The opening line to the prologue of *The Book of Margery Kempe* bills the work as “a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for sinful wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and unspecabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu . . . that now in ower days to us unworthy deyneth to exercysen hys nobeley and hys goodnesse.” Thus Margery and/or her scribe/collaborator immediately identifies the book’s readership as sinners who are in need of the savior’s mercy and goodness and its purpose as didactic and redemptive. The main character, we are told, will be “a synful caytyf” who is drawn to the love of Jesus (Prologue, 13–14). The book’s famously dramatic first chapter makes it clear that the prologue’s mentions of sin are not merely conventional; the reader is plunged in medias res with an early episode of Margery’s madness, triggered by an unconfessed sin, and much follows from this trauma.

Julian of Norwich, Margery’s older contemporary and today her only serious rival as the most famous English medieval woman writer, organizes her *Revelation of Love* around the question of sin and the related issues of damnation and mercy. Like Margery, Julian experiences direct communication from God and attempts to interpret it in the course of her text, but the two writers’ methods could hardly be more different. Julian tackles big questions such as the paradox between a loving God and the necessity for hell and damnation and works them out theologically, by carefully categorizing thoughts and actions both human and divine and by interrogating the fundamental nature of the basic concepts of sin, evil, and mercy. Margery, by contrast, attacks similar questions through an intensely personalized autobiographical structure in which her own uniqueness is
equally foregrounded with her work’s utility for other sinners. Margery does not deal in theological categories but in personal conversations with God and Jesus and in stories about flesh-and-blood people: herself especially, but also her husband, her children (conspicuous by their near-absence), and the rest of the world, broadly divided into those who supported her and those who opposed her. The presentation of Margery’s spiritual and psychic development through vivid incident, the alternation of support and revilement, and extended conversations with living people, two persons of the Trinity, and numerous scriptural figures builds what Gail McMurray Gibson has called a “theater of devotion,” a playing out of forces both internal to herself and socially constitutive.3

I want to propose a reading of Margery’s approach to sin that sorts out, as far as it is possible to do so, what she drew from her likely sources and analogues and what she contributed from her own experience, psychology, and unique method of structuring her book, in collaboration with her scribes. When Margery speaks and writes about sin, she frequently draws on known sources for terms, categories, and explanations but ends up radically reinterpreting them to achieve an idiosyncratic and highly personal vision of sin and its functions within herself and in the world.4 Any discussion of Margery’s attitudes to sin will need to take account of both her stated, conscious goals—to tell her own story of humbled pride, to reform sinners and draw them into the mercy of God, and ultimately to use her own sins to generate forgiveness for others—and her unconscious desires and fears, which often work in ways that she herself does not fully understand and which do not result in a program or structure readily imitable by her fellow Christians. To this end, I will focus on the sins of lust and pride, which appear more frequently than any others in the book and are closely related. I hope that my conclusions will contribute to the ongoing debate over where to position Margery on a continuum between a devotional subject explicable by the available models of her day and a unique individual who can be subjected to some degree of psychological analysis.

I. MARGERY AS SINFUL SUBJECT

The characterization in the prologue of Margery as a “synful caytyf” moves from a statement of general purpose to an exemplification of it in the book’s subject, “this creatur.” Both her exemplary character and her
individual traits come up immediately in a capsule description of Jesus’ handling of Margery:

How mercyfully, how benyngly, and how charytefully he meved and stered a synful caytyf unto hys love, which synful caytyf many yerys was in wyl and in purpose, thow steryng of the Holy Gost, to folwyn [oure] Savyowr, makyng gret behestys of fastyngys, wyth many other dedys of penawns. And evyr sche was turned ayen abak in tym of temptacyon—lech unto the reedspyrr whech boweth wyth every wynd and nevyr is stable les than no wynd bloweth—unto the tyme that ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Jhesu, havynge pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur, turnyd helth into sekenesse, prosperyte into adversyte, worshep into repref, and love into hatered. (Prologue, 13–22)

Margery is “in wyl and in purpose” to follow Christ, making great promises (“behestys”) to fast and do penance, but she is turned back (we are not yet told specifically how) by temptations, an exemplary motion reinforced by the proverbial image of a bending reed. Finally, Christ intervenes by turning her human and worldly advantages to their opposites, breaking down her whole being as a worldly creature. This is the first mention of the “discourse of revilement,” which will recur frequently as a major force in Margery’s story.5

But even at this early, explicitly programmatic moment in the prologue, profound ambiguity emerges as the hallmark of Margery’s sinful identity and its place in God’s plan. The phrase “in wyl and in purpose” emphasizes intention as a crucial factor, and indeed Margery often uses it as an explanatory or expiating factor in her own lapses; the following phrase, “makyng gret behestys,” however, problematizes the virtue of intention by implying that her outer declarations of purpose exceed her inner will or purpose to fulfill them. Furthermore, although “tym of temptacyon” vaguely implies that the devil is interfering with Margery’s resolve, throughout the book every one of Margery’s temptations (identified as such) comes as a test, a purification, or a punishment from God, sometimes but not always with the devil as his implicit agent. The ambiguity of intent and purpose intensifies in the following lines when we learn that “this creatur” (the first use of Margery’s characteristic epithet) “many yerys had gon wyl and evyr ben unstable” (Prologue, 23–24). The wordplay of *wyl* (astray) complicates the meaning of *wyl* (will) a few lines earlier: Was it an initially good purpose
frustrated by temptation or only an outer boast that concealed her inner instability?

Margery’s “tym of temptacyon” is unspecified, and the unstable chronology of the prologues and the book as a whole makes it hard to pin down. Following the comment about her inconstancy is the assertion that Margery was “parfythly drawen and steryd to entren the wey of hy perfeccyon,” but immediately after this (following the temporal adverb then) we learn how, by the will of God, “sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym,” presumably a reference to her postpartum dementia in the first chapter (Prologue, 24–25, 30–31). If the time of temptation is actually before the birth of her first child, then it is a feature of her earlier life that we learn nothing more about; but if (as is much more likely) the chronology here is amiss, and this is a reference to her subsequent temptations, then all of the conflicting and contradictory aspects of the latter are glossed over in this brief mention. Immediately after this, the prologue refers to the breakdown of her worldly prosperity: “Her werdly goodys, whech wer plentyvows and abundawnt at that day, in lytyl whyle after wer ful bareyn and bare. Than was pompe and pryde cast down and leyd on syde” (Prologue, 33–35). This statement presumably refers to the failure of Margery’s business ventures described in 1.2, to which a similar moral will be assigned in that chapter.

The remainder of the prologue is concerned with the heaven-sent adversities and hardships that came to Margery, her devotion and crying, and the circumstances of the book’s composition and writing. At this point, the reader is left with the impression that Margery’s story provides an exemplum of pride cast down, followed by high devotions and continued purgative worldly revilement that raise Margery all the higher in God’s sight; all these things do, in fact, structure and inform much of the subsequent narrative. But the prologue absurdly telescopes the motions of sin and temptation in the book: the humbling of Margery’s pride happens in the second chapter, and the tumultuous and painful struggles she undergoes over the course of many years expose the instability and uncertainty beneath the prologue’s tidy scheme.

The narrative proper begins with a dramatic episode with sin at its center. Margery Kempe, “xx yer of age or sumdele mor,” has a very difficult pregnancy, and after the child is born, she despairs of her life and summons her confessor, “for sche had a thyng in conscyens whech sche had neyvr schewyd beforn that tyme in alle hyr lyfe” (1.1.175–82). Her confessor rebukes her before she can properly confess, and between her fear of damnation and the confessor’s reproof, Margery goes “owt of hir mende
and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys” (1.1.199–200). The indeterminacy of this fault seems deliberate, and no reason is given for the narrator’s failure to disclose it. We do learn the reason she had not confessed the sin (the devil had convinced her that she could do private penance and be forgiven), but we are not told that either God or the devil sends the agents of her madness, fire-breathing “develys” who drag her around and tell her that she must forsake and deny Christianity and all her family and friends (she does [1.1.202]).

More generally, and more tantalizingly, she “knew no vertu ne goodnesse; sche desyryd all wykkydnesse,” leaving other specific sins possible but unnamed (1.1.212–13). We are told that she said and did just what the “spyrytys” tempted her to do and say (1.1.213–14). The relationship between the “develys” and the “spyrytys” here is unclear. If they are identical, then Margery, in a device familiar from hagiography, casts temptation as a threat of violence (“greet thretyngys” [1.1.206–7]), raising the possibility that her own temptations were subjectively violent (as they are later in the book). If, however, they are different, then the working of the “spyrytys” is both more sinister and harder to resist than the devils, even if both are sent from outside her. Whatever these spirits are, they work at a deeply interior level, damaging Margery’s will and purpose; temptation is perceivable as a psychological process.

It is possible that, as happens later in the book, God and the devil work together to chastise Margery (though Christ’s first question to her when he appears, “Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?” would belie this [1.1, 232]). But the narrative leaves the clear impression that it is Margery’s own fears (of damnation and rebuke) that drive her out of her wits, unlike later episodes of temptation, in which some bad thought on Margery’s part precipitates an intervention by God, the devil, or both. This crucial episode marks the first time we see Margery undergoing thoughts, feelings, and experiences that are unique to her, explicable neither by a system of reward and punishment for thoughts or actions nor by a coherent devotional program. In Lynn Staley’s terms, we could say that the author Kempe has designed this dramatic scene to bring Christ to the character Margery in her hour of greatest need, and indeed it is an effective narrative strategy. 6 But if we wish to see Margery Kempe as a more integrated individual with an imperfect mind and body (an “identification” in a more modern sense than the book’s writer intends), then the episode is a formative experience that lacks tight spiritual or devotional moorings.
Several of Margery’s most influential sources refer specifically to the problem of the unconfessed sin. Bridget of Sweden, whom Margery greatly admired and emulated, reports God saying, “I shall refuse to absolve the sin of a person who has not cared enough to ask my pardon for a small sin… a venial sin that could have been pardoned through contrition becomes a serious one through negligence and scorn.”7 Bridget inveighs elsewhere against secret sins, and she devotes a whole chapter of her *Revelations* to the story of a monk who had an unconfessed sin, was tormented greatly in body and mind because of it, and achieved peace only after Bridget convinced him to confess it.8 The *Meditationes Vitae Christi* notes that the kind of shame that prevents one from confessing “leads to sin and destroys the glory of the conscience.”9 Given such a clear doctrine on secret sin (not to mention the fear of being branded a Lollard for not believing in the necessity of confession), the mental violence Margery experiences is not altogether surprising. She refers the fault for her secrecy to the devil, but she clearly knew that she herself was responsible for confessing properly. Although the abrupt transition in the next chapter to Margery as an example of pride and vainglory thrusts readers rapidly into a more teleological narrative, we should be alive to the potential consequences of this early trauma as we examine Margery’s subsequent personal and idiosyncratic self-presentations.

In 1.17 Margery herself provides a short list of her own sins. She has just given birth to what would be her final child, and Jesus tells her not to have any more children and instructs her to go to Norwich and speak with Richard Caister, vicar of St. Stephen’s.10 She does so, asking him to speak with her “in the lofe of God.” Caister’s words, if he managed any, are not recorded, but Margery tells him many things about herself:

Sche … schewyd hym all the wordys whech God had reveyled to hyr in hyr sowl[e]. Sythen sche schewyd hym al hyr maner of levyng fro hyr chyldhd as ny as it wolde come to hir mende—how unkynd sche had ben ageyn owyr Lord Jhesu Crist, how prowde and veyne sche had ben in hir aport, how obstynat ageyns the lawes of God, and how envyows ageyn hir evyn-Cristen; sythen, whan it plesyd owyr Lord Crist Jhesu, how sche was chastysed wyth many tribulacyons and horrorbyl temptacyons, and aftyrward how sche was fed and comfortyd wyth holy medytacyons and specyal in the mende of owyr Lordys Passyon. (1.17.1225, 1230–40)
Margery presents her way of life since childhood exclusively in terms of her faults and sins: unkindness against Christ, pride, vanity in her bearing, obstinacy against God’s laws, and envy for other people. Consciousness of her own sins was central to Margery’s identity, and she has obviously meditated on those sins and grouped them into categories. Pride was a constant danger for her, and a key early episode (as we shall shortly see) establishes pride as an omnipresent (and never resolved) force in her life.

The timing of this conversation—just after the birth of her youngest child—inves comparison with her episode of madness just after the birth of her eldest. Then, an unconfessed sin started a chain of events that culminated in her losing her wits and experiencing extreme and graphic distress; now, she confesses her sins in a strikingly sober and general way. Unkindness against Christ is a very broad category, of which Margery accuses herself at least six times in the book, without ever mentioning any specific thought or action in connection with it. Her citation of this broad category and her later psychological contortions on the issue reveal a powerful uncertainty over where to assign the blame for her sins and how their atonement is to be used in Margery’s spiritual economy.

The speech also describes a contrastive pattern that informs all of Margery’s early life: tribulation and temptation sent by God, followed by meditative comfort, especially through contemplation of the Passion. The “tribulacyons and horrybyl temptacyons” she describes must refer either to her torments after her first child was born (in which case she previously neglected to say that they were chastisements from God) or to her upcoming temptations, especially lecherous ones, in 1.3–4 (discussed below). In the latter case, Margery has omitted any mention of the crucial intermediate phase in which she did great bodily penance but took excessive pride in it and gloried in her close relationship with Christ. Chastisement because of pride in her appearance and business ventures and because of envy of her neighbors is clear enough; these fit the neat paradigm of humbled pride promised in the prologue. But as we shall soon see, Margery’s “holy medytacyons” were marked by severe internal conflicts involving the potential sins of pride and lust, and the contrast between tribulation sent by God and the pain of Margery’s own innate wickedness is not always clear to the reader or to Margery herself. This is the second time Margery has confessed her sins right back to childhood, and she will do so three more times in the book.
Thus far I have been discussing sin a fairly general way, including Margery’s own rather broad categories. Of the seven deadly sins, most are not directly relevant to Margery’s spiritual makeup. Wrath does not apply to Margery, sloth hardly comes up at all, and gluttony appears only in indirect ways. Margery accuses herself once of the sin of avarice, in connection with her ventures into the brewing and milling businesses (1.2.275), but it quickly becomes clear that pride (discussed below) is the main problem: when she apologizes to her husband, John, for not listening to him, she admits that “hir pride and synne was cause of alle her punschyng” (1.2.287–88).

Lust and pride are clearly Margery’s besetting sins, those forces in our soul where, she says, the devil “fyndyth us most freel” (1.4.421), and they both operate on conscious and unconscious levels for her. The problem of pride and vainglory, as we shall see, constantly keeps Margery on a knife-edge of insecurity and doubt with respect to her devotional stance and her status in God’s eyes, a problem she never solves or even fully confronts. Lust, though, takes Margery and the reader through the most elaborate contortions of self-perception in the entire narrative: Margery’s conflicting sexual feelings reveal subtle and complex mechanisms of sin and contrition that keep her in their grip as she struggles to understand and resist them. Consciousness of lust and sexual temptation is a core feature of Margery’s spiritual agon, and it is here above all that we see her going well beyond the bounds of any previously understood devotional program or theological structure, revealing a singular soul trying to categorize feelings she cannot fully grasp.

Margery’s sexuality, and its place in her spiritual and devotional world, poses one of the most difficult interpretive questions in Margery Kempe studies. It has been almost twenty years since Nancy Partner, in her groundbreaking article “Reading The Book of Margery Kempe,” proposed a combination of psychoanalysis and poetics as a useful critical method in understanding the book. Partner sees in its structure and imagery a “pattern of desire and conflict,” and she rehabilitates Freudian language such as “complex of unconscious guilt-stricken desire” in order to understand Margery as a neurotic subject with both conscious aims and “displaced forbidden desires” that emerge in a careful reading of her skillfully wrought narrative. Earlier, decontextualized attempts to diagnose Margery in Freudian terms were rightly criticized as narrow and ahistorical, and Partner was the first not only to read Margery as an individual with both
conscious and subconscious desires but also to perform this reading with a sympathetic understanding of the book’s poetics and an awareness of the spiritual sources and institutional constraints conditioning her thought.16

Partner’s analysis has proven very influential, though often lightly cited, and constitutes the most coherent analysis at one end of a scholarly continuum between seeing Margery as a unique individual with knowable desires and drives and seeing her as a representative of certain forces in late medieval piety and devotion, a woman produced by her time.17 In what follows, it will be clear that although I do not follow the path of subjectivity to its Freudian conclusion, I do view Margery as a unique individual who, however much she was influenced by the things she read and the spiritual climate of her times, forged those influences into a conception of saintliness and divinity that is inseparable from her sexual feelings. I agree with Rosalynn Voaden that “it was specifically and exclusively that aspect of her spirituality comprising her sense of sin which was mapped onto her sexuality,”18 and I would like to explore in more detail how Margery deployed the idea of sin for her own goals, both conscious and unconscious, and specifically the combination of lechery and pride that ultimately constitutes her sense of herself as a sinful being.

The book’s third chapter vividly introduces Margery’s disgust with sexual activity. As the chapter opens, she is lying in bed with her husband and hears a beautiful melody that she interprets as the music of paradise. Consciousness of this joyous sound causes her to associate it with any earthly mirth or melody she hears and to weep “with greet sobbyngys and syhyngys,” despite the scorn heaped on her by others, who note that she has never been to heaven (1.3.333, 1.3.342–43). The previous chapter had introduced Margery’s crying for the first time and set it squarely between two strong drives: her joy in contemplating God and heaven and her consciousness of her own sinfulness. Now, we see concrete examples of both these forces in action. Hearing the melody of heaven brings to life her joy in experiencing the divine in this world. But what demonstrates her sinful nature? Whatever sin comes next will clearly occupy an exemplary position by representing her distaste for the general idea of worldly attachment. Margery introduces it with a simple and a temporal phrase: “And aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fl eschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose [ooze], the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fl  eschly comownyng [communication], saf only for obedyens” (1.3.346–50).19 Thus the scene is set for Margery’s battle with sexual temptation that violently dominates the next two chapters.
As the book shortly makes clear, however, Margery's revulsion for sex will not usher in a smooth or uncomplicated turning away from the world and toward God. She urges her husband, John, without success to live chastely with her. The way she puts it to him reveals a shifting and multifaceted deployment of the idea of sexual sin: they have displeased God, she says, “be her inordynat lofe and the great delectacyon that thei haddyn eythyr of hem in usyng of other” (1.3.357–59). She is concerned not only about lust in general but also about the degree of pleasure the couple experienced, an idea she expresses in very similar language at the end of the book when she must tend to her husband in his dotage. She takes the labor of looking after him as a penance for “how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinate lovys to hys persone” (1.76.6075–77). As a young woman, Margery recommends to John that they “bothyn punschyn and chastysyn hemself wylfully be absteynyng fro her lust of her bodys” (1.3.360–61). At least three modes of sin and penance, then, operate simultaneously here: lust as a representative of excessive attachment to the world, abstinence as an appropriate form of punishment, and Margery’s personal observation that she and John are conspicuous for the degree to which they enjoyed one another sexually.

At this point, Margery embarks on a program of “gret bodyly penawnce” and frequent confession (often twice or thrice a day [1.3.368–69]). Several of Margery’s sources set a precedent for copious confession. Bridget of Sweden was “oft times shriven, and noght wald sho leve undiscussid in hir consciens”; Elizabeth of Hungary was “thre yeyr in greth gostly torment, for here thowt that sche myte not han a confessor as oftyn as sche wolde be schreve”; and Marie d’Oignies confessed even tiny sins to her confessor. Margery’s confession has a focus, though: she was confessed and absolved “in specyal of that synne whech sche so long had conselyd and curyd, as it is wretyn in the gynnyng of the boke” (1.3.369–70). Again, this sin is not specified, but the proximity here to Margery’s disgust for physical intimacy suggests that it was probably a sexual sin.

This ascetic period continues to cast repentance in sexual terms, as Margery dons a hair shirt and wears it secretly in bed with her husband, even as she reluctantly pays the marital debt: “and yet sche lay be hym every nygth in his bedde, and weryd the hayr every day, and bar chylderyn in the tyme” (1.3.378–79). Marie d’Oignies treated her marital bed in a similar way, sleeping on boards that she kept concealed at the foot of the bed, and “because she clearly did not have power over her own body, she secretly wore a very rough cord under her clothing which she bound with
great force.” Marie ultimately managed to convince her husband to live chastely, and with less difficulty than Margery had. In Marie, Margery found a suitable model for her early asceticism and her negotiation of a chaste marriage; but as we shall see, lust and lechery finally play a much more central role for Margery than they do for Marie. At this point, we once again see Margery presenting apparently general penitential activity in terms specific to her own psychological makeup.

Margery claims that at this period, despite (or perhaps because of) the secrecy and guilt of her sexual activity and the scorn of other people for her ascetic discipline, “sche had gret qwiete of spyryt as for ony temptacyons. … Sche felt no rebellyon in hyr flesch.” But Margery explicitly says that the spiritual quiet and lack of temptation actually marked the beginning of a period of vainglory for her: “Sche thowt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir. Sche was smet wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory and felt it not, for sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe” (1.4.411–14). It is worth noting that this desire for intense personal communion with Christ is not very different from much of her communication with him later in the book, which she presents entirely positively: this is not the last time we will see Margery modulating, with varying degrees of awareness, between self-accusation that her devotions lay her open to presumption and vainglory and an intensely passionate embrace of the same devotions as revelations of divine joy and her own righteousness.

Christ, seeing Margery’s presumption, sends her three years of temptation, and once again, the temptation is exemplified by lust. This time, Margery even explains the concept of the besetting sin, the weak point at which the devil assails the wavering Christian:

Ower mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, seynge this creaturys presumpcyon, sent hir, as is wrete befor, iii yer of greet temptacyon, of the whch on of the hardest I purpos to wrytyn for exampyl of hem that com aftyr, that thei schuld not trostyn on her owyn self, ne have no joy in hemself as this creatur had. For no drede owyr gostly enmy slepyth not, but he ful besyly sergyth owr complexions and owyr dysposycions, and wher that he fyndyth us most freel, ther, be owyr Lordys sufferawns, he leyth hys snar, whech may no man skape be hys owyn power. And so he leyd beforhn this creatur the snar of lechery, whan sche wend that all fleschly lust had al hol ben qwenchyd in hir. And so long sche was temptyd wyth the syn of lechory, for owt that sche
cowd do. And yet sche was oftn schrevyn, sche weryd the hayr, and
dede gret bodily penawns, and wept many a byttyr teer, and preyd ful
oftyn to owyr Lord that he schuld preserve hir and kepe hir, that sche
schuld not fallyn into temptacyon, for sche thowt she had levar ben
deed than consentyn therto. And in al this tyme sche had no lust to
comown wyth hir husbond, but it was very peynful and horrybly unto
hir. (1.4.414–23)

Margery thus explicitly confesses to the reader what she had noted before
with reference to marital sex: that she is naturally inclined to “letchery.”
She packages this tribulation quite neatly as a collaboration between God
and the devil: by God’s sufferance, the devil searches her spiritual complex-
ion, finds the weakest point, and afflicts her with lecherous temptations.
Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* outlines a very similar process: when the
devil perceives that a person has withdrawn devotion to God, he sends “to
summe men temptacions of leccherie or glotonye, so hoot and so bren-
nynge that hem schal thenke thei felid nevere noon so grevous in al here lif
bifore whanne thei gave hem to synne most.” Hilton casts the process in
terms of “assaying,” a purification of the soul for the purpose of cleansing
previous sins, increasing the soul’s heavenly reward, or disposing them to
greater grace. Finally, when God decides the time is right, he “leith to His
hond, and smyteth doun the devel and al his power; and eseth hem of here
travaile.”

Margery’s temptations continue with a vivid and memorable episode.
At the same time as she is unwillingly having “peynful and horrybly” sex
with her husband, she is approached by an unnamed man “which she
lovyd wel,” who says that he will sleep with her whether she consents to
it or not. We are told that the man “dede it for to preve hir what sche wold
do” and that he is not in “ful ernest”; he is thus clearly designated as an
instrument in the collaborative plan of temptation between God and the
devil (1.4.434–40). Margery is seriously tempted but claims that “the devyl
put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not so
ben temptyd” (1.4.446–47). Despair is a corrosive and persistent force in
Margery’s book and one warned about in many of her principal sources.
Hilton, in particular, says that the assaying process he describes is often
brought about by “dispeir . . . or to mykil drede of hemssilf or of here bodi.”

At the worst point of this painful episode, Margery says she fell “half in
dyspeyr” (1.4.471); the “half” seems very like a deliberate attempt to defend
herself against the charge, even though she has previously been afflicted
with it and is “ner at dispeyr” during her subsequent sexual temptation (1.59.4881; again, she takes care not to portray herself as fully desperate). 29

The really serious moment, though, is when Margery consents to sin: “She levyd the develys susayons and gan to consentyn” (1.4.447–48). Consenting willfully to sin, in all of Margery’s source texts and throughout her own book, marks the boundary between venial and mortal sins, or at least between an easily turned away sin and one that has taken root in the soul and will require much more contrition and penance. 30 Finally, through persistence of temptation and “lakkyng of dyscrecyon, sche was ovyrcomyn, and consentyd in hir mend” (1.4.459–61). But just at this crucial moment, when she has crossed into a new realm of culpability, the man rejects her with the memorable phrase, “he had levar ben hewyn as smal as fleisch to the pott!” (1.4.463). 31

At this point, Margery experiences great shame and confusion and thinks about the “ii yer of gret qwyet in sowle” she had just experienced, forgetting (or omitting to mention) that her presumption in relying on bodily mortification during this period was what caused God to punish her in the first place. At this traumatic moment, Margery’s guilty thoughts reveal her fixation on a single offense or type of offense. Elsewhere, Margery talks about her sins in the plural, but here she refers to sin in the singular three times within a few lines, twice with the phrase “hir synne”: “Sche had … repentawns of hir synne wyth many byttyr teerys of compuncyson, and parfyt wyl nevyr to turne ageyn to hir synne, but rathar to be deed, hir thowt. And now sche saw how sche had consentyd in hir wyl for to don synne” (1.4.466–70). Given the phrase “hir synne,” Margery’s recent admission that lechery is her weak point, the initial mention of her (singular) unconfessed sin just after childbirth, her previous reference to the same sin in close proximity to her disgust with sex, and the present configuration of her torment in terms of lust, it is reasonable to assume that the unconfessed sin is indeed a sexual one. Margery’s characteristic sin, introduced without a name but now exemplified in a painful example, is both the cause and the mechanism of her punishment: she specifically tells us that she had previously repented and now actually consented willfully to her sin. At this point, Margery’s narrative becomes even more tangled: God, she says, gives her the grace to confess “many tymes and oftyn” (1.4.475) and grants her two hours each day of “compuncyson for hir synnys” (1.4.484); but frequent confession had previously formed part of her presumption rather than a cure for it, and despite her compunction, God does not withdraw her temptation “but rathar incresyd it” (1.4.479).
Has Margery, then, withdrawn her devotion from God, as Hilton warns against, and is this the cause of her chastisement? Yes and no. Margery’s previous two-year period of “qwiete of spyryt” when she “thowt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir” has multiple significance in Margery’s spiritual adventures. On the one hand, she is following the example of Marie d’Oignies, her revered forbear as an ascetic, chastely married woman, whose mortification also brought about great slander and reproof from her neighbors (a characteristic mode of spiritual growth for Margery [1.3.373–75]). But on the other hand, this excessively ascetic phase marks a decisive stage in her struggles with vainglory, as she demands more and more of Christ’s attention and desires to be marked out as his especially devoted lover. Walter Hilton and Love’s Mirror both warn that laboring against bodily temptation at the expense of spiritual labor will accomplish nothing, and this is just what Margery has been doing. 32

Sexual feelings and activity continue to be a central feature of Margery’s spiritual life, in several modes. We learn in 1.3 that Margery finally convinced her husband to live chastely “iii or iiii yer aftyr” she initially proposed it (1.3.365). In 1.9, Christ tells Margery that she must refrain from eating and drinking on Friday, “and thow schalt have thi desyr er Whitsonday, for I schal sodeynly sle thin husbonde” (1.9.646–48). John is not suddenly slain, but he is made so afraid that he is unable to approach her sexually (1.11.725–26). It shortly becomes clear, moreover, that the Friday fasting is in fact a bargaining chip in the negotiations with John Kempe. Even though God is preventing John from touching her, either Margery’s affection, God’s favor, or both mean that he is ultimately encouraged to come to the decision of his own free will. 33 Unlike the previous passage in which John comes across as a violator of Margery’s will to live chastely, he is now sensitive to her resolution, making the final offer of chaste marriage, provided Margery pays his debts and eats with him on Fridays.

References to sex and chastity crop up at regular intervals throughout the book, including a flashback in 1.21 to an occasion before the chastity vow when the pregnant Margery feels as if she is not worthy to speak with God because she is not a maiden. God assures her that despite the hierarchy of maidens, widows, and wives, “I lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast,” thus laying the ground for her future chaste marriage (1.21.1568–69). About a year after the chastity agreement, Margery tells God that “thu art as gracyows to me as thei I wer as clene a mayden as any is in this worlde, and as thow I had nevyr synned” (1.57.4748–50). In 1.48, she tells an inquisition in Leicester that “I nevyr had part of mannys body
in this worlde in actual dede be wey of synne, but of myn husbondys body, whom I am bowndyn to be the lawe of matrimony, and be whom I have born xiii childeryn” (1.48.3823–25). This certainly complicates our understanding of Margery’s views on sin and chastity, as she says this about four years after the chastity vow, and her account of her feelings before the vow makes it very clear that she thought she was sinning at that time.34

In the much-discussed chapter 1.59, Margery is again tormented with lustful thoughts, this time in a way that shows how fitful her spiritual progress has been. The chapter’s opening two sentences brilliantly effect a subtle transition from an encomium on the quantity and quality of Margery’s meditations to the fatal mistake that brings about her dire punishment:

“Thus, thorw heryng of holy bokys and thorw heryng of holy sermownys, sche evyr encresyd in contemplacyon and holy meditacyon. It wer in maner unpossibyl to writyn al the holy thowtys, holy spechys, and the hy revela- cyons whech owr Lord schewyd unto hir, bothyn of hirselyfe and of other men and women, also of many sowlys, sum for to ben sayyd and sum for to ben dampnyd, and was to hir a gret ponyschyng and a scharp chastisyng” (1.59.4832–38). The syntax of the final clause is somewhat loose, but the context makes it clear. Margery is happy to hear about the souls who will be saved, but news of damned souls seems like punishment and chastisement to her. The dire consequences of her reluctance make it worth considering in some detail just why she is so unhappy about being aware of the fate of damned souls.

Barbara Newman puts Margery’s views in the context of some late medieval female mystics who explored the paradoxical idea of enduring the pains of hell in order to show their love for God. Catherine of Siena says that she would sit at the mouth of hell to prevent any more souls going in;35 Hadewijch of Brabant actually liberates souls from hell and puts them into purgatory (and calls her own action a sin);36 Mechthild of Magdeburg disputes with God and commands him to show mercy to damned souls;37 and Marguerite Porete, like Margery, envisions herself as the worst sinner in the world, the “height of all evil” who thereby occasions the greatest grace from God.38 As Newman notes, all these mystics suffered to some extent: from knowingly flirting with heresy (and in Marguerite’s case, being convicted and executed for it), from extreme abasement and self-loathing, or simply from the wrenching paradox of embracing the ultimate punishment for the sake of the highest love.

Margery, however, stands out in this group. Like Catherine, she expresses a desire to intervene in the process of damming and saving souls, and like
Marguerite, she draws her ability to save others from the depths of her own unworthiness. Unlike the Beguines Hadewijch and Mechthild, however, she does not struggle with the spiritual dilemma of interfering with the working of God’s justice, nor does she question her own impulse to save damned souls. Furthermore, none of the other mystics views her thoughts or visions about the damned as chastisement or punishment, as Margery does. Most important in the present context is the connection between her reluctance to contemplate the damnation of others and her own sexualized sense of sin. Newman notes that “sexual pathology here overlies an acute conflict between Margery’s desire for universal salvation and her orthodox belief that hell is essential to Christian faith.” But imagery and the placement of conversations about the damned indicate a closer connection than a mere coincidental overlay.

Just two chapters before, Margery had told God at some length that she wanted him to be as gracious to other sinners as he was to her and that she never wanted to see any soul damned eternally. She concludes the conversation, and the chapter, by saying that if it was his will, “I wolde for thi lofe and for magnifying of thi name ben hewyn as small as flesch to the potte” (1.57.4774–75). This is the second occurrence of the “meat for the pot” image. The first comes from the unnamed man who tempts Margery to consent to sin and then rejects her with this same phrase (1.4.463), and the third and final comes near the end of book 1, when God says that Margery “woldist ben hakkyd as smal as flesche to the potte for her [all people’s] lofe, so that I wolde be thi deth savyn hem alle fro dampnacyon” (1.84.6893–94). Once again, Margery’s structural correspondences are telling: given the extreme lecherous punishment that is about to follow, there exists a strong, if tortured, connection between the idea of damnation and sexual temptation, brought out in a powerful metonymy between the flesch that is cut up to be cooked and the flesch that is the medium of lecherous temptation.

Margery’s dramatization of the painful tension between grace and damnation is in striking contrast to her older contemporary Julian of Norwich, whose Revelation is largely organized around the question of sin and damnation. One of the foundational questions on which Julian based her whole work is how a loving God can damn some souls for eternity. This is most clearly expressed in chapter 32 of A Revelation of Love:

And one point of our faith is that many creatures shall be damned: as angelis that felle out of heven for pride, which be now fendas, and
man in erth that dyeth out of the faith of holy church—that is to say, tho that be hethen—and also man that hath received cristondom and liveth uncristen life, and so dyeth out of cherite. All theyse shalle be damned to helle without ende, as holy church techeth me to beleve. And stonding alle this, methought it was unpossible that alle maner of thing shuld be wele, as oure lorde shewde in this time.  

Like Julian, perhaps, Margery is unable to reconcile God’s benign providence for the world with eternal punishment of irredeemable souls. Julian, though, works this problem out carefully and systematically through theological questioning and reasoning, ultimately relating it to her other main preoccupation, sin. In a passage that could almost be a commentary on Margery’s devotional methods, she concludes, “Though that we be hyely lifted into contemplation by the specielle gifte of oure lorde, yet us behoveth nedes therwith to have knowing and sight of oure sinne and of oure febilnes. For without this knowing we may not have trew meknesse, and without this we may not be safe. And also I saw we may not have this knowing of ourselfe, nor of none of all oure gostly enmes, for they wille not us so mekille goode.” We must, then, believe that knowledge of sin and damnation comes from God, and in fact it is in the interest of our “gostly enmes” (ultimately inspired by the devil) to withhold it from us. Barbara Newman notes that for Julian, hell “becomes an ancillary pain, almost a distraction from the real cause and essence of human suffering.” In a sense this is true for Margery as well: she spends less time talking about hell than many mystics, and sin is the medium through which she tries to understand the workings of God’s mercy and grace. But in utter contrast to Julian’s theological categories and reconciliations, Margery enacts the struggle between grace and damnation through the sin, and temptation to sin, in her own life.

Margery can neither get past the pain of knowing about the damned nor regard it as a healthful chastisement. She is, we learn, joyful to hear about the saved, because she wants as many people as possible to be saved. Margery had already become known for being able to predict who would be saved and who would be damned: shortly before her episode of temptation, some “gret lordys” say to her, “It is don us to wetyn that thu canst tellyn us whethyr we schal be savyd er damnyd” (1.55.4563–64). Margery brushes off the imputation in a highly orthodox manner, noting that anyone who swears oaths as they do, or commits any other sin, will certainly be damned unless they confess and do penance. But the capacity to see into the future
and know who specifically will be damned is clearly a different matter and brings her “gret peyn”:

Sche wolde not heryn it ne belewyn that it was God that schewyd hir swech thyngys, and put it owt of hir mende as mech as sche myth. Owr Lord blamyd hir therfor and badde hir belewyn that it was hys hy mercy and hys goodnesse to schewyn hir hys prevy cownselys, seying to hir mende: “Dowtyr, thu must as wel heryn of the dampnyd as of the savyd.” Sche wolde yewyn no credens to the cownsel of God, but rather levyd it was sum evyl spiryt for to deceyvyn hir. (1.59.4838 – 49)

This is the first time that Margery disbelieves the word of God, judging it to be an evil spirit instead. As with Margery’s excessive reliance on bodily chastisement in 1.3 and 1.4, God punishes her, this time for her “frowardnes and hir unbelieve” by replacing good thoughts with evil ones, including vividly described sexual temptation:

And this vexacyon enduryd xii days togedyr, and lyche as befortyme sche had iii owrys of the fornoon in holy spechys and dalyawns wyth owr Lord, so had sche now as many owrys of fowle thowtys and fowle mendys of lechery and alle unclennes, as thow sche schulde a be comown to al maner of pepyl.

And so the devyl bar hyr on hande, dallyng unto hir with cursyd thowtys, liche as owr Lord dalyid to hir beforntyme with holy thowtys. And, as sche beforn had many gloryows visyonys and hy contemplacyon in the manhod of owr Lord, in owr Lady, and in many other holy seyntys, ryth evyn so had sche now horybyl syghtys and abhominabyl, for anythyng that sche cowde do, of beheldyng of mennys membrys, and swech other abhominacyons. Sche sey, as hir thowt veryly, dyvers men of religyon, preystys, and many other, bothyn hethyn and Cristen, comyn befor hir syght, that sche myth not enchewyn [avoid] hem ne puttyn hem owt of hir syght, schewyng her bar membrys unto hir. And therwyth the devyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle, and sche must be comown to hem alle. And he seyd sche lykyd bettyr summe on of hem than alle the other. Hir thowt that he seyd trewh; sche cowde not sey nay; and sche
must nedys don hys byddyng, and yet wolde sche not a don it for alle
this worlde. But yet hir thowt that it schulde be don, and hir thowt
that thes horrybyl syghtys and cursyd mendys wer delectabyl to hir
ageyn hir wille. Wher sche went er what so sche dede, thes cursyd
mendys abedyn with hir. (1.59.4854–78)

The episode, like her previous bout of lechery, is marked by an intensity
that takes us very close to Margery’s psychological and spiritual core. As
before, the punishment is highly structured: she experiences the lecher-
ous thoughts for exactly the same amount of time as she had previously
experienced meditative contemplation. As before, God allows the devil to
perform the actual punishment, this time for a period of time specified in
advance (twelve days). The idea that she would be common to all people
not only is a species of sexual torment but could also have laid her open to
accusations of Lollardy; it was sometimes alleged that Lollards believed in
women being held in common.44

Margery’s lecherous visions are vividly and paradoxically juxtaposed
with her visions and contemplations of the manhood of Christ. Margery’s
devotion to God was always highly biased away from the godhead and toward
Christ’s presence as a man. In Rome, “al hir lofe and al hir affeccyon was set
in the manhode of Crist . . . yyf 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”
(1.35.2821–22, 2830–32).45 In the book’s closing prayers, Margery comes
very close to admitting that her devotion to Christ’s manhood is closely
enmeshed with her besetting sin of lust: “qwenche in me al fleschly lust,
and in alle tho that I have beholdyn thi blisful body in” (Prayers, 8394–96).

Once again, Margery quickly moves from a general temptation to a very
specific real-world instance: despite the fact that she is common to all, the
devil tells her that she likes one of them more than the others, and she is
forced to agree. There is no indication of who that man might be, but as
in the specification of “hir synne” in 1.4, it seems to relate to a previous sin
or desire and may be connected to her unnamed (probably sexual) sin at
the beginning of the book or to her lustful desire for the unnamed man in
1.4. Margery is completely torn in two at this point: the horrible sights and
thoughts were “delectabyl to hir ageyn hir wille.” Similarly to her hedging
during the previous episode of sexual temptation (“half in dyspeyr” [1.4.471]),
here she provides herself with a small loophole against the charge of despair:
she is “ner at dispeyr,” not quite there (1.59.4876–77, 4881). Furthermore,
in addition to saying that the temptation was against her will, she claims that she would not have acted on it for all the world. Consent of the will, essential for mortal sin, is being carefully denied here. An angel appears to Margery, explaining why she is being punished and telling her that the affliction will last a full twelve days, despite her contrition and her plea for mercy. She is, however, assured that Jesus is “nevyr the wrothar wyth the” (1.59.4904).

The most vital (and the most bizarre) aspect of this whole episode, however, is deferred until later in the book. Very near the end of book 1, Margery admits that God withdraws his grace from her “whan sche dowtyd er mistrostyd the goodnes of God, supposyng er dredyng that it was the wyle of hir gostly enmy to enformyn hir er techyn hir otherwyse than wer to hir gostly hele” (1.83.6775–77); this doubting of the divine source of key teachings could refer to the episode just discussed, but the wording strongly implies that this happened repeatedly. We see another instance of this fault in 2.3: when the ship she is traveling on encounters a storm, Margery complains bitterly to God, “Schewe thu art sothfast God and non evyl spiryt that hast browte me hedyr into the perellys of the see” (2.3.7733–35). This question of discretio spirituum, or discernment of spirits, was always a vexed one for Margery, as for other mystics, and the criticism and danger she underwent kept her constantly on the alert for false spirits (this was the reason she consulted Julian of Norwich). But despite the fact that God says to her numerous times that it is him speaking and not an evil spirit, and despite the fact that she receives specific and definite consolation from Julian on the point, she continues to fall into the error of supposing that an evil spirit, and not God, is talking to her. It is telling that after being punished by extreme sexual temptation, she commits the same fault multiple times. Lechery, for Margery, constitutes an avenue to sin, a mode of punishment, and a continuing desire; it is an animating force shadowing her devotion to Christ and straddling the chasm between righteousness and sin, pain and pleasure.

III. PRIDE AND VAINGLORY

The problem of pride (and vainglory, which is a form of pride) works within Margery in a similar way to lust; that is to say, she is aware of it as one of her besetting sins and is constantly aware of its dangers but continues to commit the sin even when she has identified it and guarded against it. Just as she identified lechery as her weak point in 1.4, she several times points to pride as one of her main problems: in 1.2 she is overly proud of
her clothes, social standing, and business ventures; in 1.3 her asceticism invites “the dedly wond of veynglory”; and having been “prowde and veyne … in hir aport” is second (after unkindness to Christ) on the list of sins she tells Richard Caister in 1.17. I want to look at these episodes in more detail, examine some of the source material that might have conditioned Margery’s attitude to pride, and trace its continuing work within her as her devotion develops.

The book’s second prologue reintroduces us to Margery, “a creature sett in grett pompe and pride of the world” (Prologue, 153–54), and in fact the first prologue had already produced a spoiler by anticipating the intended movement of the book: “Than was pompe and pryde cast down and leyd on side” (Prologue, 34–35). The two prologues have thus established the humbling of pride as an overt theme. The motif is driven home early: after recovering from her postpartum madness, Margery believes that she is bound to God and will be his servant, but “sche wold not leevyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray that sche had usyd befortym, neithyr for hyr husbond ne for noon other mannys counsell” (1.2.255–57). She then embarks on two separate businesses, brewing and milling, this time accusing herself of both pride and covetousness: “for pure coveytysse and for to maynten hir pride” (1.2.275). Obstinacy also comes to the fore here: after the failure of the brewing, she asks John for forgiveness and says that “hir pride and synne was cause of alle her punschyng, and sche wold amend that sche had trespasyd wyth good wyl” (1.2.287–89). But she immediately reneges on this promise and dives into the milling business, which similarly fails. The narrative thus pursues an explicit track of pride and obstinacy that is ultimately struck down by God.

A vital component of Margery’s proud behavior here is snobbery, or excessive care for worship. When John tries to get her to abandon her pride, she goes on the offensive by pointing out the superior status of her family over his: “sche wold savyn the worschyp of hir kynred, whatsoevyr ony man seyd” (1.2.263–68). This is the only explicit mention of Margery’s social status in the book, and although her class certainly conditions many of her subsequent activities (for example, her ability to travel), it is only here that Margery flaunts it in a prideful way. Worship here clearly has its secular meaning, “honor, high respect, esteem,” shading quickly into “fame, glory, renown”; like pomp, with which pride is repeatedly joined in these early chapters, worship denotes an impious concern with the opinion and visible respect of others. The term occurs many times in the book but usually in the meaning of religious worship or respect for God; only in this tight
cluster of five occurrences in the prologue and 1.2, and in one other chapter, does it carry the taint of pride and excessive attachment to worldly status. Margery’s social pride leads immediately to envy of her neighbors, and this is the only time the sin of envy is applied to her: elsewhere, it refers to other people being envious of her. Envy is the one sin she struggles with and then genuinely overcomes.

The narrative clearly follows the pattern of humbled pride: Margery “forsoke hir pride” at the very end of 1.2, and this is the final mention of pride in the entire book, less than 4 percent of the way in. Not even other people are accused of it. The idea that pride, traditionally the root of all sins, is no longer a factor may seem surprising in a book that has so much to say about sin. The Book of Sirach called pride *initium omnis peccati* (the beginning of all sin), and Gregory the Great designated it as the root of all the other sins, with seven branches that then branched out into all the other sins of the world. Walter Hilton echoes this idea when he says that “pride is the principal ryvere.”

Clearly, the vanquishing of pride is an essential part of the intended design of the book, however, we should divide it between Margery Kempe and her scribes. Margery’s pomp, pride, and worship, which appear and disappear so briefly in a single chapter, present a very orthodox and well-understood pattern of sin. Bridget of Sweden says at the very beginning of the *Revelations* that pride is one of the “things that are truly evil insofar as they bring about eternal death,” and Hilton notes that “a worldli man whiche lyveth and seketh principal the worschipe of himself, and cheseth the likynge of it as a reste of his herte and the ende of his blisse, he synneth deedli.” This mortal sin, then, has been instantiated in Margery, chastised by God, and abandoned, never to be mentioned again.

But pride quickly reappears in a different guise, that of vainglory. Immediately after Margery hears the music of heaven, she embarks on a regimen of severe bodily penance, including frequent confession, fasting, waking, copious prayer, and wearing a hair shirt. She is “sмет wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory and felt it not” (1.4.412–13). The punishments alone would seem to indicate that this spiritual vainglory constitutes a more serious sin than the pomp and pride. When Margery goes into business for the wrong reasons, God wreaks two pedestrian miracles (beer that did not ferment and a horse that would not grind the corn), and she gets the message and desists. But when she takes excessive pride in her ascetic discipline, God sends three entire years of temptations every single day,
including the vividly described lust for the unnamed man, and an entire year of lecherous thoughts after that (1.4.479–82). Why is the punishment for spiritual vainglory so much worse than the corrective for Margery’s worldly ostentation?

Vainglory, the excessive desire for fame and praise, is not identical with pride, but it is closely related to it. When Gregory the Great designated pride the root of all other sins, he listed seven others, of which vainglory was the principal one and the closest to the generative sin of pride; other patristic writers designated vainglory as an eighth capital sin. Margery makes it very plain that an excessive reliance on and pride in her asceticism have puffed her up with vainglory: she gives a full list of her bodily mortifications and sums up her attitude by saying, “Sche was strong, as hir thowt, that sche dred no devylle in helle, for sche dede so gret bodyly penawnce” (1.4.409–11).

This sinful urge is well documented in Margery’s sources. Bridget of Sweden warns that “when people begin to keep the flesh in check and to entrust all their will to God, then . . . the mind is troubled by pride, puffing people up above and beyond themselves.” The *Prickynge of Love* says that the devil tries out various temptations to sin and if they fail, uses pride and presumption to convince contemplatives that they are great in God’s sight. Hilton warns of a related phenomenon, pride in bodily ecstasy and a feeling of heavenly joy, in terms that could almost be describing Margery’s delight in the music of heaven:

> And therefore yif he may not lette him bi opyn bodili synnes, he wole dere [harm] hym and bigile him bi swich a vanite of bodili savoures or swettenesse in the wittis, for to bringe a soule into goostli pride and into a fals sikernesse of himsilk, wenande therbi that he hadde a feelinge of heveneli joye, and that he were half in paradise for delite that he feeleth al aboute hym, whanne he is neer atte helle gates, and so bi pride and presumpcion he myght falle into errouris or into fantasies or into othere bodili or goostli myschevys.

The fascinating thing here is that Margery’s sensations of heavenly delight come after her chastisement for worldly pride but *before* her punishment for spiritual vainglory. The chronological sequence indicates that despite the rapturous terms in which she describes her early ecstatic sensations, and despite the fact that she never cites it as a fault for which she needs to be chastised, it in fact constitutes a kind of presumption that will then
need to be purged. This is yet another instance of Margery experiencing something part sin, part devotion, and part punishment.

Margery’s vainglory arises not only from pride in bodily mortification but also from the feeling of being a uniquely privileged lover of God: “Sche thowt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir ... sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe” (1.4.411–14). This sense of being a special lover of God is explicitly warned against by Hilton: “Pride is not ellis ... but love of thyn owen excellence, that is, of thyn owen worshipspe. Yf thou fele in thyn herte a stirynge of pride, that thou art holier, wisere, betere, and more vertuous an an nothir is, that God hath geven thee grace for to serve Hym betere than othir doon ... and of this stirynge thou felist a love and a delite, and a veyn plesyne in thi silf that thou art so: this is a tokene that thou berist this blak ymage.” Yet this is a mode that Margery embraces again and again in the book. Her desire for scorn and revilement from others is almost always expressed in extreme, self-exalting terms. When Christ lifts her chastisement for vainglory, he tells her that “I schal fl owe so mych grace in the that alle the world schal mervelyn therof,” a clear instance of vainglory; he further assures her that “thow schalt have the vyctory of al thin enmys” (1.5.513–14; 1517). At a stroke, Christ has moved Margery into an utterly unique position as a holy woman and lover of God, and any meekness or humility she displays will be paradoxically changed to a spiritual victory.

Nor are Christ and Margery unaware of the dangers of vainglory. Just before the chastity vow, Margery begins traveling around England, and she is made much of by various people: “Wherfor sche had gret dred of veynglory and mech was aferde” (1.10.697). But Christ tells her, “Drede the not, dowtyr, I schal take veynglory fro the. For thei that worshep the, thei worshep me; thei that despysyn the, thei despysen me, and I schal chastysen hem therfor. I am in the, and thow in me. And thei that heryn the, thei heryn the voys of God. Dowtyr, ther is no so synful man in erth levyng, yf he wyl forsake hys synne and don aftyr thi cownsel, swech grace as thu behestyst hym I wyl confermyn for thi lofe” (1.10.699–705). This marks a dramatic turning point in the text. Christ has marked her out as a unique instrument of his grace and a conduit of forgiveness, a motif that will become ever more important as the narrative progresses. But crucially, it is also the point at which Margery, a woman full of contradictions, prone to the very sins she fears, and constantly caught between her doubts and fears about her status in God’s eyes, can no longer rely on her textual sources. Bridget of Sweden, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and the rest
have provided her with some positive examples that she has heeded and some warnings that she has not. But in none of them will she find advice on how a specially chosen holy woman and dispenser of God’s grace should behave in her soul.

Christ assures her a few chapters later that “I am an hyd [hidden] God in the, that thu schuldyst have no veynglory” (1.14.966–67). This statement is entirely characteristic of Margery’s mode of spirituality, and indeed of narrative: the more she is in danger of feeling pride (and, in fact, showing that she does so), the more Christ becomes a separate character reassuring her that she will not suffer from this dangerous sin. Paradoxically, the more God is in her, the more he must be separate from her, assuring her that she will not feel what she is in fact feeling and telling the reader. A certain measure of her competitive devotion is the comparisons Christ makes between Margery and his other great lovers: he exalts her by telling her he loves her as much as her beloved Mary Magdalene and that she is closer to him than Bridget of Sweden (her other chief inspiration) ever was (1.74.5919–20, 1.20.1523).

Furthermore, Margery’s early example of her vainglory, that she wanted Christ to let go of the crucifix and embrace her, is reiterated in later passages. In 1.14, Christ gives her an extraordinary mark of his favor in language strongly reminiscent of Bridget of Sweden: “I swer to thi mend, and it wer possybyl me to suffyr peyn ageyn as I have do beforn, me wer levar to suffyr as mech peyn as evyr I dede for thi sowle alon, rathar than thow schuldyst partyn fro me wythowtyn ende” (1.14.958–61). In 1.22, he tells her that she is a “synguler lofe” to whom he promises a “synguler grace”; in 1.36, Christ expresses intimacy with her in physical language that goes far beyond anything in her immediate sources; and in 1.80, in a meditative vision of the Crucifixion, she imagines herself running around “as it had be a woman wythowtyn reson, gretly desyryng to an had the precyows body be hirself alone” (1.22.1628–29, 1.36.2950–57, 1.80.6522–24). In the latter, Margery practices the devotional method of putting oneself into Gospel scenes recommended by such texts as the Meditationes Vitae Christi, but the addition of the nonstandard phrase “as it had be … wythowtyn reson” intensifies the emotional experience, linking it with Margery’s other episodes of madness and individualizing it to her own mental and spiritual makeup. Margery strives continually to attain and maintain a unique and special place in Christ’s regard, and his repeated assurances that he will take vainglory away from her indicate the constant danger—indeed, the presence—of that very sin.
Even a casual reader of *The Book of Margery Kempe* will be struck with how often Margery is told that her sins are forgiven. During her three-year sentence of temptation, pronounced by God as a punishment for her spiritual vainglory, Margery is “noothyng desyryng but mercy and foryefynes of synne” (1.3.405). The supposed end of this difficult period comes as she prays for just this in St. Margaret’s Church in Lynn; God appears and tells her immediately that “I … foryefe the thi synnes to the utterest point” (1.5.498). Margery is frequently told in the book that her sins have been forgiven, usually by Christ himself. She receives plenary remission twice in the Holy Land and once in Assisi and is reminded of it later by the Virgin Mary. Margery points out to Christ how often he has forgiven her sins: “Thu seyst oftyntymes in the yer to me that thu hast foryovyn me my synnes” (1.57.4740–42). Christ twice reminds Margery of this himself, the first in a tone that could be read as impatient: “A, dowtyr, how oftyntymes have I teld the that thy synnes arn foryove the and that we ben onyd togedyr wythowtyn ende?” (1.22.1626–28; see also 1.36.2948–49). The second cements the relation between forgiveness and Margery’s intimacy with Christ. After telling her that he has often forgiven all her sins, he adds the conjunction therfore and then details, in a famous passage, how she may adore him, lying in bed with him, embracing him, and kissing his mouth, head, and feet. The condition of their spiritual and physical intimacy is that her sins have been forgiven. Margery confesses with great regularity, not only to Christ but in the standard fashion, to a priest: at various points she is “schrevyn sumtyme twyes or thryes on the day” (1.3.368–69), “often schrevyn” (1.4.427), and “schrevyn many tymes and oftyn” (1.4.475). Such frequent confession was neither prescribed by Church practice in Margery’s day nor modeled in her sources. The standard frequency for confession in the late Middle Ages was once a year; in any event, Margery’s forgiveness comes straight from Christ more often than it comes from a priest after due penance. Bridget of Sweden, often Margery’s most immediate source, does say early in her *Revelations* that God has told her always to think about her sins, how she has been cleansed of original sin through baptism, and how often she has been supported and sustained by God when she has sinned. Tellingly, original sin only occurs once in Margery’s entire book, and it is in a simile: just as a priest washes away original sin at baptism, just so will Christ wash Margery “in my precyous blod fro alle thi synne” (1.14.963–64). In other words, Margery never
refers her own sin to original sin: Christ will cleanse her directly of her own particular offenses. In St. Elizabeth of Hungary’s *Revelations*, Christ appears to Elizabeth as she is weeping over her sins and tells her not to worry because all her sins have been forgiven.65 This sounds very similar to Christ’s appearance to Margery, except that Elizabeth is told this only once, not repeatedly.

What is the reason for the heavy emphasis on forgiveness? The answer becomes clear once we discern the other frequent function of sin in the book, namely, that forgiveness of Margery’s sins will ultimately result in the forgiveness of other people’s. Quite early in the narrative, Christ explicitly gives Margery the power to judge and forgive the sins of others in his name (1.10.702–5). She soon puts this into practice, telling a monk his secret sins and assuring him that God will forgive him because of her love (1.12.845–48). Later, Margery has become known for being able to tell who will be saved or damned, but she cleverly turns away this imputation of power by saying in very orthodox terms that if people commit obvious sins, they will be damned, unless they confess, do penance, and repent (1.55.4565–70). It may be that Margery is trying to avoid the implication that she is a prophet, soothsayer, or witch or performing the priestly functions of hearing confession and granting absolution; nonetheless, the larger context makes it clear that her own sins, and God’s forgiveness of them, are in fact the condition of the larger grace God grants to others.

One of the functions of Margery’s famous weeping is to express sorrow for sins, sometimes those of herself and others, sometimes those of others only.66 In 1.57, God grants her a request, and her detailed reply sets out a program whereby the forgiveness of her own sins, enhanced by her favor in his eyes, can be transmitted to other people:

I aske ryth nowt, Lord, but that thu mayst wel yevyn me, and that is mercy whech I aske for the pepil synnys. Thu seyst oftyntymes in the yer to me that thu hast foryovyn me my synnes. Therfor I aske now mercy for the synne of the pepil, as I wolde don for myn owyn…. Therfor, Lorde, I wolde I had a welle of teerys to constreyn the wyth, that thu schuldist not takyn uttyr veniawns of mannys sowle…. Yyf I myth as wel, Lorde, yevyn the pepyl contricyon and wepyng as thu yevyst me for myn owyn synnes and other mennys synnys also, and as wel as I myth yevyn a peny owt of my purse, sone schulde I fulfille mennys hertys wyth contricyon, that thei myth sesyn of her synne. (1.57.4739–60)
Margery notes in the same chapter, as she does elsewhere, that she is “the most unworthy creatur that evyr thu schewedist thi mercy onto in alle this werlde” (1.57.4761–62). The cause and effect is clear: Margery is the worst sinner in the history of the world and therefore in need of greater forgiveness than anyone, and she wants to use her tears to constrain God to give the same favor to others as he would give to her (she echoes this desire in her closing prayers, saying that she wants God to treat others’ sins as if they were her own [Prayers, 8445–48]). Her tears have become a currency of grace, an idea reinforced by a homely monetary simile: she would like to give other people contrition and weeping as easily as she could give them a penny out of her purse. The “well of tears” image appears two other times in the book (it derives ultimately from Jeremiah 9:1), but Margery transforms it into a way of generating and managing God’s grace to others.

The same Beguine mystics noted above, in the context of Margery’s reluctance to hear of the damned, undertake somewhat similar programs to channel God’s grace into other sinners. Hadewijch of Brabant “acknowledges God’s overflowing fullness and her own littleness … [and] can channel the surplus grace toward indigent souls,” while Mechthild of Magdeburg says that “the soul … is like a small vessel that easily overflows when God fills it with grace, so the excess must be given to sinners and souls in purgatory.” Neither of these mystics, however, personalizes the process with reference to her own sins in the way that Margery does. An analogous but more extreme and personal position is taken by Marguerite Porete in her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, who declares herself to be a human collection of all evils and hence, paradoxically, a vehicle of salvation for all other creatures. As Marguerite puts it, “The goodness of God is made known to the human race by means of my wickedness, so it is clear that I am the everlasting praise of God and the salvation of humankind.”

Marguerite’s focus on herself as the pinnacle of human evils suggests Margery’s focus on herself as “the most unworthy creatur” (1.57.4761) and even exceeds it in intensity. Marguerite, of course, was executed as a heretic, and as Barbara Newman notes, “Marguerite’s inquisitors may have accepted her claim to be ‘the sum of all evils’ and hence worthy to be killed.” Whether or not Margery knew of Marguerite’s work, her constant caution about exposing herself to accusations of heresy would prevent her from going this far.

Of Margery’s known or likely sources, Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life* is the only one to propose a method anything like what she is suggesting.
Hilton offers some very specific advice to would-be or part-time contemplatives on the relationship between their own sins and those of others, deploying a vivid medical image:

Thou mai, gif thou wil, sumtyme thenke on thy synnes bifore doon, and of thi freeltes that thou fallest inne eche dai, and aske merci and forguyenesse for hem. Also, aftir this, thou mai thenke of the freeltes, the synnes and the wrecchidnesis of thyn euene-Cristene, bodily and goostli, with pite and compassioun of hem, and crie merci and forgeuenesse for hem as tenderli as for thi silf and as thei were thyn owen. And that is a good thought, for I telle thee forsothe, thou mai make of other mennys synnes a precious oynement for to heele thyn owen soule when thou hast mynde of hem with compassion and sorwe of hem.

This oynement is precious though the spicery [in it silf] be not clene, for it is [triacle] maad of venym for to distroie venym. That is for to seie, thyn owen synnes and othere mennys also brought in to thi mynde, gif thou bete hem weel with sorwe of [herte], pite and compassioun, thei turne in to triacle whiche maketh thi soule hool from pride and envie, and bringeth in loue and charite to thyn euene-Cristene. This thought is good sumtyme for to haue.72

Margery’s and Hilton’s ways of relating one’s own sins to those of others share important basic features. Hilton’s process starts by meditating on one’s own sins and asking forgiveness for them, which Margery does frequently and fervently. One is then supposed to ponder the sins and flaws of one’s fellow Christians, with pity and compassion, and ask forgiveness for them in the same way as for one’s own. Hilton’s medical language, not shared by Margery, takes the process in a different direction, which nonetheless resonates with Margery’s spiritual makeup. Hilton imagines a person’s sins being combined with other people’s into an “oynement” or “triacle” (“an antidote for poison or venom,” which works by drawing out or neutralizing the poison produced by an infection).73 Hilton’s ointment can heal the soul homeopathically: it consists of two venomous components that are ground up together and transformed into a remedy by sorrow, pity, and compassion. Ultimately, the medicine will heal the sinner of pride and envy (which Margery names as sins she committed) and bring about love and charity toward other Christians.
A central theme of Margery’s book is her relationships with others and how they affect her relations with God. Throughout the book, she is scorned and reviled by many people (though supported and cherished by others), and she begins and ends with an expressed desire to be of benefit to other people in their tribulations and to help them heal the damage caused by their sins. Margery’s use of Hilton’s treacle imagery, like her deployment of many of her other sources, is original and creative, shaping it to her own spiritual and psychological eccentricities: it is again abundantly clear that she is a unique and idiosyncratic individual, influenced by available models of devotion but filled with forces, drives, and needs that she herself never fully understands (nor can we fully understand them as modern readers). Though Margery never takes the next step to say that she wants God’s forgiveness of others to rebound back and benefit her, that conclusion is inescapable given the singular and special place she demands for herself in God’s eyes and the wonder that she believes she has elicited in the world. Though she does not adopt Hilton’s vivid transformation of sin into medicine, Margery certainly envisions a mutual benefit for herself and her fellow Christians and a central place for herself in an economy of salvation.

A curious inversion of Margery’s desire to obtain forgiveness for others’ sins runs like a muted but disturbing countercurrent throughout the book: namely, the fear that she will cause other people to sin. In 1.67, a parson is doing some guest preaching at St. Margaret’s Church, and Margery cries while listening to him. When her fellow parishioners complain about it, the parson rebukes them, saying, “Frendys, beth stille and grutchith not wyth this woman, for iche of yow may synne deedly in hir, and sche is nowt the cawse, but yowr owyn demyng” (1.67.5547–49). Just what he means by people sinning mortally in Margery is not explained, except that it relates to her crying in some way. The connection is made again a few chapters later, when Margery is complaining to God about her crying because people are worried about sinning: “And thei seyn that I am in gret perel, for, as thei seyn, I am cawse that many men synne on me. And thu knowist, Lord, that I wolde yevyn no man cawse ne occasyon of synne yyf I myth, for I had levar, Lord, ben in a preson of ten fadom depe, ther to cryin and wepyn for my synne and for alle mennys synnys and specialy for thy lofe al my lyf-tyme than I schulde yevyn the pepil occasyon to synyn on me wilfully” (1.77.6085–91). Again, we do not learn exactly what the peril is, but we can begin to discern that it somehow concerns the effect of her crying on those around her. The simplest explanation is that the bad will and evil treatment
people unleash on her because of her crying are sins, although this seems unlikely to constitute the mortal sin the parson warns against. At the conclusion of the same chapter, however, another oblique reference opens up a wider dimension. Margery is trying to express to Christ just how much she loves him: “I wolde, Lord, for thi lofe be leyd nakyd on an hyrdil, alle men to wonderyn on me for thi love, so it wer no perel to her sowlys, and thei to castyn slory and slugge on me, and be drawyn fro town to town every day my lyfetyme, yf thu wer plesyd therby and no mannys sowle hyndryd” (1.77.6181–85). Here, the peril to people’s souls may be the revilement she imagines them heaping on her, but the detail of her nakedness and the presence of the clause “so it wer no perel to her sowlys” (modifying “alle men to wonderyn on me”) and the phrase “and no mannys sowle hyndryd” may indicate that she is concerned about inciting lecherous thoughts.

A very curious incident in 1.74 makes this even more likely. Christ draws Margery’s mind ever more to the contemplation of his passion, and just as before she had seen the pains of Christ in men and animals with wounds or children or animals being beaten (1.28.2226–32), now she sees the wounds of Christ in lepers and other sick people. She weeps and laments because she is not able to kiss lepers in the streets. Kissing lepers or ingesting skin or pus from their bodies was not unheard of among some ascetics and mystics in the fourteenth century, and in fact the Prickynge of Love recommends it as a way of preparing to kiss the mouth of Christ in the hereafter.74

Margery takes this advice to heart and tells her confessor what she wants to do. He replies that if she is determined to do it, she should kiss women instead of men, in order to avoid lustful temptation. She seeks out leper women and kisses two of them. But the plan backfires: “Whan sche had kyssyd hem … [and told them to be patient and thank God for their illness] … than the oo woman had so many temptacyons that sche wist not how sche myth best be governyd. … And sche was labowryd wyth many fowle and horibyl thowtys, many mo than sche cowed tellyn. And as sche seyd, sche was a mayde” (1.74.5946–56). The adjective fowle (generally used of lechery) combined with the woman’s anxiety about being a maiden make it clear that she is afflicted with lecherous temptation in the way that Margery has been twice before. Leprosy and lechery were sometimes associated in fourteenth-century religious works, and Margery is clearly following this tradition here.75 Late in the book, her own son indulges in the sin of lechery, and his face acquires “whelys and bloberyys [pimples and pustules], as it had ben a lepyr” (2.1.7461). It seems clear that Margery’s devotional kiss has caused the woman’s lecherous temptations and that this is related to
Margery’s own earlier afflictions. The connection with her son may indicate that lechery was a trait that ran in the family. In any case, Margery’s desire to generate God’s forgiveness of sinners was tempered, and sometimes undercut, by her potential to cause sin in others, either through her crying or through some association with lechery.

We can best understand Margery Kempe if we assume that she was a real person, that she underwent experiences very like the ones we encounter in her book, and that her spirituality was a combination of tradition and innovation. Sin is a central organizing principle behind her book, though there are others: the interplay between revilement and justification, for example, or the process of autohagiography, or the distribution of Margery’s energy between the active and contemplative lives. Her identifiable sources provide us with rich strains of thought that clearly inform, but do not limit, her spiritual adventures. Each time we perceive her reading and analyzing a received idea, we immediately see her transforming it with a new and potentially destabilizing interpretation or departure; conversely, each time we sense a psychological quirk or aberration in her, we need to refer it to existing structures of spirituality and devotion. To fully understand Margery (or, to be more realistic, to understand her as fully as we can), we need to be sensitive to both the traditions that inform her thought and the psychological peculiarities that make her unique.

NOTES


2. The question of Margery’s responsibility for the text vis-à-vis that of her two scribes continues to be debated. The main comments on the matter have been John C. Hirsh, “Author and Scribe in The Book of Margery Kempe,” Medium Aevum 48 (1975): 145–50; Lynn Staley, Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Nicholas Watson, “The Making of The Book of Margery Kempe,” in Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 395–434; Felicity Riddy, “Text and Self in The Book of Margery Kempe,” a reply to Watson in the same volume, 435–53. Although the precise contributions of Margery and her scribes are impossible to determine, in general I follow Watson’s conclusion that the majority of the book was written by a real person named Margery Kempe, though much can be learned from Staley’s distinction between the author Kempe and the character Margery and from Riddy’s careful insistence on a polyvocal text with an integral “unconscious.” Like most critics I will refer to the writer as “Margery.”

4. The sources to which I will refer most frequently are those directly mentioned in the *Book*, in three different passages (1.17.1257–59, 1.58.4819–21, 1.62.5127–74): Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*; Bridget of Sweden, *Revelations*; James of Milan, *Stimulus Amoris* (and its English translation, possibly by Hilton); Jacques de Vitry, *Life of Marie d'Oignies*; and Elizabeth of Hungary, *Revelations*. Mentioned in the book but not cited in this article is Richard Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*. I will also cite three works Margery or her scribes likely knew (the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, adapted into English by Nicholas Love as *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*; Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*; and Walter Hilton, *Mixed Life*) and the works of several Continental mystics that provide analogues to Margery's thought (Catherine of Siena, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Brabant, and Marguerite Porete).


6. Staley does discuss the episode (Margery Kempe's *Dissenting Fictions*, 88–92).


8. Ibid., 5.int.13 (2.305), 4.93 (2.171–73).


10. I accept McAvoy's argument that this is in fact Margery's last child; see Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Margery's Last Child," *Notes and Queries* 46 (1999): 181–83.

11. The *Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.3.393–97, 1.17.1233–34, 1.28.2305 (all people are unkind), 1.56.4628, 1.72.5792, 1.85.6991, 2.10.8294. Julian of Norwich says several times in her *Revelation* that it is unkind to blame God for one's sins and once that sin itself is unkind (A Vision, 13.63–64; A Revelation, 27.30–32, 63.10–22; The *Writings of Julian of Norwich*: A Vision Shewed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love,* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 1–2. Citations from Julian's texts will follow Watson and Jenkins's nomenclature: the Short Text will be cited as A Vision [Showed to a Devout Woman] by section and line number, and the Long Text will be cited as A Revelation [of Love] by chapter and line number. On the likelihood of Margery knowing Julian's works, see *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 436. Bridget of Sweden criticizes people's attitude to Christ, but in more specific terms such as ingratitude (*The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 1.1 [1.53], 1.19 [1.83]) and disrespect, which is broken down into even more specific insults (*The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 1.46 [1.130–32]).

12. The *Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.3.395–97, 1.27.2028–30, 1.33.2704–6, 1.69.5684–86. The *Ancrene Riwle* recommends such retrospective confession: "Schrift schal beon ihal; that is, iseid al to a mon ut of child hade" (Ancrene Wisse: The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle edited from MS Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, Early English Text Society o.s. 249 [London: Oxford University Press, 1962]). Jacques de Vitry notes that Marie d'Oignies recalled trivial sins and words from her childhood, adding that "it is a habit of good minds to recognize a sin when there is none" (*Life of Marie d'Oignies*, in Two Lives of Marie d'Oignies, ed. Margot H. King [Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1998], 19 [cited by chapter number]).

13. Words for anger apply only to God, the devil, or other people, never to Margery herself. The failure to confess her early unnamed sin could conceivably be classed as sloth, although she does not say it of herself. Margery's very orthodox wariness of excessive fasting pertains more to pride than gluttony, and the convoluted "red herring" episode in book 2 illustrates the complexity of taking pride in asceticism (2.8185–215).


15. Partner, "Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*," 45, 54.


19. Cf. Jacques de Vitry, Life of Marie d’Oignies, 5, describing chaste holy women during the sack of Liège: “Some jumped into dung-filled sewers and preferred to be snuffed out in the stinking manure than to be despoiled of their virginity.”


23. Ibid., 12.

24. Ibid., 13. The married Bridget of Sweden also lived chastely after bearing eight children, all but two of whom lived to adulthood.

25. The Book’s chronology is slightly confusing here: 1.3 begins with Margery in spiritual calm and then moves to her three years of “gret labowr with temptacyons” (1.3.380); 1.4 flashes back to her two years of “qwiete of spyryt” (1.4.407–9).


27. Ibid., 1.38.990–92, 1.39.1048–49.

28. Ibid., 1.37.976–78.

29. A number of Margery’s sources counsel against despair: see Julian, A Vision, 25.11–13; Julian, A Revelation, 52.53–57, 78.13, 80.31–35; Nicholas Love’s “Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ”: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686, ed. Michael G. Sargent (New York: Garland, 1992), 115.35–43 (cited by page and line number). After she is rejected by the man, Margery is “labowrd wyth temptacyons of dyspeyr as sche was befor . . . alwey sche dyspeyrd” (1.4.485–88). Jacques de Vitry, speaks of a young Cistercian nun to whom the devil sends “blasphemies and unclean thoughts . . . at the very moment that the thought occurred to her, she imagined that she had lost her faith, even though she resisted it with great sorrow for a long time and sorrowed greatly” (Life of Marie d’Oignies, 31).

30. Consent of the will is frequently insisted upon as an essential condition for mortal sin: see Hilton, The Scale of Perfection, 1.11.240, 1.19.468, 2.2.36, 2.2.317, 2.8.355, 2.11.464–84, 2.11.519–37, etc.; Nicholas Love’s “Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ,” 135.27–30; Julian, A Revelation, 19.18–32, 52.24–25, 53.8–10.

31. Margery uses the same phrase of herself in two other places in the book: 1.57.4774–75 (Margery would be cut up if it were God’s will) and 1.84.6891–94 (Margery would be cut up to save others from damnation). I will discuss the image more fully below.

33. At 1.76.6058–62, God tells Margery to patiently tend her indigent husband, because “he hath mad thi body fre to me, that thu schuldist servyn me and levyn chast and cleene.”

34. For the chronology, see Windeatt, The Book of Margery Kempe, vii–viii.


40. Partner identifies the first and third uses of the image as a “formal repetition with a key element reversed”: Margery is rejected by the unnamed man, then graciously accepted by Christ ("Reading The Book of Margery Kempe," 45).


42. Ibid., 78.29–35.


45. See also The Book of Margery Kempe, 1.28.2265–66, 1.35.2814–15.

46. We do learn at 1.1.175–76 that Margery was “maryed to a worschepful burgeys,” but the point now is that her family is more notable than his.

47. Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. “worship(e.” The word worship occurs in The Book of Margery Kempe in Prologue, 22 and 35, 1.2.262, 1.2.268, 1.2.271, 1.2.321, 1.2.384, and 1.56.4637–41. “Pomp and pride” occur as a pair in Prologue, 34 and 153, and “pride and pompous array” occurs at 1.2.255–56.

48. The only two exceptions are Prologue, 145, where Margery tells the second scribe that the devil envies his good deed, and 1.17.1236, where she recalls her earlier envy in her recital of her sins to Richard Caister.

49. Sirach 10:13; Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job 31.45m Patrologia Latina 76: 621A–C.


51. The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, 1.1.prof. (1.48).

52. Hilton, The Scale of Perfection, 1.5.1623–25.

53. See n. 25 above for the chronology of 1.3 and 1.4.

54. See Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job 31.45m Patrologia Latina 76: 621A–C; John Cassian, Institutes, 11.1, Patrologia Latina (Paris: Migne, 1846), 49.397C–399A.

55. The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, 4.17 (2.57).


58. Ibid., 1.5.1585–93.

59. Bridget is almost certainly a direct source here; in the Revelations, God tells the devil to say how much he (God) loves Bridget, and the devil replies: “If it were possible, you would readily suffer in each and every limb that same pain you once suffered on the cross in all your limbs together, rather than lose her” (The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, 1.34 [1.111]).
60. For “synguler lofe,” Windeatt cites Richard Rolle on “singular love” for God; but in this case it is God loving Margery rather than the other way around.

61. Plenary remission is mentioned at 1.29.2345, 1.30.2450–54, 1.31.2587–90, 1.73.5902–4.

62. She confesses in 1.1, 1.4, 1.8, 1.16, 1.27, 1.32, 1.33, 1.34, and 1.40, and her various confessors are very frequently referred to. At one point she asks the Archbishop of Canterbury to grant her permission to choose her own confessor (1.16.1158–60), and on her travels she is very anxious because of her lack of a confessor (see especially 1.32 and 1.33).


64. The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, 1.2 (1.55).

65. The Two Middle English Translations of the Revelations of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, 12.6–10.


70. Newman, From Virile Woman to WomanChrist, 129.

71. A Latin translation of The Mirror of Simple Souls was made by Richard Methley, a monk at the Carthusian house of Mount Grace in Yorkshire, which held the only manuscript of The Book of Margery Kempe.

72. Walter Hilton’s “Mixed Life” Edited from Lambeth Palace MS 472, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1986), p. 51, l. 606, p. 52, l. 622. The dates and manuscript milieu of the Mixed Life make it quite possible that Margery knew of it; see Nicholas Love’s “Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ,” Ix–Ixi. For a more detailed analysis of Margery, the concept of the mixed life in general, and Hilton’s Mixed Life in particular, see Yoshikawa, Margery Kempe’s Meditations, 120–33.

73. Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. “tr1-acle.”


75. The two classic passages are from the anonymous Pricke of Conscience (ca. 1340) and John Gower’s Mirrour de l’omme (1376–79). See Bryon Lee Grigsby, Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature (New York: Routledge, 2004), 79–81; and Carole Rawcliffe, Leprosy in Medieval England (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2006), 78–89.