Margery Kempe, Christian Materiality, and the Holy Body

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The Booke of Margery Kempe is autobiographical in nature insomuch as Margery Kempe details her mystical experiences via her life. In other words, Margery uses her life and the world in which she lives to make sense of the mystical visions that she receives from God. It is for this reason that readers of Margery both praise and critique her. On the one hand, she is hailed for composing the first autobiography in the English language, but on the other, the content of her Book is more often than not questioned for its validity. Because Margery situates her mystical experiences in a very material world, scholars of mysticism devalue her experiences, as if to say, “No self-respecting mystic would frame her mystical experiences that way – it simply would not do.” Mysticism and the material world, apparently, are contradictory if we are to believe these scholars. It is not my prerogative to question the assumptions of these scholars.
concerning Margery’s validity as a mystic; rather, I would have us reevaluate Margery’s experiences as seen in her Booke through her own cultural lens. Margery, as a member of Lynn’s Middle Class and a former businesswoman herself, lived in a material world that had begun to assign value (outside of use-value) to material objects. She lived in the protocapitalist later Middle Ages\(^1\) when the mercantile class began to flourish. It is interesting to note that the class of which Margery is a part is participating in a type of reading (interpreting) akin to the reading of material objects as holy. Instead of reading material objects as holy, the merchant class began to read material objects as having intrinsic worth outside of their use, which necessitated the epitome of reading worth onto something otherwise worthless: money. It is not my aim to digress into a discussion of money and value, but it is useful to consider this change occurring in a culture that had already been accustomed to reading spiritual meaning onto objects that exhibited no spiritual worth or characteristics in and of themselves. Margery, then, is doubly prone to reading objects for meaning that is not intrinsic as she is both a Christian and a member of the merchant class. It is this position that informs Margery’s mysticism in a way so unlike other mystics. To attempt to recover this perspective, I will discuss Christian materiality\(^2\) and how this materiality informs Margery’s conception of herself as a mystic. The very materiality of Margery’s visions is what makes them unique (and perhaps questionable to critics of more “traditional” mysticism); moreover, it is only in materiality that Margery’s visions may be made known to those around her and, through her text, to her reader. Margery, I believe, fashions her body and her visions through her body in such a way to engage the tradition of Christian materiality. Thus, she poses her body as such in this tradition. In this study, I consider how Margery’s fashioning of her body in her Book represents this authorization and how her own anxieties of materiality – her body and her world – complicate her ability to fashion her body thus. To do so, I will discuss Christian materiality and its relation to the body, Margery’s expression of her body through her clothing and tears, and Margery’s positioning of her body as a holy object in relation to other holy objects.

I. Christian Materiality and the Body

Material objects surrounded people of the Middle Ages much in the same way that they surround us today. Additionally, these material objects often took on a symbolic meaning of one sort of of another. In a world that looked to the next life as the release of one’s burden or as the paradise to the earthly toil that one endured, the issue of how to connect this world to the next was undoubtedly of constant concern for both religious authorities and laypeople. In other words, the problem of how to realize a spirituality (that often rejects the body) in a world of materiality seems to have been solved by imbuing certain material objects with spiritual meaning. A material object that belonged to or came into contact with a person of renowned holiness became a symbolic representation of that person; however, this practice seems to have led, as it often does, to making the symbolic representation holy in and of itself. (In other words, the signifier is granted the same status as the signified when they clearly are not equal.) What is more, who decides (or, perhaps rather, who proves) what constitutes a holy

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2 My conception of this term is that of Caroline Walker Bynum’s as presented in her latest work, Christian Materiality.
object only grew more muddied as the Middle Ages progressed. The Church eventually attempts to reign in what material objects may be deigned holy – relics, as it were. The problem remains, though, that laypeople had already learned to read material objects as symbolic representations of spiritual power, and once this way of reading had begun, it seems that the Church had only ineffective reactionary measures to attempt to mediate it.

The crux of the issue of holy matter seems to be how matter becomes holy matter; in other words, it is a question of both reading and authorization. Caroline Bynum Walker discusses the difficulty of authorization in regard to holy matter:

[I]t was almost impossible for church leaders and theologians to avoid the issue of holy matter. The transformed statues, chalices, wafers, cloths, relics, and even mounds of earth to which the faithful made pilgrimage in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries presented a challenge that was theoretical as well as practical for a religion that held that the entire material world was created by and could therefore manifest God. Secondly – and ironically – Cusanus’s approval of supposedly transformed objects rested on the claim to miraculous changelessness: the hosts’ supposed resistance the natural processes of decay and fragmentation. Issues of how matter behaved, both ordinarily and miraculously, when in contact with an infinitely powerful and ultimately unknowable God were key to devotion and theology. The God who lay beyond the world in unimaginable and unanalyzable darkness or light was also a God to whom substance (in the Eucharist) and even whose particles (in blood relics) might be present on earth. (Bynum Christian Materiality 17)

God’s presence on earth in material objects seems to be determined by the transformation of these objects. In other words, for an object to be authorized as holy matter, it must display something out of the ordinary – it cannot simply retain the characteristics of the material(s) of which it is made. Authorization of matter as holy rests in the reading of this matter. When we think of reading, we normally understand this skill as the ability to read the written word, but I want to broaden our conception of reading for the purposes of the study at hand to include reading objects. Immediately, one hopes, we realize the problem of determining (reading) what an object means. The written word is infinitely more precise in meaning than an object. We could bicker for hours on end to determine what “the” really means, but let it suffice to say that we agree, grammatically, that it is an article. Unlike the written word, however, we do not necessarily have agreed upon meanings for objects. Moreover, after people learn to interpret objects on their own, the possibility of imposing an authoritative meaning becomes rather difficult if not impossible. Objects were able to be read by people in the Middle Ages as holy without requiring any authority to tell them it was so or how it was so. The very material itself became holy, indicated an other-worldliness that people read as a means to interact with the other world – heaven. Many men and women may not have been capable (or allowed) to read and to interpret the Bible for themselves, but they were more than capable of interpreting objects to be holy in one way or another.

Before approaching Margery and her Booke, I would like to further investigate what Caroline Walker Bynum terms “Christian Materiality” in relation to reading. Although
in our current age we are a culture of concrete categories, the same cannot be said of the Middle Ages – especially the later Middle Ages. Where we are wont to categorize every thing as either/or, in the Middle Ages we would do well to remember that many things (experiences, objects, etc.) were both/and/and/etc. Bynum discusses such categorization:

In contrast to the modern tendency to draw sharp distinctions between animal, vegetable, and mineral or between animate and inanimate, the natural philosophers of the Middle Ages understood matter as the locus of generation and corruption. Although questions of the difference between living and nonliving and worries about decay and dissolution were common, the basic way of describing matter – the default language, so to speak, into which theorists tended to slip – was to see it as organic, fertile, and in some sense alive. (Christian Materiality 30)

This flexibility of categories makes reading an interesting task for the observer. Because an object may be one thing and also another, the interpretive power of the viewer is enhanced – the meaning of an object, ultimately, seems to lie with the person who reads it. Authorization of matter as holy or not holy becomes especially vexed when we consider this dynamic of reading. Margery Kempe seems to work within this flexibility of reading and the difficulty of authorization in the way she fashions her body in her Book. Margery fashions her body within the framework of Christian materiality so that she may take advantage of this tenuous relationship of reading and authorization. Although she was formerly businesswoman and proud member of the upper class of Lynn, she refashions her body as mystic body – what I will come to call a holy body. She manifests this inward change by changing her clothing – in other words, she draws attention to the very materiality of her body to show her detractors that she has become something else. Bynum notes the need for matter (bodies) to physically transform to be considered holy (Christian Materiality 32), and Margery achieves this transformation in her body’s presentation through materialities.

II. Clothing and Tears

Clothing functions in a number of ways for Margery. Initially, her clothing depicts her class and her position within that class to those around her in Lynn. Margery notes that despite her vision she did not immediately change her clothing. Her clothing up to the point of her vision was her way of fashioning her body to represent her position within the town of Lynn:

Neuyr-þe-lesse, sche wold not leeuyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray þat sche had vysd be-for-tym, neiþyr for hyr husbond ne for noon oþer mannys cownsel. And þet sche wyst ful wel þat men seyden hir ful mech velany, for sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd & hir hodys wyth þe typpetys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd & leyd wyth dyuers colowrs be-twen þe daggys þat it schuld be þe mor staryng to mennys sygth and hir-self þe mor ben worshepd. (Kempe 9)

Margery's emphasis on her fashion in fashioning her body is important because it signals to her reader that she understands her body as a way for others to identify who she is and whence she comes. The intricate description of the jagged edges to her clothing and the
gold pipes that she wears in her hair call our attention to how she has physically marked herself as a member of the upper class in Lynn – as a distinct body from those around her. Margery appeals to this sense of differentiation again when she writes, “Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybours þat þei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche” (Kempe 9). In other words, Margery did not want her neighbors to be as well-dressed as she was because they, then, would seem to be fashioned better than she. Fashioning, as far as Margery is concerned at this point, relates to her elite status in the community, but as she progresses through reframing her body as a mystic’s body, fashioning will become a means for her to express to the world around her that she has become a mystic.

The female body in the Middle Ages was very much a part of the material culture that surrounded it, and Margery’s awareness of the power of the fashioning of her body clearly informs her attempts to fashion her body as a virgin body. Karma Lochrie astutely addresses the construction of the female body:

*The body, particularly the female body, is itself a construct of science, medicine, theology, literature, education, the clothing industry, advertising, and fitness centers. Except for the last two industries, the same is true for the Middle Ages. The female body, simply put, has a history, and that history is determined by social and religious values, institutions, and patriarchal power structures.* (3)

The history of the female body, then, that Margery seems to engage is the female body as a mystic body. Her understanding of this type of female body is that it must be a virgin body, but what leads her to this assessment is somewhat unclear within her text other than it is an inherited cultural tradition in the Middle Ages. Margery describes lying in bed with her husband when “sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet & delectable, hir þowt, as sche had ben in Paradyse” (Kempe 11). Her response to this melody is to renounce worldly things and to speak of bliss in Heaven, which may explain her sudden desire to become a virgin body. She notes, “And aftyr þis tyme sche had neuyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for þe dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir þat sche had leuar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn þe wose, þe mukke in þe chanel, þan to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyns” (Kempe 11-12). Margery, here, seems intent on renouncing the flesh because it is a worldly preoccupation, but she must remain obedient to her husband as well. The “debt of matrimony,” as she calls it, may refer to simply the sexual act, but I believe this terminology also gestures toward her desire to be free of matrimony – to become a virgin again – so that she may be granted intimacy with Christ.

The virgin body in the Middle Ages was a pure body. Margery’s desire for this body stems from its privileged status. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl discuss the uncorrupted virgin body:

While the silencing of women through isolation is indeed a part of the history of virgins, the uncorrupted body also allows virgins (both literary and real; the saints and martyrs are matched in their verbal vigor by the female mystics who record their own experiences for posterity) to articulate themselves in ways that women inside the sexual economy of marriage cannot. (4)

Margery clearly remains within the sexual economy, which means that her body is not

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4 Margery’s body is never actually a virgin body, but she conflates the categories of chaste body and virgin body into virgin body.
pure. This lack of purity – its corruption – denies Margery the authorization to speak about her mystical experiences. As a result, Margery continually prays to be allowed to live chaste (Kempe 12). A chaste body and a virgin body are not the same, but this step is framed as a necessary step to virginity. Margery, praying to God to be allowed to be chaste, receives her wish from Christ:

. . . Cryst seyd to hir mende, “þow must fastyn þe Fryday boþen from mete & drynke, and þow schalt haue þi desyr er Whitsonday, for I schal sodeynly sle þin husbone.” Þan on þe Wednysday in Estern Woke, aftyr hyr husband wold haue had knowlach of hir as he was wonne be-for, & whan he gan neygh hir, sche seyd, “Þhesus, help me,” & he had no power to towche hir at þat tyme in þat wyse, ne neury aftyr wyth no fleschly knowyng. (Kempe 21)

Margery’s wish to be chaste has been approved by Christ; he literally stops her husband from touching her. Yet her body still is not virgin. For Margery to be fully satisfied that her chaste body is euqal to (if not the same) as a virgin body requires yet another authorization by Christ.

Never does Christ tell Margery that she has become a virgin again, but he authorizes her to live chaste as she goes on pilgrimages. Margery’s authorization becomes troubled when earthly authority opposes the heavenly authority of Christ in her visions. Christ commands her to dress in white: “And, dowtyr, I sey to þe I wyl þat þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colowr, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl” (Kempe 32). White symbolizes chastity, and by fashioning her body in white, Margery gains the authorization of the virgin body. This authorization is problematized because Margery remains with her husband, and Margery says, “A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on oþer maner þan oþer chast women don, I drede þat þe pepyl slaw[n]dyr me” (Kempe 32). Margery knows that she has been authorized by Christ, but others might not recognize this authorization.

Christ reassures her that she shall dress in white, but Margery and her husband travel to ask Bishop Philip in Lincoln to accept their vows of chastity and to dress Margery in white only for Margery to be denied white clothing at that time (Kempe 34-35). This denial puzzles Margery because she has already been authorized by Christ; however, instead of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as the bishop advises (Kempe 35), Margery prays to Christ for guidance only to be authorized yet again, which leads the bishop to advise her to visit the Archbishop of Canterbury so that he might authorize this decision (Kempe 35). Margery succeeds in gaining approval from the Archbishop: “And he fond no defawt þerin but a-prevyd hir maner of leuyng & was ryght glad þat owyr mercyful Lord Cryst Ihesu schewyd swech grace in owry days, blyssed mot he be” (Kempe 37).

The authorization of the Archbishop undoes the opposition of earthly authority to that of heavenly authority, and this earthly authorization is later enhanced when the anchor at Friar Preachers, too, acknowledges that Margery “wer a good woman, a louere of God, & hyly inspyred wyth þe Holy Gost” (Kempe 37).

Margery continues worrying over her authorization, believed by some and rebuked by others, until in Chapter 21 Christ speaks explicitly as to how she is as worthy as a virgin. This turn does not make Margery’s body virgin, but it allows her to occupy the same category of space as a virgin according to Christ. Christ tells Margery that he loves Margery’s body itself cannot become a virgin body again since she has experienced both intercourse and numerous pregnancies; however, the outward fashioning of her body may frame her thus.
her as if she were a virgin, but Margery does not believe that she is worthy of the same
love:

Þan seyd þe creatur, “Lord Ihesu, þis maner of leuyng longyth to thy holy 
maydens.” “3a, dowtyr, trow þow ryght wel þat I lofe wyfes also, and specyal 
þo wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast, 3yf þei mygtyyn haue her wyll, & don her 
besynes to plesyn me as þow dost, for, þow þe state of maydenhode be more 
parfyte & mor holy þan þe state of wedewhode, & þe state of wedewhode mor 
parfyte þan þe state [of] wedlake. 3et dowtyr I lofe þe as wel as any mayden in 
þe world.” (Kempe 48-49)

Margery’s anxiety that she cannot be loved by Christ the same as he loves maidens is
assuaged when Christ tells her that he loves her despite the fact that she is living chaste
while married. This authorization works to equate Margery’s position with that of the
virgin despite the fact that Christ does not say that she is the same as a virgin. She
has Christ’s love the same as any virgin does, which serves to authorize her worthiness
to receive these visions and to interpret them. This authorization is also one of the
many that Margery will use to frame herself as a holy body; moreover, it is through this
authorization that Margery is allowed to dress in white and that her tears symbolize
the spiritual contact of Christ with her. Margery, at this point, presents her body as
authorized by Christ.

Margery pays less specific attention to her clothing after Christ has equated her to a
virgin, but the places in which she does are points at which her authenticity is questioned
by others as a result of their misreading of her body. Margery’s lack of self-consciousness
about her clothing perhaps belies her acceptance of her body as appropriate to be a
mystic body, and her attention to her clothing seems now to fully depend upon those
around her. She remains concerned, it seems, with how people read her appearance and
her actions. Upon arriving in Rome, Margery notes she “was clas al in white liche as sche
was comawndyd for to do þerys be-forn in hir sowle be reuelacyon,” which she directly
follows with an account of a priest who slandered her (Kempe 80). The proximity of her
description of her dress to the details of being slandered reveal her paranoia that people
accept what they see that has been authorized by the unseen – that is, Christ. Upon being
advised to resume wearing black clothing by the “Duche preste” (Kempe 84), Margery
(still in Rome) encounters this priest who had slandered her: “ . . . he enjoyid gretly þat
sche was put fro hir wille & seyd vn-to hir, ‘I am glad þat þe gon in blak clothyng as þe
wer wont to do.” And sche seyd a-ȝen to him, “Ser, owyr Lord wer not displesyd thow I
weryd whyte clothys, for he wyl þat I do so” (Kempe 85). Again, Margery attempts to
convince the priest that her clothing signifies Christ’s will that she do so, but he remains
unconvinced. Margery eventually resumes wearing white clothing at the command of
Christ “& so weryd sche white clothys euyr aftyr” (Kempe 92). Margery’s attention to
clothing wanes at this point, but now I want to focus upon her attention to a second
signifier of her contact with Christ – her tears – and the eventual authorization of these
tears.

Margery notes numerous times that she bursts into tears thinking about Christ
or seeing something that reminds her of Christ, but it is in Chapter 28 when she first
sees Christ on the cross in her contemplation that she explains why she cries. Margery
argues that it only makes sense that she would cry when she sees people suffering because it reminds her of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, which she relates to compassion for a friend’s suffering:

How meche mor myth þei wepyn, cryen, & roryn ʒyf her most belouyd frendys wer wyth vyolens takyn in her syght & wyth al maner of reprefe browt be-for þe juge, wrongfully condemnyd to þe deth, & namely so spytful a deth as owr mercyful Lord suffyrd for owyr sake. How schuld þei suf[ffyr y]t? No dowt but þei xulde boþe cry & rore & wrekyn hem ʒyf þei myth, & ellys men wold sey þei wer no frendys. (Kempe 70-71)

In other words, Margery justifies her crying through a compassionate guilt. She frames her outbursts of tears as something one should be expected to do when she thinks of Christ’s death upon the cross. Margery’s focus on Christ’s suffering is typical for female mystics. Lochrie discusses how Margery’s tears, like her clothing, signifies her authorization by Christ: “Through her tears, then, Kempe makes a spectacle of her reading of the body of Christ, a reading which she herself embodies and translates into The Booke of Margery Kempe. It is ultimately Christ’s body which authorizes and embodies her own speech” (8).

Margery fashions her body and the tears from her body to act as physical signs that Christ has visited her; she both proclaims and acts the mystical experience to those around her so that they, too, may think on Christ’s Passion. Lochrie agrees, writing, “Kempe’s tears become a public spectacle by which others may be reminded of Christ’s Passion and their own sins” (196). I will examine more of Margery’s outbursts for their nature as signifiers of her connection to and authorization by Christ.

Margery continues her outbursts of tears both on pilgrimages and in churches. Such outbursts are generally viewed with annoyance by those who surround her, but in spite of this response from others, her tears continue until Christ no longer wills her to experience them. Margery’s outbursts themselves are spectacles, as Lochrie notes above, that draw others’ attention to her, and it is in this attention that Margery begins to situate herself as a holy body, which is something that I will address in the next section of my paper. For now, Margery’s tears will be further examined as bodily signifiers of her connection to Christ. In Bristol while waiting for a ship, Margery weeps and wails thinking about Christ, which leads those around her to scorn and to despise her, and she responds by seeking forgiveness from Christ on their behalf: “‘Lord, as þy seydyst hangyng on þe Cros for þi crucyfyerys, “Fadyr, forʒeyeue hem; þei wite not what þei don,” so I beseche þe, fœʒeue þe peypyl al scorne & slawndrys & al þat þei han trespasyd, ʒyf it be they wille, for I haue deseruyd meche mor & meche more am I worthy’” (Kempe 107).

Margery speaks to Christ after she has cried; her speech seems to be authorized through her tears. After she cries, Margery reasserts how her tears should be read by those around her when she expresses her intimate relationship with Christ. Margery fashions her body in a position of reception similar to that of Christ crucified to represent this relationship. That is, Margery receives the scorn of those around her, in essence, to remind the very people who scorn her of those who scorned Christ; as Christ granted his detractors forgiveness, she grants hers Christ’s forgiveness.

Similar to Margery’s attempts to control others’ reading of her body through her

7 If I were making an argument about authenticity, I would examine the continuance of her tears despite the terrible treatment that she receives from those around her, but as I am not making such an argument, this footnote will suffice to draw one’s attention to it.
dress and the tears that she sheds, Margery seems equally desirous of associating Christ’s body with her body. Margery frames her body as place in which Christ’s broken body may be seen: “Kempe seeks her own privileged reading of the Christic body in her visions of the Crucifixion at the same time that she longs for inscription of her own life in Christ’s body and, hence, his remembrance. By reading his body into the narrative of her life, in turn, Kempe bases her text on that privileged reading of the Christic text” (Lochrie 191-92). Lochrie analyzes this turn as a means in which Margery authorizes her text, too, but I am more concerned with how Margery’s reading of Christ’s body is in effort to impact others’ reading of her own body. The tears that Margery sheds link her to Christ, which in turn validates her actions. A parson defends Margery against those around her by understanding her tears as such:

Þan þe persun cesyd a lityl of hys prechyng & seyd to þe pepil, “Frendys, beth stille & grutchith not wyth þis woman, for iche of ʒow may synne deedly in hir & sche is nowt þe cause but ʒowr owyn demyng, for, þow þis maner of werkyng may seme boþe good & ylle, þet awt ʒowe for to demyn þe best in ʒowr herty, & I dowt it not it is ryth wel. Also I dar wel say it is a ryth gracyows ʒyft of God, blissed mote he be.” (Kempe 165)

The parson asks the congregation to understand Margery’s tears as a gift from God instead of sinning by focusing on her tears rather than the parson’s sermon. It would seem that he wants the people to be moved by his words as much as Margery has been moved by them; they ought to take example from her, in other words.

This authorization from the parson functions much in the same way that the Archbishop of Canterbury earlier authorized Margery’s clothing. Additional clerical authorization for Margery’s tears comes from “a worschepful doctowr whech hite Maistyr Custawns” (Kempe 165) and a second doctor (Kempe 166). The attention that Margery spends upon this authorization of her tears stems from the same anxiety that she had over her authorization as a virgin and to wear white clothing. That is to say, she becomes anxious about her tears only after they are challenged by others. The people around her often scorn her for her outbursts, but when the Grey Friar will not believe that she receives her tears from God, Margery becomes especially upset (Kempe 149). Before the above authorizations from the parson and the two doctors, Margery’s tears are taken away for a time, which leads her to be deemed a hypocrite by people:

Þan meche pepil leuyd þat sche durst no lengar cryen for þe good frer prechyd so a-geyn hir & wold not suffyr hir in no maner. Þan þei heldyn hym an holy man & hir a fals feynyd ypocrite. &e, as summe spoke euyl of hir aforn for sche cryed, so sum spoke now euyl of hir for sche cryid not. & so slawndir & bodily angwisch fel to hir on euery syde, & al was encresyng of hir gostly comfort. (Kempe 156)

Margery quite literally is damned if she does and damned if she does not regarding her tears. By removing the signifier of tears that Margery has caused those around her to read as her link to him, Christ causes Margery to suffer the scorn of the people, but he tells her, as usual, that her suffering makes her more loved by him (Kempe 156-57). Margery’s tears eventually return, and since they are doubly authorized (spiritually and

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8 By allying her body with Christ’s body, Margery gestures toward her eventual posturing of herself as a holy object.
earthly), she seems to worry less about whether people will question her legitimacy. Like her waning concern for her clothing, Margery's lessening concern over her tears allows her to progress in her fashioning of her body. Now authorized, Margery is a holy body to be read by others as a way to approach Christ.

III. Margery's Body as a Holy Body

If we look at Margery's conception of the world around her as a world to be read for meaning (or for worth), I think we are able to bring interesting light to her conception of herself as a holy body – as a conduit of mysticism. In other words, Margery positions her body as an object through which Christ speaks. Unlike the relics and holy objects that so many Christians read for meaning in her culture, Margery knew that Christ had contacted her body. Thus, it is clear to her that her body is holy – is of the same category of these holy objects. Caroline Bynum Walker discusses the materiality of holy objects during the later Middle Ages:

But the stuff of which medieval images were made was not incidental to their form or simply functional, nor indeed was it only an iconography to be decoded. The viewer cannot avoid observing the particular materials employed, and these materials have multiple meanings, again both obvious and subtle. Some are, as current slang puts it, “in your face”: others need to be decoded. For example, the crystal on a reliquary was a window to look through, but it mattered that the window was crystal; it encased the bone within in the nondecayable quintessence of heaven. Thereby it not only made a statement about the status of its contents as already glorified, it also raised them to glory. Moreover, late medieval devotional images call attention to themselves not just as materials but also also as specific physical objects. (Christian Materiality 28)

If the materiality of things, as Bynum posits, assists in raising them to glory, does it not only make sense that Margery privileges herself as the vessel? Moreover, Margery's allying of the body (flesh) with Christ fits the Christian tradition perfectly. In other words, if God became man to die to save humankind from sin, it reasons that the human body is the most perfect object through which Christ would be found. As a result of such situating, the self-abjection that we see in many other mystics of this period is loudly absent from Margery's Book. Although one may fault her for pride, I would rather have us acknowledge that Margery understands her world – a world of material things – in the manner that Bynum gestures toward. I believe I have shown through Margery's clothing and tears that her mysticism, unlike any other mysticism, participates in the materiality of the world – a materiality that ironically is the only means possible for mysticism to express itself in the mystic herself and, especially, from her outward to others.

Margery's body itself is the vehicle for mystic expression in her Book. Bynum notes, “materials that had been touched to holy objects were thought to have become that with which they had made contact” (Christian Materiality 126). Margery's body has been touched, spiritually if not physically, by Christ through her visions, which leads her to believe that her body is a site of holiness. Her body is a type of “contact relic” (Christian Materiality136) as a result. Margery's body is not a relic; it remains a body. However, the category of contact relic is something to which her body belongs. Bynum discusses this
category in specific relation to Christ and Mary: “The faithful also revered contact relics of Christ and Mary (for example, pieces of Mary’s mantle or straw from the manger at Bethlehem) and effulvial (that is, exuded) relics (such as Mary’s milk). Indeed, associated relics were particularly important in the case of Jesus and Mary, because their actual bodies were assumed to be unavailable, having been taken up into heaven” (Christian Materiality 137; emphasis mine). Margery’s body’s association with Christ – her fashioning of her body to display Christ’s contact with it – perhaps acts in a similar manner. Since Christ’s body is not available to be seen by people, Margery poses her body as a site in which Christ’s body may be read.

Margery’s contact with Christ has been indicated through her visions and Christ’s words to her, but I want to investigate two specific examples to further show Margery’s “physical” contact with Christ, which allow me to situate her body within the category of contact relic that Bynum has defined: Christ’s ravishing of her spirit and her marriage to Christ. Early in Margery’s Booke, Christ ravishes her while she is praying:

Than on a Fryday beforn Crystmes Day, as þis creatur, knelyng in a chapel of Seynt Iohn wythinne a cherch of Seynt Margrete in N., wept wondir sore, askyng mercy & forþnes of hir synnes & hir trespas, owyr mercyful Lord Cryst Ihesu, blyssyd mot he be, rauysched hir spyryt & seyd on-to hir: “Dowtyr, why wepyst þow so sor?  I am comyn to þe, Ihesu Cryst, þat deyd on þe Crosse sufferyng byttyr peynes & passyons for þe.” (Kempe 16)

The word ravish here may simply mean “To draw forcibly into or to some condition, action, etc.” (“ravish, v.” def. 2c), but the word also carries the connotation of “To rape, violate (a woman)” (“ravish, v.” def. 5b). Clearly, Christ is not physically raping Margery, but the imagery of ravishment – spiritual sexual union – was not uncommon for mystics. This bodily imagery in Margery’s text suggests spiritual contact with Christ in physical terms; in other words, Margery’s body and Christ’s body are joined for that moment of spiritual ecstasy. This joining of bodies is further elucidated when God weds Margery:

“Dowtyr, I wil han þe weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn þe my preuyteys & my ownseyls, for þu xalt wonyn wyth me wyth-owtyn ende.” . . And þan the Fadyr toke hir be þe hand in hir sowle be-for þe Sone & þe Holy Gost & þe Modyr of Ihesu and alle þe xij apostelys & Seynt Kateryn & Seynt Margarete & many oþer seyntys & holy virgynes wyth gret multitude of awngelys, seying to hir sowle, “I take þe, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayyar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so þat þu be buxom & bonyr to do what I byd þe do.  For, dowtyr, þer was neuyr childe so buxom to þe modyr as I xal be to þe boþe in wel & in wo, - to help þe and comfort þe.  And þerto I make þe suyrte.” (Kempe 86-87)

Again, it is clear that this is not a physical, earthly marriage, but the way in which Margery describes it to her reader is in the physical description of a real marriage. God not only contacts Margery, he binds himself to her in a spiritual marriage. What is more, Margery’s marriage to God is a heavenly spectacle – notice all of the holy bodies in attendance to bear witness. Margery’s body participates in this spiritual spectacle; thus, she uses her body in similar manners in earthly spectacles to express this union she has achieved with both Christ and God. Margery frames her holy body, then, to function
much in the same way that the holy objects she encounters throughout her pilgrimages do. She positions herself to others so that they may see her body and figuratively look upon Christ’s absent body. Margery’s tears and clothing are large parts in the spectacle that she creates of her body, but I now turn to her physical positioning of her body to fashion her body as a conduit of mysticism – as a conduit to Christ’s body.

To act as a conduit, Margery situates her body as if it were a contact relic as I have discussed, but it is not a relic per se despite the fact that it occupies the same category within Christian materiality. Lochrie makes the distinction between the mystic’s body (and its effects) and relics when she notes, “Unlike relics, which derive power from detached bodily parts, these tokens of mystical imitation are powerful in their relationship to the body” (40). Although she is correct insofar as the mystic’s body functions differently in its nature from a relic, Lochrie neglects to account for how the mystic presents her body to those around it – to her readers. The female body occupies a unique context in this regard. Caroline Walker Bynum notes in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, “Women more often used their ordinary experiences (of powerlessness, of service and nurturing, of disease, etc.) as symbols into which they poured ever deeper and more paradoxical meanings” (25). Margery’s body, then, becomes a body that symbolizes her contact with Christ; it becomes a holy body that represents her visions in its exterior appearance and action. Margery situates her body and its actions to draw others’ attention to it often on her pilgrimages when she encounters relics:

& sche abood not long þer [Bristol] but went forth to þe Blod of Hayles, & þer was schrevyn & had lowde cryes & boystows wepyngys. & þan þe religiows men had hir in a-mongse hem & mad hir good cher, saf þei sworyn many gret othys & horryble. & sche vndyrname hem þerof aftyr þe Gospel, & þerof had þei gret wondyr. Neuyr-þe-lesse summe wer ryth wel plesyd, thankyd be God of hys goodnesse. (Kempe 110-11)

Notice that the *Blood of Hailes* that causes Margery to burst into a fit of weeping, which removes others’ attention from the relic itself and places their attention upon Margery’s body. As the parson notes of Margery’s tears in a section I cited earlier, Margery’s body here is modeling an appropriate spiritual response – she is so spiritually moved that she manifests this affect in her physical fashioning of her body to those around her. Some men who encounter her holy body react negatively, but others “had great wonder” at it. These men seem to read Margery’s body as a devotional aid of sorts in this moment instead of the relic.

Margery fashions her body’s actions in the manner of Christ – to reveal Christ’s authorization of her body – later in her Book when she kisses lepers and when she performs a “miracle” by bringing a mad woman back to sanity. After a vision of Christ, Margery seeks permission from her confessor to kiss lepers as Christ did, and her confessor allows that she kiss female lepers. Margery comforts a particular leper: “Þefor þe sayd creatur went to hir many tymys to comfortyn hir & preyd for hir, also ful specialy þat God xulde strength hir a-geyn hir enmye, & it is to beleuyn þat he dede so, blissyd mot he ben” (Kempe 177). By kissing and comforting this female leper, Margery brings her God’s comfort. Her bodily presence symbolizes the presence of God – acts as a spiritual conduit for his grace to this forlorn woman. Similarly, when a man “schewyng tokenys
of gret heuynes” enters the church to pray, Margery approaches him to discover what ails him. His wife, after giving birth, is “owt hir mende,” and he agrees to bring Margery to her. Again, we see Margery's body functioning as a holy object – as a live intercessor to God on the behalf of others:

And þe sayd creatur preyid for þis woman euery day þat Gold xulde, ʒyf it were hys wille, restoryn hir to hir wittyys a-geyn. And owr Lord answeryd in hir sowle & seyd, “Sche xulde faryn ryth wel.” ðan was sche mor bolde to preyn for hir recuryng þan sche was be-forn, & iche day, wepyng & sorwyng, preyid for hir recur tyl God ʒaf hir witte & hir mende a-ʒen. . . . It was, as hem thowt þat knewyn it, a ryth gret myrakyl. . . . (Kempe 178)

Clearly, God is working through Margery's body in this passage. He assures her that the mad woman will be well. The people around her think that Margery has worked a miracle; rather, her holy body has represented God's working of a miracle. Both of these accounts recall Christ's own miraculous workings throughout the New Testament, but it is clear here that Margery's body is the key for these workings. Without her holy body, God would not come into physical contact with these affected women. Sarah Beckwith has discussed Margery's allying of her body with Christ's suffering (208), but what we see here is clearly Margery's body functioning, again, as a conduit of Christ.9 Margery's holy body through its contact with God brings him to earth, and perhaps in his preservation of her body is where we best see Margery's holy body granted reliquary status.10

9 Margery’s body not only feels Christ’s suffering, but it also brings his healing powers to earth through its materiality.

10 I reiterate that Margery’s body itself is not a relic, but clearly she occupies the same category, as I have already discussed. Additionally, I should note that Margery's body is preserved (meaning saved) as long as she lives; I have no way of speaking to its status after her death.

Throughout Margery’s Book, we see her body threatened by both pilgrims, sickness, and nature, but these threats are almost always assuaged by Christ’s reassurances that she shall be well. Over and over again, Margery is abandoned by others on a pilgrimage with her, and yet God always ensures that she does not perish. A particular instance of this preservation occurs when Margery does not take the same ship that her fellowship boards and waits to take a smaller vessel later. While she waits, Margery fears for her life during a thunderstorm, upon which Christ visits her in a vision: “Þan owr Lord Ihesu Crist seyd to hir, ‘Why art thow a-ferd whil I am wyth þe? I am as mythy to kepyn þe her in þe felde as in þe strengest chirche in alle þis worlde.’ & aftyr þat tyme sche was not so greatly a-ferd as sche was be-forn, for euyr sche had gret trust in hys mercy, blyssed mote he be þat comfortyd hir in euery sorwe” (Kempe 101). Instead of becoming uncorruptible in death (as a relic), Margery's body is uncorruptible in life as long as Christ desires. We see Margery's faith in Christ's protection of her when the smaller vessel she boards the next day is at sea during a storm:

And, whan þeir wer in þe lityl schip, it be-gan to waxin gret tempestys & dyrke wedyr. ðan þei cryed to God for grace & mercy, & a-non þe tempestys sesyd, & þe had fayr wedyr & seyled al þe nyght on ende & þe next day tyl evyn-song-tyme, & þan þei cam to londe. &, whan þei wer on þe londe, þe forseyd creatur fel downe on hir knes kyssyng þe grownde, hyly thankyng God þat had browt hem hom in safte. (Kempe 102)

Margery's holy body is preserved on her voyage despite the storms that the ship encounters. Margery's body as a conduit bears Christ's healing and teachings to others, but it is also
preserved through the same connection to Christ.

IV. Conclusion

Margery Kempe’s body is a holy body as she presents it throughout her Book. Even though much of the action of this text occurs within Margery in visions of and interactions with Christ and God, the location of this text is clearly Margery’s body. She fashions her exterior to reveal this interior in her clothing, tears, and the very positioning of her body. Margery’s body is not a relic, but it is a holy body that occupies the same category within Christian materiality. As Bynum notes, “Distinctions between living and dead, body and thing, presence and mimesis, part and whole, animate and inanimate, tended to blur; all of creation could convey and reveal God” (Christian Materiality 267). Clearly, Margery’s body participates in the blurring of these boundaries. She is both a woman of the world and a mystic, sinner and holy, sexual and chaste, orthodox and heterodox, accepted and rebuked, etc. Perhaps Margery’s body fits the Christian materiality of her age so well because of its contradictory situating throughout her text. What is more, the way in which others read Margery’s body is a constant preoccupation. Much like the Church’s anxiety surrounding holy matter, Margery worries over others’ reading (especially in denying) her holy body. Capitalizing on the flexibility of Christian materiality and of reading that allows her to authorize her body through its physical presentation, Margery attempts to control how others read her, but she ultimately is not able to convince all readers that her body is a holy body despite her efforts to frame it thus. What matters, however, is that her culture allowed her the space to fashion her body to be read in the way she intended, and I believe we cannot deny her body is a holy body from such a perspective.

Works Cited


