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sche was labowrd wyth þe oþer man for to syn wyth hym in-as-mech as he had spoke to hir. At þe last thorw inoportunyte of temptacyon & lakkyng of dyscrecyon sche was ouyr-comyn, & consentyd in hir mend, & went to þe man to wetyn yf he wold þan consentyn to hire. And he seyð he ne wold for al þe good in þis world; he had leuar ben hewyn as smal as flesch to þe pott. Sche went a-way al schamyd & confusyd in hir-self, seyng hys stabylnes & hir owyn vnstabylnes.¹

It is an account which is notable for its attention not only to desire but to the process by which desire is made, and it may serve as a paradigm for analysis. Many of the determining factors of desire that can be isolated here may also be made to speak of the wider cultural matrix within which desire *could* be produced in early fifteenth-century England.

First, and most conspicuously perhaps, the sexual encounter takes place within a religious context. Both the date and the occasion are identified within a framework of routine orthodox worship: the date is St Margaret's Eve and the sexual encounter takes place before and after evensong at the parish church of St Margaret's. This gives a particularly pointed spiritual framework to sexual events. St Margaret was a popular medieval saint, a virgin martyr who rejected the sexual overtures of a great man (Olybrius, governor of Antioch) and endured torture and execution rather than submit to his desires. Kempe's yielding and humiliation is presented against St Margaret's spiritual strength and triumph.

The probability of Kempe's own consciousness of this contrast, not explicitly drawn in the text, is heightened by the fact that she reads the incident as a test of her own spiritual state. Prior to her account of this event she describes how for two years following her revelations from God she had been without feelings of sexual desire, and had become proud of her spiritual strength. Christ, 'seyng þis creaturys presumpcyon' (14), at this point sent her three years of temptation – hence the reference at the beginning of the extract to the second year of her temptation. Just prior to this episode Kempe acknowledges sexual desire to be her own area of greatest vulnerability and hence the obvious location of temptation for her. The devil knows, she says, where his creatures are weakest and probes them precisely there: 'wher þat he fyndyth us most freel þer be owyr Lordys sufferawns he leyth hys snar' (14). Kempe's spiritual strength is sexually assaulted, as was St Margaret's, but unlike St Margaret's, is not sufficient to resist.

The church is conspicuous not only in providing the material framework of date, time and location but also as the ideological force regulating the lawful and unlawful arenas of sexual activity. Sex with her husband at this time, Kempe points out, is permissible but undesirable: 'so abhomynabyll on-to hir þat sche mygth not duren it'. What she specifically desires is unlawful adultery with the other man: she wants 'to syn wyth hym'. As Foucault has shown, the law produces the desire it seeks to repress: 'the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated. Where there is desire, the power relation is already present'.² Kempe's text is explicit about the extent to which the woman is aroused at least partly by the forbidden nature of the particular sexual act.

She also, however, recognises undue pleasure in marital sex as unlawful, and later reads her duty to nurse her husband through his last, incontinent illness as the appropriate punishment for her earlier delight in his body. While the law may license the sexual act under certain conditions, it constructs desire as unlawful, sinful. The domination of sexuality in the narrative of Kempe's life is named as the besetting sin of lechery, and transgression becomes specifically sexualised.³ Kempe's desire is both policed and produced by her continual preoccupation with chastity. The very strength of her desire for chastity produces the strength of the sexual desire which undermines it.

Chastity and desire, spirituality and sexuality, both in this incident and throughout the book, are polarised but inseparable. The narrative repeatedly re-enacts the struggle between them. In this episode Kempe's preoccupation with sexual temptation interferes with her attempt to hear the divine service and say her prayers:

þis woman was so labowrd wyth þe mannys wordys þat sche
mygth not heryn hir euynsong, ne sey hir Pater Noster, er
thynkyn ony oþer good þowt, but was mor labowrd þan euyr
sche was befor,

while church law intervenes to block the easy fulfilment of her desire. Desire is openly linked to questions of control. The domination of the law produces the desire for the illicit. The woman must then choose whether to satisfy law or desire; and this in turn creates anxiety around issues of choice and agency.

The narrative is cast in terms of a gendered struggle for control. First, language calls attention to the man's attempt to dominate the woman, to erase her

choice and negate the issue of *her* desire: 'sche xuld not wythstond hym'; 'sche xuld not chese'. Her experience of desire seems aroused by the very terms in which the sexual overture is made, terms which apparently block her desire by erasing the factor of her choice. Even as she struggles to make her choice, she talks about it in terms of *his* desire, *his* will and *his* intent:

And, whan euensong was do, sche went to the man befor-seyd
þat he xuld haue hys lust, as sche wend þat he had desyred, but
he made swech symulacyon þat sche coud not knowe hys entent,
& so þei partyd a-sondyr for þat nygh.

Her own desire grows stronger, and she makes an even bolder choice, insofar as she determines to go back to the man, but only after much hedging does the language of the narrative come to attribute agency to the woman. First her decision is presented in terms of another agency that overcomes her and to which she consents: 'sche was ouyr-comyn, & consentyd in hir mend'; only then does the grammar shift to allow her to become the active agent of the verbs, recasting the man in the passive role of consent: she 'went to þe man to wetyn yf he wold þan consentyn to hire.'

The text is chronically slippery around the problematic of agency, repeatedly redirecting it not just between man and woman, but between human and superhuman agents. Kempe's interpretation of the temptation as a test removes the man's agency to make him an instrument of the devil, and the schematic explanation of her two years of spiritual pride and three years of temptation that precedes her account of this incident confirms the superhuman framework. Interior struggle is removed to the sphere of conflict between spiritual antagonists greater than the self:

þe Deuyl put in hir mende þat God had forsakyn hir, and ellys
xuld sche not so ben temptyd. She leuyd þe Deuelys suasyons &
gan to consentyn for be-cause sche cowde thynkyn no good
thowt. þerfor wend sche þat God had forsake hir.

The continuous textual strategy of referring to Kempe in the third person as 'this creature' is clearly also linked to this anxiety about agency. The phrase becomes symbolically significant in its capacity to focus the instability of Kempe's agency and control. It allows her to be the grammatical subject of sentence after sentence,

while simultaneously prohibiting the identification of that subject with the first person 'I'.⁴

Finally, it is notable that words are a crucial element in the production of desire here. It is the man's words that interrupt Kempe's thoughts and distract her from evensong. She is tormented by thoughts of this man 'for to syn wyth hym in-as-mech as he had *spoke* to hir' (my italics). Despite the emphatic bodiliness of this text by comparison with the texts of other holy women, the experience of desire emerges here in a curiously disembodied way, out of thought and speech. There is no reference to any kind of touching; words alone are sufficient to arouse desire.

Autobiography?

So far, this is to read the narrative as a direct account of an individual woman living in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as though the text were a straightforward mirror to the writer's inner self. When *The Book of Margery Kempe* was first published in 1936⁵ its reception indicated a refusal to find textuality as in any way a barrier between the person of the subject and the reader. Kempe was diagnosed in Freudian terms as a hysteric, and her text treated in the same way as the oral communication of an individual attending for therapy.⁶ This trend is by no means confined to the text's initial reception: Stephen Medcalf consults Dr Anthony Ryle for a diagnosis of Kempe in a piece published in 1981, and Barry Windeatt cites this same diagnosis in his translation, published in 1985.⁷

The problem is not whether or not Kempe was a hysteric or suffered from any neurotic illness – that kind of information is irrecoverable – but that the text of her book does not make her available to us in the same way as a living person. Besides the obvious point that textuality necessarily shapes and structures its content, selecting and omitting in order to emphasise particular points, there is the further problem of whether, in this case, we can even legitimately refer to the book as 'her book'. It is, after all, not written down by her, but by two scribes, the first described to us as unintelligible by the second, and the second, by his own admission, initially incapable and unwilling.

Furthermore, the second scribe, whose text is the only one we now have access to, does not depict himself as entirely a passive instrument of dictation. He discusses his relations with Kempe in Chapter 24, describing how he asked her questions to test her feelings and insisted, despite her unwillingness, that she pray to

God to know in advance when he would 'visiten hir wyth deuocyon' and then tell him sincerely of her feelings. 'And so þis creatur', the book tells us, 'sumdel for drede þat he wold ellys <not> a folwyd hir entent for to wryten þis boke, compellyd, dede as he preyed hir' (55). In addition, if Kempe could not read or write English, we must assume that the scribe was responsible for the introduction of Latin quotation (as, for example on p. 235).⁸ Robert C. Ross and John C. Hirsh, writing on the question of the relations between Kempe and her scribes, have both come to the conclusion that the second scribe, far from being the passive transcriber that Meech suggests in his introduction, was an active participant in the writing of the text.⁹ He was engaged in producing, according to Hirsh, 'a lesson not less than a biography'; perhaps, as Ross says, preserving the record of a holy life with a view to canonisation.¹⁰

There is much more about the process of collaboration between Kempe and her scribes that we might wish to know, but do not. Clarissa Atkinson speculates, for example, that the first scribe

– a layman who lived in Margery's house – was close enough to her to be important in the selection (and perhaps the recollection) of episodes. He probably was an encouraging listener, a source of support and confidence, and his enthusiasm may have nourished the full and lively character of Book I;

while the second scribe, a cleric, may have inhibited her, Atkinson suggests, by his authority or anxiety.¹¹ This kind of thinking is unsubstantiated by any evidence, but it does nevertheless underline the importance of that missing evidence. The point is that to assume Kempe as the shaping intention behind the text is no less speculative than fantasising about the kind of collaborative relations that might have shaped it. Atkinson further speculates that Kempe's 'measured statements of careful orthodoxy' at her heresy trials are likely to have been edited, if not composed, by her scribe, anxious to maintain the appearance of orthodoxy. Oddly enough, however, despite her insistence on the second scribe's active intervention in and addition to the text in his concern to 'protect her reputation and enhance his own', Atkinson is assertive about the need to recognise that 'the book *is* an autobiography', and that Kempe herself, despite the active role of her scribes, 'essentially . . . reconstructed her own life'.¹²

Lynn Staley Johnson's reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* insists on

Kempe's authorial control not in opposition to the presence of the scribes but via their very conspicuousness. Johnson has analysed how the scribes function as witnesses to Kempe's holiness (noting, for example, the minor miracle that allows the difficult text of the first scribe to become legible to the second after Kempe's prayers) and compared this authorising role with that of the confessor-scribes of other holy women.¹³ On the basis of this study of scribal function she makes the suggestion that Kempe invented her scribes in order to retain control over the text without appearing to do so. Such a suggestion, of course, demands that we also accept Kempe's claim to illiteracy as a fiction. Johnson is not the only critic to argue that literal truth may be sacrificed in the service of a higher truth,¹⁴ yet it is still difficult to accept the falsification of factual detail of this kind in a narrative that goes out of its way to reassure the reader as to its honesty, admitting that events are not written down in their proper order and that some things have been forgotten, but claiming above all that 'sche dede no þing wryten but þat sche knew ryghth wel for very trewth' (5). While we may assume that such things as direct speech are subject to a degree of invention, and that both Kempe and her scribes, if both existed, were influenced by saints' lives and other mystical writings in terms of the shape and emphasis they were led to give to the events they recorded, the contention that the book deliberately sets out to document in such detail a writing situation which is patently untrue, asserts invention of a very different order. David Lawton, in comparing the mediation of Kempe's work with that of other women mystics, makes the point that 'there is simply no account of textual mediation as complex and as circumstantial, almost wantonly obscure, as that provided in *The Book of Margery Kempe*'. For Lawton, this is part of an argument for the transferral of authority from the written text to the spoken voice, but it seems to me also to endorse the improbability of its fictionality. As Lawton argues later in the same article, 'she does not seek the space of fiction, or the reflexivity of language: we are mistaken to thrust either upon her book'.¹⁵

There has been an understandably strong wish, especially on the part of some feminist critics, to make *The Book of Margery Kempe* speak with the voice of that identifiable woman and to attribute authorial control to her. Ross, in a patronising footnote towards the end of his article, indicates his intention to publish a future article showing that 'feminist criticism has created more problems than it has solved while it has fashioned a Margery that quite certainly did not and does not exist in text or fact'.¹⁶ Feminist criticism, however, does not have to approach the text in terms of making it speak with the voice of a 'real' woman. It is possible instead to look at

this book using the textual relations it describes as a model for the cultural relations that produced it. Sarah Beckwith has rightly attacked earlier critics of Margery Kempe for characteristically 'projecting what are problematics of culture and cultural shifts onto the personality through which they are embodied'.¹⁷ Readings that diagnose Kempe as neurotic fail to address the cultural practices which speak of fracture rather than unity at a *social* level. Similarly, the project of this paper is to reject the notion that the text 'reflects' an individual personality, and to look instead at how the relationship between an illiterate laywoman and a literate male cleric which produces the text can speak of the wider relations between the female laity and the male clergy which mapped the production of fifteenth-century sexuality. In this way we can explore the making and shaping of desire as both a textual and a cultural process.

Genealogy

The kind of critique that can reasonably be focused on this text is one that Foucault might describe as 'genealogical' – one that looks at sexuality and desire as the effects of institutions operating in a specific time and place. Sexuality, as Foucault argues, is not an inherent quality or a biological drive, but a way of fashioning the self within historically specific circumstances. It must not, he insists,

be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. it is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network.¹⁸

Sexuality, desire, even the very definitions of gender, in other words, cannot be separated from the political and cultural conditions that produce them, from what Raymond Williams calls the 'structure of feeling'.

The central and most powerful institution producing the framework within which matters such as gender and sexuality could be thought in the fifteenth century was the church. Orthodox teaching of the medieval church on the topic of gender is well known.¹⁹ It embraced the classical view predominating from the time of Aristotle of a 'natural' hierarchy in which the female was the inferior of the male and

hence rightly subject to him. Woman was seen as a creature of cold and wet humours, in the thrall of passion rather than capable of reason, more libidinous than man and in need of male control, whether by the father or the husband. This same insistence on the rightfulness of male dominance over the female was, more importantly for the church, given biblical authority by St Paul, who taught that women owed obedience to men and should be forbidden either to preach or to teach.²⁰

The role of women within the medieval church was highly restricted. Women could enter the church as nuns or anchoresses, but, following the Pauline strictures, were forbidden ordination, so that even nuns and anchoresses had to make their confessions to and receive the sacraments from men. Nuns might be allowed to educate girls and very young boys, but not boys over eight, who by then were expected to be beginning to take on the superior and dominant role towards women. Women's claim to spiritual authority, then, was fenced by their need to seek authorisation from an ordained and better educated male clergy.²¹

Eileen Power has shown how the learning of nuns, equal to that of monks throughout the Anglo-Saxon and early medieval period, had degenerated by the end of the thirteenth century.²² Few fifteenth-century nuns were likely to know Latin, and texts addressed specifically to them were generally in the vernacular. The education of laywomen, although on the increase in the fifteenth century, still left them in a very marginal position in relation to men. Few laywomen outside aristocratic circles would acquire more than a smattering of literacy, since personal tutors or nunnery schools were the only alternatives to holy orders for women as a way of acquiring education beyond the elementary level of a song school, and women were specifically debarred from grammar schools and universities.²³

These restrictions on literacy were themselves part of a self-regulating polarity whereby male clerics were likely to be the most literate members of society and female laywomen the least literate. In this way, then, the power structure of male dominance, and in particular male clerical dominance, strove to maintain the conditions for its own continuance. Women were excluded from written words, the instruments of power, and marginalised by their insufficiency. Kempe, as Françoise Le Saux has noted, was well aware of the power of the word: 'writing in her narrative', she argues, 'appears more as an expression of authority than a means of communication'.²⁴ She sets great store by a ring she possesses, inscribed with the Latin words 'Ihesus est amor meus' (78), and dreams of seeing her name written in the Book of Life, although she has to ask the child who holds it out to her to

show her her name (206-07). Lochrie too has argued extensively for the 'fundamental orality of mystical texts' as framing both the distinctiveness of their utterance and the problematic of its authorisation.²⁵

Just as the superior literacy of the clerical male constructed the inferiority of the less literate female, so did the enforced celibacy of the clerical male construct the devalued status of the non-virgin laywoman. Sexual prohibition was male celibate authority's response to the material existence of woman; diatribes against the sins of the flesh document the danger and temptation offered specifically to celibate men by the female body and suggest the writers' own guilty knowledge that it was scarcely unknown for clerics to succumb to bodily temptations. Woman was defined as the unruly, subversive incarnation of the temptations of the flesh, and this construction of the female in its turn helped to reproduce the consciousness of the celibate clerical male. Male spirituality constructed sexuality as lechery, thereby rendering it thinkable only in terms of sin. And it demonised the female, whether as the desiring subject or as the object of male desire.

Women, therefore, in particular sexually active women, were excluded from the most powerful zones of the medieval church. Kempe, as a married woman who had borne children, did have European models to follow (Blessed Angela of Foligno and Blessed Dorothea of Montau, for example, and, explicitly acknowledged in references to Kempe's reading material (39, 143), St Bridget of Sweden);²⁶ but St Margaret, virgin martyr of Kempe's parish church, was a more familiar female model. *The Book of Margery Kempe* represents Kempe's attempt to remake herself in the image of a virgin: she wears white clothes, suppresses almost all reference to her fourteen children, obtains permission from her husband and the ecclesiastical authorities to live chastely and is almost pathologically afraid of rape. The coincidence of moments of spiritual crisis with moments of sexual crisis in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is not accidental, but the working out of a classic opposition. Spiritual authority was available to a woman only via the obliteration of her sexuality, if not her gender.²⁷

Lollardy

As Mary Douglas has shown, all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, the spaces which both define and threaten their functioning as systems. It is there that purity encounters danger and the identity of the sacred is under

pressure.²⁸ There is an obvious logic, then, to the fact that the greatest threat to the unity of the late medieval church in England came in the form of a predominantly lay movement, which questioned the sacraments, rejected the need for an ordained clergy and specifically encouraged women to take a more proactive role in the spiritual life of the community. Lollardy clearly spoke to the concerns of those disempowered by ecclesiastical orthodoxy; and it is impossible to read *The Book of Margery Kempe* without noticing how often it engages with this heresy. Margery Kempe was probably in her late twenties in 1401 when the statute *De Heretico Comburendo* was passed. The statute was enacted in response to this 'certain new sect . . . usurping the office of preaching'. The threat offered by the Lollards, according to the statute, is that 'they make unlawful conventicles and confederacies, they hold and exercise schools, they make and write books, they do wickedly instruct and inform people, and . . . stir them to sedition and insurrection and make great strife and division among the people'.²⁹ The Lollards were attempting to educate and empower social groups on the margins of the clerical establishment; for ecclesiastical and secular authorities alike this was tantamount to inciting rebellion. The impetus to link heretical thinking with collective revolt is made visible in the attempts of monastic chroniclers to associate Wyclif with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.³⁰ The statute of 1401 was simply the logical outcome of this way of thinking: it showed the authorities of church and state united in their wish to take the strongest possible action against heretics, by legislating for the church to hand over punishment to the state, so that the death penalty could be imposed.

The legal conjunction of church and state in 1401 was a moment which had been visibly approaching since the controversy over the Wyclifite translation of the bible. Popular access to the bible in English was seen as dangerous by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities because it not only put the sacred Word into the hands of those uneducated in traditional theology, but also potentially encouraged questioning of and discontent with any kind of authority. The Lollard emphasis on the Word can scarcely be exaggerated. Lollards translated, preached, wrote treatises, were identified as heretics by the books they owned. Even owning a book written in English came to seem suspect to authorities investigating heresy. The name 'Lollard' probably derives from Dutch *lollen*, to mumble; and Lollards are identified by their contemporaries as 'janglers',³¹ abusers of words and the Word. Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon at St Mary-of-the-Meadows, Leicester, writing (in Latin) during Wyclif's lifetime in the late fourteenth century,³² is particularly aggressive towards them on this account:

For as master John Wyclif was powerful and able above all others in disputation, so they believed themselves second to none in argument; so even if they had been lately attracted to that sect they became exceedingly eloquent, prevailing over others in all craftiness and wordy encounters, strong in words, mighty in prating, outstanding in disputations, outshouting all in litigious strife. So that what they might not achieve by right reasoning they made up for by quarrelsome violence and high-sounding words.³³

The doctrines of Lollardy cast doubt on the power of the sacraments, poured scorn on the worship of images, relics and shrines and argued that the God's church was the congregation of true believers rather than the visible institution. This breakdown of the distinction between layman and priest was enough in itself to render the movement dangerously populist in the eyes of the established church, but the further and more radical implication of its collapsing of the layman/priest divide was the opening up of a possible role for women in the spiritual life of the Lollard community. The Lollard programme of active education of the laity included encouraging women to become readers, interpreters and even teachers of Scripture. Women were thus entering a domain previously closed to them, participating in a discourse that had for hundreds of years been clerical, and predominantly male, territory. Margery Kempe's book, as Sarah Beckwith argues, 'was produced in conditions of deep anxiety as to who were to be the keepers of the word'.³⁴

Establishment figures fixed on this elevation of women as symbolic of the particular anathema of Lollardy. Knighton condemns Wyclif for making the bible

which was formerly the province only of learned clerks and those of good understanding . . . common and open to the laity, and even to those women who know how to read. As a result the pearl of the gospel is scattered and spread before swine.³⁵

Thomas Netter of Walden, Provincial Prior of the English Carmelites from 1414 onwards, was also provoked into a violent attack on what Allen calls 'feminine publicity',³⁶ and held the Lollards responsible for the fact that women were claiming the right to speak even in Parliament.³⁷ Bishop Pecock, in the mid-fifteenth century, maintained the strongly gendered quality of this clerical anger in singling

out for his venom those Lollard women

whiche maken hem silf so wise bi the bible . . . and avaunten and profren hem silf whanne thei ben in her jolite and in her owne housis forto argue and dispute agens clerkis.³⁸

Records confirm that women were notably active in spreading the heresy. Allen notes a Lollard woman preaching in London in 1410 (note 36 above), and Archbishop Courtney's investigations in Leicester in 1389 identified a woman, Alice Dexter, as one of the three leaders. Her husband, Roger Dexter, was another of the three, and this pattern of women acting together with their husbands is a recurrent one in the history of Lollardy.³⁹ We know too that Lollardy became widespread in East Anglia, and that here, as elsewhere, women were active in disseminating the heresy. A number of women figure in the concentration of heresy trials in the Norwich diocese between 1428 and 1431.⁴⁰

At a much earlier date, however, East Anglia was home to the first Lollard martyr. William Sawtre, the first heretic to suffer the extreme penalty under the 1401 statute, was, at the time of his first examination for heresy in 1399, a chaplain of Margery Kempe's own parish church, St Margaret's, in Lynn. She must have heard him preach before that date, although whether she recognised his preaching as heretical or assumed it to be orthodox cannot now be established. Sawtre abjured on his first examination and moved to London, where he again began preaching heresy. He was burnt as a relapsed heretic in 1401.⁴¹ The absence of Sawtre's name from Kempe's book has caused some speculation amongst critics. Medcalf offers the suggestion that the sin she cannot confess at the opening of her book is the sin of having listened to Sawtre, and Atkinson raises the possibility of scribal editing.⁴² Perhaps all we can say is that the text's silence about Kempe's acquaintance with the first Lollard martyr is an eloquent silence, particularly in the context of the repeated accusations of Lollardy Kempe later undergoes.

The first occasion she records (though it may not be the first chronologically) is when she is abused by monks in Canterbury for her weeping and they threaten her with burning, provoking a demonstration of popular hostility against her (28-29). Again in Lincoln and in London, in 1413, she is threatened with burning by townspeople (33, 36), but on these occasions treated kindly by the Bishop of Lincoln and the Archbishop of Canterbury respectively.⁴³

In 1414 Sir John Oldcastle was convicted of heresy and imprisoned in the

Tower pending his execution. He escaped and tried to raise a rebellion against the King, confirming the worst fears of church and state concerning the link between heresy and treason. The rebels were betrayed and trapped, but Oldcastle himself escaped and was not rearrested until 1417, when he was finally executed. Persecution of heresy naturally became more intense after the 1414 rising. Within months a statute was passed to increase co-operation between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities in proceeding against heresy, and two years later Convocation established stricter measures for regular inquiries into suspected heresy.⁴⁴

Margery Kempe's experiences reflect this intensified activity against heresy. The detailed attention given in the *Book* to her trials on her return from pilgrimage to Santiago in 1417 gives Lollardy a new prominence in the narrative, and shows the secular authorities as active as the clergy in the rooting out of heresy.⁴⁵ When she is tried at Leicester in the late summer of that year, it is the mayor who first orders her imprisonment, and who is dissatisfied with her answers to the abbot. He insists, furthermore, that she obtain a letter from the Bishop of Lincoln, so that his own responsibility for her is transferred (111-19).⁴⁶ Later the same year, in York, she stands trial again before the Archbishop of York, although this time laypeople take her part against the authorities and try to stop her going to prison (122). The Archbishop discharges her, but makes arrangements to get her out of the diocese as fast as possible. On her journey south she is again threatened by 'malicyows pepil' (129) in Hull, so that she has to leave the town for her own safety, and yet again arrested in Hessle, a few miles out of Hull, and brought back to trial again before the Archbishop of York in Beverley (129-31). All of this activity precedes the eventual arrest and execution of Oldcastle in the December of this year,⁴⁷ which perhaps helps to explain the high level of anxiety displayed by the authorities during this summer and autumn. Certainly Kempe is abused at the Beverley trial, presumably figuratively, with the name of 'Combomis dowtyr' (132) (Lord Cobham was the title of Sir John Oldcastle).

Several of the attacks on Kempe as a heretic are clearly gendered. When she tells one of the Canterbury monks a story from the bible (an inherently dangerous action at a time when access to vernacular Scripture was central to accusations of heresy), he responds by expressing the wish that she should be enclosed in a house of stone so that no one should speak with her (27). As Atkinson comments, the monks' subsequent threats are evidence not merely of strong feelings about Lollardy but also of 'an ancient suspicion of religious women who were not safely

enclosed'.⁴⁸ When she is taken to Hessel under guard the men and women of the town abuse her in terms that make it clear that the threat she poses is as much that of a disorderly woman as that of heresy, and that the two are linked together in popular thinking:

men callyd hir loller, & women cam rennyng owt of her howsys
wyth her rokkys [distaffs], crying to þe pepil, 'Brennyth þis fals
heretyk.' So, as sche went forth to-Beuerleward wyth þe seyde
zemen & þe frerys be-forn-seyd, þei mettyn many tymes wyth
men of þe cuntre, which seyde vn-to hir, 'Damsel, forsake þis lyfe
þat þu hast, & go spynde & carde as oþer women don, & suffyr
not so meche schame & so meche wo.' (129)

Orthodox churchmen, even those who subsequently become her supporters, are taken aback by the combination of her spiritual claims and her gender. When she visits Richard of Caister, vicar of St Stephen's, Norwich,⁴⁹ to ask him if she may speak with him for an hour or two about God, his surprise is essentially linked to the fact that she is a woman:

He, lyftyng vp hys handys & blyssyng hym, seyde, 'Benedicite.
What coud a woman ocypyn an owyr er tweyn owyrs in þe lofe
of owyr Lord?' (38)

The unorthodoxy of a laywoman making the claims to spiritual revelation that Kempe makes is a trigger associating her in the minds of those she meets with doctrinal unorthodoxy.⁵⁰ As it is, there are mixed signals in the text regarding the question of her orthodoxy. On the one hand she accepts the authority of the established clergy, fasts, goes on pilgrimage,⁵¹ makes frequent confession, receives communion once a week⁵² and seeks the appropriate permission to license her choices (such as receiving this frequent communion, wearing white clothes, living in chastity with her husband). Her statements when on trial are quite orthodox, although, as Atkinson points out, these could have been edited as a result of the orthodoxy, and perhaps anxiety, of the scribe working with her (p.125 above).

On the other hand, many of her statements and actions are unguarded, to say the least, for such dangerous times. Her readiness to cite Scripture at Canterbury has already been noted as provocative, and when she cites the gospel in her trial at

York, the churchmen seize on this as evidence of heresy: 'her wot we wel þat sche hath a deuyll wyth-inne hir, for sche spekyth of þe Gospel' (126). Allen has shown that the passage from St Luke's Gospel which Kempe cites as her authority to speak of God is precisely the same as that used by the Lollard Walter Brute in 1391 to defend women's right to preach.⁵³ Earlier in the same trial she also refuses to swear an oath, another sign by which Lollards were often identified. But despite these multiple pointers to potential heresy, Kempe was never convicted. Pointers, it seems, though they laid the speaker open to accusation, were not in themselves sufficient to condemn the accused.

One wonders whether Kempe, a laywoman without the theological education of those who examined her in doctrine, had any developed sense of the distinctions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The books she took pleasure in having read to her are an orthodox group, including in particular 'þe Bybyl wyth doctowrys þer-up-on' (143), yet despite the insistence here on a glossed bible (presumably to indicate its orthodoxy), she finds no difficulty in responding to the request of a great cleric that she should interpret the text 'Crescite & multiplicamini' for him (121).⁵⁴ She registers no sense of difficulty about offering to gloss Holy Scripture for a great cleric, and it may be that she is simply unaware of the Lollard reverberations of her position.⁵⁵ Coming, as she did, from the parish of William Sawtre, she may have imbibed some elements of Lollard thought without perceiving them as in any way against orthodox belief.

The text offers us no way of telling whether these contradictions are part of Kempe's own position or evidence of contesting agendas on the part of her and her scribes. In a sense it does not matter whether the contradiction is internal or external in narrative terms; what we witness in either case is a struggle between differently positioned discourses, a struggle which speaks of the conditions of early fifteenth-century cultural production.⁵⁶

Encounters with clerics

The narrative structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe* precisely mirrors this struggle for authority in that it is based on a sequence of encounters between Kempe and clerics. The emphasis in all such encounters falls firmly on the word, and it is probably above all this willingness on Kempe's part to engage in verbal conflict that makes her clerical opponents suspect her of being a Lollard. The gift God offers her

in recompense for the mockery and humiliations she will have to endure for his sake is the power to 'answer every cleric'. In Christ's first colloquy with Kempe, following her despair after falling prey to desire in Chapter 4, the shape of the ideal encounter is announced in Christ's words to Kempe:

þow xalt ben etyn & knawyn of þe pepul of þe world as any raton
knewyth þe stokfysch. Drede þe nowt, dowtyr, for þow schalt
haue þe vycictory of al þin enmys. I schal ȝeue þe grace j-now to
answer euery clerke in þe loue of God. (17)

Kempe is to be given grace in place of education; she is to be divinely inspired with verbal power in response to clerical attempts to dominate her.

The book opens with an encounter that establishes a pattern of difficulty in relations between female and cleric and a polarity between male spiritual authority and female sexual waywardness. Chapter 1 presents Margery Kempe so ill after her childbirth that she expects to die and sends for her confessor 'for sche had a thyng in conscyens which sche had neuyr schewyd be-forn þat tyme in alle hyr lyfe' (6-7). However, as she goes on to explain,

whan sche cam to þe poynt for to seyn þat þing which sche had
so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye & gan
scharply to vndernemyn hir er þan sche had fully seyde hir entent,
& so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he mygth do. (7)

The sin remains unconfessed both here and throughout the book. The combination of her own dread of damnation on the one hand and the priest's 'scharp repreuyng' (7) on the other is what sends her, as she describes it, out of her mind. This temporary 'madness' marks a significant moment in her sexual life, and at the same time creates the conditions for the first significant spiritual moment. Both the disturbance and the awakening out of it to spiritual life are cast in sexual terms. She suffers visions of devils pawing at her and attempting to swallow her, visions that cause her to tear her own flesh with her nails, and she is then brought back to health by the vision of a sexually desirable Christ 'in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, & most amyable þat euyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye' (8).

Much later in her life, when she suffers another twelve days of being tormented by evil thoughts, those thoughts are again not only sexual, in that they

enact fantasies of being sexually available to every kind of man, but specifically play out such sexual fantasies on clerical bodies:

Sche sey as hir thowt veryly dyuers men of religyon, preystys, & many oþer, bothyn hethyn & Cristen comyn be-for hir syght þat sche myth not enchewyn hem ne puttyn hem owt of hir syght, schewyng her bar membrys vn-to hir. (145)

The episode is a strikingly clear dramatisation of the way the prohibitions of the church produce Kempe's sexuality. As in the incident with the man who demands her sexual favours above, sexuality is again inseparable from issues of control. Kempe's sexual desire inextricably fuses the wish to be dominated with the need to choose:

& þerwyth þe Deuyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han fyrst of hem alle & sche must be comown to hem alle. & he seyde sche lykyd bettyr summe on of hem þan alle þe oþer. Hir thowt þat he seyde trewth; sche cowde not sey nay; & sche must nedys don hys byddyng, & zet wolde sche not a don it for alle þis worlde. But zet hir thowt þat it xulde be don, & hir thowt þat þes horrybyl syghtys & cursyd mendys wer delectabyl to hir a-geyn hir wille. (145)

Two possibilities have been suggested concerning the unconfessed sin that provokes her postnatal disturbance. One is that it is a sexual sin, although what this might be is not clear, especially since Kempe affirms at her trial in Leicester that she has never known any man sexually but her husband (115). The other is that it is heresy, perhaps including a close association with her former parish priest, William Sawtre. It is fitting that these should be the two possibilities suggested since they represent the two dominant points of reference in the narrative of Kempe's life, and each produces the shape of the other. Regularly those who accuse Kempe of heresy also accuse her of whoredom, and often, too, Kempe says that the words they used to her in their accusations of heresy are too obscene to repeat. The Steward of Leicester, after failing to force Kempe to confess to heresy, takes her to his private room and tries to force his sexual advances on her instead.

The unconfessed sin stands at the head of the book as the emblematic

unsayable in the narrative. Again, since the narrative is the co-production of woman and cleric, the unsayable, like the foul words left uncited, consists of what is constructed as transgressive between the makers of the text. As Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*:

What remains "unthinkable" and "unsayable" within the terms of an existing cultural form is not necessarily what is excluded from the matrix of intelligibility within that form; on the contrary, it is the marginalized, not the excluded, the cultural possibility that calls for dread . . . The "unthinkable" is thus fully within culture, but fully excluded from *dominant* culture.⁵⁷

The claim of this sexually active woman to be a special vessel of the Holy Spirit is one materialisation of the unsayable within that culture. It is notable how often this claim is in fact expressed without words, through her weeping and crying out. Her expression of spiritual wisdom in words, as when she interprets the text for the cleric in Chapter 51, is unusual. Much more frequently she draws attention to herself via non-verbal statements such as her demonstrative tearfulness or her white clothes.

Her children, the inescapable material markers of her non-virgin status, constitute another great unspoken. Once, again on trial, when verbal statements have to be made and are made under duress, she tells her accusers that she has borne her husband fourteen children (115), but they are otherwise largely absent from the narrative. One assumes that they get in the way of her spiritual life in practical as well as symbolic ways, but she never explains how she deals with such practical problems. The closest we come to discovery is, significantly, at a moment of mystical communion, when Kempe transfers agency for her practical concerns to the Lord, so that she may be free to pursue her spiritual vocation:

In þe tyme þat þis creatur had reuelacyons, owyr Lord seyde to hir, 'Dowtyr, þow art wyth childe.' Sche seyde a-zen, 'A, Lord, how xal I þan do for kepyng of my chylde?' Owir Lord seyde, 'Dowtyr, drede þe not, I xal ordeyn for an kepar.' (48)

Even more evasive is the recording of a conversation concerning a potentially illegitimate child born abroad. Returning home from pilgrimage, Kempe goes to

visit a certain anchorite who, she has heard, has turned against her. He asks her what she has done with the child conceived and born abroad. The text gives us her reply:

'Ser, þe same childe þat God hath sent me I haue browt hom, for
God knowyth I dede neuyr sithyn I went owte wher-thorw I
xulde haue a childe', (103)

but also notes the anchorite's disbelief. As Kempe and her scribe tell the story, the charge of adultery is refuted, but no explanation for the birth is offered.

Encounters with clerics in the book depict a struggle for spiritual authority. Clerics are broadly portrayed as either good or bad insofar as they respond positively or negatively to Kempe's claim to that authority. It is clear too that gender is central to this power struggle. Orthodox church teaching decreed women to be subject to men, and laymen and women in turn subject to the clergy, but the church also had a duty to acknowledge the authority of those specially chosen by God. The problem, of course, was how to prove such special status.⁵⁸ Kempe clearly claims it, and the book judges the clerics she meets according to whether they are meek or dominating towards her.

Chapters 33 and 34 express explicit authorial awareness of such encounters as struggles for authority and control. They tell a story which is constructed around the polarity of the good priest, who believes and supports Kempe, and the bad priest, who says malicious things about her wearing white clothes and thinking herself holier and better than others. The malice of the second is diagnosed as a clear problem of unwillingness to relinquish control:

þe cawse of hys malyce was for sche wold not obeyn hym. &
sche wist wel it was a-geyn þe helth of hir sowle for to obeyn
him as he wolde þat sche xulde a don. (84)

The bad priest stirs up trouble for her precisely around this question of obedience by inciting the good priest to ask her 'yf sche wolde be obedient vn-to hym er not' (84). Kempe agrees unequivocally to obey the first priest, who is also her confessor, and he commands her to change her white clothes for black. She obeys and endures mockery from those accustomed to seeing her in white. In particular she meets the enemy priest, who expresses pleasure in seeing her in black. The dialogue that

follows is a clever piece of negotiation around the problem of authority:

'Ser, owyr Lord wer not displesyd thow I weryd whyte clothys, for he wyl þat I do so.' Than þe preste seyde to hir a-zen, 'Now wote I wel þat þu hast a deuyl wyth-inne þe, for I her hym spekyn in þe to me.' 'A, good ser, I pray 3ow dryuyth hym away fro me, for God knowyth I wolde ryth fawyn don wel & plesyn hym yf I cowde.' And þan he was ryth wroth & seyde ful many schrewyd wordys. & sche seyde to hym, 'Ser, I hope I haue no deuyl wyth-inne me, for, 3yf I had a deuyl wyth-in me, wetyth wel I schuld ben wroth wyth 3ow. & sir, me thynkyth þat I am no-thing wroth wyth 3ow for no-thing þat 3e can don on-to me.' And þan þe preste partyd a-wey fro hir wyth heuy cher. (85)

The text is no mere record of this struggle, but an enactment of it. The attempts of clerics to tell Kempe when to write the book, her refusal of their offers to write on her behalf when she feels the time is not right, her difficulty then in finding a writer 'þat wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr ne 3eue credens to hir felingys' (4), the problems of the first text and the need for 'special grace' from God to enable anyone to read it, the second scribe's loss of faith in her, the failure of the third scribe, the success of her prayers in creating the conditions for a final text to be written down – all these aspects of the production of a text are part of the struggle of a laywoman believing herself inspired to assert the authority of her inspiration over the educated male clerics who must become her instruments.

Even the afterlife of the text participates in this same story of male clerics either accepting or contesting the divine authority claimed by this awkward woman. In the margin next to the priest's first words in the story told above (Chapters 33 and 34), a reader of the manuscript, probably a Carthusian of Mountgrace,⁵⁹ where the manuscript once belonged, has written 'A proud prist' and next to Kempe's final reply 'A meke hanswer', thereby ceding victory to Kempe. The margin thus allows one more cleric to endorse Kempe's authority; yet at the same time it also allows him to frame Kempe's authority with his own. Not only here, but throughout the text, the annotations respond to the kind of behaviour (weeping, crying, falling to the ground) that earned Kempe such disapproval from immediate onlookers with approving citations of parallel behaviour by Carthusians of Mountgrace (see note 14

above). Thus the spatial arrangement of this manuscript continues to document the struggle for authority between lay female and clerical male even after it leaves the hands of Kempe and her scribe.

This process of struggle frames the production of the text at every point. It creates the material that can be voiced. We need to refer to it to remind ourselves that the male scribe, simply as presence, shapes the text in all kinds of ways beyond, and perhaps in addition to, direct intervention. As a priest, the second scribe may have imposed, wittingly or otherwise, a variety of demands and constraints on what Kempe could say. He may or may not have been Kempe's confessor.⁶⁰ The speaker/scribe relationship functions in any case in ways parallel to the confessional, identified by Foucault as 'a ritual of discourse . . . that unfolds within a power relationship'. The confessor, as Foucault notes, is no neutral ear, but the authority who requires and assesses the confession: 'the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing'.⁶¹ The anomaly of the English noun 'confessor' confirms Foucault's point. Contrary to the usual pattern by which nouns of agency denote the subject of the verb (we would expect, in other words, a confessor to be the one who confesses), the noun 'confessor' locates agency in the listener, leaving no noun deriving from the verb 'to confess' which can refer to the one who confesses. The scribe, then, may be partly responsible for the sexual explicitness and the strong sense of sexual guilt that pervades the book; equally, as one vowed to celibacy himself, and in a position of disapproval regarding Kempe's sexual life, he may have inhibited, whether deliberately or not, a fuller recording of Kempe's sexual life.

Viewing the speaker/scribe relationship via the model of the confessional highlights in the first place the role of law in producing the text made out of this relationship. Desire, however, as we have seen, emerges out of the prohibitions of the law, and desire too may be read into the functioning of the speaker/scribe relations. The very system set up to categorise and police sexual behaviour, in other words, is likely to stimulate the experience of sexual pleasure via its own functioning. The scribe may have found his own desires engaging in the sexual narrative of the laywoman who tells him her story, while Kempe may have found her desires reactivated in the process of telling her story to a celibate male representative of the institution attempting to regulate those very desires.

Medieval churchmen were not unaware of the possible pleasures for women of discoursing at length with male confessors. The acclaimed theologian and

chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, concerned by the upsurge of writings by women claiming divine inspiration, warned clerics to judge the authenticity of female visionaries carefully. It is especially important if the visionary is a woman, he writes, 'to consider how she talks with her confessors and spiritual directors, whether she draws out endless conversations, under the pretext now of frequent confession, now of a lengthy account of her visions, now of whatever conversation she chooses'.⁶² Not surprisingly, perhaps, Gerson, a male cleric himself, calls attention only to the dangers of female desire directing the confessional and does not consider the cleric as a potential locus of desire.

The Book of Margery Kempe does not tell a simple story of one woman's desire, but a story of desire constructed through the specific relations between the woman and the man who make the text and the wider relations that place them in their particular historical and social location. That location was above all one of contested domination, one in which Lollardy was constructing a new space for women in relation to the Word. Kempe may not have been a Lollard, but there can be no doubt that Lollardy was the cultural force which created the space for her to speak and produced the conditions in which both gender relations and sexual desire could be so closely tied to verbal experience and to the struggle for control.

The dynamics of Kempe's text position her as simultaneously controlling (visionary, spiritual authority, dictator and corrector of the written text) and controlled (laywoman, penitent, illiterate, a figure dependent on ecclesiastical permission to live her chosen life and on the offices of a scribe to give it written form). 'This creature' is simultaneously a speaking subject and the object of another's writing. The writing of the book, like the experience of desire it expresses, is the product of a tension between subjection and control. What *The Book of Margery Kempe* documents is not a woman writer taking control of language, but a textual relationship between woman and scribe which both represents and enacts the wider struggle for verbal control precipitated by the crisis of Lollardy. This is the struggle which underlies the shaping of desire in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

NOTES

* A version of this paper was read to the Gender and Medieval Studies Conference on 'Medieval Sexualities' at the University of Leeds in 1994. I am grateful to Cath Sharrock for reading and commenting on an early draft of the paper.

¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, vol. I, EETS os 212 (London, 1940), pp. 14-15. All subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition, and page numbers appear in the text.

² *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 81. David Aers, in his discussion of 'The Making of Margery Kempe' (*Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* [London and New York, 1988], ch. 2), discusses the church's construction of lawful marital sex as untainted by desire.

³ The sexualisation of transgression throughout the narrative was the specific subject of a paper given by Rosalynn Voaden to the conference on 'Medieval Sexualities' held at Leeds in 1994. Nancy Partner calls attention to the irony of the married woman's role in this respect: 'Sin presented itself in one essential form to the minds of sensitive women and yet precisely that behaviour was urged on them as a duty to family and society' ('Reading the Book of Margery Kempe', *Exemplaria* 3 [1991], p. 49). Though Partner's discussion leads in different directions from mine, they share certain emphases, notably on narrative structure and the importance of desire and its negative to that structure.

⁴ Karma Lochrie has analysed in much more detail 'the site of rupture' from which the medieval woman writer speaks and the fissure her writing brings into language (*Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* [Philadelphia, 1991]; the phrase is quoted from p. 6). Diane Purkiss's work on seventeenth-century women writers is also relevant here. Even two centuries and more after *The Book of Margery Kempe* was composed, the subject position constructed for women was still fissured, their position with regard to language, especially written language, still marginal: 'Characteristically', Purkiss observes, 'woman was the object of discourse, the ground of representation, or the unstable site which offered the possibility of fixing meaning. However, women were also able to speak, to say "I"'. Consequently they occupied a marginal position with respect to language, neither speaking at its centre nor excluded from it altogether' ('Producing the voice, consuming the body: Women prophets of the seventeenth century', in *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740*, ed. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman [London, 1992], p. 142).

⁵ The only extant manuscript was identified as *The Book of Margery Kempe* by Hope Emily Allen in 1934. It was first published (in a modernised version) by Colonel William Butler Bowdon, the owner of the manuscript, in 1936.

⁶ For fuller accounts of this reception, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca and London, 1983), pp. 197, 210 and John C. Hirsh, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe: Paramystical Practices in Late Medieval England* (Leiden etc., 1989), p. 8. Allen cites Father Thurston's very influential 'expert judgment on Margery's neuroticism' in her Prefatory Note, p. lxxv.

⁷ Stephen Medcalf, ed., *The Later Middle Ages* (London, 1981) pp. 114-15; B. A. Windeatt, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 300-01, n. 24. Other recent work has also attacked this de-historicizing critical approach; see e.g. David Aers, *Community*, pp. 74-75; Sarah Beckwith, 'Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency, and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Exemplaria* 4 (1992), 173-79; Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages*, Chicago and London, 1989, ch. 3; Julia Long, 'Mysticism and Hysteria: the Histories of Margery Kempe and Anna O', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London, 1994), pp. 88-111; Sandra J. McEntire, 'The Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality', in *Margery Kempe: a Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York and London, 1992), p. 51. Partner ('Reading the Book of Margery Kempe' 60-66) argues for keeping the diagnosis of hysteria, but freeing it from the associations of vulgar usage and reconceptualising it within a broadly psychohistorical perspective. Kempe's 'psychic structure', she argues, 'became the characteristic anti-chronological structure of the narrative' (p. 64).

⁸ The biblical text which a great cleric asks Kempe to interpret (121; see further p. 128 below) is cited in Latin, but this need not mean that the cleric cited it verbally in Latin. It was quite common for written texts to record verbal interchange in a different language (as with legal proceedings, for example), and the scribe may here have cited the text in Latin simply because that was the orthodox language of scriptural citation. The functioning of Latin in *The Book of Margery Kempe* has been briefly, but suggestively, discussed by Sarah Beckwith ('Problems of Authority', 182-83, 190-91; *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* [London and New York, 1993], pp. 38-39), Karma Lochrie (*Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, pp. 79-87) and David Lawton ('Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in McEntire, pp. 93-116, esp. pp. 98-100).

⁹ Robert C. Ross, 'Oral Life, Written Text: The Genesis of The Book of Margery Kempe', *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 226-37; John C. Hirsh, 'Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975), 145-50.

¹⁰ Hirsh, 'Author and Scribe', p. 148; Ross, 'Oral Life, Written Text', p. 228.

¹¹ Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 30.

¹² Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, pp. 36, 216.

¹³ 'The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of

Norwich and Margery Kempe', *Speculum* 66 (1991), 820-38. Oddly enough, Johnson does not mention a second, more powerful claim to the miraculous: the second scribe finds his eyes failing when he begins work, but his sight is restored to full health when he comes back to his work after Kempe's advice not to give up. Cf. David Lawton's discussion of Kempe's disclaimers and the convention of confessors mediating the writings of women mystics ('Voice, Authority and Blasphemy', pp. 100-01).

¹⁴ John A. Erskine, while not doubting the existence of the scribes, has also argued that Kempe's narrative voice differs from the first-person account of a mystic such as Richard Rolle by recounting events to which she was not always party and thereby operating in a fictional mode. 'The vital question for the literary critic', Erskine claims, 'is not the literal truth, but the artistic status of the *Book*' ('Margery Kempe and Her Models: The Role of the Authorial Voice', *Mystics Quarterly* 15 [1989], 82). If this is indeed the vital question for a literary critic, it is not one that Kempe's fifteenth-century readers would have shared. The book aimed in its own time to persuade a contemporary audience of the truth of Kempe's visions, not to please them with literary artifice; and the annotations on the manuscript, noting for example approval for Kempe's tears and comparisons with the mystical experiences of Methley, Norton and Rolle, confirm that this was indeed how it was read in the fifteenth century. See Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, chapter 6, for a detailed analysis of the reception of the book both in and after the fifteenth century.

¹⁵ Lawton, 'Voice, Authority and Blasphemy', pp. 101, 111.

¹⁶ Ross, 'Oral Life, Written Text', p. 236, n. 30.

¹⁷ *Christ's Body*, p. 110. Beckwith's concern in looking at *The Book of Margery Kempe* is more with class than gender: she reads it in the context of the specific interaction between the ecclesiastical and rich burgh communities of Lynn in this period.

¹⁸ *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, p. 105.

¹⁹ For a collection of sources, see e.g. Robert P. Miller, ed., *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York, 1977). This church teaching was supported, as Thomas Laqueur and others have shown, by medical approaches to gender (*Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1990).

²⁰ See e.g. 1 Cor. 11. 9, 14. 34; Eph. 5. 22-24; Coloss. 3. 18-19; 1 Tim. 2. 12-14.

²¹ The writer who has done most to explore women's response to the gendered male authority of the medieval church is of course Caroline Walker Bynum. See her discussions of holy women in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1982); 'Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century', *Women's Studies* 11 (1984), 179-214; 'Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality', in *Anthropology and the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Moore and Frank E. Reynolds (Chicago, 1984), pp. 105-25; *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance*

of *Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987). I also discuss the question further in an article entitled 'Holy Women and their Confessors or Confessors and their Holy Women: Margery Kempe and the Influence of Continental Tradition', forthcoming in *Prophets Abroad*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden.

²² *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275-1535* (Cambridge, 1922).

²³ Atkinson expresses surprise at Kempe's illiteracy (*Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 79) and Johnson frankly suspects it of being fictional ('The Trope of the Scribe', p. 834); but neither offers any evidence for their belief that the ability to read and write was common in women from mercantile households. Sylvia Thrupp, in her study of *The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1399-1500* (Chicago, 1948), is the most optimistic, but the evidence she finds is minimal and limited to London. While it shows quite clearly that girls of this class might achieve some level of education, it does not show, as she claims, that the majority probably did (pp. 161, 171). Other studies of medieval literacy and education pay notoriously little attention to women. Nicholas Orme's discussion of literacy amongst the merchant class in his *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London, 1973), pp. 45-50, does not deal with women (nor does the book generally); and Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran speculates on the possibilities that girls outside the aristocracy may have been educated in song schools or in schools attached to noble households without being able to find any evidence for either (*The Growth of English Schooling 1340-1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese* [Princeton, 1985], pp. 70, 116). David Cressy, writing about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, following the Tudor expansion of education, concludes that even at this late period 'women were almost universally unable to write their own names' (*Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* [Cambridge, 1980], p. 145). He rates their illiteracy within the relatively advanced diocese of Norwich at more than four-fifths (p. 128). Most recently, Julia Boffey notes the potentially conflicting ways of interpreting the evidence concerning female literacy in her discussion of 'Women Authors and Women's Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 159-82. It may well be the case that non-aristocratic laywomen were more widely educated than the evidence suggests, but there would seem, in the current state of research into the subject, to be no good reason to think illiteracy in such women unusual.

²⁴ "'Hir not Lettyrd": Margery Kempe and Writing', in *Writing and Culture*, ed. Balz Engler (Tübingen, 1992), p. 54.

²⁵ *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. The phrase is quoted from p. 61. Cf. Wendy Harding's suggestion that we read *The Book of Margery Kempe* for traces of 'the confrontation between the clerk's linear, historical orientation with its insistence on the precise recording of dates, and Margery's oral expression with its reliance on memory and sensuous or affective association' ('Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval*

Literature, ed. Sarah Stanbury and Linda Lomperis [Philadelphia, 1993], p. 171).

²⁶ Laquita Higgs argues that Kempe's version of married chastity was unusual in England ('Margery Kempe: "Whete-Breed or Barly-Breed?"', *Mystics Quarterly* 13 [1987], 57-64); but her argument should be considered alongside Susan Dickman's fuller exploration of the subject, which demonstrates that 'a growing number of pious women in the fourteenth century were wives and mothers', while still acknowledging Kempe's mysticism as particular to English middle-class conditions ('Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe [Cambridge, 1984], p. 156).

²⁷ Lochrie's quotation of St Jerome underlines the point: 'As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man' (*Epistle on Ephesians*, quoted in 'The Book of Margery Kempe: the Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16 [1986], p. 53). Nevertheless, as Dickman's study shows, this ideal had become somewhat modified by the later Middle Ages, and the Lollard movement in late fourteenth-century England increased the pressure on this intransigent definition of the female.

²⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; London and New York, 1984). Much recent criticism on Kempe takes up the question of marginality, and Lochrie and Beckwith specifically acknowledge Douglas's influence on their work. Wendy Harding's essay, 'Body into Text', shares the focus of the present paper in identifying *The Book of Margery Kempe* as the site of a struggle for control between dominant and marginal elements in fifteenth-century culture. For a rejection of this position in favour of a view that sees 'social liminality' as 'a necessary part of a literary fiction', see Lynn Staley Johnson, 'Margery Kempe: Social Critic', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 22 [1992], p. 179).

²⁹ A. R. Myers, ed., *English Historical Documents 1327-1485* (London, 1969), p. 850. Although, as I argue above, I do not think there is anything unusual about finding a woman of Kempe's class to be illiterate in the early fifteenth century, Lollardy was one of the forces operating during this period to spread literacy across previously uneducated social groups.

³⁰ The relevant extracts from the chronicles are cited and discussed by R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London, 1970), pp. 373-78. On the link between heresy and rebellion see further Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Sedition 1381-1431', *Past and Present* 17 (1960), 1-44, reprinted in Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984).

³¹ Lauren Lepow cites examples (*Enacting the Sacrament: Counter-Lollardy in the Towneley Cycle* [Rutherford etc., 1990], p. 66).

³² V. H. Galbraith dates the writing of this part of the chronicle to c. 1390 ('The Chronicle of

Henry Knighton', in Fritz Saxl, ed. D. J. Gordon [London, 1957], p. 141). Knighton died in 1396.

³³ Myers, *English Historical Documents*, p. 843.

³⁴ Beckwith, 'Problems of Authority', p. 185.

³⁵ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. J. R. Lumby, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 92 (1889, 1895), vol. II, p. 152 (my translation).

³⁶ Meech and Allen, p. 259n. Allen argues that his attack was probably at least begun by 1419, when a Lollard woman publicly preached heresy in London.

³⁷ See James Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation in England*, 4 vols (London, 1908), Vol. I, p. 195; cited by Lochrie, 'The Book of Margery Kempe: the Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority', p. 46. Windeatt notes that Netter was prominent in prosecuting Lollards and was present at Archbishop Arundel's examination of Oldcastle (see below, p. 125-26). He was also, as Windeatt points out, following Allen (pp. 270n, 328n), regarded as a special patron of female recluses. Allen identifies him as the Provincial whose authority is sought to admonish the Carmelite who defends and supports Margery Kempe (Meech and Allen, p. 168).

³⁸ *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*, ed. Churchill Babington, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 19 (1860), vol. I, p. 123.

³⁹ See Claire Cross, "'Great Reasoners in Scripture": The Activities of Women Lollards 1380-1530', in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker, *Studies in Church History*, Subsidia, I (Oxford, 1978), pp. 360-61. Cross demonstrates the continuing activity of women Lollards up to the Reformation. She suggests that women may have found an active role within Lollardy because of its orientation towards the family (p. 360).

⁴⁰ See Norman C. Tanner, ed., *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31*, Camden 4th series, 20 (London, 1977).

⁴¹ See K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London, 1952), pp. 150-51.

⁴² Medcalf, *The Later Middle Ages*, p. 117; Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, pp. 103-04.

⁴³ Ironically, the Archbishop of Canterbury at this time was Archbishop Arundel, the same notorious opponent of Lollardy who had presided at Sawtre's trial in 1401. The Bishop of Lincoln was Philip Repington, who had himself stood trial for heresy before Archbishop Arundel in 1382. Since abjuring his heresy he had risen to a position of prominence within the Church and become active in tracking down Lollards.

⁴⁴ See John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414-1520* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 8, 220-23.

⁴⁵ Margery Kempe's travels may also have brought her into repeated contact with heresy. Bristol, the port from which she sailed and to which she returned after her pilgrimage to Santiago, was a known centre of Lollardy, as was Leicester, where she stood trial. Individual Lollards themselves sometimes covered considerable distances and thus spread their teaching over a wide area.

William White, for example, burnt at Norwich in 1428, had clearly disseminated his ideas beyond the diocese, and his teaching is recorded as far south as Colchester (Thomson, *The Later Lollards*, pp. 125-26).

⁴⁶ The Bishop of Lincoln at this time was Philip Repingdon, who had shown kindness to Kempe in 1413. Repingdon made several inquiries into heresy in 1417 (Thomson, *The Later Lollards*, p. 98).

⁴⁷ Oldcastle was hanged and burnt in the presence of the Duke of Bedford, the same duke who sends his men to arrest Kempe at Hesse as 'þe grettest loller in al þis cuntre er a-bowte London eythyr' (129). See Meech and Allen, p. 316n.

⁴⁸ Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 108. Cf. Netter's raging (above) against women demanding a public voice as against his support for women recluses. Beverley Boyd, in her essay comparing 'Wyclif, Joan of Arc, and Margery Kempe' (*Mystics Quarterly* 12 [1986], 112-18), notes that the attack on both women is essentially an attack on their departure from their proper estate: 'Having made themselves unique, they transgressed against the medieval, feudal, concept of order, thus leaving themselves open to charges that they rejected the authority of the church, a matter uppermost in the minds of those who sought to stamp out the Lollard heresy' (p. 117).

⁴⁹ Norman Tanner describes Richard of Caister as 'one in a succession of radical vicars of St Stephen's', and notes John Bale's identification of him as one who privately approved of Wyclifite teaching (*The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370-1532* [Toronto, 1984], p. 232).

⁵⁰ As Beckwith points out, 'that she can be paradoxically called both Lollard and mystic is a testimony to the complicity of both such forms in the fracturing of authority of her age' (*Christ's Body*, p. 111). Beckwith notes earlier that (like Lollardy) mysticism is 'radically bound up with questions of authority and authorization' and has been located as 'the very origin of radical protestantism' (p. 12).

⁵¹ Atkinson pays particular attention to Kempe's visit to the Blood of Hayles in 1417 on her return from pilgrimage to St James of Compostela (Meech and Allen, p. 110). This shrine, as she points out, was especially popular during the early fifteenth century, and Sir John Oldcastle denied the significance of the Blood of Hayles at his trial. In her view, a visit to Hayles at this date can be seen as 'a statement of orthodoxy' (*Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 56, n. 17).

⁵² Allen notes Father Thurston's comment that such frequency was 'very unusual in the fifteenth century even for monks and nuns' (p. 263n.). See further Bynum, 'Women Mystics' and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

⁵³ Meech and Allen, p. 315n. Lochrie (*The Book of Margery Kempe: the Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority*, pp. 44-45) cites Brute's arguments more fully from Bishop Trefnant's register, but does not acknowledge Allen's work here and mistakenly names the Lollard as William Brute.

⁵⁴ One of the aspects of biblical translation which scandalised the contemporary Church was the fact that it made the text of Scripture available to lay readers without the traditional glosses directing them to the orthodox meaning of the text. The Lollard John Purvey apparently added a translation of the glosses to the first (1384) version of the Wyclifite bible, a copy of which Queen Anne sent to Archbishop Arundel for his approval. No orthodox churchman, however, would have been likely to approve an unlettered laywoman's possession of such a text, and Arundel's constitutions of 1407 explicitly forbade possession of any Wyclifite or post-Wyclifite translation of the bible. It must be assumed that *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is so concerned to fend off charges of heresy, makes reference to an orthodox Latin bible with the glosses. Chaucer's Wife of Bath (who, interestingly, chooses the same text as Margery Kempe to gloss, though with a very different interpretation) may have shocked fifteenth-century readers more by daring to usurp the traditionally male clerical role of glossing the bible than by her promiscuity, as Susan Schibanoff's study of marginalia in the fifteenth-century Egerton MS demonstrates ('The New Reader and Female Textuality in Two Early Commentaries on Chaucer', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 [1988], 71-108). See further Janette Dillon, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London and Basingstoke, 1993), pp. 40, 62-67.

⁵⁵ The gloss is not her own in any original sense. It is entirely orthodox and familiar, as Lochrie has pointed out ('*The Book of Margery Kempe: the Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority*', p. 49). It is her position, as an uneducated laywoman offering to teach the meaning of scripture to a cleric, which is unorthodox. As Beckwith notes in a more general context: 'Even where what she says is absolutely orthodox, the position from which she speaks renders it suspect' ('Problems of Authority', p. 193). Both Allen (in a note) and Lochrie, presumably following Allen, raise the possibility that the clerk's request may in fact be designed as a test of Kempe's orthodoxy.

⁵⁶ Both Beckwith (*Christ's Body*) and Lochrie (*Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*) situate *The Book of Margery Kempe* within conditions of cultural fracture, though they adopt different perspectives on these conditions. David Aers' seminal article 'Rewriting the Middle Ages: Some Suggestions', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18 (1988), 221-40 set the agenda for later work through its plea for scholars to discard the outworn image of the middle ages as 'a harmonious world unified by one coherent system of Christian dogma that includes uncontested doctrines of gender, sexuality and social order' (p. 221).

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, 1990), p. 77. Aers describes this moment of refusal to confess as representative of the specific and distressing clash between Kempe's search for 'a potentially Lollard-like autonomy' and her acceptance of the authority of the institution such autonomy would reject (*Community*, pp. 84-86).

⁵⁸ The whole question of 'discretio spirituum', or the discernment of spirits, was the subject of

much controversy in Kempe's lifetime, especially following the canonisation of St Catherine of Siena and St Bridget. Gerson's 1415 treatise, *De Probatione Spirituum*, was the best known discussion. Though hostile to holy women, it borrowed arguments from Alfonso de Jaén's late fourteenth-century *Epistola Solitarii ad Reges*, written in defense of Bridget's sanctity. An example of Gerson's hostility is cited below.

⁵⁹ Meech and Allen, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. xxxvi. Meech summarises and analyses the annotations in this hand on pp. xxxviii-xliv.

⁶⁰ Allen's note (p. 329) on the importance of Meech's discovery that Kempe's confessor and parish priest, Master Robert Spryngolde, was still alive at the time of her dictation of Book I would seem to indicate that she considers him to be a possible scribe. See further my discussion of 'Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s', forthcoming in *Leeds Studies in English* 27.

⁶¹ *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, pp. 61-62.

⁶² 'Hoc praecipue considerare necesse est, si sit mulier, qualiter cum suis confessoribus conversatur et instructoribus, si colloctionibus intendit continuis, sub obtentu nunc crebrae confessionis, nunc proluxae narrationis visionum suarum, nunc alterius cujuslibet confabulationis' (*De Probatione*, 11, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Mgr Glorieux [Paris, 1973], vol. IX, p. 184). Atkinson also cites this passage, p. 123.