the savior of her desire: 
margery kempe's passionate gaze 

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Feminist criticism of The Book of Margery Kempe continually vacillates between seeing the narrative as startlingly unique and labeling it as clearly unoriginal, grappling with the central tension of how to handle the historical singularity of Kempe's use of standardized cultural narratives. The desire to read Kempe's text as representative of the struggle against patriarchal oppression leads many of the most innovative and interesting feminist works, although often positive about Kempe's cultural maneuvers, to regard her enterprise as ultimately flawed, the result of an overdetermined interaction of oppressive patriarchal structures and a subjugated female participant. But the mimetic masochism and submission to

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1 See Sarah Beckwith, Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings (New York: Routledge, 1993), for a discussion of the range of responses to Kempe's use of crucifixion piety (especially 110).

patriarchal recuperation of female desire that many critics read in Kempe’s identificatory relation to the Passion does little to explain the appeal of such a narrative for a woman like Kempe. As one who undertakes the “dangers and difficulties of female authorship” from outside the protection of religious confinement, Kempe hardly seems a candidate for self-abasement or self-abnegation. Moreover, the tendency to erase the idiosyncrasies of Kempe’s text in order to extract a generalizable cultural or psychological schema overlooks the opportunities provided by her Book for exploring the ways in which an actual historical consumer successfully negotiates an identity out of traditional cultural narratives. In her struggle to define


6 Beckwith, ibid., 37.


6 For further discussion of the role of imagination in Kempe’s text, see David Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430 (London: Routledge, 1988), especially 107-8. Beckwith, likewise, takes up this question in Christ’s Body, 78-111, but still insists on Margery’s masochistic identification with Christ.

7 A number of critics have described this tension created by the social expectation of late medieval society. See in particular Ehnsted Bremner, "Margery Kempe and the Critics: Disempowerment and Deconstruction," in Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays, 119. See also the work of Aers, Harding, and Lochrie, and Jane Schlenburg’s study of similar dilemmas experienced by early medieval women, Forbears of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
plots" that govern her "life story." It is here that she is saint, mother, and wife without conflict, for Kempe’s Christ is the savior of her desire.

In looking for a theoretical approach that addresses the individual’s imaginative use of cultural dramas, I have found feminist film theory’s exploration of the hypothetical spectator’s participation in cinematic narratives particularly useful. Its sophisticated treatment of spectators’ desires provides a useful starting point for examining the dynamics of active visualization that are encouraged in neo-Franciscan devotional texts. Moreover, the path of its development centers on the unanswered problematic of how female spectators extract pleasure from visual narratives that seem to reinforce their oppression with respect to economies of the gaze.

Kempe’s descriptions of her own process of imaginative meditation provide a unique opportunity to explore the subtle dynamics of how an actual historical consumer interacts with a popular cultural drama. As Jacques Lacan comments in “The Mirror Stage,” though a general outline can be mapped for imaginary processes of identity formation, the "fictional direction" of this drama is situated before social determination and therefore will “always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, . . . will only rejoin the coming-into-being (le devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as / his discordance with his own reality.” Kempe’s Book, as a text that maps the "fictional direction" of Kempe’s identity negotiations, bridges the gap between the hypothetical models put forward by psychoanalytic film theorists and the studies of actual spectators by cultural materialists. The autobiographical nature of The Book of Margery Kempe, with its detailed description of both psychological and material contexts, allows for an examination of the female spectator’s

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8 See Partner, “And Most of All for Inordinate Love,” 255, where she outlines these two plots. Her essay emphasizes the “dark plot of denied desires” (255) and finds the general thrust of Kempe’s Book to be “desire seeking its satisfaction” (259).

9 The film-like nature of mystical visions and devotional meditation has been noted by number of critics. See for example, Despere (Ghosts of Light), Petrie (The Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature), and particularly the work of Sarah Stanbury, “The Virgin’s Gaze: Spectacle and Transgression in Middle English Lyrics of the Passion,” PMLA 106 (1991): 1083-93, and “Feminist Film Theory Seeing Chretien’s Enide,” Literature and Psychology 36 (1990): 47-66.


11 This is my term for the ways in which individuals personalize the general cultural “mythologies” of their historical moment. See the concluding chapter of my dissertation, “Passionate Imaginings: The Mystical Remythologies of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1998, for further discussion of this term.

12 This term is borrowed from Despere, Gossips of Light, 62.

of the gaze in traditional Hollywood narrative neatly outlines the Freudian pleasures (and fears) that the classical film experience provides for male viewers. According to this formula, man is the bearer of the look while woman is the erotic object of his gaze. The pleasure of this gaze comes from "subjecting [people as objects] to a controlling and curious" look.\textsuperscript{14} For the spectator, voyeuristic pleasure operates on two levels, both of which posit the female body as object of desire: 1) the erotic pleasure of looking at "the female form displayed for his enjoyment" and 2) the fascination with "the image of her like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman" within the bounds of the drama.\textsuperscript{15}

The image of the woman, however, reminds the male viewer of the fear of castration he originally experienced upon noting sexual difference. In the classical cinematic narrative, the "threat of castration" created by the female body is countered by the male gaze in two ways. The first way is through the voyeuristic pleasure of "de-mystifying [the woman's] mystery," after which the woman is subjected to punishment for her guilt or redeemed through masculine power. That is, the hero either inflicts punishment or provides salvation from masculine punishment. The second method is achieved by transforming the female figure into a fetish object, either by emphasizing the physical beauty of the body or "rendering it phallic-like."\textsuperscript{16} Fetishizing the female body provides a "complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation)."\textsuperscript{17}

Whether the threat of Woman for the male (heterosexual) viewer signifies the threat of castration, sexuality outside male control, or an autonomous Other, the male gaze seeks to control that body by reinscribing the power of the group in possession of the phallus (men) over the group that signifies its lack (women). Hollywood classical cinema—typically written and directed by men—has overwhelmingly posited a male spectator and has, therefore, allowed little room for the expression of visual pleasures for women.

\textsuperscript{14} Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 59.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{16} Ann Kaplan, Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (New York: Methuen, 1983), 31.
\textsuperscript{17} Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 64.

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Theoretically, however, the pleasure of the gaze is available to any person able to look at and find another body pleasurable. Margery's envisioning of Christ's Passion allows for an examination of this theoretical possibility because it presents a dramatic narrative as viewed from a particular woman's perspective.\textsuperscript{18} The Passion allows Margery to return to the "Holy Family Romance."\textsuperscript{19} It is this primal scene that allows Margery to investigate the mystery of Christ's body repeatedly: "Swech gostly syghtys hadde sche euery Palme Sunday & euery Good Fryday, & in many oper wise bope many 3erys to-gedyer" (1.79, 190).\textsuperscript{20} Of all Margery's visions, these repeated "viewings" of the Passion most closely resemble the cinematic experience of the female spectator. The mythic, and yet realistic, nature of both film and vision allow the female spectator to situate herself within "a symbolic order" that shapes her historical reality.\textsuperscript{21} For Margery, the narrative unity and the presence of Mary as her role model and Christ as the object of desire in the Passion story create a medium for her to establish a visual relationship to Christ's body that solves her conflicts within the Symbolic: in her imaginings she can be a pious, chaste woman who actively desires a male body. The unusual storylining of the Passion provides the female gaze with a male "hero" who also functions as an object of the desiring gaze. By becoming the object of the gaze, Christ also becomes the object of desire—a role traditionally assigned to women.

Christ, in Kempe's Book, typically appears as the masculine object of Margery's affectionate gaze. Margery first envisions Christ "in lyknesse of a man" (1.1, 8); she would cry, roar and weep at the sight of

\textsuperscript{18} Following Staley's lead, I have chosen to preserve references to "Margery" in the sections where the experiences and actions seem to belong to the character described in Kempe's Book.

\textsuperscript{19} This term is Beckwith's, but Margery's replacement of her own family with the Holy Family is noted by a variety of critics. See especially Partner's essay "And Most of All for Inordinate Love."

\textsuperscript{20} The primal scene for Margery centers on the mother-son relationship (see Aarts, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, 104), which allows for female power and an exploration of an erotic male/female relationship: "And also, dowtry, lu clepest my Modyr for to coomyn in-to bi sowle & takyn me in bryr armys & layn me to hir brestys & 3eumyn me soxyn" (1.86, 210).

\textsuperscript{21} Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 57.
children in their mothers’ arms only “3yf sche myth wetyn þat þei wer ony men children” (1.35, 86); and she transfers her erotic desires for Christ’s body to the “semly” men she sees in the streets of Rome. In fact, Margery’s insistence on Christ’s sexual difference suggests her preoccupation with the female/male dichotomy that leads the soul to union, not identification, with Christ. Christ tells her,

“Whan þow stodyst to plese me, þan art þu a very dowtyr; whan þu wepyst & mornyst for my peyn & for my Passyon, þan art þow a very modyre to haue compassyon of hyr chylde; whan þow wepyst for oper menny synnes and for aduersytys, þan art þow a very syuster; and, whan thow sorwyst for þow art so long fro þe blysse of Heuyyn, þan art þu a very spowse & a wyfe, for it longhth þe wyfe to be wyth hir husband & no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens.” 1.14, 31

If Christ is to be lover and husband, brother, son and father, he must be male/other, not female/self.

In her visualizations of the Passion, Margery likewise retains gender delineations that point to Christ as object of desire. His body is displayed for visual consumption; it is subject to the controlling and curious look of the crowd, his disciples, and especially his own mother. Margery identifies herself primarily with the Virgin Mary, sharing her particular perspective on the event:

& than hyr thowt owr Lady wept wondir sor. And þerfor þe sayd creatur must nedys wepyn & creyn whan sche sey swych gostly sytys in hir sowle as freschly & as verily as 3yf it had ben don in, dede in hir bodily sght, and hir thowt þat owr Lady & sche wer al-wey to-gedyr to se owr Lordys paynys. 1.79, 190

Sharing the Virgin’s gaze allows Margery to actively participate in this established narrative from a privileged position. By sharing the Virgin’s gaze and tears, Margery shares the Virgin’s rights to Christ’s person.

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When þe sayd creatur beheld þis glorios syght in hir sowle & saw how he blisyd hys Modyr & hys Modyr hym, . . . þan þe sayd creatur thowt sche toke owr Lord Ihesu Crist be þe clothys & fel down at hys feet, preyng hym to blisyn hir. 1.79, 188–89

Because this is Margery’s own imaginative reconstruction of the Passion, she moves beyond the limited pleasure of the cinematic experience of visual identification to actual mimicry of the leading lady. Margery imitates the very actions and words of the Mother to her Son. This doubling of Mary by Margery further establishes the Virgin as Margery’s mirror image. Compare these laments, the first Mary’s, then Margery’s:

“A, der Sone, 3yf þu wilt al-gatys dey, late me deye befor þe & late me neyur suffyr þis day of sorwe, for I may neyur beryn þis sorwe þat I xal han for þi deth.” 1.79, 187

“A, Lord, wher schal I become? I had wel leuar þat þu woldist sle me þan latyn me abydyyn in þe worlde wyth-owtyn þe, for wyth-owtyn þe I may not abydyyn here, Lord.” 1.79, 189

This doubling occurs again with Mary’s and Margery’s responses to the Jews who come to torment Jesus.

“Alas, 3e cruel Iewys, why far þe so wyth my sweete Sone & dede he 30w neyur non harm? 3e fille myn hert ful ful of sorwe.” 1.80, 192

“3e cursyd Iewys, why sile þe my Lord Ihesu Crist? Sile me rãprar & late hym gon.” 1.80, 192

Margery outdoes Mary by offering her life in exchange for Christ’s. As a reward for his mother’s suffering and Margery’s intercessions, Christ offers to return to comfort them both after his death:

“Be stille, dowtryr, & rest wyth my Modyr her & comfort þe in hir, for sche þat is myn owyn Modyr must suffyr þis sorwe. But I xal come a-geyn, dowtryr, to my Modyr & comfortyn hir & þe bothyn & turnyn al 30wr sorwe in-to joye.” 1.79, 189

In this dual promise to both, Christ himself validates Margery’s identification with his mother and reminds her that his mother is to be her role model in sorrow and in joy. If Mary must endure his Passion and patiently await his Resurrection, then Margery must do so as well, knowing from her neoFranciscan readings how devoted he
is to his mother. Margery can find comfort in his similar devotion to her.

Through her identification with the Virgin Mary, Margery can also fulfill her desire for physical intimacy with Christ, at least voyeuristically: "Than owr Lord toke up his Modyr in his armsys & kissyd him ful sweetly" (1.79, 187-88); and again "Pan he toke vp his blissyd Modyr & kissyd him ful sweetly" (1.81, 196). The Virgin, as the object of Christ's desire, is the figure that Margery aspires to become. Through her imitation of Mary, Margery can secure her position as "the object of her object of desire" without directly altering the narrative of the Passion and without exposing the carnality of her erotic attachment to his manhood. The Virgin's purity and her rights as a mother to gaze upon and fondle her son help camouflage Margery's active and desiring female look.24

While Margery's identificatory involvement centers on imitating the Virgin Mary, and the other women who possess a similar gaze, her direct visual pleasure arises from gazing upon the sensual spectacle of Christ's naked form. The presentation of his body as spectacle codes Christ as the erotic object of Margery's active, desiring gaze. As "bearer of the look" in her Passionate imaginings, Margery obtains the two visual pleasures typically aligned with the male gaze: 1) the pleasure of looking at the human form presented for her enjoyment, and 2) identification with the privileged character who is able to gain control and possession of the desired object. Nonetheless the maleness of Christ's eroticized body functions as a threat to Margery on two accounts: one specific to the female gaze, the second specific to her Christian beliefs. First, in choosing to identify herself with Mary as the object of Christ's desire, she instills her object of desire with male subjectivity, which traditionally has subjugated women and denied active female desire. Second, the masculine aspect of God in Margery's conception of the Trinity acts as an authority and judge who appraises sexuality negatively and uses sexual temptation as a punishment. Therefore, at the same time that Christ's masculine body provides visual pleasure, it is a reminder of the religious and social taboo against visual pleasure for women.

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24 For discussions of the Virgin's eroticized gaze, see Stanbury, "The Virgin's Gaze," and Aers, Community, Gender.

When Margery first envisions Christ, he comes to her "in lykenesse of a man, most semly, most bewayuows, & most amayble þat eyr myght be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpil sylke, sytynge up-on hir beddyz syde" (1.1, 8). Margery insists on his body being "in the lykenesse of a man" and aligns her sight with that of "mannys eye" to appreciate the pleasing spectacle that Christ's body provides. Even his departure is presented as a spectacle for her enjoyment: "he stey up in-to þe eyr, no ryght hastiyl & qwykly, but fayr & esly þat sche myght wel be holdeyn hym" (ibid.).

Margery so actively defines Christ's body as erotic object that her early visions require no less than that Christ be subject to her desires.

Sche thowth þat sche louyd God mor þan he hir. Sche was smet wyth þe deddy wounde of veynglory & felt it not, for sche desyrd many tymes þat þe Crucifix xuld losyn hys handys fro þe crosse & halsyn hir in tokyn of lote. Ower mercyful Lord Crist Ihesu, seyn þis creaturyz presumpcyon, sent hir, as is wriete befor, iij 3er of greet temptacyon. 1.4, 13-14

This gaze is one of "presumpcyon" because it assumes that her Lord is merely an object subject to her whimsical desire for a token of his love. In presuming that she loves God more than he loves her and making Christ subject to her desires, she inverts the power structure of God and humanity, and, by symbolic connection, man and woman. For although Christ embodies many of the "feminine" attributes of God (as the non-aggressive, nurturing nurse at the bedside and the beautiful, graceful body upon which she gazes as it rises toward the heavens), he is also connected to the masculine authority of the Godhead of which Margery is fearful.

When Margery attempts to separate Jesus's gentle mercy from the Father's patriarchal prerogative to judge and damn souls, she is graphically reminded of the power of those who possess the phallus. She is punished by being shown the "horybl syghtys & abhominabl" of men's genitals, both priest and lay, Christian and heathen. In this vision, Margery is forced to acknowledge the threat of dominance, particularly in the form of rape, that the male body poses for her: "þe Deuyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle & sche must be comowen to hem alle ... & sche must nedys don hys byddyng, & ȝet wolde sche not a don it for alle þis
worlde" (1.59, 145). But the horror of the chastisement arises not from a dislike of sexuality itself, for prior to her conversion, she and her husband had “gret deflectedon pat bei haddy eybrym of hem in vsynyng of opher” (1.3, 12). And even in her Satanic visions she finds the images arousing: “But set hir thowt pat it xulde be don, & hir thowt pat þes horrybyl syghtys & cursyd mendys wer defected by hir a-geyn her wille” (1.59, 145). Her rejection of these sights stems from the conflict this sexuality has for her identity as a holy woman and from her fear of the punishment that her active female sexuality entails.

Even though Margery knows the cultural cost of her active love of Christ, it is clear that she would rather avoid the cup of violent martyrdom and preserve her autonomous sexuality:

Sche ymagynd in hir-self what deth sche myght deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr þowt sche wold a be slayn for Godys lofe, but deth for þe poynt of deth, & berfor sche ymagynd hir-self þe most soft deth, as hir thowt, for deth of inpacyens. 1.14, 29–30

Margery, by associating her love of Christ with martyrdom, recalls the violent martyrdoms of female saints at the hands of masculine figures of power. The women of these tales incur the wrath of male authority figures by refusing to submit to society’s patriarchal hierarchy. A virgin rejects the marriage proposal of her persecutor or of the suitor favored by her father, choosing instead to take up Christ as her object of desire. 25 Margery’s audacious choice of God as her suitor similarly requires that she be threatened with rape, as well as physical violence and death.

Rape is the most objectionable of these possibilities, for it would mean both a loss of control of her sexuality and her self-constructed identity as the chaste lover of God. Margery, like a number of women saints, fears even physical contact with the male body and becomes obsessed with the fear of rape on her last pilgrimage.

Per cam preistyts to hir, per sche was at oste, of pat cuntre. Pei clepyd hir Englisht sterbe & spokyn many lewyd wordys vn-to hir, schewyng vn-clenly cher & cuntenawns, proberyng to ledyn hir, a-boowlën yf sche wolde. Sche had merch þede for hir ...

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chastite & was in gret heuynes, Pan went sche to þe good wife of þe hows, preying hir to han sum of hir maydens þat mythlyn wyth hir þat nyght. Pe good wife assyngyd twyn mydenys, þe whych weryn wyth hir al þat nyght, þet dryst sche not sleypyn for dreed of defilyng. 2.6, 236–37

Protecting her chastity becomes protecting herself from unwanted male-initiated sexuality.

Her fear of male contact is not necessarily fear of sexuality but a fear of losing her ability to live a life of her own choosing. As Wendy Harding explains, “on a number of occasions narrated in her book, we find men attempting to discipline Margery’s body . . . in order to assert masculine power and remind her of her secondary status.” 26 Similarly, the Devil’s “dailing” with her is abominable not because it is sexual, for he dailles with her “liche as owr Lord dalid to hir be-form-tyme” (1.59, 145); but his sexual tableau is not one of her choosing. The “manhod of owr Lord,” Margery’s chosen object of desire, is replaced with the “cursyd thowtes” of “mennys membrys” forced upon her by the Devil—despite “anything þat sche cowde do” (ibid.). Like the “semly” Steward of Leicester who attempts to sexually molest her (1.47, 112–13), the Devil demands that she be a sexually passive victim. This sexual domination is figured more generally as an issue of power in the social control men have over Margery’s mobility, spiritual practices, and self-definition. 27 As a woman, she is unable to defend herself in public from such attacks, for “only men can counter the authority of men on her behalf.” 28

Unless Margery wishes “to forsake this disturbing form of life to return to the pinnfold of an unwelcome domesticity under husbands’ rule” and “risk the collapse of her painfully evolved identity into the appalling psychic chaos she experienced after her first childbirth,” 29


27 See Bremner, “Margery Kempe and the Critics,” 122–123, for a discussion of how this struggle for personal autonomy plays out in her conflicts with the men of her community. See also Aers, Community, Gender, where, citing the Mayor of Leicester’s accusations that Margery is a “fals strumpet, a fals lollor, & a fals deceyuer of þe pepy” (1.46, 111), he argues that “Margery subverts the dominant powers’ official version of correct sexual, religious, and social order, a threat to major and interlocking areas of control” (100).

28 Bremner, ibid., 128.

29 Aers, Community, Gender, 102.
she must construct a personal narrative that defends her against such masculine domination. In her meditations on the Passion, Margery figures Christ as the champion of her active sexual desire. He intercedes in her meditations to make his masculine body subject to her female gaze and desire:

"Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretyly to se me, & þu mayst boldly, whan þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þi weddyd husband, as thy derworthy derlyng, & as for thy sweate sone. . . . & þefor þu mayst boldly take me in þe arms of þi sowle & kyssen my mowth, myn hed, & my fete as swetyly as thow wylt." 1.36, 90

Here Margery is in the active position as lover of Christ; she boldly initiates love-making, and the gender hierarchy of man over woman is reversed in the hierarchy of mother over son. Meanwhile God remains the Father—the original object of desire—but in terms that give Margery control.

Despite Christ's ability to mediate the threat of the paternal Godhead through the crucifixion of his own humanity, his "manhole" persists as a constant reminder of the masculine authority that inflicts punishment for female desire. Margery's passionate gaze, therefore, threatens to recall the established gender hierarchy that seeks to limit female desire and the pleasure of female looking. The gender hierarchy of the Middle Ages, which inscribes women as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior, validates the logic of Man as bearer of the look and his position of authority over the female body. Woman's position within this gendered system complicates the possibility of an active female gaze.

By refusing to adopt one of the prescribed female roles—wife or cloistered religious—and by insisting on preserving her autonomy, Margery increases the threat of physical domination of her body by men. To obtain the male object of her desire, she must position herself as the passive object of the male gaze. Furthermore, she is hindered from actively pursuing her object of desire by her lack of a penis. Because female desire cannot enforce its gaze though social or biological power, the woman as spectator must therefore envision herself as both the bearer of the look and the recipient of the gaze of her desired object. In order to accomplish this double-vision, she must instill the object of her desire with the necessary subjectivity to perceive her as the object of desire. In doing so, however, the gazing woman reinscribes male control over her own body.30

These dual aspects of the female gaze, the disruption of gender hierarchy and the reinscription of male control over the woman's body, create an interesting dilemma for active female desire. Margery, a woman who actively gazes upon the male body with desire, is caught between the fear of patriarchal punishment for her curious look and the fear of male violence, which she has made possible by constructing herself as the object of the object of desire.31

To deny the dual threat that the male body as object of desire poses for the female gaze, Kempe constructs a system of looking that attempts to deflect the threat of social retribution and to limit the reinscription of male power over her desire. In a manner similar to that of the male spectator's attempt to contain female sexuality, Margery, as female spectator, seeks ways in which to restrict male sexual dominance and the threat it poses to her person. In this process, the sadistic and fetishizing tendencies of the active gaze, typically repressed by women, are reactivated in her envisioning of the Passion: Christ's body is subject to voyeuristic punishment, redemption, beautification, and overvaluation. Due to the constraints on female sexual activity, these active aspects of the female gaze retain certain "feminine" characteristics of passivity, nurture and sympathy. The punishment inflicted upon the male body, to deny its masculine power, is carried out by male characters, who function as figures of judgment and power. This allows Margery, as a woman, to disavow her role in this punishment despite her being the bearer of the look in her own imaginary drama. Not implicated in the punishment

30 Linda Williams, in "When the Woman Looks," in Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick: American Film Institute, 1984), 83-99, comments on the similar danger for women who are visually assertive in the horror film. They are punished for their curiosity and their investigation of the monster's representation of their own "horrific" sexuality. For a discussion of similar complications in the relationship of victimhood, heroism, gender and sexuality, see Carol Clover, Men, Women, and Chainaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

31 In "The Virgin's Gaze," Stanbury provides a list of medieval cultural narratives that not only disapprove of the female gaze but warn that women who look will be punished, typically by sexual violence. Particularly interesting is Bernard of Clairvaux's discussion of Eve and Dinah as women who sin through their curious gaze; Dinah, moreover, brings about her own rape by her curious looking (and she only looks at women). The Ancene Riwle provides similar warnings against women's visual curiosity.
phase, she can adopt a compassionate role. Also, having often been the object of the gaze herself, Margery can respond sympathetically to the suffering of Christ as the object being looked at.

But these sympathies, at least in Margery's case, do not imply that the active female gaze necessarily entertains masochism (as Beckwith and others posit); rather Margery must witness the violence against Christ's male body in order to counteract the fears that the male body inspires. The male body receives the violence that Margery perceives is her due as a punishment for her active desirous gaze. The retribution by masculine powers, which is designed to enforce female passivity, is thus turned away from her and turned toward the body that has brought out her active desires in the first place. In this way Margery, as bearer of the look, avoids violence to her female body, much as the male spectator attempts to avoid threats to his penis, whether literally (castration) or figuratively (preserving the symbolic power of his phallus), even at the expense of the desired object. Within her narrative, Margery recuperates Christ's body by minimizing the threat of his sexual difference through techniques similar to those outlined by Mulvey for the male gaze: voyeurism and fetishism. These techniques allow Margery to diminish the threat that his manhood poses for her as a woman.

Voyeurism, the first of these recuperative techniques, is connected with ascertaining guilt, which then necessitates punishment or redemption, or both. First, the nature of Christ's body must be investigated visually. To introduce her Passion meditations, Margery describes the motivation for her imagined reenactments:

> Whan pei wer comyn in-to pe cherch & sche beheld pe prestys knelung be-born pe Crucifixe, and, as pei songyn, pe prest ye which executyd pe seruyse peat day drew up a cloth be-for pe Crucifixe thre tymys, euer tym eyar ope, pe pepil xulde se pe Crucifix, pean was hir mende al holy takyn owt of al erdy thynys & set al in gostly thynys, preying & desyrynge pe sche myth at pe last han pe ful syght of hym in Heuyn whic is boþin God & man in oo persone.

The tutillating raising of the cloth slowly reveals more and more of Christ's precious body, creating a desire in her to see his manhood more fully. The result of this examination is both pleasurable and disturbing, for these visions of the "Lordys body lying be-born hir"

portray him as the "semeliest man þat euyr myth be seen er thowt" (1.85, 208). He is sexually desirable and thus guilty of possessing the "phalus"—the signifier of Man's sexual difference from and domination over Woman.

This investigation of Christ's true nature as the messiah, as the one who is both Man and God, dovetails into Margery's investigation of him as her object of desire. Uncovering these mysteries of his humanity help push the action forward to the first flagellation scene:

> And owr Lord askyd, "Whom seke se?" And þei seyd a-geyn, "Ihesu of Nazareth." Owrd Lord answeryd, "I it am." And þan anon sche sey Iudas come & kysyn owr Lord, & þei lewys leyd handys vp-on hym ful violenlyche. Pan had owr Lady & sche meche sorwe & gret peyn to se þe lombe of jnoccencye so contemtly be haldyn & drawyn... And a-swite þe sayd creatur beheld wyrh þir gostlye eye þe lewys puttyng a cloth be-forn owr Lordys eyne, betyng hym & bofetyng hym in þe heuyl & bobyng hym be-forn his swe woot, criyng ful cruelye vn-to hym, "Telle us now how smet þe." Þei spard not to spittyn in hys face in þe most schamful wise þat þei cowde... & þei wolde not spare to huggyn hys blisful eys & drawyn þe her of hys berd.

1.79, 189-90

In this scene, voyeurism entwines itself with narrative action through sadism. As Mulvey points out, "sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end."32 Once the threat of Christ's male body has been ascertained, Margery's voyeurism adopts sadistic elements to punish that body for being male, for its potential to sexually subjugate her. The punishment of Christ's body becomes necessary because Margery, by imagining herself as the object of his desire, reinscribes Christ's male subjectivity, thus making herself vulnerable to male domination.

In addition to investigating and punishing the male body for its direct threat to her person, Margery envisions Christ taking upon himself the violence that would normally be directed at her for her active gaze. Christ as mediator assumes this second guilt—the guilt that Margery as a woman incurs within the social hierarchy and

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32 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 64.
within Christianity as bearer of a desiring look. In becoming the passive object of phallic punishment, he takes upon himself the punishment Margery believes she deserves for usurping male privilege.

And a-non afyr sche saw hem drawyn of hys clothys & makyng hym al nakyd & sithyn drewn hym forth a-forn hem as it had ben pe most malefactor in al pe worlde. & he went forth ful mekely a-forn hem al mody-nakyd as he was born to a peler of ston & spak no worde a-gem hem but leet hem do & sey what pei wolde. And þer þei bowndyn hym to þe peler as streyt as þei cowde & beety hyn on hys fazr white body wyth baleys, wyth whippis, & wyth scorgys.

His nakedness, his meekness, the tying of his body to the “peler of ston,” the beating “wyth baleys, wyth whippis, & wyth scorgys” all point to Christ’s subjugation to male authority. His disempowerment as the “fair white body” eradicates the threat his masculinity poses to Margery and protects her from the social repercussions incurred by her active female gaze.

Despite the sadistic nature of Margery’s look, her gaze is not “masculinized”; far from becoming “cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating,” which Kaplan claims is the necessary outcome of adopting an active gaze, Margery retains “traditionally feminine characteristics . . . of kindness, humaneness, motherliness.”\(^{33}\) The male spectator’s “gaze carries with it the power of action” because of his possession of the phallic, signifier of superior physical and symbolic power within gender hierarchy.\(^{34}\) He, by means of identification with the male hero, is actively involved in the voyeuristic pleasure of “ascertaining guilt, . . . asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment and forgiveness.”\(^{35}\) Margery, however, does not have this opportunity since the women with whom she shares her gaze (the Virgin Mary, in particular) lack the signifying phallus that provides Man with the authority of judge and the power of executor of justice; therefore, these women rely on men to carry out the punishment of the guilty object.

The gender division between those who inflict punishment and those who watch passively is underlined by the women who come to apologize for the violence carried out by the men (1.81, 194–95). Margery aligns herself with these sympathetic women, as one incapable of engaging in Christ’s punishment, thus refusing to accept the directive to take personal responsibility for Christ’s Passion that appears in many devotional texts. Because of this gender split, the voyeuristic nature of Margery’s sadistic gaze is more pronounced than the gaze of a male spectator—her gaze must remain passive in this respect for she cannot involve herself in the punishment through active participation or gender-based identification with his tormentors. This separation of the female spectator from the violence inflicted upon her object of desire allows her to sympathize with the male body. Nonetheless, that body still undergoes ritualistic punishment, both eliminating its phallic power and taking on itself her own guilt.

The importance of the visual affirmation of Christ’s punishment is revealed by the fact that the women in Margery’s vision actively seek out the sight. Margery and Mary follow Christ on his road to Golgotha, observing the violence done to his body intently. Margery, in her description of her vision, focuses largely upon the scenes in which Christ’s body is subject to violence. She includes two scenes of the flagellation and describes the crucifixion in detail. In all three scenes, both women must observe the violence to ensure that Christ’s body has undergone the punishment necessary to eradicate its threat of masculine power. The purpose of the punishment of Christ’s body would be lost if it were not presented as spectacle for the female gaze, for it is in this imagined visual space that Christ’s masculinity can be denied.

To the diegetic sadism of Margery’s Passion meditations is added the fetishistic pleasure of Christ’s body as spectacle. In both the first flagellation scene and the crucifixion, spectacle and diegesis intersect to make the unimaginable sign—the non-threatening male object of female desire.\(^{36}\) With Christ functioning as both the central figure of the action and the object of desire, the presentation of his

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\(^{33}\) Kaplan, *Women and Film*, 29.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{35}\) Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 64.

\(^{36}\) Such an intersection between diegesis and spectacle is rare in Hollywood classical cinema for "the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen” and separates his actions from the display of the female body for the viewer’s pleasure. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 63.
body for Margery's visual pleasure is part of the narrative goal. Rather than his visual presentation "work[ing] against the development of the storyline," the "moments of erotic contemplation" of his body provide either the climax (as in the first flagellation scene) or the central action (as in the crucifixion) of the narrative. Even without the usual break in the diegesis, the first flagellation scene and the crucifixion both fulfill the main purpose of spectacle by making the body "the direct recipient of the spectator's look," with little or no mediation of that look through the characters. Both scenes minimize dialogue among characters to allow for a focus upon the visual presentation of Christ's body. Moreover, in order to erase Christ's subjectivity, and thus render him a more perfect visual object, he is denied a speaking part in both flagellation scenes; neither does he actively advance the narrative action in the spectacles of his flagellation and his crucifixion. By responding to neither the violence of flagellation nor the pain of crucifixion, Christ functions as the passive recipient of both gaze and action.

This objectification of Christ's body through spectacle furthers the conflation of Margery's gaze as spectator and the gaze of the Virgin Mary: "Hys blisful Modyr beheldyn & þis creatur how hys precowys body schrynkyd & drow to-gedyr wyth alle senwys & veymys in þat precowys body for peyne þat it suffyrð & felt, þei sorwyd & mornyd & syhyd ful sor" (1.80, 192). By presenting Christ's body as spectacle, the need for Mary to serve as the intermediary figure through which Margery achieves the object of desire is removed. In the scenes before and after the spectacle, the interactions between Mary and Christ, and Margery and Christ, although parallel, are described separately. The presentation of Christ as visual object, however, allows for the description of their experiences to coalesce and Margery, therefore, is able to possess the object of desire more directly.

But with the pleasurable display of Christ's body comes the reminder of his possession "of a sinister genital organ"; the "sublime mixture of fear and desire that such images produce" is "in fact . . . at the very heart of fetishisation." For the male spectator, fetishization covers over the lack of the phallus in the woman, which reminds him of the threat of castration. The woman's body is fetishized in cinema through two techniques: 1) by denying the "guilt" of the body's lack by making it "a perfect product, . . . stylized and fragmented by close-ups," and 2) by making the body into a phallic object or surrounding the body with phallic signifiers. Margery employs her own version of these recuperative measures to the spectacular body of Christ as a means of denying his threatening masculinity. To retain her pleasure, Margery separates off his male power from his body through denial and re-visioning.

Just as the voyeuristic sadism discussed above depends upon a visual "distance" between the viewer and the object viewed, Margery's fragmentation and perfection of Christ's body provides the necessary "distance" for fetishism. "This gap between the visible and the knowable, the very possibility of disowning what is seen, prepares the ground for fetishism," for then the "abominable" member can be disavowed. In the first flagellation scene, Christ's body is presented as the "perfect product, . . . stylized and fragmented" to make it simultaneously appealing to the female gaze, yet harmless. Margery's gaze eroticizes Christ's "fayr white body" first by fragmenting it through narrative close-ups and then by voyeuristically undressing him. The Jews' mockery of Jesus, quoted above, draws attention to his "eyne," his "heuyd," his "swete mouth," his "face"—even his "blisful eys" and the "her of hys berd" are not spared (1.79, 190). Not only is Christ's body safely fragmented into parts, but, once his full form is revealed, he is infantilized, reinscribing his position

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42 Kaplan, Women and Film, 51.
44 Despite Margery's interest in Mary as a model for her own imagined relationship to Christ, there is no similarly detailed physical description of the Virgin. Mulvey notes that this ban is likewise in force for the male spectator and the male lead. "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (63). Perhaps the reluctance of the spectator to assume sexual objectification is based on more than "ruling ideology"; even within Margery's desire to be the object of the object of desire (like unto Mary), she is less interested in the physical desirability of the Virgin Mary, or the other women within the narrative, as a basis of connection—it is their actions, their responses to Christ, that are depicted and emulated.
under the female control of his Mother. “And a-non after she saw
hem drawyn of hys clotys & makyn hym al-nakyd . . . al modyr-
naked as he was born” (ibid.). In this form, his masculinity is re-
dered harmless and asexual by the implied innocence of his being
“modyr-naked.”

During the crucifixion, Margery’s overvaluation of Christ con-
tinues, turning his eroticized body into a fetish that is reassuring rather
than threatening.

Sithyn sche went forth in contemptacyon . . . to þe place þer he
was naylyd to þe Crosse. And þan sche sey þe lewys wyt hryt vi-
olens rendyn of owr Lordys precyous body a cloth of sylke, þe
which was cleyn & hardyd so sadly & stritely to owr Lordys
body wyt þys precyous blood þat it drow a-wy al þe hyde & al þe
skyn of hys blisys body & renewyd þys precyous woundys & mad
þe blod to renne down al a-bowtyyn on euer yse. Pan þat pre-
cyous body aperyd to hir syght as rawe as a thyngh þat wer newe
flayn out of þe skyn, ful petows & rewolf with be-holdyn. . . . &
a-non after sche beheld how þe cruel Iewys leydun hys precyous
body to þe Crosse & sithyn tokyn a long nayle, a row & boistews,
& sett to hys hand & wyt hryt violens & cruelnþ þe dreyyn
it thorw hys hande, . . . how þys precyous body schrynkyd & drow
to-gedyr wyt alle senwys & weynys in þat precyous body. . . . Than
sey sche . . . how þe lewys festenyd ropis on þe oper hand. . . .
And sithyn þe drowyn hys blisful feet on þe same maner.
1.80, 191–92; my italics

In this passage, Margery seven times describes Christ’s body as “pre-
cyous,” an adjective that implies both Christ’s singular bodily per-
fecion and his body’s value in her sight. In addition, that body is
again visually fragmented through descriptions of various body flu-
ids and parts. Margery moves from a verbal version of the cinematic
“long shot” of his body on the cross to detailed close-up of each of
his hands and of his feet. Christ is not only stripped of clothing to
reveal his naked body, as in the flagellation scene, but partly flayed
so that the spectator is allowed to view the body without the skin, to
view “alle [thè] senwys & weynys.” Through this stylized description
of the crucifixion, the sadistic punishment of the male body, neces-
sary for the protection of Wyman as bearer of the look, is made vi-
scually pleasing to the curious gaze.

These two episodes also serve to fetishize Christ’s body by
emphasizing its association with the feminine. As the corollary to the
phallic construction of the female body by the male gaze, Margery’s
feminization of the object of her desire undercuts the threat that
Christ’s gender poses to her active desire. In the two flagellation
scenes, Christ’s body is presented in a manner similar to those of vir-
gin women martyrs. He is stripped and dragged before male judges,
all the while appearing meek and silent. Margery thrice mentions
the “perer of ston”—a signifier of the phallic power to which he is
submissive—to which he is tied and then beaten. In her envisioning
of the crucifixion scene, Christ’s feminization is portrayed through
his passive submission to masculine punishment, inflicted by the
long phallic nail, which pierces his flesh. As the Cross is raised,
Christ’s male body is destroyed and replaced by a feminized bleed-
ning body: “& þan owr Lordys body schakyd & schoderyd, & alle þe
joyntys of pat blisful body brostyn & wentyn a-sundyr, & þys precyowan
woundys ronyn down wyt reuerys of blood on eurey syde” (1.80,
192). Christ’s torn and bloody body comes to signify the female
wound that is so troubling to the male spectator according to femi-
nist film theory. For Margery, as a female viewer, this fetishizing of
Christ’s body allows for a complete denial of his phallic power, and
her own desire is thus preserved from castration.45

Through these modified forms of voyeuristic punishment and
fetishization, Margery is able to claim her object of desire without
threat of male domination or social retribution. The two, recuperative
measures work together to redeem Christ’s body by simultane-
ously denying its maleness and punishing its maleness. The
meditations on the Passion have prepared Christ’s body for her pos-
session. Prior to this point, physical possession of her Lord through
active expressions of female desire (touching and kissing) were
fraught with frightening difficulties, for his connection to the God-
head threatened her independence.

Also þe Fadyr seyd to his creatur, “Dowtyr, I wil han þe weddyd
to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn þe my preuyteys & my

45 In Christ’s suffering, his “precious wound,” the pouring forth of blood, Kempe plays
upon the image of Christ as the feminine component of the Trinity. Julian of Norwich’s
portrayal of Jesus as mother provides one well-known example of this tradition. For a full
discussion of this portrayal of Christ, see Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality
of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and Holy Feast, Holy
Fast, particularly chapters 8, 9, and 10.
cwnselys, for þu xalt wonyn wyth me wyth-owtyn ende." Pan þe creatur kept sylens in hir sole & answeryd not þerto, for sche was ful sor afrd of þe Godhed & sche cowde no skyle of þe dalyawns of þe Godhede, for al hir lofe & al hir afeccyon was set in þe manhode of Crist.

1.35, 86

Margery is unwilling to surrender the special intimacy she has with the manhood of Christ and weeps "wondir sor" (1.35, 87), until the Son intercedes for her. Despite her ambiguous feelings toward the Father, he takes her for his wedded wife, telling her that all will go well "so þat þu be buxom & bonyr to do what I byd þe do" (ibid.).

But after Christ's body is deprived of his connection to the patriarchal Godhead through death, the women in Margery's drama are free to form a community of lovers who take their joy beyond the voyeuristic gaze and actively express desire through physical contact.

Owr Lady had þan a maner of joye whan hir dere Sone was takyn down of þe Crosse & leyd on þe ston be-for hir. And þan owr blisful Lady bowyd down to hir Sonys body & kyssyd hys mouþ... And þan þe creatur thowt sche herd Mary Mawdelyn seyn to owr Lady, "I pray sow, Lady, 3yf me leue to handelyn & kissyn hys feet, for at þes get I grace." Anon owr Lady 3af leue to hir & alle þo þat wer þer-a-bowe to do what worship & reuerens þei wolde to þat precyows body. And a-non Mary Mawdelyn toke owr Lordys feet & owr Ladiys sisterys toke hys handys, þe on oyster on hand & þe oþer sister an-oþer hand, & wept ful sor in kissyng of þo handys & of þo precyows feet.

1.80, 193–94

The lifeless body is now pure object, the ideal fetish. The women can now handle it as they please, without fear, for with the eradication of any possible male subjectivity the threat of male domination is gone. Each one of the women is aggressively devoted to her particular piece of Christ's body, and a single body part fulfills their desire for the whole.

The Pietà, typically reserved for Mother and Son, is extended to women in general, but in the process the conflation of female gazes is broken; every woman now must fend for herself. Margery no longer aligns herself with the Virgin or even Mary Magdalene. Now that Christ's subjectivity is gone, Margery's original purpose in adopting Mary's position in the narrative is no longer advantageous. His spirit having left his body, Christ can no longer express active desire and the Virgin Mary no longer functions as the object of his desire. For Margery, this loss of identification takes her out of the dramatic action, and her participation in this scene is reduced to that of spectator once again: "And þe sayd creatur thowt þat sche ran euyr to & fro as þat be a woman wyth-owtyn reson, gretly deseryng to an had þe precyows body be hir-self a-lone" (ibid).

But the Passion, once it is achieved and repeatedly reconstructed through the meditations, allows Margery to get what she really wants—possession of the living Christ, purified of the sins of Man. After his "manhode" has been subjected to the rigors of Margery's female gaze, after he as undergone investigation, punishment, and fetishization, Christ can be redeemed as the perfect man for the autonomous, sexual woman.

Returning in his resurrected form, Christ no longer experiences the physical suffering of the cross.

And þan þe creatur thowt þat sche say owr Lady felyn and tastyn owr Lordys body al a-bowtyn & hys handys & hys feet 3yf per ony sorhed er any peyne. And sche herd owr Lord seyn to hys Modyr, "Der Modyr, my peyne is al a-goo, & now xal I leynyn for euyr-mo. And, Modyr, so schal 30wr peyne & 30wr lorwe be turnyd in-to ful gret joye. Modyr, aske what se wol & I xal tel-lyn 30w."

1.81, 196

All the torments and persecutions he suffered at the hands of violent men during his Passion no longer have any hold on him, or by transference on the women for whom he has suffered. His death has paid the debt incurred by active female desire and his own masculine threat, and his body is now available as the impossible sign of Man and not Man. The resurrected body promises relief for women, who still experience pain and sorrow on earth, by providing a figure cut to the measure of their desire, an imagined ideal that they can love without fear and who will turn their sorrow into joy.

Kempe emphasizes her belief in the theoretical touchability of the risen Christ by conveying Margery's clear disapproval of and disappointment with the Noli me tangere episode found in devotional texts.

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40 Even Christ possesses a male subjectivity that can't be denied in her other imaginative dalliances with him. Despite his homelessness with Margery, her expressions of active desire must await his invitation (1.36) or be mediated through the Virgin (1.79–81).
The scene is a repetition of the joyous reunion between Christ and his mother, substituting Mary Magdalene for the Virgin Mary; this time, however, the woman is denied physical contact, a denial that disturbs Margery's sensibilities.

Sche, nowyng owr Lord, fe down at hys feet & wolde a kyssyd hys feet, sayyn, "Maisty." Owr Lord seyd to hir, "Towche me not." Þan þe creatur thowt þat Mary Mawdelyn seyd to owr Lord, "A, Lord, I se wel þe wil not þat I be so homly wyth þow as I haue ben a-forn," & mad heuy cher. ... And Þan þe creatur thowt þat Mary went forth wyth gret joye, & þat was gret merueyl to hir þat Mary enioyid, for, 3yf owr Lord had seyd to hir as he dede to Mary, hir thowt sche cowde neyur a ben mery. þat was whan sche wolde a kissyd hys feet, & he seyd, "Towche me not." The creatur had so gret swem & heuyynes in þat worde þat eyr wyth when sche herd it in any sermown, as sche dede many tymys, sche wept, sorwyd, & cryyd as sche xulde a deyd for lofe & desyr þat sche had to ben wyth owr Lord.

Implied in this scene is a critique of both Christ, for his lack of familiarity, and Mary for her acceptance of the prohibition against touching. Margery explicitly denies her connection to Mary Magdalene at this point, and in doing so rejects the implied cultural ascertainment of impurity to Mary, which would prevent her from contact with the divine. Fortunately Margery’s redefinition of female desire allows her to claim a spiritual purity that puts her on par with the Virgin Mother. Unlike Mary Magdalene, whose identity as prostitute is already mythically fixed, Kempe uses her text to define herself as both sexual and chaste. She shares the Virgin’s privileged intimacy with Christ; he does not presume to be her “maisty” but encourages her to be on “homly” terms with him.

"Be he neyur so gret a lorde & sche so powr a woman when he weddwyth hir, þet þei must ly to-gedir & rest to-gedir in joy & pes. Ryght so mot it be twx þe & me, for I take non hed what þu hast be but what þu woldist be. And ofstyn-tymes haue I teld Þat I haue clene forgyoue þe alle thy synnes, þerfore meost I nedys be homly wyth þe & lyn in þi bed wyth þe."

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47 One is tempted to read the line “hir thowt sche cowde neyur a ben mery” as “she could never imagine herself in Mary’s role.”

For Margery, to be “homly” is to be sexual, and the familiarity with Jesus provided by affective devotion allows her to satisfy her desire for intimacy with Christ. Even though he is her “Lord,” he does not judge her by her failure to measure up to societal standards of femininity and sanctity, but accepts her would-be identity—virgin wife.

The risen Christ’s gendered identity is equally fluid, especially in Margery’s imagined dalliances with him. He is her “husband,” her “derworthy derlying,” her “swete sone” (1.36, 90). As the savior who is Man and no Man, he is able to be her holy bridegroom and answer her prayers for a man who condones and submits to her active female desires: “þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi sole & kyssen my mouth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wylt” (ibid.). She no longer needs the Virgin as intercessor, for Christ’s Passion has redeemed both Margery’s desire and his own male body.

As the risen Christ, Jesus is able to intercede between her and the godhead.

&& a-non in þe syght of hir sole & sche sey owr Lord standyng ryght up owyr hir so ner þat hir thowt sche tok he hys toos in hir hand & felt hem, & to hir fellng it weryn as it had ben very flæsch & bon. & þan sche thankyd God of al, for thorw þes gostly sytys hir affecccyon was al drawyn in-to þe manhood of Crist & in-to þe mynde of hys Passyon vn-to þat tym þat it plesyd owr Lord to 3euyn hir vnirdstondyn of hys invnirdstondybl Godhed. 1.85, 208

It is through these spiritual sights that Margery is able to create an imaginative answer to the impossibilities of her own identity. She has translated her sexuality into holiness, and through the very physical body of Christ she is able to understand spiritual mysteries. The Passion acts as the bridge between Margery’s social failures and her spiritual triumphs. Through it she is able to reconcile herself to the patriarchal power of the Father and he to her unconventional sexuality, autonomy, and spirituality:

But afterwardys, when hir husband & sche wyth on assent had mad awov of chastite, as is be-forn-wretny, & sche had ben at Rome and Jerusalem & suffyrld mech despite & repref for hir wepyng & hir criyng, owr Lord of hys mercy drow hir affecccyon in-to hys Godhed, & þat was mor feruent in lofe & desyr & mor sotyl in vnirdstondyng þan was þe Manhood. 1.85, 209
Margery’s treatment of the Passion narrative gives us a glimpse of what happens when one woman mystic operates as co-constructor of meaning in the text and gives us an example of how her desiring gaze deals with the threat presented by the taboo against women looking. Margery does not accept “masculization, masochism or marginality”; she demands that Christ become the impossible sign—the male body without phallic power that will allow for the fulfillment of her desiring gaze. And Christ’s redemption comes only through Margery’s imaginary drama. If he is to be the perfect object of desire, it is not enough that he promises not to be “a-schamyd of þe as many oper men ben” (l.36, 90). Margery must envision Christ as taking upon himself the suffering that her desire incurs in order to insure that her desire will be free from punishment.

And þan owr Lord sayd to hir sowle, “Dowtyr, þes sorwys & many mo suffyrde I for þi lofe, & diuers peynys, mo þan any man can tellyn in erth. perfor, dowtyr, þu hast gret cause to louyn me ryght wel, for I haue bowt þi lofe ful der.” 1.79, 190–91

In her vision of the Passion, it is through Christ, as mediator of his own masculinity, that Margery secures the salvation of her desire.

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2 Renoir, "Descriptive Technique," 192.

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