “privete (n.),” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/.
27. Such figurative interpretations are also orthodox. See Lynn Staley, trans. and ed., The Book of Margery Kempe (New York: Norton, 2001), 89 n. 5.
The command is twofold: a directive toward both physical and spiritual productivity. Having satisfied the “bodily” component of the command, Margery has moved on to producing “frute gostly.” She leverages her indisputable claim to physical motherhood (the ground for the metaphor) into a claim for spiritual motherhood.

Margery again drew on her status as a mother when she was examined by the Archbishop of York and had to defend her right to speak publicly. He found her orthodox but asked her not to “techyn ne chalengyn” his people. She refuses his request and quotes the words spoken to Christ by a woman who heard him preach: “Blyssed be the wombe that the bar and the tetys that gaf the sowkyn” (Luke 11:27). This scriptural passage is the basis of Margery’s defense; it leads her to conclude that “me thynkyth that the gospel gevyth me leve to spekyn of God” (126). The passage offers dual grounds for Margery’s right to speak. First, Christ affirms the unnamed woman’s speech. Second, more subtly, but more interestingly, the passage connects female speech with Mary’s role as physical mother. As Mary, the “wombe” that bore Christ, is blessed, so is Margery, whose womb has borne many children. Her role as mother, not only possessing but also using her “wombe” and “tetys” to birth and nurture children, makes her “blyssed.” And because she is blessed, she has the right to speak. Motherhood provides a foundation for some authority as a religious teacher; relying on examples of spiritual mothers who were “voices of holy wisdom,” David Herlihy suggests that medieval mothers assumed a critical if not very visible role in their children’s religious education. Margery’s conclusion certainly (and perhaps purposefully) misreads the passage, which concerns Christ’s speech and makes no mention of Mary’s right to speak or of the unnamed woman’s right to speak more than the single sentence in praise of Mary. Furthermore, it offers only slim grounds for the deduction that other mothers are “blyssed” because Mary herself is. Whether Margery misrepresented the passage, however, is less important than the fact that she chose to stake her claim on this

28. This interpretation is reinforced by Christ’s comment earlier in the text that it is “no synne” for Margery to continue to have sex with her husband because “I wyl that thow bring me forth mor frwte” (59).

29. Margery’s suggestion that both physical and spiritual offspring are desirable and that the latter is even somehow dependent on the former departs from typical representations. Hali Meidenhad, for instance, sharply contrasts the experience of physically bearing children—which involves “sore sorhful angoise”—with producing spiritual offspring, which is restricted to a virgin, who “ne swinke[eth] ne ne pineo[eth]” (Hali Meidhad, ed. Bella Millett EETS no. 284 [Oxford University Press, 1982], 18 and 20).

30. Herlihy, Medieval Households, 123. Geoffrey Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale provides one example of a mother in this role and also draws comparisons with Mary; see Bruce Hol singer, “Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music: Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale and the Ideologies of ‘Song,’” New Medieval Literatures 1 (1997): 157–92.
basis, on the authority of motherhood. In doing so, she collapses the categories of physical and spiritual. She emphasizes that she is physically a mother, referring to specific body parts and to the acts of birthing and nursing, but she uses these references to justify herself as a spiritual mother in the mode of Mary who is permitted to teach her "children"—a category that seems to include everyone Margery encounters.

Throughout the Book, Margery talks about her physical motherhood strategically, using it primarily at the beginning to establish her claim to motherhood and to set up the connection between her sexuality and spirituality. She is trying to do a tricky thing: to insist that her physical motherhood is valuable and, in fact, the basis of her unusual claim to spiritual authority but then to leave it behind quickly so that she can assume the spiritual motherhood that is thus enabled. She wants to make clear that her claim to physical motherhood is indisputable and represents an important connection to Mary, but its true value comes only when she makes the transition to spiritual motherhood. Once she has made that transition, she wants to inhabit the spiritual aspect fully. While Margery's representation is always mediated at some level by her scribe, the use of her own motherhood is so unorthodox and so dependent on her individual identity that it seems more likely to have its origin in Margery's view of her life than in the scribe's. Taking on the role of spiritual mother helps Margery to appear experienced and authoritative because it necessarily positions other people as children. But she is focused on the Virgin Mary, and for Margery, Mary's key characteristic is her maternity; even her virginity is a facet of her identity as Christ's mother. Margery makes use of her own unusual purchase on that imagery; throughout the Book, she stresses her superlative spiritual status—as the closest intimate of Christ's, the most persecuted and therefore most worthy figure, the loudest weeper—and her motherhood is another distinguishing feature of which she can take advantage. As a result, Margery's motherhood, which might have been a major obstacle to her spiritual life, becomes the improbable foundation for it.

IMITATING THE VIRGIN MARY

The Virgin Mary was the most powerful and honored female figure of the Middle Ages, so it is hardly surprising that Margery, who is always concerned with spiritual status, would seek to imitate her.\(^31\) Mary was

\(^{31}\) While Julian of Norwich is also interested in both motherhood and Mary and also uses these concerns as authorizing strategies, critics have most heavily emphasized the former in her text. See, e.g., Ritamary Bradley, "The Motherhood Theme in Julian of Norwich," *Fourteenth Century English Mystics Newsletter* 2, no. 4 (1976): 25–30; McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, chap. 2; Maud Burnett McInerney, "'In the Meydens Womb': Julian of
the paragon of motherhood in all its forms. What may be more surprising, however, is that Margery’s focus on Mary is unusual among women; Caroline Walker Bynum notes that “the humanity of Christ was a more prominent emphasis in women’s piety than was devotion to the Virgin.”

This may explain why so few critics have noticed the elements of *imitatio Mariae* in Margery’s text and why none has recognized the ways in which she strategically modifies that tradition in order to support her claim to spiritual authority through motherhood.

Near the beginning of the *Book*, Margery has a trio of visions that emphasize how closely she identifies with Mary and how tightly that identification is tied to maternal images. These visions are an early and important sign that Margery’s ultimate model is Mary rather than the various other female saints who have similar characteristics. The visions begin with Christ’s instruction to Margery to “thynke on my modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that thow hast” (32). Margery then sees herself as a kind of midwife at the births of Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus (32–33); in all three births, Margery is most closely associated with Mary, regardless of Mary’s changing role throughout. Margery is an active participant in these scenes, contrasting with the rather passive physical mothers, and she demonstrates a fair amount of maternal authority, taking charge of the young Mary and announcing that she will be the mother of Christ. Here, Margery becomes a spiritual mother to the ultimate spiritual mother.

Through most of the *Book*, Margery focuses on Mary as the divine example of physical motherhood transformed into spiritual mother-

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32. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 269. Gambero notes, however, that the human aspects of Mary were becoming more emphasized near the end of the Middle Ages; he suggests that the faithful imagined Mary “as a Mother, smiling as her Holy Child embraces her” and, during the Passion, as “a Mother who cannot bear the overwhelming sorrow that has befallen her” (Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages*, 255–56).

hood, seizing on the two devotional models clustered around that transformation: Mary as Mater Dolorosa, or grieving mother, and as Mediatrix, or intercessor. These models are connected because Mary’s suffering at Christ’s crucifixion established her as the emotional link between the human and the divine and, therefore, as a mother to and intercessor for humanity. These roles for Mary are developments particular to the later Middle Ages and were popular in various medieval texts, including lyrics, Dante’s Paradiso, and Chaucer’s “An ABC” and Canterbury Tales. Most medieval literary representations of Mary, however, mention these roles in the context of other characteristics and emphasize the paradox of her simultaneous power and humility. Dante typifies this view when he addresses Mary as “Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son, humble and exalted more than any creature.” Similarly, the prologues of both the Prioress and the Second Nun in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales at once appeal to Mary as a powerful intercessor and stress her humility. The Prioress prays for “help” in telling her tale, addressing the Virgin as “O blisful Queene” and mentioning her “magnificence” alongside her “humblesse” and “grete humylitee” (lines 473, 481, 474, 470, and 475). The Second Nun portrays Mary as one who helps not only those who request it but also “er that men thyn help biseche, / Thou goost biforn and art hir lyves leche” (lines 55–56); she is “Mayde and Mooder,” which makes her “humble, and heigh over every creature” (lines 36 and 39).

By downplaying certain aspects of Mary’s physical maternity—as well as her own—and highlighting instead the suffering that marked the end of Mary’s physical motherhood and the beginning of her spiritual motherhood and intercessory power, Margery takes advantage of the power while virtually ignoring its counterpart: humility. This is a distinct departure from other mystical texts, which habitually embraced

34. Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy: Paradiso, vol. 3, pt. 1, Text, trans. with commentary by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton University Press, 1975); and Geoffrey Chaucer, “An ABC” and Canterbury Tales, in The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), hereafter referred to parenthetically. Jaroslav Pelikan notes that these two aspects of Mary—as Mediatrix and as Mater Dolorosa—were the most important contributions of the later Middle Ages to Christian teachings about Mary; he observes “a close correlation between the subjectivity of the devotion to Mary as the Mater Dolorosa and the objectivity of the doctrine of Mary as the Mediatrix” (Pelikan, Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996], 125–26 and 136).

35. For more on the varied paradoxes mobilized in portrayals of the Virgin Mary in medieval literature, see Teresa P. Reed, Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

humility and revered Mary for her exemplary demonstration of that quality.37 There are some elements of humility and subordination in Margery’s text: she portrays herself as obedient to Christ and to the Church (all the while remarking on her many encounters with clerical figures who are less obedient than she). But her imitatio Mariae is a strategy for spiritual authority, and so she focuses on those elements of the Marian model that provided a link between Mary’s earthly maternal experience and her authority as supreme spiritual mother. Margery wants to duplicate that link. Her characteristic weeping thus emulates Mary’s suffering and facilitates her access to the associated intercessory power.

Some of Mary’s experiences with earthly maternity are more useful for Margery’s project than others. She ignores perhaps the most popular element of Mariolatry: Mary as the nursing mother of the holy infant.38 Unlike many female saints—and some monks39—Margery does not have visions of herself nursing the Christ child. Mary most fully participated in physical motherhood through nursing; her conception was immaculate, and it was believed that she did not experience labor pains. As a result, images of Mary as a nursing mother, Maria Lactans, became particularly important and symbolically charged. In the fourteenth century, such images had become symbols for female humility, a virtue that is not dear to Margery’s heart. In her popular study of the Virgin Mary, Marina Warner describes the contemporary attitude: “If woman was considered inferior because of her greater subjection to biology, then the Virgin, by accepting that female destiny, by bearing and suckling a child, revealed her model humility.”40 The image was more complex than Warner allows; Bynum contends that Mary’s breast was an empowering symbol and provided the basis for perceiving the female body “as powerful in its holy or miraculous exuding, whether of breast milk or of blood or of oil,” but such “extraordinary flowing” in female saints, Bynum acknowledges, “was predicated on extraordinary closure.”41 Margery’s lay existence deprives her of the ability to claim any “miraculous exuding,” and the image remains problematically physical, even—or perhaps especially—for the Virgin Mary.

37. Consider, for instance, Julian of Norwich’s insistence that she is important not as an individual visionary but as the vessel through which God provided a message for all of her fellow Christians.


39. Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 115.

40. Warner, Alone of All Her Sex, 202.

41. Bynum, Holy Feast, 274.
Margery does embrace the physicality of Mary’s experience as Christ’s mother but primarily through her suffering. The most physical and perhaps best-known element of Margery’s *imitatio Mariae* is her copious weeping, although the connection to Mary has gone largely unrecognized—perhaps because the weeping is so extreme that any precedent seems inadequate. Sarah Beckwith notes that “tears of compassion had long been considered a special sign of grace,” but they were a sign specifically associated with Mary. Tears were a prominent feature in the cult of *Mater Dolorosa*, which reached its height in the fourteenth century, and Eamon Duffy identifies the devotion to the sorrows of Mary as “the most distinctive manifestation of Marian piety in late medieval England.”

Many Marian lyrics described her sorrows; one late fourteenth-century poem speaks in Mary’s voice, bewailing “Wel may I mone and murning maken, / And wepen til myn eyne aken. / For wane of wele my wo is waken, / Was nevere wif so wo.” We might guess that Margery’s eyes ached from her repeated bouts of weeping as well; in their very excessive-ness, her tears are a testament to her Marian spirituality.

The embodiedness of Margery’s suffering, which scholars commonly claim as a facet of her *imitatio Christi*, strengthens her *imitatio Mariae*. Beckwith points out that Margery concentrates “on those parts of [Christ’s] life which emphasize embodiedness most completely,” his birth and death. Margery focuses most frequently and most intensely on Mary’s experience at these moments; her identification with Mary gives her access to these scenes. Karma Lochrie, in her influential reading of Margery’s associations with the flesh, points to the originary moment of Margery’s weeping as evidence that it is part of *imitatio*

42. Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 89. Other female spiritual figures, such as Marie d’Oignies, were also associated with excessive weeping, but their tears and suffering are not connected with Mary’s. For Marie’s case, see Jennifer N. Brown, *Three Women of Lie£: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d’Oignies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 93–95.


45. Alternatively, Jeffrey Cohen suggests that Margery’s cries represent “vocalizations [that] might be understood as a bodily response to the inadequacies of language, communicating on her behalf what words might or could not” (Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, Medieval Cultures 35 [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003], 162).

46. Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, 81. Beckwith does also suggest that this embodied strategy ultimately provides a way to move past the body: “By approximating herself to Christ, misrecognising herself in him, by living a life which is itself a mimesis and remembrance of the Passion, the female mystic may gain access to the Word” (Beckwith, “A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe,” in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers [New York: St. Martin’s, 1986], 54).
Christi: while visiting Mount Calvary, she weeps uncontrollably as her body seems to mimic Christ’s crucified body.\footnote{Lochrie, 
*Translations of the Flesh*, 169–70.} But Margery associates these experiences with Mary rather than Christ. In spite of the physical mimesis, Margery never fully identifies with Christ on Mount Calvary but instead likens her suffering to that of people who “for inordinat lofe and fleschly affeccyon yyf her frendys er partyn fro hem, thei wyl cryen and roryn and wringly her handys as yyf thei had no wytte ne non mende” (77). This view aligns her with the audience at the crucifixion rather than with Christ himself. Soon after, Margery names the actual figure with whom she identifies in these moments of suffering, explaining that “sche thowt sche saw owyr Lady in hir sowle, how sche mornyd and how sche wept hir sonys deth, and than was owyr Ladiis sorwe hir sorwe” (78). Thus Margery’s suffering is initiated by Christ’s Passion, but it is the suffering of “owyr Lady,” for which Margery has special empathy and that she takes as the object of her *imitatio Mariae*.

Mary was recognized as having had various sorrows, but the greatest was her pain at the Passion. This emphasis was the creation of later religious authors; it does not feature prominently in the biblical accounts. Margery’s Christ intends her tears as a manifestation of Mary’s grief, a visible human representation to inspire others. Late in the *Book*, he reveals this to Margery: “I geve the gret cryis and roryngys for to makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace that I putte in the into a tokyn that I wil that my modrys sorwe be knowyn by the that men and women myth have the mor compassyon of hir sorwe that sche suffyrd for me” (175). Those who observed Margery’s crying did not always comprehend this aim. Some who did recognize the connection rejected it, suggesting that Margery’s suffering was excessive and admonishing her that “owr Lady, Cristys owyn modyr, cryed not as sche dede” (159). In other words, Margery’s Marian suffering surpasses even Mary’s. Margery herself begins to feel that her suffering is too great and cries out, “Lord, I am not thi modir. Take awey this peyn fro me, for I may not beryn it” (159). Although Margery momentarily rejects the role of Christ’s mother, her rejection makes it clear that her suffering—and her *imitatio*—is of Mary.

Mary’s suffering for her crucified son links her physical motherhood with the much broader spiritual motherhood she achieves; with the death and resurrection of Christ, Mary assumes the position of mother to humanity. She becomes the “almighty and al merciable queene, / To whom that al this world fleeth for socour,” as Chaucer addresses her in the opening lines of “An ABC” (lines 1–2). Mary’s status as intercessor was tied to the actual roles of mothers as intercessors in medieval households. Because wives were often significantly younger than their hus-
bands, women could bridge the generations within their families and mediate between fathers and children. Herlihy explains, “Used to seeking the help and intercession of their natural mothers, medieval people seem to have sought comparable services from their spiritual mother in heaven.”

The crucial depiction of Margery’s role as a “natural mother” is brief, but she often acts as an intercessor for her spiritual children, pleading with Christ for their salvation or healing. She has one such encounter with a priest: “Be inqwyryng he cam into the place wher that sche was, and ful humbely and mekely he clepyd hir modyr, preying hir for charité to receyven hym as hir sone. Sche seyd that he was welcom to God and to hir as to hys owyn modyn” (100). As his spiritual mother, Margery is able to assure the priest that he is “welcom to God.” Like Mary, she can act as an intercessor to God and guarantee a man’s salvation.

In the only extended episode concerning one of Margery’s biological children, she acts as a spiritual mother toward her son. She intercedes with him on God’s behalf so that her son “schulde be the mor diligent and the mor besy to folwyn owr Lordys drawyng” (209). He becomes seriously ill, but her concern is for his salvation, even at the expense of his health. Others accuse her of actually causing her son’s bodily sickness to prompt him to repent, saying that “thorw hir prayer God had takyn venvawns on hir owyn childe” (208). She shows no greater or lesser concern for her biological son than for her many spiritual children, for whom she also weeps and intercedes. This episode, near the end of the book, demonstrates that Margery has moved beyond physical motherhood and sees herself primarily as a spiritual mother.

But Margery does not only intercede between men and God; she also intercedes within the holy family—this is where she begins to exceed Mary as a spiritual mother and intercessor and where her idiosyncratic path to spiritual authority takes an unusual turn. Christ recognizes the expansive nature of Margery’s spiritual motherhood and suggests that it benefits him, saying, “Thu art to me a very modir and to al the world for that gret charité that is in the” (95). Christ also credits Margery with interceding for him with his mother, a peculiar permutation of the usual practice of intercession. He explains, “And also, dowtyr, thu clepist my modyr for to comyn into thi sowle and takyn me in hir armys and leyn me to hir brestys and gevyn me sokyn” (198). Here we do see


49. Bridget of Sweden has a similar episode with one of her sons, Charles, but it is narrated by the Virgin Mary as she tells how she attended his judgment after death. There is no direct discussion of Bridget’s concern for Charles beforehand or of how her community perceived this, although, according to Mary, a devil does colorfully decry Bridget as a “cursed sow . . . who had a belly so expansive that so much water poured into her that her belly’s every space was filled with liquid for tears!” (Birgitta of Sweden, 187).
Mary nursing her son, but this nurturing takes place at Margery’s instigation and within her very “sowle.” Here Mary remains a physical mother while Margery’s mothering is spiritual. This substantiates Margery’s spiritual authority: if she can intercede between Christ and Mary, then her messages from Christ to other people are surely credible.

A MATERNAL AND SEXUAL CREATURE

While Margery’s intercessions are unusual, her combination of sexual and maternal imagery becomes patently unorthodox. She finally shifts from a selective *imitatio Mariae* to exceeding any available precedent. It is not enough, in other words, for Margery to do *imitatio* differently than other female mystics do; she must take it up another level to confirm her true specialness. She goes beyond identification with Mary and uses her *imitatio* as a springboard to her own inimitable intimacy with Christ. Margery returns to the physical and sexual aspects of her earthly life in order to transform her Marian spiritual motherhood into this insuperable spousal intimacy. Mary can be somewhat sexualized in this role through Song of Songs–type imagery, but her dominant sexual characteristic is her virginity, her experience of becoming a mother without engaging in sexual intercourse. In this final phase, Margery does not abandon her Marian model but instead radically alters it by suturing a new kind of intimacy onto it. She combines maternal and erotic elements, constructing a relationship with Christ that exceeds what anyone else—even Mary herself—could claim.50

The family roles played out in the spiritual relationships Margery has with God, Christ, and Mary are far from traditional. This, says Dinshaw, is “one big queer family”; it “shows up the earthly family for its limitations, especially for its lack of intimacy.”51 Yet Margery does experience a fairly deep intimacy with her husband and, at times, with her son, and that human intimacy becomes a critical factor in her unorthodoxy. Motherhood and sexual passion, which were (and still are) popular religious metaphors, have a physical basis in Margery’s earthly life: just as she founded her spiritual motherhood on her physical motherhood, she founds her spiritual sexuality on its earthly equivalent.52 Most

50. The vow of chastity Margery takes is an important part of this process, as are her various mentions of how she is revolted by the prospect of sex with her husband or other men. Her recurring fear of rape as she travels signals her desire to preserve the transition she has made while also indicating that this is not completely under her control.


52. Margery’s literalism might also be read in the context of the particular kind of spiritual life she develops, rejecting enclosure in favor of wandering the world. Beckwith points out that “Margery’s book is a devotional work which does not exclude the material
female mystics renounced the earthly roles of wife and mother; rather than simply ignoring or denouncing those parts of her identity, however, Margery uses them to make her relationship with Christ distinctively intimate. She experiences spiritual sexuality through physical interactions and combines it with maternal imagery, producing unique and unsettling configurations of imagery and characters.

Critics have consistently seen Margery’s sexual imagery as an unsuccessful attempt at affective piety, which frequently utilized metaphors of marriage, love, or desire. In some texts—including the Book—this metaphorical language becomes surprisingly literal. Margery’s use of the imagery of desire reworks those traditions in several important ways: by reforming its nature, by depicting its real-life context, and by combining it with other elements. This pattern is so pervasive in the text that it cannot be accidental or imposed. I see it as evidence of Margery’s role in shaping her own story; even if the scribe is selecting, rephrasing, or restructuring her dictation, this combination of the maternal and sexual must come from the material of her life as she presented it to him. Certainly the representation of Margery is constructed, but this aspect of the constructed representation, I would argue, bears the stamp of Margery herself.

Numerous female religious figures, including Angela of Foligno, Adelheid Langmann, and Catherine of Siena, envisioned themselves marrying Christ or God. Others used images of nursing the Christ child or of Christ as lover. Such imagery was most often demonstrably metaphorical, as examples from Angela of Foligno and Hadewijch will demonstrate. Margery may not have known these thirteenth-century female mystics, but they are typical examples of affective piety and contribute to the context in which scholars have read Margery’s Book. Hadewijch, for instance, says that Christ “came in the form and clothing of a Man... took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him” but also interpolates the point that “he gave himself to me in the shape of the

context of its piety... Margery was a religious woman who refused the space traditionally allotted to religious women—the sanctuary (or imprisonment) provided by the anchoress’s cell or the nunnery. Her lack of circumspection, her insistence on living in the world, enables the social dimension which makes her mysticism distinctive” (Beckwith, “A Very Material Mysticism,” 37). See also Beckwith, Christ’s Body, chap. 4.

53. See n. 3 above.

54. Elsewhere I have argued that Margery’s deployment of widowhood and wifehood represents a similar manipulation of female roles and similarly signals her active role in shaping the Book. See Tara Williams, “‘As thu wer a wedow’: Margery Kempe’s Wifehood and Widowhood,” Exemplaria 21 (2009): 345–62.

Sacrament, in its outward form,” thus reminding us that this is a vision expressed in figurative terms. Angela of Foligno also combines the imagery of Christ as lover with an explicitly metaphorical context: she “kissed Christ’s breast . . . then she kissed his mouth. . . . Afterward, she placed her cheek on Christ’s own, and he, in turn, placed his hand on her other cheek, pressing her closely to him.” This intimate interaction, however, occurs while Angela is having a vision of herself with Christ in a sepulchre, and throughout he “lay[s] dead, with his eyes closed.”

The language describing such encounters sometimes borders on the orgasmic. Angela depicts another encounter in which she was “filled with love and inexpressible contentment which, satisfactory as it was, nonetheless generated in her a hunger so unspeakably great that all her members dislocated” (183). However, the metaphorical status of the description is again carefully preserved. Angela prefacing her description by specifying twice that she saw “with the eyes of her soul” and explains that these feelings were inspired by a vision of love as a sickle; she reiterates that “this should not be understood to mean that it could be compared to anything spatial or measurable” and the sickle “was not something that could be compared to anything spatial or material because it was a reality perceptible only to her mind through the ineffable workings of divine grace” (182–83). While Margery does sometimes make use of metaphors, as when she sees Mary nursing Christ in her “sowle,” the metaphorical context for the sexual imagery often falls away and is replaced by the context of her earthly life as a wife and mother. Margery’s sexual imagery is not simply an attempt at affective piety that veers into the literal; she is deploying sexual imagery in a different context and to a different end. For Angela, Hadewijch, and other female mystics, desire is figurative, and Christ is a divine lover; for Margery Kempe, desire is homely and familiar, and Christ is a daily partner with whom she shares an exclusive intimacy.

It is also worth noting that those female religious figures who were closest to Margery’s experience and of whom she certainly knew—Bridget of Sweden and Julian of Norwich—were muted in their descriptions of spiritual intimacy. Most studies that compare Margery and Bridget focus on their similarities as female spiritual figures who had experienced wifehood and motherhood rather than on the very different ways in which they use and depict those experiences. Although Bridget is consistently

described as the “bride” of Christ in her *Revelations*, this functions as an honorific even more than as a metaphor. Rather than engaging in intimate conversations with Christ, Bridget records Christ’s and Mary’s virtual monologues or responses to organized “interrogations” from her visions. While Margery gains special authority from her homely intimacy with Christ, Bridget relies on the more established—and more masculine—model of prophetic authority. Julian avoids sexualized imagery, focusing on herself as one of many “evenchristen” (fellow Christians), all of whom can be as close to Christ as a child to a parent, and authorizing herself primarily as a representative who received visions intended for that wider audience.

Within this context, Margery’s sexual imagery is unusually concrete and familiar: less divine ravishing than daily affection. Other female mystics tended to use orgasmic language and rapturous imagery; Margery was not attempting to render the nature of an ineffable and transcendent experience but rather to certify her intimacy with Christ. He invites her to “kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt” (95); in addition, he must “nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the” (94). This is not sexualized holy rapture; it is a domestic and “homly” sexual and spousal relationship. For Margery, erotic descriptions are not as much about her soul being ravished or lifted up as about her closeness to Christ and the ways in which that intimacy is beyond what others can approach; she is as close to him as if she were his real and only wife or lover—even closer because she is also his daughter and mother. Margery equates her experiences with those described in other devotional texts: “Sche herd nevyr boke, neyther Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amorys*, ne *Incendium Amoris*, ne non other that evyr sche herd redyn that spak so hyly of love of God but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle” (51). But she also goes further. Christ assures Margery that she is “a synguler lover, and therfor thu schalt have a synguler love in hevyn” (62).

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61. This is a dominant theme in the *Book* and is often observed by other figures in the text; one clerk affirms, “he had nevyr herd of non sweche in this worlde leyving for to be so homly wyth God be lofe and homly dalawonce as sche was” (85).
Margery also depicts herself in bed with Christ and his mother. This is not a configuration that is conventional or, indeed, anything less than startling. Christ reflects, “Dowtyr, I thank the for alle the tymys that thu hast herberwyd me and my blissyd modyr in thi bed.” For this act “and for alle other good thowtys and good dedys that thu hast thowt in my name and wrozt for my lofe thu schalt have wyth me and wyth my modyr . . . al maner joye and blysse lestynyng wythoutyn ende” (201). Not only has this strange bedroom scene occurred, it has occurred many times and forms part of the basis for Margery’s heavenly reward. This sexually suggestive scene cements her salvation but noticeably lacks the explicit metaphoricity insisted on by other female visionaries. The bed, as far as we can tell, is indeed a bed. Even if we accept the premise that this spiritual family is not constrained by the incest taboos that regulate behavior in human families, this new trinity of bedroom partners is unusual. It creates an intimacy with Christ and the holy family that is hard to top and an authority for Margery as a spiritual speaker that is hard to ignore.

Margery’s religious sexual imagery is also bound up with her active earthly sex life (or, later, her recollections of it—even after her marriage becomes chaste, her sexual past provides the context for her relationship with Christ). While other female mystics may concretize their experiences with Christ, those can never be as literal as Margery’s because she has the physical experience that they mostly lack. She is not imagining a physical and erotic relationship with Christ based on what she has heard or read; she is imagining it on the basis of the actual relationship she had with her husband. So when she kisses Christ’s feet, head, or mouth, it is not as part of an idealized if literal spousal relationship that she has never had—it is a kind of replication, albeit a heightened and improved one, of a relationship she has already experienced. Most other female mystics envision Christ as their lover or husband; Margery envisions him as her alternative or replacement lover or husband.62 Parallel to the ways in which her physical motherhood made her claim to spiritual motherhood more credible (because she indisputably had the ground of the metaphor), her experience with earthly sexuality makes her claim to spiritual eroticism stronger and more meaningful. And it adds to the authority that Margery can claim.

62. These problematic characteristics of Margery and her text may be partly responsible for Sarah Rees Jones’s provocative contention that the text was a fiction “written by men, for men, and about men” (Jones, “A Peler of Holy Church”: Margery Kempe and the Bishops,” in Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchinson, Carol Meale, and Lesley Johnson [Turnhout: Brepols, 2000], 391). Jones argues for locating the text not in the tradition of female autobiography but instead “within the general tradition of clerical chastisement through the medium of lives of holy women” (382).
Whereas Julian’s parent/child imagery downplays her individual presence and significance within the text, Margery’s maternal imagery allows her some measure of power over the most impressive male figures of all time: God and Christ. As David Aers points out, only as a mother could a woman exercise power over a man at any age. Throughout the *Book*, however, Margery has reminded us that sexuality and motherhood are linked. Not only does she, as the visionary, use sexual metaphors to talk about God but—in a departure from devotional tradition—the holy family also uses sexual metaphors to talk about her. Margery’s treatment of the holy family has attracted attention but has not been connected to her use of sexual imagery. Ralph Hanna sees Margery as seeking “a denatured family, one thoroughly spiritualized, in keeping with her efforts to enact a holy life” and as participating in a “textually based surrogate household, the Holy Family,” derived from the *Meditaciones vitae Christi*. Beckwith contends that, rather than simply replacing the biological family, spiritual relationships that were figured as familial transformed and transcended their earthly models. Aers argues specifically that Margery is struggling against traditional family roles. But, as we have seen, something larger is at work in her mingling of the sexual with the familial and spiritual: a strategy for authority.

Margery derives authority from her over-the-top intimacy with the holy family. In her relationship with God, she occupies many roles simultaneously. This becomes apparent in a surprising context: when she is marrying him. Although she is reluctant to accept this sign of divine favor, Christ convinces her to go through with it and excuses her cold feet to God. God speaks his vows, including the familiar “for richar, for powerar,” but goes on to promise, “For, dowtyr, ther was neyvr childe so buxom to the modyr as I schal be to the bothe in wel and in wo, to help the and com-fort the.” The vows describe God as her “childe” immediately after he takes her as “my weddyd wyfe” (92). The marriage ceremony traditionally reinforces a wife’s duty to obey and submit to her husband, but this one attributes some power to Margery as a mother to God.

67. While references to mystics as mothers of Christ, and to God or Christ as mother, occurred elsewhere—most famously in Julian’s *Shewings*—Margery’s role as mother of God is unusual. On the distinction between God as mother and Christ as mother, see Ricki Jean Cohn, “God and Motherhood in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Studia Mystica* 9 (1986): 26–35.
Margery is also figured as Christ’s mother, a label that follows logically from her extended *imitatio Mariae* but that quickly leads into other roles. Christ identifies himself as “thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde” (94–95). Elsewhere he elaborates, “Thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse” (44). The combination of these roles would be shocking and impossible in a biological family but, according to Christ, it simply agrees with scripture, “wytnessyng the gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dysciples, ‘He that doth the wyl of my Fadyr in hevyn he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me’” (44). Although one hesitates to accuse Christ of misinterpreting scripture, and although incestuous representations of the Holy Family were not uncommon, the offered precedent is an inadequate basis for his words to Margery. The key role of “wyfe” and “spowse” is absent from the gospel version. As a result, it lacks the sexuality that makes the other so unusual; the scriptural version combines different family roles but does not combine the familial with the erotic. Moreover, the role of brother, which draws on fluid ideas about gender roles that were more common, is eliminated in Christ’s words to Margery. Her human roles as mother and wife—the same roles the Virgin Mary had—distinguish Margery from most female religious figures and provide a natural foundation for her claims to the identities of spiritual mother and lover, also like Mary. While other women seeking spiritual lives renounced such earthly roles, Margery leverages them to construct a closer parallel between herself and Mary and then stretches—even violates—that parallel to create a still closer intimacy with Christ as her son and lover.

The argument I have outlined might appear, however, to be undermined by one word that Margery habitually uses: *creatur*. The use of this term, which emphasizes that human beings were created by God, might be interpreted as a strategy of modesty that also de-emphasizes gender. Such a reading would place Margery in a less feminine and thus less sexually charged position. But her use of *creatur* actually has the opposite effect, since every direct address to Margery identifies her as a woman. Christ, for instance, starts most of his speeches with “Dowtyr,” reminding the reader repeatedly of her womanhood (especially in Christ’s eyes). Margery is frequently asked about her marital status, her absent husband, and the identity of her father. The mayor of Leicester asks her “of what cuntre´ sche was and whos dowtyr sche was” but overwrites her answer by identifying her as a “fals strumpet” (113–14). Mar-

68. Bynum argues that gender and gendered characteristics are relatively fluid for medieval writers (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 162).
gery’s femaleness, obscured under creatur, reemerges continually in the identities others inscribe upon her. The oscillation between the two (creature vs. woman/daughter/mother/wife, even strumpet) underscores rather than underplays Margery’s gender.

Furthermore, Margery does not consistently refer to herself as creatur throughout the Book. At two significant junctures already discussed, creatur is replaced by words that define Margery in relation to her husband and son. Chapter 76 relates how her husband was seriously injured and so “the sayd creatur, hys wife, was sent for,” and for the rest of the chapter, the word creatur is not used (172). Similarly, in the first and second chapters of the second book—when Margery is interacting with her grown son—the creatur becomes “the modyr” or “hys modyr” (207–10). She is a creatur again only after her son and husband have died (211). In part, these deviations are attributable to the fact that readers are seeing Margery through the eyes of others (beyond even the scribe): the people of Lynn, in the first case, and her son and daughter-in-law, in the second. Nonetheless, these two moments illustrate the ways in which Margery is at odds with the roles of wife and mother as they are traditionally imagined: her community criticizes her for failing to care for her husband and for causing her son’s illness. These moments also illuminate Margery’s desire to transform those roles (and, possibly, her reluctance to label herself with them). In this context, we can see creatur as an empowering identity; it is constantly reinscribed as female, but the new ways in which Margery imagines what it means to be a woman, wife, and mother contribute to her power and authority rather than compromising them. She is able to shed the expectations of these roles and return to being a female creatur.

Despite its careful tailoring to Margery’s particular experience, the Book does have implications for our understanding of gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages. Margery suggests that physical motherhood is valuable not only socially but also spiritually and that spiritual value is not solely dependent upon chastity or virginity but is accessible through other means. To that extent, she is recuperating the fleshly aspects of femininity. In medieval texts, sex is often portrayed as earthly and negative, whereas spiritual devotion is metaphorical and positive, but Margery refuses to abide by that distinction. Can we really tell the difference between her intimacy with her husband and her intimacy with

69. Previous studies have paid little attention to this, but Staley does note that Margery slips from third to first person pronouns during her visit with her husband to the Bishop of Lincoln (Staley, Dissenting Fictions, 79).

70. When Margery negotiates with her husband over chastity, she is referred to as “hys wyfe” (37), but this is a more isolated example, and she is the creatur for the rest of that chapter.
Christ, except that she prefers the latter? Margery’s discussions of earthly sex—and how she would rather eat muck or let her husband be beheaded than engage in it—certainly put it in a negative light, but these descriptions might be read as an attempt to enforce a difference between earthly and spiritual intimacy that otherwise barely seems to exist in the *Book*. 