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The Rehabilitation of Margery Kempe

Stanley Hussey

In 1934 occurred one of those accidental discoveries which both enrich and complicate medieval studies. A fifteenth-century manuscript, in the possession of a northern catholic family, the Butler-Bowdens, came to light. It was identified by Hope Emily Allen as *The Book of Margery Kempe* (the manuscript is untitled) and a note on the binding leaf, in a fifteenth-century hand, reads *Liber Montis Gracie*, 'This boke is of Mountegrace', that is of the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace in North Yorkshire. Hitherto Margery Kempe had been known only through Wynkyn de Worde's pamphlet (c. 1501) entitled 'A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by oure Lorde Ihesu Cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margerie Kempe of Lynn'. That was a considerable and, as soon appeared, a deliberate and curious abridgement ('taken out') of the original. As Sue-Ellen Holbrook says:

In sum, the extractor has searched for passages that commend the patient, invisible toleration of scorn and the private, inaudible, mental practice of good will in meditation rather than the public or physical acts or sensory signs of communion with God and has left behind all that is radical, enthusiastic, feminist, particular, potentially heretical and historical.¹

Misrepresentation was compounded when in 1521 Henry Pepwell reprinted these extracts in an anthology of mystical pieces and described their author as a 'deuoute ancre', as if she had been another Julian of Norwich.

Colonel Butler-Bowden produced his own translation of the *Book* in 1936, and the Early English Text Society edition by S.B. Meech and H.E. Allen was published in 1940.² In 1950 the unique manuscript was acquired by the British Library where it is now MS Additional 61823. In this essay I quote from the recent edition by Barry Windeatt, which follows his very readable Penguin translation of 1985.³ Reference is

to line (Windeatt numbers throughout), but for the longer quotations I also give chapter number so that they can be followed in Meech and Allen.

I

At its first appearance, and indeed in several discussions since, the *Book* was celebrated as 'the first autobiography in English'. Yet three criteria by which we might try to define autobiography are not present, or at least not fully demonstrated, in this work. This account is not the whole of her life, nor is it always chronological in its approach. It tells little of the times in which she lived or the lands she visited. She has practically nothing to say about Compostela, for instance, simply four lines covering her stay of fourteen days, and very little about Rome. Her book seems overwhelmingly concerned with her own preoccupations and the people she met (and the one reflects the other). And, more important, it may well not have been all her own work. The second and longer of the two Prologues (although it appears first in the manuscript) opens:

Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful
wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and
undyrstondyn the hy and unspcabyl mercy of ower sovereyn
Savyowr Cryst Jhesu, whos name be worschepd and magnyfyed
wythowten ende, that now in ower days to us unworthy deyneth to
exercysen hys nobeley and hys goodnesse. Alle the werkys of ower
Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace
that he werkylth in any creatur is ower profyth, yf lak of charyte be
not ower hynderawnce.

And therfor, be the leve of ower merciful Lord Cryst Jhesu,
to the magnyfyng of hys holy name, Jhesu, this lytyl tretys schal
tretyn sumdeel in parcel of hys wonderful werkys, how mercyfully,
how benyngly, and how charytefully he meved and stered a synful
caytyf unto hys love, wech synful caytyf many yerys was in wyl
and in purpose, thorw steryng of the Holy Gost, to folwyn oure
Savyowr.

Not an autobiography, you notice, but 'a schort tretys and a comfortabyl', i.e. comforting, 'for synful wrecchys', almost a moral work. But we can't take it like that,

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for its heroine is too much of an individual for most readers to make the considerable leap of faith to believe that much of what she experienced might directly help them.

Although her father John Brunham, a substantial citizen of King's Lynn, is mentioned later on (there is nothing about her mother), Margery's story begins, not with her birth, or even with her childhood, but with her marriage to John Kempe, probably in 1393, when she would have been about twenty. And not really with her marriage, but with her first pregnancy, a difficult pregnancy, and the near-fatal sickness she suffered as a result. It was in this sickness that she had her first vision of Christ Jesus, who came to her

in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyvows, and most amyable that evyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde, loking upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere that sche was strengthyd in alle hir spyritys, seyde to hir thes wordys:

'Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevyr the?' And anon, as he had seyde thes wordys, sche saw veryly how the eyr openyd as brygth as ony levyn, and he stey up into the eyr, not rygth hastyli and qwykly, but fayr and esly, that sche mygth wel beholdyn hym in the eyr tyl it was closyd ageyn. (227-36, ch. 1)

After this she makes a miraculous recovery. It is a curious parallel – but one not really worth pursuing since the two women's characters and the results of their visions are so different – with the case of Julian of Norwich who in 1373 (the probable year of Margery's birth) received her revelations when she, and her friends and family as well, thought she was about to die. St Bridget of Sweden, too, dates her visions from shortly after the death of her husband in 1344.

Margery had fourteen children, but only one is mentioned, the renegade son who, through her prayers, eventually reforms and who finally comes back to Lynn with his German wife. When he dies, about a month after, she accompanies her daughter-in-law to Ipswich with the intention of returning home after seeing her safely embarked back to Germany, but ends up sailing with her and making her final pilgrimage abroad to Danzig and back home via Aachen (probably between April 1433 and mid 1434); this is related in the much shorter second book. It was not an easy journey – she was now sixty – and on her return to Lynn she was reprimanded for going by her confessor who was only mollified by the intervention of our Lord. We hear nothing about the other children (except for Christ's passing reference, 7142), not

even whether they all reached adulthood. The early chapters of Book I make some attempt at order and method: 'as schal be seyde aftyr' (323), 'as schal be wretyn aftyr' (366). In chapter 15 Christ tells Margery that she will go on pilgrimage to Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago two years before she actually goes (1411 for 1413). Almost one-third of Book I, in fact, takes place before she sets off on her pilgrimages abroad at the age of forty. Some of these early English pilgrimages were made with her husband, the long-suffering John Kempe. By chapter 25, however, similarity of subject-matter occasionally takes precedence over chronology:

Ferthermore her folwyth a rygth notabyll matere of the creaturys
felyng, and it is wretyn her for convenyens, in-as-mech as it is in
felyng leche to the materys that ben wretyn befor,
notwythstondyng it befel long aftyr the materys whеч folwyn.

(1878-81, ch. 25)

After she returns from her pilgrimages, both at home and abroad, chronology flies out at the window: 'for thow the mater be wretyn befor this, nevrthelesse it fel aftyr this.' (5544-5, ch. 67). But, even earlier, comes the disarming close to chapter 16: 'Rede fyrst the xxi chapetre, and than this chapetre aftyr that.' (1206-7), and a number of casual introductions – 'One day long before this time', 'another day', 'another time', 'soon after' – are of only limited help.

II

Whose, though, is this *Book*? Is it true autobiography, only biography, or, as we might say today, 'ghosted'? It is usually held that Margery was illiterate, although there is one reference to her reading ('whethyr thu redist or herist redyng', 7342). She was certainly *read to*, by a number of people. She can quote scripture and argue about its true meaning, once getting the better of clerics over a particularly dangerous text, *Crescite et multiplicamini* (4011)⁴ and in chapter 53 countering the common Pauline and antifeminist objection

As-swythe a gret clerke browt forth a boke and leyde Seynt Powyl
for hys party ageyns hir, that no woman schulde prechyn. Sche,
answeryng therto, seyde:

'I preche not, ser; I come in no pulpytt. I use but

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comownycacyon and good wordys, and that will I do whil I
leve. (4210-14)

She tells the Steward of Leicester that she has no Latin (ch. 47) but in chapter 6 of Book II quotes the Psalter in Latin. This latter reference, however, may be an addition by her priest-scribe whose contribution we must now investigate.

Here we are dependent upon the two prologues to the *Book*, both dated 1436 although the shorter of the two (which comes second) in fact precedes the longer version which is an expansion of it. Despite the advice she is given, and even an offer to write the account for her, Margery waits twenty years after the events before deciding to commit them to writing:

For it was xx yer and mor fro tym this creatur had forsake the
world and besyly clef onto ower Lord or this boke was wretyn,
notwythstondyng this creatur had greet counsel for to don wryten
hir tribulacyons and hir felingys, and a Whyte Frer proferyd hir to
wryten frely, yf sche wold. And sche was warnyd in hyr spyrit that
sche schuld not wryte so sone. (158-63, Short Prologue)

This long interval would in itself account for some of the disturbed chronology previously mentioned. The attempt to reduce disorder to some kind of order must be the responsibility of the amanuensis. The *Book of Margery Kempe*, then, is in some sense not 'my story' but 'her story', the story of 'this creature', as Margery regularly calls herself. The two prologues (whose significance has been best studied in a closely-reasoned article by Sue-Ellen Holbrook), together with the end of the final chapter of Book I and the beginning of the first of Book II, provide us with at least some pieces of the jigsaw.⁵ Margery's first choice of amanuensis was an Englishman who came back from 'Dewchlond' and stayed with her 'tyl he had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for the tym that thei wer togydder' (93-96). Since this man had a wife and a child and also 'good knowlach of this creatur and of hir desyr' (92), it has been suggested that he was the errant but now reformed son – 'and sythen he deyde' (96), as did her son. But since the son fell ill on the day after coming home and died a month later, this would hardly give enough time to write very much of the *Book*, and, in any case, one would suppose his English to be better than is stated at the end of Book I: 'And thow that he wrot not clerly ne opynly to owr maner of spekyng, he in hys maner of wrytyng and spellyng mad trewe sentens' (7418-20). Her second choice was a priest who was responsible for deferring the project for a further four years,

partly through his inability to read what had been written but probably also through fear of becoming too closely involved with someone so suspect. So he sent her on to another man who, despite his greater familiarity with the dialect of the original version, and despite having been paid in advance by Margery, was in his turn soon defeated:

And this good man wrot abowt a leef, and yet it was lytyl to the
purpose, for he coud not wel fare therwyth, the boke was so evel
sett and so unreasonably wretyn. (120-22, Long Prologue)

But the priest has a conscience, so he persuades Margery to get the book back, and, second time round, despite the devil's attempt to wreck his eyesight, things go much better, as he tells us in the Prologue. He completed Book I in 1436 and added Book II in 1438.

Hirsh argued that this unnamed priest (perhaps to be identified with her confessor, Robert Spryngolde) deliberately sets Margery's reminiscences in a more general, and sometimes a more literary context, that he and not she is responsible for *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁶ In general terms this must be true, and on one occasion when God, following Margery's prayers, restores the wits of a woman who suffered from severe post-natal illness (as Margery herself had), the priest gives an eye-witness account:

It was, as hem thowt that knewyn it, a ryth gret myrakyl, for he
that wrot this boke had nevyr befor that tyme sey man ne woman,
as hym thowt, so fer owt of hirself as this woman was, ne so evyl
to rewlyn ne governyn, and sithyn he sey hir sad and sobyr anow –
worschip and preysyng be to owr Lord wythowtyn ende for hys hy
mercy and hys goodnes, that evyr helpith at nede.

(6001-06, ch. 75)

Margery, unlike Catherine of Siena, did not give rise to a cult 'to press her claims and to maintain her memory'.⁷ There is no *famiglia*, as with St Bridget, and no ready named confessor to write the contemporary account which eventually forms the basis for canonisation. She makes do, as best she can, with telling it all to a single priest, not even like it was, but like it *had been*, twenty years before. Unlike Julian, she seems not to have much reflected, during the long interval, on the deeper spiritual meaning of the events. I agree with Holbrook, however, that this is in a very real

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sense, Margery's own book, that the scribe is more mediator than interventionist, that she decided to write it at what she believed was the proper time and that she keeps control of it:

The preste, trustyng in hire prayers, began to redyn this booke, and it was mych mor esy, as hym thowt, than it was beforntym. And so he red it ovyr befor this creatur every word, sche sumtym helpyng where ony difficulte was.

Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan thyngys befellyn. And therfor sche dede no thing wryten but that sche knew rygth wel for very trewth.

(130-39, Long Prologue)

Not surprisingly, some criticism has recently gone further. Lynn Staley comments that the *Book* is a 'disturbing and difficult reading experience' (agreed), but argues that it was designed as such: 'Kempe does not directly address the reader but addresses the reader through the scribe' (again true, at least in part). But for Staley, beyond this, there is 'Margery' and there is 'Kempe':

. . . although Kempe uses autobiographical apparatus to shape an account of Margery as a representative type, she uses those details as a screen for an analysis of communal values and practices.

It is Kempe who fashions Margery's biography since

the world Margery flees is the world in which Kempe lives, where success is valued as highly as failure is scorned.⁸

So the *Book* is really a fiction, exploring the subject of secular and spiritual authority in relation to a single individual. I remain unconvinced: to me Margery the manipulator is an unbelievable figure and the structure of her *Book* (in so far as it has one) is simply too episodic, as Staley admits elsewhere.⁹ Surely criticism has moved on from the schizophrenic Chaucer and Langland, yet here is thoroughly modern Margery (sorry, 'Kempe') being, we are led to believe, even more sensitive and cunning than her medieval predecessors.

III

The *Book*, then, was first perceived as autobiography, although, as we have seen, the term needs considerable qualification in Margery's case. But as other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century mystical writers were gradually edited or modernised (sometimes both), it was legitimate to ask what kind of a mystic (if mystic at all) Margery was in comparison. For R.W. Chambers, in his Introduction to the Butler-Bowden modernization, she is 'a difficult and morbid religious enthusiast'.¹⁰ She was too emotional for Dom. David Knowles when compared with the austerity of the *Cloud* author, or even Hilton.¹¹ In his opinion she is undoubtedly sincere, charitable, and when she can be checked accurate, but exhibits 'a strong exhibitionist streak in her nature, and an absence of depth in the alleged spiritual communications' (the 'alleged' is interesting). Riehle sees 'pathologically neurotic traits',¹² Colledge and Walsh a 'morbid self-engrossment'.¹³ 'Everyone agrees that she was "neurotic"', says Sheila Delany;¹⁴ everyone does not, in fact, even if Delany puts 'neurotic' in quotation marks. Nor is she 'paranoid', 'hysterical', or other terms from popular modern psychology you can think of. Margery inevitably comes off worse in comparisons, explicit or implicit, with Julian – if only she had stayed *put* – whereas she cannot even begin to compete with the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. And she would have done far better to have taken heed of the warnings by Hilton and the *Cloud* author against literal interpretation of mystical metaphors. Even those critics more sympathetic to Margery remain guarded in their assessment:

Although she was shrewd, her mind was neither profound nor disciplined, and she lacked not sincerity but discrimination. She was as flamboyant in her religious practices as she had been formerly in her dress.¹⁵

Marion Glasscoe finds that 'the narrative has an air of self-absorption and self-justification'.¹⁶

IV

For many of Margery's critics (medieval as well as modern) her mystical experiences are simply too physical. The English contemplative tradition shows little evidence of the trances, levitations, stigmata, eucharistic ecstasy, visions and

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supernatural signs of its continental counterpart. It is, in a word, far less obviously charismatic. Rolle, with his *caldor*, *dulcor* and *canor*, is the best it can offer and he is sometimes regarded as superficial. Margery, too, experiences heat in her breast, melody (almost every day for twenty-five years – 2870), sweet smells, motes in the air, and a sound like a redbreast singing in her ear (2969), but as Atkinson remarks, they do not seem central to her experience.¹⁷ Her colloquies with Christ are far more important.

The gift of penitential tears was of course traditional. For her it is authenticated, all over again, by Christ himself (ch. 14), Julian of Norwich (ch. 18), the Virgin Mary (ch. 29) and Saint Jerome (ch. 41). Hilton, whom she did not meet but whose 'book' she had heard read, whilst not dissenting, identifies tears and other 'such great bodily fervours' as characteristic of souls comparatively inexperienced in contemplation – as he would put it, not yet 'reformed in feeling'.¹⁸ Her public outbursts of 'plentyvows teers and many boystows sobbyngys' (394) begin after a three-year period of bodily penance. The crying ('screaming') happens for the first time at Calvary:

And sche had so gret compassyon and so gret peyn to se owyr
Lordys peyn that sche myt not kepe hirself fro kryng and roryng,
thow sche schuld a be ded therfor. And this was the fyrst cry that
evyr sche cryed in any contemplacyon. And this maner of crying
enduryd many yerys aftyr this tyme, for owt that any man myt do,
and therfor sufferyd sche mych despyte and mech reprefe.

(2215-20, ch. 28)

Thereafter 'weeping, crying and roaring' ('sob', evidently more extreme than 'weep', sometimes replaces 'cry') become something of a litany in Book I; the cries are absent from Book II. Many people found them acutely embarrassing, and in Lynn a famous visiting preacher, probably the Franciscan, William Melton, would not allow her at his sermons despite the representations of other clerics. Some people believed she could have stopped had she wished. She asks God (who refuses) to let her cry in private and not in public, but she is convinced that she needs tears and is desolate when God withdraws them for a time:

And, thei so wer that owr Lord wythdrow fro hir sumtyme the
habundawnce of teerys, yet he wythdrowe not fro hir holy mendys
ne desyrys of yerys togedyr, for evyr hir mynde and hir desyr was

to owr Lord. But hir thowt it was no savowr ne swetnesse but
whan sche myth wepyn, for than sche thowt that sche cowde
preyin. (6724-29, ch. 62)

The more she tries to restrain her tears, the more loudly she cries.

The 'ravishing' of her spirit starts as early as chapter 5 and in the following chapter she begins to participate in the life of the Holy Family. She takes part in the preparations for Christ's birth, becomes the Virgin's handmaiden, and is present at the birth itself. Later on she goes with Our Lady to the Mount of Olives and she sees Christ betrayed by Judas and subsequently buffeted by the Jews and the soldiers (chapters 79-80). After the Crucifixion she comforts Mary with a hot drink ('a good cawdel', 6560). All this we can accept as part of affective piety, if somewhat extreme. Meditation on the Passion was a standard part of the early stages of contemplation. Chapter 66 tells us that she was granted knowledge of Christ's manhood before her pilgrimages abroad and of the Godhead afterwards. Her favourite word for all the intimate conversations with Christ is 'dalliance'. In Middle English this signified informal, usually enjoyable, discussion. Often, as the citations under sense 1 in the *Middle English Dictionary* suggest, it was associated with coquetry and courtship: Gawain and Bertilak's wife have 'dere dalyaunce of her deme wordez' (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1012). Margery has a ring upon which is engraved, by Christ's command, *Jhesus est amor meus* (2542). The best of the *Middle English Dictionary's* (not very many) examples of sense 2 ('serious, edifying or spiritual conversation') of both noun and related verb are from Margery Kempe's *Book*. Did anyone object to her use of 'dalliance'? We do not know.

It is with the direct physical manifestations of the mystical marriage that, for us at least, things become more difficult. For several medieval writers (especially continental women mystics) Christ is like a lover. For Margery he is a lover:

For it is convenyent the wyf to be homly wyth hir husband. Be he
nevyr so gret a lorde and sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth
hir, yet thei must ly togedir and rest togedir in joy and pes. Ryght
so mot it be twyx the and me, for I take non hed what thou hast be,
but what thou woldist be. And oftyntymes have I telde the that I
have clene foryove the alle thy synnes. Therfere most I nedys be
homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thou
desyrest gretly to se me, and thou mayst boldly, whan thou art in thi
bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husband, as thy derworthy

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derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr, and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed and my fete as swetly as thow wylt. And as oftyntymes as thu thynkyst on me, or woldyst don any good dede to me, thu schalt have the same mede in hevyn as yyf thu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body which is in hevyn. For I aske no mor of the but thin hert for to lovyn me that lovyth the, for my lofe is evyr redy to the. (2944-61, ch. 36)

I doubt whether Margery saw the mixed metaphor here ('as your wedded husband . . . as your sweet son'); she is too literal-minded for that. Although, at the end of chapter 14, God had pointed out to her the metaphorical meanings of daughter, mother, sister, wife and spouse, this piece of instruction seems to have passed Margery by. And yet, her marriage to the Godhead is carefully stated to be 'in hir sowle' (2848) and here 'in the armys of thi sowle, for myn owyn precyows body . . . is in hevyn.' There is no way of telling whether these phrases are Margery's own words or the priest-amanuensis's gloss on them. Marriage, not to mention John Kempe's insistence on his conjugal rights and those fourteen pregnancies, was something Margery knew all about. Holy virgins, and the white clothing signifying chastity, she had heard about as well. Initially Christ has to assure her that he loves wives too:

Than seyde the creatur 'Lord Jhesu, this maner of levying longyth to thy holy maydens.'

'Ya, dowtyr, trow thow rygth wel that I lofe wyfes also, and specyall tho wyfys which woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mygtyn have her wyl, and don her besynes to plesyn me as thou dost, for, thow the state of maydenhode be mor parfyte and mor holy than the state of wedehode, and the state of wedehode mor parfyte than the state of wedlake, yet, dowtyr, I lofe the as wel as any mayden in the world. (1566-74, ch. 21)

The insertion of widowhood (of which there is no question here) into the traditional trilogy of virgins, widows and wives, does sound more like the priest's language than Margery's own. In the early years of her marriage she had, like the

Wife of Bath or the Wife in *The Shipman's Tale*, seen clothes as a mark of fashion and social advancement. It would have taken some resolution to turn herself into the mystic's usual function as the transparent and empty vessel of God's love (as the self-abnegatory 'this creature' might lead us to expect) and publicly, at least, she never quite made it. Her manner was naturally direct, insubordinate, sometimes abrasive, and she never did things by halves. Nancy Partner puts it well: 'she did not understand any of the subtle negotiations which were necessary to turn personal experience into an authorized source of respect, dignity, harmony with institutions'.¹⁹

With Margery, Jesus Christ is usually protective, reassuring and accommodating. It has been objected, principally by Stargardt, that he is sometimes reduced to the status of a crude miracle-worker – a stone weighing three pounds and a six-pound spar fall upon her from the church vault, but she is unharmed (chapter 9); thunder and lightning appear on demand (chapters 44, 47); St Margaret's Church at Lynn is, at her prayer, saved from fire by a miraculous fall of snow (chapter 67) – but not always. At the start of her penitential career, Margery (traditionally, perhaps) wears a hair shirt. Christ tells her to take it off. Later she gives up eating meat, but is eventually ordered to start eating it again. She believes she has given up her fashionable dress for the more modest garb of a pilgrim – but no, she is commanded to wear fine linen. And the things she is asked to do are sometimes unpleasant and unwelcome. In Rome her confessor orders her to look after a poor, sick, verminous old woman (chapter 34). Back home again, she suffers dysentery and various other bodily pains (chapter 56). In chapter 59 God withdraws from her (as happens to other mystics) 'alle good thowtys and alle good mendys of holy spechys and dalyawns, and the hy contemplacyon which sche had ben usyd to befortyme' (4850-52) and allows the devil to tempt her with hallucinations which, in her case, take the form of sexual advances by clerics. Finally John Kempe falls downstairs and is seriously injured. As ever, people were very ready to blame it all on her:

And than the pepil seyde, yf he deyde, hys wyfe was worthy to ben hangyn for hys deth, for-as-meche as sche myght a kept hym and dede not. They dwellyd not togedyr, ne thei lay not togedyr, for (as is wretyn befor) thei bothyn wyth on assent and wyth fre wil of her eithyr haddyn mad avow to levyn chast. And therfor, to enchewyn alle perellys, thei dwellyd and sojowryd in divers placys, wher no suspicyon schulde ben had of her incontynens.

(6022-28, ch. 76)

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God tells her to look after her husband. Margery objects, on the grounds that it would prevent her from serving Christ in prayer and contemplation, but she finally sees both the poetic justice and the devotion in tending this old, childish and now incontinent man:

And therfor was hir labowr meche the mor in waschynege and wryngyng, and hir costage in fyryng, and lettyd hir ful meche fro hir contemplacyon, that many tymys sche schuld an yrkyd hir labowr, saf sche bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinat lovys to hys persone. And therfor sche was glad to be ponischyd wyth the same persone and toke it mech the mor esily, and servyd hym and helpyd hym, as hir thowt, as sche wolde a don Crist hymself.

(6072-80, ch. 76)

God can sometimes be a hard taskmaster, but he keeps his promises and support always materialises when she most needs it.

V

Twice we are told of the books that Margery heard read:

. . . so excellently that sche herd nevyr boke, neythyr Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amoris*, ne *Incendium Amoris*, ne non other that evyr sche herd redyn, that spak so hyly of lofe of God but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle, yf sche coud or ellys myght a schewyd as sche felt. (1256-61, ch. 17)

He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys therupon, Seynt Brydys boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other. (4818-21, ch. 58)

'Hilton's book' was probably *The Scale of Perfection*, but just possibly *Mixed Life*, meant for a 'worldly lord' with contemplative inclinations but secular responsibilities. The *Stimulus Amoris*, often mistakenly attributed to St Bonaventura and which

includes a series of meditations on the Passion, exists in a Middle English version, *The Prick of Love*, possibly adapted by Walter Hilton. Just what Margery made of Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* is unclear since it is in Latin.

St Bridget of Sweden (whose book is authenticated by Christ in chapter 20) was probably something of a role model for Margery. Bridget was married at thirteen, had eight children, went on pilgrimage to Santiago (as Margery did) with her husband, but after his death became a visionary and pilgrim and founded a new order of nuns. Margery visited Syon, the English house of the Bridgettine order, in 1434 when she returned from Prussia (Book II, chapter 10). Bridget was an aristocrat (Margery was bourgeois) and became a force in politics at Rome, where she died. The canonization of Bridget was being discussed while Margery was in Rome and was eventually confirmed in 1415. And yet Bridget's *Liber Celestis* (which also exists in a Middle English version) is in many ways unlike Margery's own book. It is a series of disconnected visions with no linking material such as Margery's pilgrimages. In her revelations Bridget is visited by several saints and is commanded by Christ and his mother to pass on advice to various bishops, friars, the city of Rome and the papal court, especially on the cessation of warfare between England and France. She witnesses the Nativity and the Crucifixion but as a spectator rather than a participant. There is quite frequent use of allegory (again unlike Margery's *Book*). Bridget is usually referred to as 'þe spouse' or, by the Virgin, as 'þe doghter' (e.g. in Book 2, chapter 6: 'Wordes of maiden Mari to þe doghtir and of Criste to þe spouse'). What very little there is about the mystical marriage is traditional and orthodox:

pou buse be redi to he weddinge of mi godehede, in þe whilke is no
fleshli luste, but þare is alpirswettteste gasteli delite. (I, ch. 20)

a gude saule, þat is Godes wife, brynges furth gude werkes þat are
plesynge to Gode. (IV, ch. 67)

When Melton preaches in King's Lynn, 'he prechyd meche ageyn the seyde creatur, not expressyng hir name, but so he expletyd hys conseytys that men undirstod wel that he ment hir' (5107-09). Hearing this, the priest who wrote down her book began also to lose faith in her. His belief is restored when he reads the life of Mary of Oignies. Mary was a married woman who persuaded her husband to live chaste (as Margery eventually persuaded John Kempe) and became one of Christ's chosen brides. She too wept copiously and on at least one occasion was not allowed in church because of it. Her *Life* was written in Latin by her confessor, Jacques de Vitry,

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although a Middle English version of it also survives. Jacques de Vitry calls such women *mulieres sanctae*, and such quasi-religious groups as the beguines in the Low Countries and the Rhineland and the tertiaries in Italy are another manifestation of the greater lay participation in the religion of the late Middle Ages. Beguines took no formal religious vows and did not completely sever secular ties; they were sometimes wives and mothers.²⁰ They were organised 'in what might loosely be called religious collectives', predominantly active but with a definite interest in contemplation.²¹ Their only 'rules' were those which evolved to meet the needs of individual communities. Margery, of course, was the supreme individual, not a member of a group, and it must be doubtful whether she had any knowledge of beguines, but she would surely have been sympathetic towards their aims.

England (as so often) was late in joining the mystical common market. One result is, as I said, that it escaped several of the more embarrassing pathological practices of some continental women mystics. What is very evident in England is the growth of lay piety. One manifestation of this is the kind of life practised by a few wealthy and pious widows, women like Lady Margaret Beaufort (Countess of Richmond and Derby and the mother of the future Henry VII), her grandmother, Margaret, Duchess of Clarence, and Cicely, Duchess of York. Margaret Beaufort commissioned Wynkyn de Worde's 1494 print of *The Scale of Perfection and Mixed Life*, the first book to which de Worde put his name. Now these were aristocrats, but there is some evidence of the conviction that more ordinary people should be allowed to participate in the gospel story, in their own language (as the Lollards argued). Margery's 'eye-witness' account of the Crucifixion is reminiscent of the York Crucifixion play. The stress on action, as well as suffering, with bit-players (the soldiers at York but Margery includes the Jews) taking centre-stage for a moment, is natural in drama, less so in contemplative literature. Her earlier service as handmaid to the Virgin is following in the footsteps of her saviour, as related by the gentle Nicholas Love, Prior of Mount Grace Charterhouse (which owned the manuscript of her *Book* in the Middle Ages) who tells us that his book is written 'for common people and simple souls' and who honestly admits that he has allowed his imagination to play over both the scriptural account and his source, the pseudo-Bonaventure *Meditationes*:

. . . & how oure lord Jesus mekely holp hem boþe [Mary and Joseph] at hir nede & also in leying þe borde, makyng be beddes & sech opere choores gladly & lowly ministryng, & so fulfillyng in dede þat he seiþ of him self in þe gospel, þat Mannus sone came

not to be seruet bot to serue.

(ch. 13)

The *Meditations* itself encourages the reader's participation in the gospel story:

You, too, who lingered so long, kneel and adore your Lord God, and then His mother, and reverently greet the saintly old Joseph. Kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus who lies in the manger and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him a while. Pick Him up and hold Him in your arms. Gaze on His face with devotion and reverently kiss Him and delight in Him. Then return Him to the mother and watch her attentively as she cares for Him assiduously and wisely, nursing Him and rendering all services, and remain to help her if you can. (ch. 7)

Similarly Margery's revelations are 'wretyn for to schewyn the homlynes and the goodlynes of owyr mercyful Lord Crist Jhesu, and for no commendacyon of the creatur' (1747-49). Here was she, a mere citizen of Lynn, able to share in these miraculous happenings.

VI

As the New Historicists regularly remind us, we write (and rewrite) history in our own image. So it was, I suppose, inevitable that attempts would be made to portray a feminist Margery Kempe. The clerics made the rules and the clerics were men (as the Wife of Bath knew). Atkinson remarks that women having no responsibilities such as teaching or parish work

may have participated enthusiastically in the 'New Piety' in part because it was possible for them to do so. Mystical experience requires no office or ordination; women's experience is as valid as men's.²²

The oppression of women in a capitalist society is one of the arguments of Delany and Aers.²³ But it cannot really be made to stick in Margery's case: she is far too much of an individual to be hijacked by the sisterhood. Nor is she completely confident about her own 'feelings' despite frequent confirmation by God, and she regularly seeks

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clerical approval for her way of life. At the very end of Book I, she is still uncertain about the nature of some of her 'stirrings':

Sumtyme sche was in gret hevynes for hir felyngys, whan sche knew not how thei schulde ben undirstondyn many days togedyr, for drede that sche had of deceytys and illusyons, that hir thowt sche wolde that hir hed had be smet fro the body, tyl God of hys goodnesse declaryd hem to hir mende. For sumtyme that sche undirstod bodily, it was to ben undirstondyn gostly.

(7404-09, ch. 89)

Her pilgrimages (in England, anyway) sometimes seem less visits to holy places than a personal search for validation and reassurance.

More insidious – and to my mind more wrong-headed – is the belief in some modern criticism that if a work can be shown (or even claimed to be) complex, paradoxical, and above all subversive, it is *ipso facto*, that much more rewarding. This approach is frequent in two recent books, those of Lochrie and the collection of essays edited by McEntire.²⁴ Lochrie's is a careful reading, but for me it is spoiled by what is seen as Margery's ordered and deliberate strategies of subversion which are often explained by using the work of twentieth-century French feminist writers. Let me demonstrate by two quotations from the section on Laughter, in a chapter entitled 'Fissuring the Text'

In a culture which attempts to place the flesh (and woman) in parentheses, Kempe uses laughter to disperse the parentheses and contaminate the boundaries which preserve the power of the medieval Church and society. (p. 137)

Kempe's treatise offers a theology and hermeneutic of mirth which periodically erupts in her narrative, but which often runs like a silent subtext within it. (p. 144)

I don't think that these are unrepresentative quotations. One might object that Kempe's forte was weeping rather than laughter, but perhaps the one leads to the other. I can find very little that is illuminating in the collection of essays. Kempe is 'richly problematic' according to Szell,²⁵ whereas she herself might, I imagine, have regarded what she said and did as quite straightforward. Holloway is talking about Bridget, but

it might as well have been Margery

Care was always taken by Bride and her circle that her writings be authorized and orthodox. However that never prevented them from being powerful, subversive and feminist.²⁶

If in doubt, there can be the 'thinly disguised metaphor'. The following two instances are identified by Ruth Shklar:

The wryly comic episode [in the second Prologue] of the priest wearing spectacles that, of course, only make his vision worse serves as a thinly disguised metaphor for the real restrictions that prevent him from writing.

When part of the church vault falls on Margery's head and back but she is unharmed

The strikingly real physical contact between Kempe's body and the materials of the church highlights her strained relations within the church as both hierarchy and community.²⁷

We see, all too readily, what we want to see.

VII

So how far has Margery Kempe really been rehabilitated? Epithets like 'hysterical', 'neurotic', even 'self-absorbed' are clearly inadequate to describe her and I have suggested that terms from feminist or literary theory are very little better. Her claims for the quality and the extent of her contemplative experiences are nevertheless considerable:

Sche teld hym how sumtyme the Fadyr of hevyn dalyd to hir sowle as pleylny and as veryly as o frend spekyth to another be bodyly spech. Sumtyme the Secunde Persone in Trinyte, sumtyme alle thre Personys in Trinyte and o substawns in Godhede, dalyid to hir sowle and informyd hir in hir feyth and in hys lofe how sche schuld lofe hym, worshepyn hym, and dredyn hym . . . Sumtyme

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owyr lady spak to hir mend. Sumtyme Seynt Petyr, sumtyme Seynt Powyl, sumtym Seynt Kateryn, er what seynt in hevyn sche had devocyon to, aperyd to hir sowle and tawt hir how sche schuld lovyn owyr Lord and how sche schuld plesyn hym. Her dalyawns was so swet, so holy, and so devowt, that this creatur myt not oftyntymes beryn it, but fel down and wrestyd wyth hir body, and mad wondrousful cher and contenawns, wyth boystows sobbyngys and gret plente of terys, sumtyme seyng 'Jhesu, mercy', sumtyme 'I dey.'

(1251-56, 1262-70, ch. 17)

Her amanuensis says (chapter 87) there were many more such experiences, some of them more subtle and more extreme than those written. Christ promises her a singular love in heaven (chapter 22). To Rolle 'singular' was the very highest form of love. In the longer Prologue we are told that 'Sche knew and undyrstod many secret and prevy thyngys which schuld beffallen aftyrward be inspiracyon of the Holy Gost' (56-57) and in chapter 59 God tells her she would learn of the fate of the saved and the damned. For the author of *The Cloud* (who, perhaps significantly, is never mentioned) and for Hilton too, the advanced stages of contemplation are a lengthy and intricate business. The pure soul is shown the final fate of the reprobate (and of the saved too) only in the penultimate chapter of Book II of *The Scale*.

Like most of the mystics, Margery says that she is unable to explain her revelations in detail to those who cannot envisage them:

. . . sche cowde nevyr rehersyn but fewe of hem; it wer so holy and so hy that sche was abaschyd to tellyn hem to any creatur, and also it weryn so hy abovyn hir bodily wittys that sche myth nevyr expressyn hem wyth hir bodily tunge liche as sche felt hem. Sche undirstod hem bettyr in hir sowle than sche cowde uttyr hem.

(6791-96, ch. 83)

There are similar remarks in chapters 78 and 87. This is, I think, more than an excuse, although it makes it difficult for us to gauge how genuine her experiences were. The language may be exaggerated and she is apt to confuse the metaphorical with the literal, but in many cases she should be given the benefit of the doubt.

I reach this conclusion partly because she seems to have impressed and been accepted by more people than she alienated or merely embarrassed. Apart from her inveterate enemies like the Mayor of Leicester or William Melton, she wins the

approval of Repyndon of Lincoln (although he temporises a little), Arundel of Canterbury, the Pope's legate, Julian of Norwich, the abbess of Denny and a number of clerics: the Carmelite Alan of Lynn, Richard of Caister, the bishop of Worcester, the Abbot of Leicester, Robert Spryngolde, Thomas Hevingham, and others unnamed (some in England and some abroad). A priest who has heard of her but never seen her travels from England to Rome especially to meet her. The Franciscans in Jerusalem have heard of her (2390). If she is the Margery Kempe who on 13 April 1438 was admitted to the Guild of the Trinity of Lynn – and there is no reason to suppose otherwise – her pilgrimages done, she perhaps gained acceptance in her own town. Some opposition comes from those who see people simply in categories, as at Beverley: 'Damsel, forsake this lyfe that thu hast, and go spynne and card as other women don' (4330-1). When John Kempe falls ill and she has to look after him, the same kind of people simply regard it as her come-uppance.

The taunts of 'Lollard' are only to be expected at this time (and in those white clothes), especially in some of the places she visited. When she returns from Spain she makes her way from Bristol, a Lollard centre, to York, via Leicester, the Lollard 'capital'. Oldcastle was captured and executed in December 1417, the same year. It is the secular authorities who apprehend Margery and hand her over to the bishops for trial; she is not specifically attacked by the Church. She is caught up in the general anxiety over domestic rebellion; were not Lollards even now encouraging women to take a more active role in the community? Since she (a) went on pilgrimages, (b) appears to have believed in images, and (c) was orthodox on the mass, such a charge could hardly be made to stick. In any case, 'loller' was sometimes simply a term of abuse. Langland's Will was

... yclothed as a lollare,
And lytel ylet be, leueth me for sothe,
Amonges lollares of Londone and lewede ermytes,
For y made of tho men as resoun me tauhte.

(C-Text, V, 2-5)

She was perhaps one of the first – although certainly not the last – to discover that the English abroad can be particularly beastly: 'And sche fond alle pepyl good onto hir and genty1, saf only hir owyn cuntremen' (2443). Even the Saracens 'mad mych of hir' (2442). On one occasion her English companions

... cuttyd hir gown so schort that it come but lytil benethyn hir

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kne, and dedyn hir don on a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle [rough sackcloth], for sche schuld ben holdyn a fool and the pepyl schuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon. Thei madyn hir to syttyn at the tabelys ende benethyn alle other, that sche durst ful evyl spekyng a word. (2005-10, ch. 26)

All the difficulties and opposition she experiences she regards as suffering to be offered up to God. And God, in his turn, uses them to comfort her and assure her of her eventual entry into heaven without the torments of purgatory.

We are left with an unpredictable, difficult, sometimes too literal-minded personality whose *Book* whilst not chaotic is certainly episodic and inconsistent. Lynn Staley sums this up nicely:

... good confessors succeed bad confessors; John Kempe seems at times to threaten Margery's vocation and at others to support it; bishops are at once accessible and intractable; and Margery seems profound in one incident, banal in the next.²⁸

Margery Kempe is a one-off; there is no programme for contemplatives here, no idea that her manner of life might be followed by another devout woman. Sometimes I am sure that we sympathise with the Archbishop of York (who on the whole finds her innocent of the charges against her): 'What, woman, art thou come ayen? I wolde fayn be delyveryd of the' (4397). Margery Kempe, however, will not go away. But nowadays we are more willing to accept the contradictions in her personality: the desire for confirmation of her way of life from someone in authority, but also the directness of approach which allows her to rebuke the Archbishop of Canterbury for the language used by his retainers (chapter 16), the Archbishop of York for calling her a heretic (chapter 52) and the Bishop of Worcester whom she challenged with the extravagances of his household (chapter 45). And perhaps we can now begin to locate her rather more profitably in the changing fifteenth-century spiritual climate. In the present-day trial of Margery Kempe, over what the longer Prologue calls 'hyr felyngys and revelacyons and the forme of her levyng' (86), I think the jury is still out.²⁹

NOTES

¹ S.-E. Holbrook, 'Margery Kempe and Wynkyn de Worde', *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, IV, ed. by M. Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 27-46, 35.

² W. Butler-Bowden, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Cape, 1936); S.B. Meech and H.E. Allen, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Early English Text Society, 212 (1940).

³ Barry Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000); *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

⁴ Windeatt, *The Book*, 2000, see note on this line.

⁵ S.-E. Holbrook, "'About Her": Margery Kempe's Book of Feeling and Working', in *The Idea of Medieval Literature, New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, ed. by J.M. Dean and C.K. Zacher (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), pp. 265-84.

⁶ J. Hirsh, 'Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Medium Aevum*, 44 (1975), 145-50.

⁷ C.W. Atkinson, *Margery Kempe: Mystic and Pilgrim* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 18.

⁸ L. Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 4, 35, 39, 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁰ Butler-Bowden, *The Book*, p. xxii.

¹¹ D. Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), p. 143.

¹² W. Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 11.

¹³ E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), p. 38.

¹⁴ S. Delany, 'Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Writing Women* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 76-92, reprinted in R. Evans and L. Johnson, *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵ J. Bray, 'Concepts of Fourteenth Century Sainthood', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 66 (1984), 40-77.

¹⁶ M. Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 273.

¹⁷ Atkinson, *Margery Kempe*, p. 46.

¹⁸ W. Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. by J.P.H. Clark and R. Dorward (New York

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and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), II, ch. 29.

¹⁹ N.F. Partner, 'Reading the *Book of Margery Kempe*', *Exemplaria*, 3 (1991), 29-66, 66.

²⁰ See S. Dickman, 'Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, IV, ed. by M. Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984), 150-68; U. Stargardt, 'The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Germany and Margery Kempe', in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. by T.J. Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 277-313; S. Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998).

²¹ Evans and Johnson, *Feminist Readings*, p. 3.

²² Atkinson, *Margery Kempe*, p. 162.

²³ Delany, 'Sexual Economics'; D. Aers, 'The Making of Margery Kempe: individual and community', in *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 73-116.

²⁴ K. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); S.J. McEntire, *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays* (New York and London: Garland, 1992).

²⁵ T.K. Szell, 'From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in McEntire, *Margery Kempe*, pp. 73-91, 90.

²⁶ J.B. Holloway, 'Bride, Margery, Julian and Alice: Bridget of Sweden's Textual Community in Medieval England', in McEntire, *Margery Kempe*, pp. 203-21, 205.

²⁷ R. Shklar, 'Cobham's Daughter: *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Power of Heterodox Thinking', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 56 (1995), 277-304, both quotations from 287.

²⁸ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, p. 176.

²⁹ Other works consulted but not specifically referred to in the text include: S. Beckwith, 'A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in D. Aers, *Medieval Literature* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 'Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Exemplaria*, 4 (1992), 171-99, and *Christ's Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 78-111; C.W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); E. Colledge, 'Margery Kempe', in *Pre-Reformation English Spirituality*, ed. by J. Walsh (London: Burns and Oates, 1965), pp. 210-23; S. Dickman, 'Margery Kempe and the English Devotional Tradition' in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England I*, ed. by M. Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1980), 156-72; R. Ellis, 'Margery Kempe's Scribe and the Miraculous Books', in *Langland, the Mystics and*

the Medieval English Religious Tradition, ed. by H. Phillips (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 161-76; D. Gray, 'Popular Religion and Late Medieval English Literature', in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England*, ed. by A. Torti and P. Boitani (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 1-28; J. Hirsh, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe* (Leiden: A.J. Brill, 1989); S-E. Holbrook, 'Order and Coherence in the *Book of Margery Kempe*' in *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence and Imagination*, ed. by C.H. Brennan et al. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1989), pp. 97-110; R. Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls, Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984); K Lochrie, 'The *Book of Margery Kempe*: the marginal woman's quest for literary authority', *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 16 (1986), 33-55; D.R. Uhlman, 'The Comfort of Voice, the Solace of Script: Orality and Literacy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Studies in Philology*, 91 (1994), 50-69; N. Watson, 'Middle English Mystics', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by D. Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); B. Windeatt, *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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