MARGERY KEMPE’S RAVISHMENT INTO
THE CHILDHOOD OF CHRIST

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In Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, the dreamer, clasped in the claws of an eagle and carried aloft, likens himself to two biblical and two mythological figures: Enoch and Elijah, Romulus and Ganymede. At least insofar as his means of transportation are concerned, the dreamer is most like Ganymede, “That was yborne up, as men rede, / To hevene with daun Jupiter, / And mad the goddes botiller” [who, we read, was taken up to heaven by Lord Jupiter and made the god’s butler]. Modern readers, I suspect, tend to feel compassion for Ganymede, a victim of aquiline Jupiter’s abduction. Why, then, does Chaucer put this ravished youth in the company of blessed men rewarded with bodily assumption? And how does Ganymede’s abduction parallel the dreamer’s visionary experience?

Chaucer does not include St. Paul among the four men he lists as having been taken up into heaven, but he very well could have done so. For medieval religious writers, the *locus classicus* of mystical rapture was the passage in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians in which he describes how he was caught up (raptus est) to the third heaven, “whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not … and heard secret words, which it is not granted to men to utter” (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Middle English writers often employed the word “ravish” to translate the Latin word *rapere* used by the Vulgate in this passage. Although Margery Kempe was never taken up into heaven bodily, she claims to have experienced mystical ravishment on numerous occasions. In this essay I will survey Middle English spiritual writers’ discussions of mystical “ravishment” with the aim of dispelling our initial impression of the incongruity of Kempe’s use of this word to describe her mystical encounters with Jesus. We are perhaps inclined to allow Kempe to be “ravished” by the adult Jesus, but why does she say that she was “ravished” into the childhood of Christ?

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I. Ravishment in the Middle English Mystics

In his *Scale of Perfection*, a Middle English devotional text probably known to Margery Kempe, Walter Hilton uses the past participle “ravished” and the noun “ravishing” in speaking of the highest stage of contemplation. In the third stage of contemplation, he says,

>a mannys soule ... [is] as it were mykil ravyschid out of the bodili wittes and thanne bi the grace of the Holi Gost is illumyned for to see bi undirstoon-dyne soothfastnesse, whiche is God, and also goostli thynges, with a softe swete brennande love in hym, so perfightli that bi ravyschyng of this love the soule is ooned for the tyme and conformyd to the ymage of the Trinite.

[a man's soul is, as it were, much ravished out of his bodily senses and then by the grace of the Holy Ghost is illumined to see and understand the truth, which is God, and also spiritual things, with a soft burning love for him, so perfectly that by the ravishing of this love the soul is temporarily united and conformed to the image of the Trinity.]

Hilton prefaces this sentence with the phrase “as it were” to make it clear that he is using the word “ravish” figuratively. He goes on to use the image of marriage to describe the union of the soul and God, a union which may be anticipated on earth, but which is only perfected in heaven: “whoso bi raveschyng of love is fastned to God, thanme God and a soule aren not two but bothe oon. Not in fleisch, but in oo spirit” [when a person is fastened to God by ravishing of love, he and God are not two, but one — not in one flesh, but in one spirit]. Hilton is careful to point out that the marriage and ravishment he is speaking of are spiritual, not bodily, but he clearly considers these human experiences analogous.

Later in the *Scale*, Hilton warns his readers against spiritual complacency. They should not cease searching for Jesus, though “thou fele a liti His goostli presence in devocion or in knowynge” [you feel his spiritual presence a little, in devotion or in knowledge]. Hilton notes that even a soul “raveschid into the thridde hevene
with Poule" [ravished into the third heaven with Paul] has not yet experienced Jesus "as He is in His joie" [as he is in his beatitude]."

_The Prickynge of Love_, a ME devotional text with which Margery Kempe was familiar, speaks of ravishment briefly in its discussion of two kinds of spiritual drunkenness. Since neither of these experiences involves the loss of bodily sensation, both may entail deception. While pointing out that ravishment, in contrast, is not fraught with this danger, the author offers a description of this latter experience: "but ȝit ful sikernesse is hit noon, but ȝif ȝou be ravished fro þe vsynge of þi bodili wittes so þat all maner of fantomes of bodily lykenesse are withdrawn fro byholdyng of þi soule, and þi mynde overpasseþ þe commune & þe resounable maner of þynkyng of þis life" [but yet you do not have complete security unless you are ravished from the use of your bodily senses so that all kinds of images of bodily likeness are withdrawn from the beholding of your soul, and your mind surpasses the rational manner of thinking common to people in this life]. In other words, imagination is not operative during ravishment.

Hilton and the author of _The Prickynge of Love_ were not idiosyncratic in their mystical use of the word "ravish." Indeed, they probably did not have much choice when it came to vocabulary, considering that the word "ecstasy" was exceedingly rare in Middle English and the word "rapture" not at all part of the Middle English lexicon. The Middle English noun "ravishing" was derived from the present participial stem of the French verb _ravir_, which, in turn, was derived from the medieval Latin verb _rapire_, a vulgarization of classical Latin _rapere_. In classical Latin, _rapio, rapere_ had various meanings, including (1) "to seize and carry off, snatch away," (2) "to take away (property, etc.) by force, carry off as plunder," and (3) "to carry off (and violate), ravish." The fourth-declension noun _raptus_ referred to (1) "the action of snatching or tearing away," (2) "robbery, rapine, plunder," and (3) "the action of carrying off, abduction, rape." According to R. E. Latham, Anglo-Latin _raptus_ was used to refer to "swift movement" and, more specifically, to "rapture" and "ecstasy." In other words, in the Middle Ages _raptus_ comes to be used figuratively to speak of someone being spiritually, and not just physically, carried away. Similarly, Kathryn Gravdal notes that "[w]hen it first appears, _raviissement_ means the action of carrying off a woman, but by the fourteenth century it comes to have a spiritual sense: the carrying of a soul to heaven.
From this religious meaning it develops a more secular, affective one: the state of a soul transported by enthusiasm, joy, or extreme happiness.\textsuperscript{17}

Although *raptus* was used by medieval Latin writers to refer to ecstasy, those who wrote about mystical experiences usually distinguished between *raptus* and *extasis*.\textsuperscript{18} For example, Thomas Aquinas remarks that “[r]apture (*raptus*) adds something to ecstasy (*extasis*). For ecstasy means simply a going out of oneself by being placed outside one’s proper order; while rapture denotes a certain violence in addition.\textsuperscript{19} Insofar as both involve violence, rapture can be said to resemble rape.\textsuperscript{20}

One Anglo-Latin writer who uses the Latin noun *raptus* and the verb *rapiere* to speak of mystical experiences is Richard Rolle, who devotes an entire chapter to describing two types of *raptus* in his *Incendium amoris*, a devotional text that was familiar to Margery Kempe.\textsuperscript{21} In his translation of Rolle’s *Incendium* into Middle English, the Carmelite prior Richard Misyn translated *raptus* and *rapiere* into “ravishyng” and “ravish,” respectively.\textsuperscript{22} According to Rolle, in one type of rapture a person “is so carried off (*rapiitur*) outside of the senses of the flesh that during the time he is ‘rapt’ (*raptus*) he does not experience anything in the flesh, nor can anything be done by the flesh.”\textsuperscript{23} Not surprisingly, Rolle gives the example of St. Paul who was “rapt” (*erat raptus*) to the third heaven. He adds that “even sinners are ‘rapt’ when they are carried away in vision at any time, so that they may see either the joy of good men or the punishments of the reprobate.”\textsuperscript{24} This statement indicates that Rolle considers imagination central to at least one type of rapture. The second type of rapture he describes entails “the elevation of [one’s] spirit to God through contemplation,” which only happens to the “perfected lovers of God.” Rolle implicitly likens this type of rapture to rape when he notes, following Aquinas and others, that it “is done as by certain violence,” since “supernatural grace works against nature.”\textsuperscript{25} Like Hilton, Rolle says that when the soul is ravished by love it is united to God. Unlike his more sober contemporary Hilton, however, Rolle emphasizes the sensible pleasures one experiences in ravishment, which he considers as a foretaste of heaven. The ravished soul, he explains,

\begin{quote}

is glued to Him with an indissoluble chain of love, and flying through excess of spirit (*per excessum mentis*), outside the enclosure of the body, it drinks of
\end{quote}
the supremely wonderful small cup from the heavens... [It receives and experiences the fervor of love within itself in a real way. And then the soul melts in the song of honey by its sweetness.]

In mystical ravishment, therefore, one experiences the trio of mystical sensations for which Rolle is famous: canor, dulcor and fervor.

In chapter eleven of his Emendatio vitae, Rolle uses the verb rapere a number of times to describe the effects that the love of God has upon a soul. Like an attractive force, desire for the Beloved "carries (rapit) the soul outside itself toward the Beloved, so that the soul would rather be there ... than where the body ... is." Objectifying charitus as the force that binds (copulare) Christ and the chosen soul, Rolle bids the soul "enter the bedchamber of the King boldly," saying that it should "not fear to seize Christ (Christum rapere non veresis). He is the one you have sought, Whom you have loved." By making amor Dei signify both the soul's passionate yearning for God and God's mystical action upon it, Rolle grants human beings a good deal of agency in their relationship with the deity.

In the long text of her Showings Julian of Norwich emphasizes God's loving condescension toward humankind by presenting the image of a majestic king being familiar with his poor servant:

"[T]han thyngkith thys pore creature thus: Loo, what myght thys noble lorde do more wurschyppe and joy to me than to shew me that am so lytylle thys marvelous homelynesse? ... This bodely exsample was shewde so hygh that thys mannnes hart myght be rayysched and almost foryet hymselfe for joy of thys grette homelynesse.

[Then this poor creature thinks thus: behold, how might this noble Lord cause me more honor and joy than to show me, who am so little, this wonderful familiarity? ... This lofty image was presented to me so that human beings might be ravished at heart and might forget themselves on account of the joy caused by this great familiarity.]"
The word “ravish” here indicates God’s ability to win Julian’s love (and that of her readers) through the revelation of his intimacy with humanity.

While the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* emphasizes God’s inaccessibility, he recognizes that human volition plays a role in enabling one to experience the grace of contemplation. Whereas some people who labor hard in spiritual exercises only experience the perfection of contemplation upon the “callyng of oure Lorde … þe whiche callyng is clepid rauisching (*raptus*)” [call of our Lord, which is called ravishing], others are “so homely wip God in þis grace of contemplacion, þat þei mowen haue it when þei wolen in þe comoun state of mans soule … & yet in þis tyme þei haue fulle deliberacion of alle þeire wittis, bodely & goostly” [so familiar with God in this grace of contemplation that they may have it when they will in the ordinary spiritual state of human beings … and yet at this time they have the complete use of all their senses, both bodily and spiritual]. Elsewhere, the author makes it clear that even when a creature in this life is “so hise rauischid (*rapta*) in contemplacion & love of þe Godheed” [so highly ravished in the contemplation and love of the deity], it still does not pierce through the cloud of unknowing that separates it from God.

The foregoing overview of ME spiritual writers’ discussion of ravishment sheds some light upon Margery Kempe’s experience of it. Like Hilton and Rolle, Kempe regards ravishment as an occasion of mystical union with Christ. As does Rolle, she considers ravishment a cause of great delight and is not ashamed of desiring to embrace her Beloved. Belonging to the *Cloud*-author’s first category of contemplatives — those whose mysticism is dependent upon their being ravished — Kempe is unable to experience the grace of contemplation whenever she wants to. Aware of her physical separation from Christ even during ravishment, Kempe never passes beyond “the cloud of unknowing” that separates her from her Beloved. Despite the similarities between Kempe’s experience of rapture and mystical theologians’ theory of it, Kempe disagrees with them somewhat on the bodily aspect of this phenomenon. Whereas male theologians tend to speak of mystical ravishment as an out-of-body experience, Kempe’s experience of it is embodied in tears, cries, contortions and “phantastic” visions of Jesus and Mary. For Kempe, as for Julian, ravishment is connected with the faculty of the imagination.
II. Margery Kempe’s Mystical Ravishment and Devotion to the Christ-Child

Although Margery Kempe tells us that in her travels she often feared being raped (231, 406 & 412), she leaves us with the impression that she yearns to be mystically ravished by Christ. In her Book, Kempe uses the past participle “ravished” six times: once to refer to her fear of being defiled (412), and five times in reference to her frequent experiences of being suddenly carried away into contemplation or made privy to Christ’s locutions. While noting that medieval mystics commonly use erotic images from the Song of Songs to describe their union with God, Wolfgang Riehle objected to Kempe’s “too forceful analogy between her mystical love and her earlier married sexuality.” “[I]n Margery,” he claimed, “there is frequently a crude realism which intrudes in a very embarrassing manner.” As an example of this, Riehle cited Margery’s use of the word “ravish”: “In a way which is typical for her sick, neurotic psyche she uses the verb ravished in both an erotic and a mystical meaning.” More recent medievalists generally approach the study of medieval mystical discourse more sympathetically than did Riehle. For instance, in her article on the erotic language of medieval mystical texts Sarah Salih points out the difficulty modern scholars have in determining whether medieval writers are speaking about religion or sex, which in itself suggests that “the two are not now and were not then discrete realms of discourse or of experience.” Along these same lines, I would like to suggest that Kempe’s use of the word “ravish” to denote her sudden contemplation of Christ, as both a man and an infant, is probably not coincidental. For Kempe, this word most likely had both sexual and religious connotations.

The swiftness and involuntary nature of Kempe’s mystical experiences liken them to “ravishment” in the sense of abduction or rape. Kempe herself testifies that Jesus endowed her with mystical experiences “whan he wolde, and how he wolde, and wher he wolde” [when he wished, and how he wished, and where he wished], and that she got her holy thoughts “not of hir owyn stody ... but of hys yyte” [not through her own effort ... but through his own gift] (361 & 359). Christ emphasizes the suddenness of his visitations when he tells her that he comes into her soul and sets it on fire with love as suddenly as lightning comes from heaven (334).
One of the passages in which the word “ravish” is used in a mystical sense occurs in the beginning of the Book when Kempe describes how numerous temptations counteracted her desire to live a devout life. One day this difficult period came to an end when Christ “ravysched hir spyrty” [ravished her spirit] and told her that her sins had been forgiven (71). Later in the Book Kempe recounts how she went to Norwich to visit the tomb of the saintly vicar Richard of Caister in order to pray for the recovery of a priest who was dear to her. Echoing Rolle, Kempe says that she was overcome by “the fyer of lofe” [fire of love] burning in her heart, but on this occasion she is overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude for having known Richard rather than love of Christ per se:

sche fel down with boistows sobbyngys, wepyngys, and lowde cryes besyden the grave of the good Vicary, al ravyschyd wyth gostly comfort in the goodness of owr Lord, that wroth so gret grace for hys servawnt whech had ben hir confessowr. (285)

[she fell down with boisterous sobbing, weeping, and loud cries beside the grave of the good vicar, all ravished with spiritual comfort through the goodness of our Lord, who had greatly blessed his servant, who had been her confessor.]

The three other passages in which Kempe uses the word “ravish” in a mystical sense involve people or objects that serve as sacramental reminders of Christ. One of the many incidents in the Book that reveal the fine-tuning of Kempe’s sacramental sensibilities describes how Kempe sees a reflection of the mater dolorosa in a poor woman’s dismay at being momentarily separated from her infant son (202). In this passage, however, she does not use the word “ravish.” The first instance in which she does use this word in a sacramental context is when she sees the Abbot of Leicester and his retinue approaching and “anon in hir sowle sche beheld owr Lord comying with hys apostelys, and sche was so raveschyd into contemplacyon wyth sweetnes and devocyon that sche myth not stondyn ageyns her comying” [at once she beheld in her soul our Lord coming with his apostles and she was so ravished into contemplation with sweetness and devotion that she could not stand as they approached] (238). Kempe leans against a pillar in the church to prevent herself from falling.
In the second instance Kempe participates in a Candlemas procession when “hir mende was raveschyd into beholdyng of owr Lady offeryng hyr blissful sone” [her mind was ravished into beholding our Lady offering her blessed son] (357). The Speculum sacerdotale, a fifteenth-century manual for priests, tells about a similar vision which a noblewoman had on the feast of Candlemas. Despite the fact that the woman’s chaplain was not present to say mass for her, she went into her lady chapel and “a noon as it hadde ben in a raveschynge of hure mynde, hure thought sche was sette in another passyng fayre chirche” [at once, as if in a ravishing of her mind, she thought she was in another church, which was very beautiful], where she saw Christ celebrate mass and numerous saints holding candles. Given a taper at the beginning of the liturgy, the woman refused to relinquish it later on when the Virgin Mary’s messenger asked for it back. In the course of fighting over the taper, the woman awoke from her vision when the candle broke in two.36

Whereas on the second occasion of Kempe’s ravishment she “went waveryng on ech syde as it had ben a dronkyn woman, wepyng and sobbyng so sor that uneth sche myth stondyn on hir feet” (358) [went wavering on each side as if she were a drunken woman, weeping and sobbing so heavily that she could scarcely stand on her feet], on the third occasion she actually falls down. Wishing to determine if Kempe, as a hypocrite, only cries and weeps in front of other people, two priests take her to a neighboring parish where few people are around. On the way back Kempe sees women with infants in their arms and asks them if any of them are male. Like Herod who specified that all the male children under two were to be killed (Mt. 2:16), Kempe, in search of the baby Jesus, is only interested in male infants. The Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden, one of Kempe’s saintly heroines, likewise emphasize the maleness of the baby Jesus.37 When the shepherds arrive at the place of Christ’s birth, having been told by an angel that the “salvator mundi et non salvatrix” has been born, “pae asked whethir it was man or woman. And be modir shewed to baim pat it was a man” [they asked whether it was male or female and the mother showed them that it was a male].38 Unlike the shepherds, who find the divine child they are looking for, Kempe is disappointed when she learns that the babies are female. “Than was the mende so raveschyd into the childhod of Crist, for desir that
sche had for to see hym, that sche mith not beryn it, but fel downe and wept and cryid so sor that it was merweyl to her it” [Then was her mind so ravished into the childhood of Christ, on account of her desire to see him, that she could not endure it, but fell down and cried so profusely that it was a marvel to hear it] (360, emphasis mine). Kempe’s lying down during this experience of ravishment may partly be explained by her love-longing, her intense desire to see Christ. While it is not clear whether the babies in this scene cause Kempe to have a vision of the Christ-Child, which itself is the source of her tears, the infants clearly remind her of her physical separation from him. Earlier in the Book, Christ explains to Kempe that when she cries out of compassion for him she is like his mother, but that when she sheds tears on account of her separation from him she is like his wife (101). Somewhat surprisingly, in this scene centered on the childhood (as opposed to the adulthood) of Christ, Kempe seems to be overcome with sorrow in being separated from her heavenly spouse. The tears she sheds on this occasion are probably a mixture of disappointment and spiritual joy.

Knowledgeable of the lives of mulieres religiosae, Kempe must have heard about how the Christ-Child granted his intimacies to so many of these women. For example, the Christ-Child appeared to the twelfth-century English hermitess Christina of Markyate, “his sorely tried spouse,” in order to strengthen her resistance against the advances of her lascivious spiritual director. As her mystical spouse, the infant Jesus offers Christina love without the taint of lust. In his life of the Flemish beguine Mary of Oignies (d. 1213), Jacques de Vitry tells us that she sometimes lay in bed with “her spouse” for days on end, and “Suntyme thre dayes to-gadir or more, as hir semyd, she clyped oure lorde as a lité babbe dwelnynge bitwix hir pappys [and] played wip hym as with a childe” [sometimes three or more days at a stretch, as it seemed to her, she embraced our Lord as a little baby resting between her breasts and played with him as with a child]. Although in these last two cases the Christ-Child appears to the female saint by himself, the Virgin Mary often appears with her son, serving as an intermediary between him and the female visionary. Having been invited by the Virgin to “embrace her spouse,” the Dominican nun Agnes of Montepulciano (d. 1317) bound the Christ-Child to her “with tight arms and ... was filled with unspeakable sweetness.” Nor should
this be a cause of wonder," her biographer remarks, "for she had found him whom her soul loved" (Song of Songs 3:4). When the Virgin Mary comes to retrieve the Christ-Child an hour later, Agnes does not want to give him back, "to be separated from so sweet a spouse." Mary has no choice but to seize her son "with a kind of pious violence." The Christ-Child sometimes appeared to saints without at first revealing who he was. A fourteenth-century English exempla collection tells us about a certain woman who greatly desired to see Jesus in the form of a child. In church she sees a beautiful boy walking about and asks him if he knows his prayers. Reciting the "Ave Maria" for her, the boy disappears as soon as he reveals that he is the blessed fruit of Mary's womb.

Margery Kempe seems to hope that the Christ-Child will also appear to her unexpectedly in the course of her worldly ambit. She must have seen the image of St. Christopher painted over the portal of her parish church, and inferred from the story of Christopher's life that Jesus might appear to her in the guise of an ordinary child or adult. In medieval visions of the Christ-Child, hagiographers sometimes make clear his identity, before stating who he is, by noting that the little boy is exceedingly beautiful. In Christ's only external apparition to Kempe, he is easily recognizable on account of his handsomeness. When Kempe was suffering from post-partum depression, Christ "aperyd to hys creatur ... in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyvows, and most amyable that evyr myght be seen wyth mannys eye ... syttyng upon hir beddy syde" [appeared to his creature ... in the likeness of the most handsome, beautiful and courteous man that might ever be seen with human eye ... sitting upon her bedside] (55). Assuring Kempe of his love for her, Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving her with peace of mind.

I have already referred to the incident in which Kempe came across women carrying babies back in England. She describes a similar experience that happened to her in Rome, and compares it to the occasions on which she came across good-looking men. Kempe seems to hope that one of the infants or men she meets will turn out to be Christ:

when sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her armys, yf sche myth wety that thei wer ony men children, sche schuld than cryin, roryn and wepyn as thei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode. And yf sche myth an had hir wille, oftentymes sche
wolde a takyn the childeryn owt of the moderys armys and a kyssed hem in the sted of Criste. And yff sche sey a semly man, sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym, les than sche myth a seyn hym that was bothe God and man. And therfor sche cryed many tymes and ofsyn. (190–1)

[when she saw women in Rome carrying infants in their arms, if she discovered that any of these were male, she would cry, roar and weep as if she had seen Christ in his childhood. And if she could have had her will, she would have often taken the infants out of their mothers’ arms and kissed them in the place of Christ. And if she saw a handsome man, she experienced great pain in looking upon him, for fear that she might have seen him who was both God and man. And therefore she cried many times and often.]

This incident is similar to Kempe’s encounter with babies when she was in England, except that here she explicitly tells us that she reacts to the infants “as if” they were the Christ-Child himself. Somewhat surprisingly, Kempe does not seize — or “ravish” — these infants from their mothers’ arms, possibly because they are not willing to surrender them to a woman so overcome with emotion.55 Perhaps, too, Kempe does not appropriate these children because she realizes that they are not the boy of her desires. Whereas Catherine of Siena desired to kiss all the children in her mother’s kitchen because she found them so adorable, Kempe does not seem fond of babies in themselves, but only to appreciate them as sacramental reminders of the Christ-Child.55

Objects as well as people draw Kempe’s imagination to meditation on the humanity of Christ. While these objects, as signs, make him present in her soul, they also remind her of his physical absence. When Kempe sees a crucifix, she fancies that her heavenly spouse is holding his arms out to embrace her: “sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe” [many times she wished that the body on the cross would free its arms and embrace her as a sign of love] (66).56 Yet Kempe does not embrace the corpus on the cross, possibly because the people around her would not have considered
this a seemly thing to do. There is also the practical difficulty that Christ’s arms were not free to enfold her! Inaccessibility and impropriety were not issues when it came to the life-size effigies of the infant Jesus that were mass-produced in the later Middle Ages. These devotional objects gave Christ’s devotees the opportunity to embrace him physically. The fourteenth-century Dominican nun Margaretha Ebner, for example, lavished maternal attention on her Christ-Child statue, rocking it in its cradle, nursing it upon demand, and conversing flirtatiously with it. Although Kempe did not own such a statue, in Venice she came across a lady who allowed other women to venerate her effigy of the infant Jesus.

And the woman the which had the ymage in the chist, whan thei comyn in good citeys, sche toke owt the ymage owt of hir chist and sett it in worshepful wyfys lappys. And thei wold puttyn schirrys therupon and kyssyn it as thei it had ben God hymselfe. And whan the creatur sey the worshep and the reverens that thei dedyn to the ymage, sche was takyn wyth swet devocyon and swet meditacyons, that sche wept wyth gret sobbyng and lowde crying. And sche was mevyd in so mych the mor as, whil sche was in Inglond, sche had hy meditacyons in the byrth and the childhode of Crist. (177–8)

[When they came to good cities, the woman who had the effigy in the chest would take it out of her chest and place it in honorable wives’ laps. And they would put shirts on it and kiss it as if it were God himself. And when the creature saw the veneration and reverence that they showed to the effigy, she was overcome with sweet meditations and affection, and wept with great sobbing and loud crying. And she was all the more moved since back in England she had had lofty meditations on the birth and childhood of Christ.]

In this passage, Kempe does not use the word “ravishment” to describe the effect the Jesus doll has on her, but she indicates that she experienced an infusion of grace in beholding the Christ-Child effigy when she says that “sche was takyn wyth swet devocyon.” In her narration of this event, Kempe links the women’s enactment
of maternal behavior towards an image of the infant Jesus with her habit of meditating on Christ's childhood when she was in her own country.

Towards the beginning of her Book, Kempe recreates scenes from the childhood of Mary and the nativity of Christ in which she plays a central role. These visions follow upon Christ's instructions to lie down and ready herself for the contemplation he promised to inspire in her (73). In ceasing her activity and lying down, Kempe is in effect preparing herself to be ravished by Christ into a vision of him and his mother. Entering into the biblical narrative reconstructed in her imagination, Kempe carries out the spiritual directives of Franciscans who urged the devout to engage in participatory meditation on the life of Christ. In his Lignum vitae, for example, Bonaventure tells his reader to “contemplate that divine manger so that you may press your lips to the child’s feet and redouble your kisses.” With the flurry of a middle-class woman managing a household, Kempe bustles about begging for food and drink for the Holy Family and finding them lodgings. Whereas Bridget of Sweden in her Revelations describes how she witnessed with silent wonder the instantaneous and painless birth of Christ, Kempe misses the central event of the nativity since she is busy tending to the supposed material needs of the mother and her child. As did the saintly midwife Anastasia of medieval legend, Kempe becomes Mary’s handmaiden, arranging a bed for her and helping her care for the newborn. After Mary wraps the child with pieces of cloth, Kempe metaphorically “swathed hym wyth byttyr teerys of compas- sion, havyng mend of the scharp deth that he schuld suffyr for the lofe of synful men” [swaddled him with the bitter tears of compassion, having in mind the sharp death that he would suffer for love of sinners] (77–8). Kempe’s interactions with Jesus are usually very concrete, but in this case her affections for him substitute for physical gestures. Similarly, in his De quinque festivitatibus pueri Jesu, Bonaventure encourages those who have given birth to Christ spiritually in their souls to nourish him with holy meditations, bathe him with the warm fountains of devout tears, swathe him with the bands of chaste desires, carry him in the embraces of holy love, kiss him with the numerous feelings of devotion, and cherish him in the interior sanctuary of the mind. Whereas some medieval mystics focused on Christ’s infancy in order to avoid meditating on harsher subjects, Kempe is not afraid to see Christ’s future Pas-
sion foreshadowed in the discomforts he endured as an infant. The tendency of the medieval Christian imagination to conflate Christ's infancy and Passion can be seen in medieval accounts of the eucharist appearing as a bleeding infant. While many medieval saints had visions of the host transformed into the Christ-Child, Kempe, somewhat surprisingly, does not mention having had any. She does, however, bathe the Christ-Child in the chamber of her soul, harbor him and his mother in her bed, arrange for Mary to nurse him, and watch her swathe him with a white kerchief (371-2 & 377). Christ commends Kempe's spiritual motherhood when he tells her that she is a true mother to him and all the world (375).

The Book's emphasis upon Kempe's mothering of the Christ-Child has caused some scholars to criticize Margery for channeling her maternal affections into her adoration of the infant Jesus, while neglecting her own flesh-and-blood children. Even granting that Kempe adopted Jesus as a sort of perfect foster-child, a substitute for her own imperfect children, I think it would be unfair to dismiss her piety towards the Christ-Child as a mere displacement of maternal instincts. As Caroline Walker Bynum and Rosemary Hale

Figure 1: Woman bathing the Christ-Child, Aspremont Psalter, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 118, fol. 135r; reproduced with permission of the Bodleian Library.
have demonstrated, holy women tended to incorporate their social roles into their religious lives: they sought union with the divine by embodying their spirituality in the nurturing roles that were familiar to them.\textsuperscript{60} Their mothering of the Christ-Child was a positive route to holiness.

Holy women did not simply regard Jesus as their child or spouse; they also conflated these images. Since Mary was both the mother and bride of Christ in the medieval Christian imagination, it is understandable that religious women adopted these dual roles as well. In their exegesis of Psalm 18:6, medieval writers saw Jesus "as a bridegroom" who proceeded from the "bridal chamber" (thalamos) of Mary's womb.\textsuperscript{70} Conflation of spousal and filial imagery can also be seen in one of the legends of the virgin-martyr Catherine of Alexandria, whom Margery Kempe venerated.\textsuperscript{71} After Catherine converts to Christianity upon seeing an image of Mary and the Christ-Child, she has a vision in which the infant Jesus places a wedding ring upon her finger.\textsuperscript{72} Although late-medieval artists often portrayed Catherine of Siena marrying the adult Christ, according to her Miraci\textsuperscript{l} she was wed to the infant Jesus.\textsuperscript{73} Medieval men as well as women interacted with the Christ-Child as if he were their spouse. For example, Friedrich Sunder (d. 1328), chaplain of the female cloister at Engelthal, had a vision in which Mary prepared a bridal bed for him and her son: "then Jesus advanced to the little bed, and Mary ... joined the holy soul with the little Jesus. And they had such loving joy and pleasure with one another of embraces and kisses, with laughter and all divine pleasures."\textsuperscript{74}

Kempe seems to conflate spousal and filial images more than other holy women because even when she is imagining the Christ-Child as her son, she never loses sight of his husbandly regard for her or ceases to think of herself as his wife.\textsuperscript{75} The passage I have cited earlier in which she says that she is disturbed at meeting handsome men as well as baby boys illustrates her focus on Christ's manhood. Another good example of this occurs in the famous passage in which Christ gives Kempe permission to embrace her in bed as a woman does her husband:

\begin{quote}
thu mayst boldely, when thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddryd husbond, as thy dereworthy derlyng, and as for thy sweete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr, and wil
\end{quote}
that thou love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to
love hir hushonde. (196, emphasis mine)

[when you are in bed, you may boldly embrace me
as your wedded husband, as your precious darling,
and as your sweet son, for I wished to be loved as a
son is loved by his mother, and wish that you love
me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her hus-
band.]

As Sarah Beckwith points out, Kempe's relationships with Jesus —
as both her spouse and child — seem almost incestual. 86

Although, throughout the Book, Kempe conceives of Christ
multifariously as her father, child, and husband, she seems to privi-
lege spousal imagery over the filial and paternal. Since Kempe al-
ways relates to a male Christ, 87 I think we are justified in using a
heterosexual model to interpret her language of mystical ravish-
ment. 88 While Kempe seems to enjoy being swept off her feet by
an assertive, masculine, and romantic Christ, in her meditations
she customarily imagines Jesus as a helpless baby and suffering man
of sorrows, that is, as a male in need of her compassion and tender
care. 89 By combining these passive and active images of Christ,
Kempe can be said to achieve a sort of marital equality with her
heavenly spouse. 90

Like the bride in the Song of Songs who desires her beloved,
Kempe is anxious to be united with her spouse, whether he is em-
bodyed as an infant or a man in the prime of his youth. Considering
Kempe's emphasis upon Christ as her loving husband and the
medieval characterization of holy women as spouses of the infant
Jesus, Kempe's use of the word “ravish” to describe how she is mys-
tically drawn into contemplation of Christ's childhood does not
seem to be a mere coincidence. In one of his sermons, Bernard of
Clairvaux uses the Latin word rapere just as Kempe uses the word
“ravish” when he states that “the perfect soul desires to be rav-
ished (rapit) into the most chaste embraces of her spouse, saying,
‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth’ (Song of Songs 1:1).” 91
Although we may be shocked at Ovid's claim in the Ars amatoria
that women desire to be raped, Kempe's autobiography suggests
that at least one medieval woman wished to ravished in a mystical
sense. 92
NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2004, in a session on "Mysticism in the Fifteenth Century: Reception and Innovation." With reference to my title, it should be noted that Middle English had the noun "ravishing," but not the word "ravishment." See the entry for "ravishing" in the Middle English Dictionary, ed. Robert E. Lewis, Sherman M. Kuhn and Hans Kurath, (Ann Arbor, 1952-2001).


5. Here and throughout this paper I cite the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible.

6. An example of the word "ravish" used for Paul's mystical experience occurs in the Dialogue of Catherine of Siena, in which God says, "I rueschide hym [Paul] to be pridele heune, that is, to the heigthe of the trinitye" [I ravished him to the third heaven, that is, to the height of the Trinity], The Orchard of Syn, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, EETS o.s. 258 (London, 1969), p. 183. For other examples of Paul's "ravishment," see the MED. The ME word "ravish" was also used to describe the taking up of Enoch and Elijah, Stanzaic Life of Christ, ed. Frances A. Foster, EETS o.s. 156 (London, 1926), p. 272.

7. In her autobiography, Kempe refers to "Hyltons boke" twice in her listing of the devotional texts with which she was familiar, The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Barry Windeatt (Harlow, 2000), pp. 115 & 280. Henceforth, all references to Kempe's Book will be to this edition. As Barry Windeatt notes,
Kempe is probably referring to Hilton’s Scale of Perfection, although “[i]t may be that Kempe’s reference to Hilton’s work also embraces his Epistle on the Mixed Life, for this exposition . . . has a relevance for Kempe’s own vocation,” p. 10. For an edition, see that by S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, Walter Hilton’s Mixed Life Edited from Lambeth Palace MS 472 (Salzburg, 1986).


9. *Scale*, p. 84.

10. Kempe refers to the text by its Latin name, the *Stimulus amoris, Book*, pp. 115 & 280. Authorship of the Latin version is assigned to James of Milan, although the book was formerly attributed to Bonaventure.


12. The MED gives only two entries for the ME word “extasey,” a word ultimately derived from Greek. One of the passages is from the Wycliffite Bible, which translates the Latin word *extasis* of Acts 3:10 as “extasie.” In the other passage, the resurrected Jesus tells his disciples that he knows “that ye be in great extacye / whether I be ryson verelye” [you are in great doubt as to whether I have truly risen], *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS s.s. 3 (London, 1974), p. 369. Wolfgang Riches cites an additional reference: The *Doctrine of the Horte* explains that “[e]xstasik love . . . alieneth the soule for fro hire mynde vnto the loue of pat ping the whiche it loueth” [ecstatic love draws a soul from her mind unto the love of that which she loves], *Middle English Mystics*, trans. Bernard Standring (London, 1981), p. 92. ME also had the verb “rapen” and the noun “rapt,” but not the noun “rapture,” which, according to W. W. Skeat, “seems to be a pure coinage; there is no F. [French] *rapture*, nor Late L. [Latin] *raptura.*, *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1958), p. 501. The *Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* uses both the past participles “ravished” and “rapt” to translate “in extasi menis raptus” and similar Latin expressions, ed. Robert Easting, EETS o.s. 318 (Oxford, 2002), pp. 34–7, 40 & 43.


16. On the semantics of *raptus* in late-medieval legal texts, with particular reference to Cecily Chaumpaigne’s charge of *raptus* directed against Chaucer, see


19. *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, vol. 4 (Westminster, Maryland, 1948), 2–2, q. 175, a. 2, ad 1; *Summa theologica* (Madrid, 1956). In this passage, Aquinas refers to the etymology of the word “ecstasy,” which, as Elliott notes, literally means “standing outside one’s senses” (cf. ST, 1–2, q. 28, a. 3). The passage cited above occurs within Aquinas’s question on raptus (2–2, q. 175), which he considers a sub-category of "graces freely given."

20. On the language of violent eroticism in late-medieval mystical texts, see Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. K. Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 83–6. Violence is also a characteristic of raptus in the sense of taking goods by force. In Matthew 11:12, for example, Jesus states that those who wish to obtain the kingdom of heaven must use violence: "regnun caelorum vim patitur, et violenti rapiunt illud" [the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away]. In his *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, Lydgate translates the word repere as "ravish": "fior by record of Seyn Matthew, / The hevene (as by hys sentence), / Wommen ys by violence" [For as St. Matthew says, heaven is won by violence]. Lest his reader take this literally, he quotes John Chrysostom to the effect that one should "Ravisse, lyk a champion, / The noble hihe hevenly place, / By vertu only & by grace" [ravish, like a champion, the high heavenly place, yet only by virtue and grace], *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS e.s. 77, 83 & 92 (Millswood, 1975; rpt. of 1899, 1901, 1994 eds.), pp. 12–13.


23. Rolle seems to be thinking here of mystics' loss of bodily sensation. The ME lives of holy women found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114 provide examples of this kind of ravishment. According to Jacques de Viiry, when Mary of Oignies fasted and received the eucharist, "she felid ... hir spirit as departid fro hir body ... she was abstracate froo sensibl things and raveshyd abouen himself in an excexe (*in quoquum excessu rapit*) [she felt her spirit depart from her body ... she was withdrawn from sensible things and ravished above herself in an ecstasy], "Prosalegenden," ed. C. Horstmann, *Anglia* 8 (1885), 141; *Vita* of Mary of Oignies, in *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 5 of June (23), p. 552. In his life of St. Elizabeth of Spalbeck, Philip of Clairvaux says that during her "raueschyng" (*raptus*) she was "alle starke as an ymage of tree or stoon, wipouten felynge of moynge and brethe, but no pinge maye be touched or stiryd of hir, not as mykel as hir litel fynge" [she was completely still like a tree or a stone, without movement and breath, so that she could in no way be stirred, not even her little finger], "Prosalegenden," p. 108; *Vita* of St. Elizabeth of Spalbeck, in *Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum bibliothecae regiae bruxellensis Pars I. Codices latini membranei*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 1886), p. 364. On rapture in the lives of thirteenth-century Beguines, see Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the Vitae of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester, 1994), pp. 10–23.

24. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life* by Richard Rolle, trans. M. L. del Mastro (Garden City, 1981), pp. 235–6; *Incendium amoris*, ed. Margaret Deanesy (Manchester, 1915), p. 254. An example of the latter type of rapture is mentioned in the Summoner's Prologue, in which he tells us "How that a frere raussshed was to helle / In spirit ones by a visioun" [how a friar was once ravished to hell in a vision], in which he sees a swarm of friars nesting in Satan's arse, III.1676–7.


26. *Fire*, p. 237; *Incendium*, pp. 255–6. Rolle's *excessus* here is a common Latin expression used for "ecstasy." Hugh of St. Victor, for example, glosses the word "ecstasy" as follows: "Extasim, id est mentis excessum [ecstasy, that is, a stepping outside of one's mind], quoted by Riehle, *Middle English Mystics*, p. 92. Similarly, Bonaventure concludes his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* by quoting Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, in which he tells his friend, "Etenim te ipso et omnibus immensurabili et absoluvo purae mentis excessu, ad superessentialen divinarum tenebrarum radium, omnia deserens et ab omnibus absolutus ascendes" [And indeed, when you have departed, in pure mind, immeasurably and absolutely from yourself and all things, abandoning all things, and freed from all things, you will ascend to the superessential ray].
27. *Emendatio vitae & Orationes ad hominem nominis Ihesu*, ed. Nicholas Watson (Toronto, 1995), pp. 56–62. In the corresponding chapter of his ME tradition, Misyn almost always uses “ravish” to translate *rapere*, as in the following exclamation: “O holy gost, þat giftis grace quher þou wille, cum in to me & ravish (raphe) me to þe” [O Holy Ghost, who give grace where you will, enter into me and ravish me], p. 123; *Emendatio vitae*, p. 57.

28. *Mending*, p. 79; *Emendatio*, p. 57.

29. *Mending*, p. 82; *Emendatio*, p. 60. It should be pointed out that Misyn does not use the word “ravish” in his ME translation of this passage: “He it is þat þou hast & luffyd; criste is þin: halde hym” [he is the one whom you have sought and loved; Christ is yours — hold him], p. 125. A similar idea appears in Rolle’s *Incendium*: “þis is þe lufe þat criste rauyschis (rapit) in to our hertis” [this is the love that ravishes Christ into our hearts], p. 99; *Incendium*, p. 271. Rolle repeats this idea in his lyrical “Song of the Love of Jesus”: “Luf rauyschys Criste inty ower hert; I wate na lust it lyke” [Love ravishes Christ into our hearts; I know of no other pleasure that is like it]. *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Oxford, 1931), p. 44. Note how Rolle is careful to distinguish between spiritual and sensual ravishment. As an analogue to Rolle’s idea of the soul’s boldness in seizing Christ, Richle cites Augustine’s “anima capit Deum” [the soul seizes God], *Middle English Mystics*, p. 95. In the prologue to her tale, the Prioress uses the “ravish” in a similar way when she prays to the Virgin Mary, who “ravishedest down fro the Deite. / Thurgh thyne humblisse, the Goost that in th’alighte” [ravished down from the deity, through your humility, the Holy Ghost that descended upon you], VII, pp. 469–70.


33. Commenting on Kempe’s insistence upon sleeping between two young women when lodging for the night on her way to Aachen, Ute Stargardt notes “the ludicrous situation of an old crone’s virtue being guarded by young women instead of their honor being protected by an old woman past her prime and sexual allure,” *The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Ger-

34. *Middle English Mystics*, pp. 38 & 96.


40. Jesus earlier names the three types of tears Margery sheds: tears of compunction, devotion and compassion, *Book*, p. 100.

41. For the influence that the lives of saintly women had on Kempe’s sense of her own identity, see, among others, Susan Dickman, "Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 150–68.

43. “Prosalegenden,” p. 172; *AASS*, vol. 5 of June (23), p. 566.


45. “locutio et actu ad amplexandum Sponsum suum ipsam curialiter invita-
bat... quem restrictis manibus ad se stringens, ipsumque sibi approprians,
inefabilis jubilat tripudio, et indicibilis dulcedine replebatur. Nec mirum,
quia invenerat quem diligebat anima sua... Cumque sic per alcius horac
spatium absentiam filii, propter Agnetis solatium, sustinuisset; tandem finem
visioni volens imponere, coepit Agnetem requirere, ut filium suum ei red-
tere non tardaret. Quod cum Agnes omnino renuaret, asserens se nullatenus
[posse] a Sponso tam dulcissimo separari... ipsa Dei genetrix filium suum
manibus apprehendens, quadam pia violencia, ad se trahere conabatur” [by
word and gesture she [the Virgin] graciously invited her [Agnes] to embrace
her spouse... Clasping him tightly with her arms and receiving him as if he
were her own son, she rejoiced with ineffable delight and was filled with un-
speakable sweetness. Nor should this be a cause of wonder since she had
found him whom her soul loved.... And when the Virgin had endured the
absence of her son for about an hour, for the sake of consoling Agnes, at last
she wished the vision to come to an end and admonished Agnes not to delay
in giving her son back to her. When Agnes altogether refused to comply, say-
ing that she in no way could be separated from so sweet a spouse, the moth-
er of God seized her son in her arms with a kind of pious violence, and tried
to pull him to herself], Raymond of Capua, *Vita of Agnes of Montepulciano*,
*AASS*, vol. 2 of April (20), p. 794.

46. London, British Library, MS Additional 18363, fol. 43r–v. This tale also ap-
ppears in Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange,
vol. 2 (Cologne, 1851), pp. 87–8.

47. On the saint’s popularity in later-medieval England, see David Farmer, *The
Christopher in Mediaeval Wallpainting (London, 1929); and H. H. Brindley,
“Notes on the Mural Paintings of St. Christopher in English Churches,” *The

48. For example, in a thirteenth-century life of St. Edmund of Abingdon, the
Christ-Child appears to the boy Edmund without at first identifying himself:
“apparuit ei speciosus forma prae filiis hominum, candore niveo niveus, et
rubore roseo rubicundus” [He appeared to her beautiful before the sons of
men (Ps. 44:3), bright with snowy whiteness and reddy with rosy redness],

49. I characterize this vision as “external” because Kempe describes Christ as sitting at her bedside, rather than as being inside her soul, which is how she usually localizes Jesus and Mary in her visions.

50. Similarly, Kempe has a vision of Christ, the “semeliest man that evry myth be seen er thowt” [the most handsome man that could ever be seen or imagined], being brutally stabbed, Book, p. 369.

51. As Ann Clark Bartlett has suggested, this scene seems to be influenced by the romantic trope of Christ the knight rescuing a maiden in distress, Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Literature (Ithaca, 1995), pp. 56–8. Considering that the word “ravish” was sometimes used in ME religious texts in reference to God’s rescuing of a soul from danger, Margery can be said to have been “ravished” by Christ from mental anguish. In The Imitation of Christ the devout soul prays to God that he “[r]avish me and deluyer fro alle indurable conforme of creatures” [rescue and deliver me from all transitory creature comforts], The First English Translation of the Imitatio Christ, ed. B. J. H. Biggs, EETS o.s. 309 (Oxford, 1997), p. 97.

52. In note 214/2 of her edition of The Book of Margery Kempe, Hope Emily Allen calls attention to a late-fifteenth-century Italian woodcarving of the Madonna and Child, which is unusual in that the infant Jesus is not held in the Virgin’s arms, but rests upon her lap and is detachable, EETS o.s. 212 (London, 1961; rpt. of 1940 ed.). For a picture of the statue, see Tancred Borenius, A Catalogue of the Pictures, etc., at 18 Kensington Palace Gardens, London, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1923), plate 59. One cannot help but speculate that if ever Kempe saw such an image, she may well have “ravished” the baby Jesus or at least have been tempted to do so. A medieval miracle-story recounts how a woman stole a Christ-Child statue from the arms of his mother in order to force Mary to bring about the release of her abducted son. For a version of this story, see Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda aurea, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, vol. 2 (Tavarnuzze, 1998), pp. 909–10. This tale is also depicted in the wall paintings in the lady chapel of Winchester Cathedral, M. R. James and E. W. Tristam, The Wall Paintings in Eton College Chapel and the Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral, Walpole Society 17 (Oxford, 1928/9), plate 21.


54. A similar passage occurs in one of the Meditations of pseudo-Anselm, “De passione Christi”: “Dulcis in extensiore brachiorum; extendens enim brachia nobis insinuavit quod amplexus nostros ipse desiderat” [He is sweet in the ex-
tension of his arms; for by extending his arms out to us he indicates that he desires our embraces. PL 158, col. 762a.


57. Accompanied by two Franciscan friars from Jerusalem, this woman probably brought back her effigy as a souvenir from Bethlehem. According to his biographer Thomas of Celano, St. Francis was instrumental in reawakening devotion to Christ-Child, who “in multorum cordibus oblivionis fuerit datus” [had been forgotten in the hearts of many], Vita prima, in Fontes Franciscani, ed. Enrico Menestò and Stefano Brufani (Assisi, 1995), p. 362. Thomas tells how Francis had a crèche scene set up one Christmas in order to enkindle the townspeople’s faith. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Kempe’s text mentions two Franciscan friars fostering veneration of a Jesus doll.

58. “Contemplare itaque nunc, anima mea, divinum illum praesepe, ut pueri pedibus labia tua figas, et oscula gemines” [And now, o my soul, contemplate that divine manger, so that you may press your lips upon the infant’s feet and redouble your kisses], in Opera omnia, ed. A. C. Peltier, vol. 12 (Paris, 1868), p. 70.

59. Revelaciones, pp. 187-90; Liber, pp. 485-7. Gail McMurray Gibson points out the self-exaltation involved in Kempe’s insistence upon being the Virgin’s handmaiden, The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago, 1989), pp. 50-1. On artistic representations of the Bridget’s vision, in which she is usually portrayed as a prayerful observer of the nativity, see Henrik Cornell, The Iconography of the Nativity of Christ (Uppsala, 1924).


62. "Revera suavis est, quando nutritur sanctis meditationibus, quando balneatur devoti et calidis lacrymarum fontibus, quando involvitur castis desideriorum velaminibus, portatur in sanctae dilectionis amplexibus, osculatur crebris devotionis affectibus et confovetur in interioribus mentis sinibus. Sic igitur nascitur spiritualiter" [Indeed, he is sweet when he is nourished with holy meditations, bathed with the devout, warm fountains of kisses, wrapped up in the chaste folds of desires, carried in the embraces of holy love, kissed with frequent affections of devotion, and nourished in the inner parts of the mind. Thus the child is spiritually born], in Opera omnia, vol. 8 (Quaracchi, 1898), pp. 91–2.

63. Christ criticized blessed Margarita, disciple of St. Umilità, for wishing to taste the "honey" of his infancy, but not the "gall" of his bitter Passion; see Petroff, *Visionary Literature*, pp. 11–2.


66. Perhaps this is due to the priority Kempe gives to spousal imagery. Christ compares her emotional reception of the eucharist to the reunion of a wife and her long-awaited spouse, *Book*, p. 376.

67. Elsewhere Christ expresses his gratitude to Kempe for being his mother’s handmaiden and for helping her “to keypn hym in hyis chylhood” [take care of him in his childhood], without naming the specific ministrations she performs for him, p. 364. By imagining Mary and Jesus nestled within her, Kempe likens herself to the figure of St. Anne in the Anna Selbdritt images of the later Middle Ages. Somewhat surprisingly, Kempe, unlike other holy women such as Margaret Eber, does not imagine herself nursing the infant Jesus, Hale, “Imitatio Mariae,” pp. 196–7; “Rocking the Cradle,” pp. 212–3. In an early medieval Irish poem a nun expresses great joy in nursing Jesus every evening, *Early Irish Poetry*, ed. James Carney (Cork, 1965), p. 51. One late-medieval female saint had a vision in which “the breasts (including her own) of the entire heavenly chorus of virgins swell with milk on Christmas day, as they think of nursing the baby Jesus,” quoted in David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 120. For an image of a woman preparing a bath for the infant Jesus, while Mary rests on a bed, see Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 2, fig. 110. For a representation of a woman (without a halo) bathing an aureoled Christ-Child that appears in the margins of the Psalter (ca. 1300) made for Joffroy d’Aspremont and his wife Isabelle de Kievaing (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 118, fol. 135 recto), see the figure accompanying this article. The Hours made for this couple, which formed a pair with the Psalter, also has a marginal image of a woman bathing a child (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, MS Felton 1254–3, fol. 10 recto), except that here he is lacking a halo. See Lilian M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley, 1966), figs. 704–5. For a recent study of the illuminations in these manuscripts, see Nigel Morgan, “Gendered Devotions and Social Rituals: The Aspremont Psalter-'Hours' and the Image of the Patron in Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth-Century France,” *Melbourne Art Journal* 5 (2003), pp. 5–24. The woman in these marginalia may be one of the midwives present at the nativity (see note 60 above), but she may also be a contemporary lay woman. Medieval men as well as women desired to bathe the Christ-Child. In the poem “Philomena” composed by the Franciscan Archbishop of Canterbury John Pecham (d. 1292), the narrator exclaims, “O quam dulce balneum / ei praeparassem / O quam
libens umeris / aquam adportassem / Praesto matri virgini / semper ministrassem / Pauperisque parvuli / pannulos lavassem" [O how sweet a bath I would have prepared for him, O how willingly I would have brought the water with my arms, would always have been at hand to serve the virgin mother and to wash the swaddling clothes of the poor little one], *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, ed. Clemens Blume and Guido M. Drees, vol. 50 (New York, 1961; rpt. of 1907 ed.), p. 605.

68. For negative assessments of Kempe’s maternity, see Stargardt and Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ* (Philadelphia, 1995), pp. 91–3. Margaret Gallyon suggests that Kempe’s silence “on the subject of her children may be defended on the grounds, that although her Book has been described as an autobiography, it is more accurately a spiritual autobiography, the story of a soul’s journey to God,” *Margerit Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England* (Norwich, 1995), p. 51.

69. As Caroline Walker Bynum explains, “[t]he somatic quality of visionary experience was thus, in part, a continuation of women’s somatic social responsibility. Not only did female mystics kiss, bathe and suckle babies in visions . . . they actually acted out maternal and nuptial roles in the liturgy, decorating life-sized statues of the Christchild for the Christmas crèche or dressing in bridal garb when going to receive their bridegroom in the eucharist,” “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992), p. 198.

70. Similarly, in her discussion of medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs, Ann W. Astell notes that “Mary’s Bridegroom in these texts assumes the striking form of an Infant Boy nursing at the breast,” *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 48–9.


72. For a fourteenth-century German version of this legend, see H. Varnhagen, *Zur Geschichte der Legende der Katharina von Alexandrien* (Erlangen, 1891), pp. 18–23. For late-medieval artistic representations of the marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria to the Christ-Child, see Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton, 1951), pp. 107–8, figs. 100 & 103. Lewis notes that it is unclear whether the story of Catherine’s marriage
to the Christ-Child was known in medieval England, *The Cult of St. Katherine*, p. 108.


75. Bynum likewise remarks that Kempe was “intensely” attracted “to Christ’s maleness,” *Holy Feast*, p. 246.


77. It is a male anchorite who tells Kempe that “ye sowkyn eyn on Crystys brest” [you suck even at the breast of Christ], *Book*, p. 74. She herself does not use the image of Jesus as mother.

78. Karma Lochrie’s problematizing of scholars’ assumption of a heterosexual model of gender relations as a necessary point of reference for the language of medieval mysticism does not seem applicable to the case of Kempe, “Mystical Acts,” pp. 180–209. Kathy Lavezzo offers a homoerotic interpretation of Kempe’s interaction with the women who lavish their affections on the Christ-Child effigy, “Sob and Sighs between Women: The Heteroerotics of Compassion in The Book of Margery Kempe,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenberg and Carla Freccero (New York, 1996), pp. 175–98. In my view, this reading ignores Kempe’s desire for an exclusive spousal relationship with a male Christ. In her meditation on the Passion, for example, Kempe joins other women in tending to Christ’s dead body deposited from the cross, but she confesses that she had a great desire “to an had the precyous body be hirself alone” [to have had the precious body all to herself], *Book*, p. 350. In other words, Kempe does not want to share Christ’s body with other women.

80. This can been seen in the words that God the Father uses when he takes her by the hand and marries her before the court of heaven: as his “weddyd wyfe,” she shall “be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do” [be obedient and submissive to do what I bid you do]. God goes on to tell her that “ther was neyvr childe so buxom to the modyr as I schal be to the” [there never was a child so obedient to its mother as I shall be to you], Book, p. 192. Although Kempe’s spiritual husband gives her orders, he is also her obedient son.
