

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "'Meditacyon' or 'Contemplacyon'?"
Margery Kempe's Spiritual Experience and Terminology', *Leeds
Studies in English*, n.s. 33 (2002), 115-34

Permanent URL:

[https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-
full&object_id=123749&silos_library=GEN01](https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123749&silos_library=GEN01)



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

'Meditacyon' or 'Contemplacyon' ? Margery Kempe's Spiritual Experience and Terminology

Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa

Since the discovery of the *Book of Margery Kempe*¹ in 1934, commentators have criticised her lack of serenity and suspected the credibility of her spiritual experience. David Knowles, among others, thought Margery 'improperly' classed among the English mystics.² But over the past twenty years, a growing body of scholarship on medieval female spirituality has led to the re-evaluation of the *Book* within the genre of devotional literature.³ A close reading shows that the *Book* is not the paltry record of an eccentric laywoman but manifests some distinctive aspects of later medieval piety through its accounts of Margery's meditative experience. Margery's meditational experience is illuminated by understanding a change in the laity's spiritual experience in the Middle Ages, and the *Book* unfolds a creative experience of memory in which meditation functions specifically as a spiritual mnemonic.

Margery is considered a vivid representative of a new class of the devout laity with access to vernacular books on the contemplative life. She mentions 'Hyltons boke' (chap. 17, p. 39, line 23) in an interview with Richard of Caister and also recounts that Hilton's book was one of those books of contemplation that an unnamed priest read to her.⁴ This experience of contemplative literature seems to have laid the foundation for her spiritual progress: 'Thus, thorw heryng of holy bokys & thorw heryng of holy sermownys, sche euyr encresyd in contemplacyon & holy meditacyon' (chap. 59, p. 144, lines 5-7).

Her account shows a change in lay devotion 'from its anti-intellectual key, with a heavy emphasis on the recitation of set prayers and passive attendance at ritual, to the ideal of devout literacy',⁵ which consists of meditative prayer and the reading⁶ of books describing the contemplative life.

This new emphasis on contemplation and the pursuit of the mixed life is incorporated into the ideal of the devout layperson by Nicholas Love, who

recommends reading Walter Hilton in his *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* in 1410:

Whereof & oper vertuese exercise þat longeþ to contemplatif lyuyng, & specialy to a recluse, & also of medelet life, þat is to sey sumtyme actife & sumtyme contemplatif, as it longeþ to diuerse persones þat in worldly astate hauen grace of gostly loue; . . . lete him loke þe tretees þat þe worþi clerk & holi lyuere Maister Walter Hilton þe Chanon of Thurgarton wrote in english by grete grace & hye discrecion; & he shal fynde þere as I leue a sufficient scole & a trew of alle þees. Whos saule rest in euerlastyng pese; as I hope he be ful hye in blisse, ioynede & knyht without departyng to his spouse Jesu, by perfite vse of þe best part þat he chase here with Marie. Of þe which part he graunt vs felawchipe'.⁷

Love's recommendation of Hilton's *Treatise on the Mixed Life*⁸ seems to represent the Carthusian Order's approval of admitting lay-people to the practice of contemplation and the reading of books.⁹ As Love's example shows, the change in the laity's spiritual experience could have produced a devout laywoman such as Margery, for whom meditation and contemplation were central to the progress of her spiritual life.

Importantly, her meditative experience involves unique psychological processes, the subtlety of which is conveyed by a variety of terms. Denise Despres situates Margery's meditations in the Franciscan spiritual tradition and suggests that her visual meditations and her ability to recreate Scripture constitute a creative act of recollecting a life.¹⁰ But Margery's meditational experience accompanies more complicated psychological processes than being explained solely by the Franciscan tradition. Gunnel Cleve explores the terminology for Margery's spiritual experience: she examines the various meanings Margery attaches to the noun 'dalyawns' and the verb 'dalyin' by looking at context and situation. But the scope of her research covers only a limited area of Margery's terminology.¹¹ To date, therefore, there has not been a comprehensive analysis of Margery's spiritual experience and the various terms she uses for the experience. What follows are an analysis of what we can recover of her psychological processes and an examination of the terminology she employs to describe her spiritual experience.

The Psychological processes of Margery's spiritual experience

Writing the *Book* with her amanuensis, Margery recalls her meditational experience: she reports her meditations in retrospect, after having practised them and having considered their meaning for twenty-five years or so.¹² This 'remembering' process creates two problems for our examination of the *Book*. As she states in her Proem, she does not use chronological order to recount her experience. Since she writes as the matter comes to her mind, the flow of the *Book* sometimes drifts, and the way she narrates is occasionally accompanied by abrupt leaps and repetitive accounts. Yet, despite the structural problem, what comes to Margery's mind relates in large measure to her account of her unique meditative experience. We can also speculate on the extent to which Margery actually did meditate in particular ways at the times she says she did, and on the amount of reconstruction and insights she adds. The intense meditation she describes at the holy sites during her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, for example, reflects the impact the pilgrimage had on her.¹³ But what she recounts is not necessarily autobiographical. It might be shown as an intensely emotional experience which renews her spiritual perception of the Redemption.

As Margery belongs to the tradition of affective devotion which encourages the use of the faculty of imagination, the way she conveys her meditational experience is affected by her highly visual imagination, itself effected by her intense power of emotional concentration. As I have noted, Margery is most influenced by the Franciscans' imaginative meditation, elaborated in the *Meditationes* and transmitted to Margery through Nicholas Love's translation, the *Mirror*. The *Meditationes*, probably written by a Franciscan, Giovanni de Cauli, popularized ideas about the value of compassion and provided the laity with an example of systematic meditation on the life of Christ according to the Canonical Hours. It also constantly encouraged an imaginative participation in the events of Christ's life by employing one's senses and imagination.

Moreover, in Margery's imaginative meditation, the relationship between the earthly and the spiritual worlds is so close that they continually overlap because she finds the Incarnation always present in her life: there is no clear demarcation between the present and the eternal. Through her imagination she is instantly transported to an eternal present. This peculiar dramatisation of her imaginative experience might be explained by the symbolic system in which 'the here and now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is

simultaneously something . . . and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal, something omni-temporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event'.¹⁴

Significantly, her meditation seems to have a kind of 'cross-over' status: although Margery's meditation initiates an experience willed imaginatively, it becomes the means by which Margery receives divine illumination or visionary insight. As she increasingly engages in visual and participatory meditation, she experiences the intense reality of God present in her life and conceives her meditative experience as an interplay between her will and His grace. At the same time, Margery puts layers of interpretation on her meditations as she gains understanding over the years of her life. The recollected meditation mirrors the way she grasps its meaning after considering her life in the light of that meditative experience. For example, through the process of reflection, Margery realises that what she had experienced in Jerusalem plays a crucial role for her spiritual progress.¹⁵ Her meditation thus constitutes a vital process of self-knowledge, which is distinguished by a revelatory quality which might be compared with what Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, calls 'spots of time'.¹⁶

Furthermore, Margery's meditations are nurtured in a matrix of Church teaching, devotional literature, liturgy, ritual and iconography, all interacting with one another; this matrix gives us a glimpse into the symbolic interactions between clerical intellectual spirituality and lay piety. Moreover, the visual aspect of her meditation suggests that Margery makes significant use of medieval iconography as a spiritual mnemonic to express herself. Her visual meditation nurtures the affective dimension of her piety and preserves the memory of her meditative experience in an immediate way. Detailed analysis of verbal and visual iconography shows that concrete images are linked to a sophisticated context of medieval iconography and that the images' subtle and abstract implications add peculiar richness to the significance of her meditation.

For example, in chapter 85, Margery recapitulates earlier meditations coloured by vivid visual imagination. As Margery sees the Virgin watching the cross raised from the ground, she feels that 'sche sey owr Lord standyng ryght up ouyr hir so ner þat hir thowt sche toke hys toos in hir hand & felt hem, & to hir felyng it weryn as it had ben very flesch & bon' (chap. 85, p. 208, lines 21-24). This image evokes not only the iconography of the Crucifixion, i.e. *Stabat Mater*, but also medieval depictions of the Last Judgement in which the Virgin intercedes on behalf of sinners just below the bare feet of Christ in 'majesty'.¹⁷

Through these intricate psychological processes, Margery chooses and

relocates the events of her life in relation to her meditations. Five major meditational experiences are very important for her progress; they are roughly categorised into two kinds of experience which run through the whole Book: one that appears in a scene or a well-defined sequence with the use of visual imagination; the other that is understood as Christ's discourse or meditative colloquies between Christ and Margery. The sequence of meditation on the early life of the Virgin and infant Christ (chapters 6 and 7), meditations during the Jerusalem pilgrimage (chapters 28 and 29), the sequence of meditation on the Passion in the context of the Easter liturgy (chapters 78-81), and meditation on the Purification of the Virgin (chapter 82) are highly visual and imaginative, while Christ's long discourse on Holy Communion is presented in monologue (chapter 86). In-between the meditative blocks, she apparently intersperses spiritual colloquies with Christ. Nevertheless, the colloquies are the means by which she grows in her awareness of how her life is bound with Christ.¹⁸ Each meditation that Margery embeds in the chronological movement of her life significantly illuminates her inner spiritual progress. To convey this unique spiritual experience, Margery chooses the terms available to her. In the next section I examine what she means by the terms with which she describes her meditational experience.

Margery's terminology for her spiritual experience

In the Proem, Margery enumerates various types of spiritual experience:¹⁹

For euyr þe mor slawnder & reprof þat sche sufferyd, þe mor
sche incresyd in grace & in deuocyon of holy medytacyon of hy
contemplacyon & of wonderful spechys & dalyawns which
owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle, techyng hyr how sche
schuld be despysed for hys lofe . . . Sche knew & vndyrstod
many secret & preuy thyngys which schuld befallen aftyrward
be inspiracyon of þe Holy Gost. (Proem, p. 2, lines 29-38)

Sche xuld don wryten hyr felyngys & reuelacyons & þe forme
of her leuyng þat hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle þe
world. (pp. 3-4, lines 32/1-2)

The words '*meditacyon*', '*contemplacyon*', '*wonderful spechys & dalyawns*' and

'felyngys & reuelacyons' relate her inner spiritual experience. As she compares the gift of contemplation and devotion with the bliss of heaven, the inner spiritual experience which she describes with these various terms seems to be central to the salvation of her soul. Christ gives a glimpse of heaven when he says: 'Per [in heaven] þu schalt se wythowtyn ende euery good day þat eyr I 3af þe in erth of contemplacyon, of deuocyon, & of al þe gret charite þat I haue 3ouyn to þe to þe profyete of thyn euyn-cristen' (chap. 64, pp. 157-58, lines 36-38/1-2).

There is, however, a certain ambiguity in her use of these terms. It is helpful to examine more broadly the terminology that Margery uses for her inner spiritual experience and to categorise her idiosyncratic terms for the various meditations in the *Book*. First, I explore 'meditacyon' and 'contemplacyon', which Margery groups together or uses alternatively; these terms seem to play a pivotal role in her meditative experience. But it is often difficult to distinguish these terms in the medieval period. *The Middle English Dictionary* provides a definition of the terms in a medieval religious context: 'meditacyon' is described as 'meditation, contemplation; devout preoccupation; devotions, prayer';²⁰ 'contemplacyon' as 'religious meditation, contemplation of the Divinity and the divine order'.²¹ The terms overlap in the Middle Ages as well as being used distinctively: medieval writers did not always distinguish the terms they used to talk about the inner spiritual experience, although they distinguished the activities. In some contemporary examples, contemplation designates meditation in terms of devotional practice: 'Blessid ben the clene of herte, for thei schulen see God, 3ee thei schulen first seen hym here by contemplacioun, that is to seye, by goode thou3tes and desyres and goode undurstondynges'.²² John Gower also overlaps the meaning of the two terms: 'With worthi knyhtes environed / The king himself hath abandoned / Into the temple in good entente . . . Wher as with gret devocioun / Of holi contemplacioun / Withinne his herte he made his schrifte'.²³

By contrast, in modern mystical theology, theologians rigidly separate the activities and the terms: they distinguish between willed and conscious 'meditation' and a higher kind of knowledge of God which is felt to be experienced through a supernatural virtue or gift and which is generally called 'contemplation'. Modern theology defines meditation as a form of mental prayer which employs the interior faculties – 'the memory, the imagination, the emotions, the intellect, in influencing the will, and the will itself in its corresponding affective acts and resolutions',²⁴ and which proceeds by discursive steps. But contemplation is intuitive rather than discursive: it is 'the intuitive experience of union with God through the activity of faith, charity, and the gifts

of wisdom and understanding'.²⁵

Meditation in the Middle Ages grew in a monastic milieu where those vowed to the contemplative life fostered techniques of contemplation which consist of reading, meditation and prayer. Having developed from meditation, contemplation attempts to transcend the activities of imagination and intellect through an intuitive concentration on the divine. Importantly, in the wave of affective piety in the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux placed the practice of meditation in a broader context of contemplation, which is governed by personal striving for perfection through a three-stage programme for spiritual growth.²⁶

Bernard argues that those who pursue the contemplative life can be led to the higher stage of spiritual union particularly through meditating on Christ's humanity:

The soul at prayer should have before it a sacred image of the God-man, in his birth or infancy or as he was teaching, or dying, or rising, or ascending. Whatever form it takes this image must bind the soul with the love of virtue and expel carnal vices, eliminate temptations and quiet desires. I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men as a man. He wanted to recapture the affections of carnal men who were unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.²⁷

This passage asserts that the sensory and emotional devotion to Christ's humanity in meditation can be transformed into spiritual love – the goal of contemplation in God. Affective meditation on the events of Christ's life elicits the meditator's compassion and initiates a process of moral reform. As a soul moves from the elementary stage to the higher stage of spirituality in meditation, it reaches the point at which meditation gives way to contemplation.

Bernard argues further: 'Perhaps, too, we have here those puzzling reflections seen by the Apostle in the mirror and fashioned, as I have said, by angelic hands from pure and beautiful images, which I feel bring us in contact somehow with the being of God, that in its pure state is perceived without any shadow of corporeal substances'.²⁸ Through meditation on the holy manhood of Christ, the mystic is ultimately led to contemplation without the aid of corporeal

or visual images of any kind until s/he transcends the physical by recognising the divine image in the corporeal.²⁹ The meditation thus culminates in the wholly spiritual contemplation of Christ's divinity and in a glimpse of the mystical and beatific vision of heaven.

In the *Form of Living*, which dates from the last year of Richard Rolle's life (1348-49), he discusses active and contemplative life and regards contemplation as a transcendent experience – 'gifen of Goddes godenes'.³⁰ He makes a clear distinction between meditation and contemplation by assigning them a lower and higher role in contemplative experience:

Contemplatife lyf hase twa partyes, a lower and a heer. Pe lower party es meditacion of haly wrytyng, þat es Goddes wordes, and in other gude thoghtes and swete, þat men hase of þe grace of God abowt þe lufe of Jhesu Criste . . . Pe hegher party of contemplacion es behaldyng and ʒernyng of þe thynges of heven, and joy in þe Haly Gaste, þat men hase oft.³¹

Furthermore, Rolle asserts the superiority of contemplative experience: contemplation is 'a wonderful joy of Goddes luf, þe whilk joy es lovyng of God, þat may nocht be talde',³² for it is 'a syght, and þai se intil heven with þar gastly egh'.³³

In *Emendatio Vitae*, in defining approaches to contemplation, Rolle again distinguishes between contemplation and meditation: 'Contemplatyfe lyfe or contemplacion has thre partys: Redyng, Prayer, & Meditacion. In redyng, god spekis to vs; In prayer, we speke to god; In meditacion, awngels to vs cum down & techis vs, þat we erre nott. In prayer þa go vp & offyrs owr prayers to god, loyand of owr profett, þat ar messyngers be-twix god & vs'.³⁴ Notably, Rolle here says that angels come down during meditation to help in the move towards contemplation. Rolle further argues that 'Meditacion in god & godly þingis, aftyr prayer and redyng is to be takyn, qwher is þe halsyng of rachell . . . To meditacione, longis inspiracion of godd, vndirstandyng, wysdome & syghyng'.³⁵ Following the contemplative tradition in which Rachel represents the contemplative knowledge of the love of God, Rolle clearly points to this mediating function of meditation. Thus, for Rolle, meditation is a means to receive the transcendent gift of contemplation.

In the fourteenth century, however, as the practice of meditation on the

suffering of Christ was increasingly recommended as a devotional practice appropriate for the devout laity, meditation practised by professed contemplatives as the initial step towards contemplative union was separated from contemplation.³⁶ This change in the role of meditation and that of contemplation appears in Nicholas Love's translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, in which he disregards contemplation and recommends meditation on the life of Christ as a devotional practice appropriate for those in the active life. However, in Book I of the *Scale of Perfection*, Hilton uses the term 'contemplation' to cover meditative experience. Presenting three stages of contemplation, he argues that 'the second part of contemplation lies principally in affection, without the understanding of spiritual things'.³⁷ Although he uses the term 'contemplation', 'this second part is modeled after the affective program articulated by Bernard; meditation on the humanity of Christ brings about contrition and prepares the meditator for a more spiritual love'.³⁸ Hilton mentions various kinds of meditation associated with the second part of contemplation. He divides the second part of contemplation into lower and higher degrees, and says that in this lower second part of contemplation those who practise it sometimes experience a special fervour of love and spiritual sweetness.

Hilton extends to those in active life the possibility of attaining the lower, second part of contemplation, which was preserved for those who pursue the contemplative life: 'Men of active life may by grace have the lower degree of this feeling when they are visited by our Lord, just as strongly and as fervently as those who give themselves entirely to the contemplative life and have this gift'. But he also argues that for those in active life 'it does not last very long: it comes and goes as he wills who gives it'.³⁹

The higher degree, on the other hand, 'can be had and held only by people who are in great quietness of body and soul'⁴⁰ and it is exclusively for those vowed contemplatives. The higher degree of the second part of contemplation leads the meditator to the third part of contemplation that corresponds to the spiritual union usually identified with contemplation on the divinity. Hilton, then, uses the term 'contemplation' both for meditation on the humanity of Christ, and for contemplation of his divinity.

Margery's terminology seems to be grounded in this tradition in which the terms 'contemplacyon' and 'meditacyon' may both overlap and be distinct. In the *Book*, meditation and contemplation are introduced as the first of the devotional practices according to a new set of instructions Christ gives Margery on her conversion: Christ 'rausched | hir spyryt' (chap. 5, p. 16, lines 31-32),⁴¹ forgives

her sins to the uttermost point and starts the first long colloquy: 'thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in þi mend. . . Pan schalt þow ly styлле & speke to me be thowt, & I schal zefe to þe hey medytacyon | and very contemplacyon' (p. 17, lines 27-31).

In the first sequence of meditation, Margery consciously directs herself to meditation: 'An-oþer day þis creatur schul[d] zeue hir to medytacyon, as sche was bodyn be-for, & sche lay styлле, nowt knowyng what sche mygth best thynke'(chap. 6, p. 18, lines 9-11). At his command to think on his Mother, 'a-noon sche saw Seynt Anne . . . þan sche preyd Seynt Anne to be hir mayden & hir seruawnt' (chap. 6, p. 18, lines 15-17), and she meditates on the early life of the Virgin and on the infancy of Christ. Noticeably, she describes this spiritual experience as one of 'beheldyng al þe processe in contemplacyon' (chap. 7, p. 19, line 27), and she lists 'medytacyon' and 'contemplacyon' together: 'many swet thowtys & hy medytacyons & also hy contemplacyons, sumtyme duryng in wepyng ij owyres & oftyn lengar in þe mend of owyr Lordys Passyon' (chap. 7, p. 19, lines 36-38).

'Meditacyon' and 'contemplacyon' recur especially in the context of the meditation on the Passion. Margery recalls that soon after her conversion in Advent she had the meditation on the Passion focused on the manhood of Christ: 'An-oþer tyme, as þe creatur lay in hir contempplacyon in a chapel of owr Lady, hir mynde was ocupijd in þe Passyon of owr Lord Ihesu Crist, & hyr thowt verily þat <she> saw owr Lord aperyng to hir gostly syght in hys manhod with hys wowndys bledyng' (chap. 85, p. 207, lines 14-18). In an interview with Richard of Caister, she reveals that meditation on the Passion is the core of her meditative experience – 'sche was fed and comforyd wyth holy medytacyons & specyal in þe mende of owyr Lordys Passyon' (chap. 17, p. 39, lines 3-5).

Margery also uses the term 'contemplacyon' for her intense meditation on the Passion during her vigil in the Church of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem: 'Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon . . . sche saw veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. Beforn hir face sche herd and saw in hir gostly sygth þe mornyng of owyr Lady' (chap. 28, p. 68, lines 10-11 and 16-19).⁴² On Mount Calvary, 'sche had so very contemplacyon in þe sygth of hir s[owle] | as yf Crist had hangyn befor hir bodily eye in hys manhode' (p. 70, lines 5-7). Her characteristic crying first occurred in that contemplation, and it continued for ten years in contemplation. She recounts that the cries 'come neuyr wyth-owtyn passyng gret swetnesse of deuocyon & hey contemplacyon' (p. 69, lines 18-19).

In her meditation on the Passion in the context of the Easter liturgy,

Margery first describes that 'sche had many an holy thowt of owr Lordys Passyon & beheld hym in hir gostly syght as verily as he had ben a-forn hir in hir bodily syght' (chap. 78, pp. 184-85, lines 34/1-3). Then, she recounts that 'an-oþer tyme sche saw in hyr contemplacyon owr Lord Ihesu Crist bowndyn to a peler . . . Sithyn sche went forth in contemplacyon þorw þe mercy of owr Lord Ihesu Crist to þe place þer he was naylyd to þe Crosse' (chap. 80, p. 191, lines 4-5 and 33-35). Similarly, on Easter morning, Margery was 'in hir contemplacyon wyth Mary Mawdelyn' (chap. 81, p. 197, line 11).

'Contemplacyon' and 'meditacyon' are also used to describe other kinds of religious meditation. The Purification is envisioned during 'þe contemplacyon in hir sowle þat sche had in þe beholding of owr Lord Ihesu Crist' (chap. 82, p. 198, lines 8-9). 'Sche thowt in hir sowle þat sche saw owr Lady ben purifijd & had hyr contemplacyon' (lines 26-27) in beholding other women purified of their childbirth. When she saw weddings, 'a-non sche had in meditacyon how owr Lady was joynyd to Ioseph & of þe gostly joynyng of mannys sowle to Ihesu Crist' (chap. 82, pp. 198-99, lines 36/1-2).⁴³

These examples show how Margery's personal terminology relates to her meditational experience. Although medieval mystical theology contends that one transcends all images formed in the imagination in a contemplative experience, Margery frequently uses 'contemplacyon' to indicate the affective meditation on the life of Christ. She does not distinguish between 'medytacyon' and 'contemplacyon', but uses the terms to indicate any spiritual experience that takes place through affective imagination. Moreover, her use of 'contemplacyon' echoes that of Hilton, in his description of the second part of contemplation – meditation on the humanity of Christ. These examples lead us to see that Margery's 'contemplacyon' is closely related to 'meditacyon', and that both terms especially relate to her compassion for the humanity of Christ.

Relevant to her visual meditation is the term 'vision', which she uses to describe her experience of seeing vision and hearing Christ and the saints speak to her.⁴⁴ In a Middle English religious context, the word 'vision' indicates a supernatural manifestation and a vision experienced either by a waking person, especially as a divine revelation or also as a delusion or by a sleeping person as a symbolic, prophetic, or monitory dream.⁴⁵ As Rosalynn Voaden notes, 'in nearly all cases these visions and locutions feature Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints, or angels'.⁴⁶ Although Margery does not use the term 'vision' about the experience, she opens her *Book* with a vision of Christ, who 'aperyd to hys creatur . . . in lyknesse of a man . . . seyde to hir þes wordys . . . And a-noon, as he had seyde þes

wordys, sche saw veryly how þe eyr openyd as brygth as ony levyn, & he stey up in-to þe eyr' (chap. 1, p. 8, lines 14-15 and 19-23). When she confides her spiritual experience and privileged relationships with Christ, the Virgin and the saints to Richard of Caister, she recounts: 'owyr Lady spak to hir mend . . . [saints] aperyd to hir sowle & tawt hir how sche xuld louyn owyr Lord' (chap. 17, p. 39, lines 28-32). The mystical events include not only a vision but also an audition, which is granted to her in the form of a heavenly melody.⁴⁷

Occasionally Margery does use the term 'vision'. When Christ tells her that he will pray the Virgin to beg for Margery, who is then destitute in Rome, she has a vision of the Virgin: 'Than on a nyth sche say in vision how owyr Lady, hir thowt, sat at þe mete wyth many worshepful personys & askyd mete for hir. And þan thowt þis creatur þat owr Lordys wordys wer fulfilled gostly in þat vision, for he behestyd þis creatur a lityl be-forn þat he xuld preyn hys modir to beggyn for hir' (chap. 38, p. 93, lines 15-20). She also uses 'vision' for her highly visual meditation on the Passion. When she is punished by horrible temptations, she compares the bitter experience with a glorious vision and high meditations on the manhood of Christ that she used to embrace: 'as sche befor had many gloryows visyonys & hy contemplacyon in þe manhod of owr Lord . . . ryth euyn so had sche now horybyl syghtys & abhominabyll' (chap. 59, p. 145, lines 5-8).

In reviewing her meditational experience soon after her conversion in Advent, she recounts a vision of Christ she had in sleeping: it led her to a meditation on the Passion:

An-oþer tyme, þe seyde creatur beyng in a chapel of owr Lady sor wepyng in þe mynde of owr Lordys Passyon & swech oþer gracys & goodnes as owr Lord ministryd to hir mynde, & sodeynly . . . sche was in a maner of slep. & a-non in þe syght of hir sowle sche sey owr Lord standyng ryght up ouyr hir . . . thorw þes gostly sytys hir affeccyon was al drawyn in-to þe manhod of Crist & in-to þe mynde of hys Passyon. (chap. 85, p. 208, lines 16-27)

Noticeably, she identifies this affective meditation as 'visyons': 'As is wretyn be-forn, þes maner of visyons & felyngys sche had sone aftyr hir conuersyon' (chap. 85, p. 208, lines 29-30), most especially in Lent before the Jerusalem pilgrimage. She also recounts a similar experience of seeing the Virgin: 'An-oþer tyme, as þis creatur | was in an hows of þe Frer Prechowrys . . . hir ey-ledys went a lityl to-

gedyr wyth a maner of slep, & sodeynly sche sey, hir thowt, owr Lady in þe fayrest syght þat euyr sche say' (chap. 85, p. 209, lines 15-19).⁴⁸

These examples suggest that Margery's vision could be considered as a spiritual or imaginary vision distinguished by seeing or hearing things with the spiritual senses. It is most conveniently interpreted as an imaginative vision according to the Augustinian analysis of vision as corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual. 'Imaginative vision is a phantasm supernaturally caused in the imagination without the aid of the sense of sight'.⁴⁹ This psychological process explains what is going on when Margery reports that she saw Christ, the Virgin, and the saints in her spiritual eyes, or had a vision of them.

Another distinct form of meditative experience for Margery is spiritual colloquy with Christ. She describes it as 'wonderful spechys & dalyawns' which, in a religious context, signifies 'serious, edifying, or spiritual conversation; communion'.⁵⁰ Held in an intimate and homely manner, holy dalliance and meditative discourse are the characteristic form of her communication with Christ. After her conversion Christ undertakes a new enterprise of supervising her spiritual life: he speaks to her, commands her in her mind, and consoles her in dalliance. Margery first uses the term, 'dalyawns', in reporting an intense spiritual experience caused by a tribulation in her life. When she is accused as a false Lollard in Canterbury, she prays to Christ and is eventually rescued by two young men. Then she enters a period of contemplation:

Than aftyr þis sche was in gret rest of sowle a gret whyle & had hy contemplacyon day be day & many holy spech & dalyawns of owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst . . . wyth many swet terys of hy deuocyon . . . how hir hert mygth lestyn þat it was not consumyd wyth ardowr of | lofe, whych was kyndelyd wyth þe holy dalyawns of owyr Lord whan he seyde to hir many tymes, 'Derworthy dowtyr, lofe þow me wyth al þin hert . . . þow wer a chosyn sowle . . . a peler of Holy Cherch'. (chap. 13, p. 29, lines 11-23)

Grouped together with 'contemplacyon', 'dalyawns' is presented as a direct experience with Christ that comes in her 'contemplacyon'. Moreover, 'dalyawns' is the means by which God puts love into her soul and assures her that she is chosen as his beloved: it is a kind of communication that emanates from God to convey His love for Margery.⁵¹

Furthermore, 'dalyawns' and 'dalying' cluster around her pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to Rome, where her mystical marriage to the Godhead takes place.⁵² Cleve argues that through close contact with the sites of Christ's life on earth, Margery is increasingly preoccupied by her identity as the bride of Christ, and suggests that 'dalyawns' expresses the relationship that God has with her through mystical marriage.⁵³ As 'dalyawns' is defined in a secular context as 'amorous talk or to-do; flirting, coquetry; sexual union',⁵⁴ its secular semantic values seem to colour its spiritual use in Margery's matrimonial imagery, although Margery seeks, by means of this term, to express spiritual love. Importantly, 'dalyawns' also occurs in contemplation during Holy Communion which Christian mysticism has traditionally interpreted as the spiritual marriage of the human soul to God through the sacrament of the eucharist:⁵⁵ 'in þat Chapel sche had so hy contemplacyon & so meche dalyawns of owr Lord' (chap. 56, p. 138, lines 26-28); she cries at Communion because she feels abundance of love in it.

God's 'dalyawns' recurs in 'contemplacyon' and 'meditacyon' in Margery's later years when she is spiritually transformed through her meditative experience:

Whan sche beleuyd þat it was God & no euyl spiryt þat 3af
hir so mech | grace of deuocyon, contricyon, & holy
contemplacyon, þan had sche so many holy thowtys, holy
spechys, and dalyawns in hir sowle . . . Sche vndirstod hem
bettyr in hir sowle þan sche cowde vttyr hem. 3yf on of hir
confessowrys come to hir whan sche ros vp newly fro hir
contemplacyon er ellys fro hir meditacyon, sche cowde a
telde hym meche thyng of þe dalyawnce þat owr Lord dalyid
to hir sowle. (chap. 83, pp. 201-02, lines 28-32 and 38-40/1-
3)

Margery also describes dalliance as sweet: 'The sayd creatur lay ful stille in þe chirch, heryng & vndirstondyng þis swet dalyawnce in hir sowle as clerly as on frende xulde spekyn to an-oper' (chap. 87, p. 214, lines 14-16).

As she reviews her meditative experience, she judges that she was strengthened in her faith in God through dalliance: 'Of þis maner speche and dalyawnce sche was mad mythy & strong in þe lofe of owr Lord & gretly stablyd in hir feith & encresyd in mekenes & charite wyth oper good vertuys' (chap. 87, pp. 214-15, lines 36/1-3). As Cleve argues, 'dalyawns' contains a wide

variety of semantic values applicable to spiritual marriage.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, these examples from Margery's later years suggest that she uses 'dalyawns' not only to illuminate the matrimonial aspects of her relationship with God but to convey her spiritual experience which is synonymous with the manner of devotional life bestowed on those who are assiduous in contemplative experience.

Margery's inner spiritual experience includes '*felyngys & reuelacyons*'. Through her conversion, she is chosen to receive 'reuelacyon': ' "I byd þe gon to þe ankyr at þe Frer Prechowrys, & schew hym my preuyteys & my counselys whеч I schewe to þe". . . [Sche] schewyd hym þe reuelacyons swеч as wer schewyd to hir' (chap. 5, p. 17, lines 31-36). This passage suggests that her 'reuelacyon' is synonymous with God's secrets and counsels, as the *MED* defines it 'the communication or disclosure of spiritual doctrine, mystical truth, divine precepts, historical events, etc. by God through Christ, the Holy Spirit, a saint, etc.'⁵⁷

Revelation as privileged spiritual experience empowers Margery as a mouthpiece of God. For example, when she persuades her husband to make a sacramental vow of chastity, she tells the Bishop of Lincoln with authority that she was commanded in her soul by Christ to wear white clothes: 'And, yf 3e clothyn me in erth, owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst xal clothyn 3ow in Heuyn, as I vndyrstond be reuelacyon' (chap. 15, p. 34, lines 12-14). She uses 'reuelacyon' synonymously with 'felyngys' which, in a religious context in the medieval period, is defined as 'spiritual or mystical awareness or insight' and 'intuitive knowledge or foreknowledge; divine prescience'.⁵⁸ Margery's own account shows that she has a prophetic gift: she is able to foretell future events including natural occurrences and to see the secrets of people's hearts and more. For example, in her interview with Richard of Caister, she tells 'her felyngys whеч sche had be reuelacyons bopen of qwyk & of ded & of hys owyn self' (chap. 17, p. 39, lines 14-16). God sends Margery to a lady who asks her about her husband in purgatory; Margery answers that the sufferings in purgatory can be reduced by a pious act such as almsgiving.⁵⁹

More importantly, after Margery is fully empowered by Christ, who assures her that her status is equivalent to that of maidenhood, she recounts more of the prophetic revelations she has received from God: 'Many | mo swеч reuelacyons þis creatur had in felyng . . . Sche had sumtyme so gret trubbyl wyth swеч felyngys . . . And þan aftyr hir turbele & hir gret fere it xuld ben schewyd vn-to hir sowle how þe felyngys xuld ben vndyrstondyn' (chap. 23, pp. 54-55, lines 27-28 and 38/1-5). 'A rygth notabyl matere of þe creaturys felyng' (chap. 25,

p. 58, lines 25-26) also occurs in this period. She prophesies that a chapel will not be granted baptisms and purifications: 'sche had be reuelacyon þat þei xuld not haue it . . . þe inspiracyon of owyr Lord was be experiens preuyd for very sothfast & sekyr in þe forseyd creatur' (chap. 25, p. 60, lines 6-7 and 15-17).

The various terms Margery chooses to relate her spiritual experience give a glimpse into the complexity of the inner processes that enrich the account of her meditative experience.⁶⁰ More importantly, in the context of later medieval use of the terms 'contemplation' and 'meditation', Margery's use of language reveals something of the dynamics of spiritual illumination open to the devout laity. By being alert to the nuances of meaning in the terms Margery uses, we learn the nature of her devotion and, by implication, that available to the laity in the later medieval period. Furthermore, for Margery these terms are the means by which she can effectively translate her personal experience and inner struggle into a creative work and show how God works through her, over time, in the details of her life. Margery's use of the terms shows that although only privileged contemplatives are granted contemplative visions, the laity can participate in a meditational experience by which they grow closer to God and foster their understanding of the love of God.⁶¹

NOTES

¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, vol. 1, EETS o.s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940; repr. 1961), hereafter the *Book* in the text and BMK in endnotes. All citations to Margery Kempe are from this edition and will be followed by chapter, page and line number.

² David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), pp. 148-49.

³ See Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Gail M. Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. chapters 2 and 3; Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴ See BMK, chap. 58, p. 143. Barry Windeatt speculates that 'Kempe's reference to Hilton's work also embraces his *Epistle on the Mixed Life*, for this exposition . . . has a relevance for Kempe's own vocation, although there are no evident verbal reminiscences in the *Book* of Hilton's writings'. See *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Barry Windeatt (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 'Introduction', p. 10.

⁵ Hilary M. Carey, 'Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England', *Journal of Religious History*, 14 (1986-87), 361-81 (p. 372).

⁶ Sometimes reading would actually mean being read to. See Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 76-108.

⁷ *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*, ed. by Michael G. Sargent, *Garland Medieval Texts*, 18 (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 124, lines 31-44.

⁸ *The Scale of Perfection*, Book I, addressed to a recluse, excludes the term 'mixed' and discusses only the active and the contemplative lives, while the *Mixed Life*, addressed to a feudal lord, introduces the mixed life.

⁹ The practice was further approved by the whole church through Archbishop Arundel's licence. See Carey, p. 373. The popularity of these contemplative texts is attested by those fourteenth- and fifteenth-century wills which include them in a list of bequests. See Margaret Deanesly, 'Vernacular Books in England in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', *Modern Language Review*, 15 (1920), 349-58.

¹⁰ Denise L. Despres, 'The Meditative Art of Scriptural Interpolation in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Downside Review*, 106 (1988), 253-63 (p. 262). See also Despres, *Ghostly Sights: Visual Meditation in Late-Medieval Literature* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1989).

¹¹ See Gunnell Cleve, 'Margery Kempe's "Dalyawns" with the Lord', in *Neophilologica Fennica: Société Néophilologique 100 ans*, ed. by Kahlas Tarkka Leena (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1987), pp. 11-21.

¹² Julian continued to be given inward teaching about the meaning of her visions for twenty years. She incorporates in the Long Text her growth in understanding over those twenty years. See Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. by Marion Glasscoe, 3rd rev. edn, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), chap. 51, p. 74 and chap. 86, p. 135.

¹³ See BMK, chap. 28, p. 70, lines 9-17.

¹⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 74.

¹⁵ See BMK, chapter 57 for the meditation that takes place in the context of Holy Week.

¹⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XII in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 223: 'There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue, whence, depressed / By false opinion and contentious thought, / Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight, / In trivial occupations, and the round / Of ordinary intercourse, our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired; / A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced, / That penetrates, enables us to mount, / When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen'.

¹⁷ See, for example, 'Last Judgement, and angels with Instruments of the Passion', London, Estate of Major J.R. Abbey, J.A. 7398, fol. 57, reproduced in Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts: 1390-1490*, Part I & II, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), Part I, Ill. 225; Part II, pp. 176-78, cat. no. 56. It depicts the Virgin and St John the Baptist kneeling below Christ.

¹⁸ See my doctoral thesis, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A Study of the Meditations in the Context of Late Medieval Devotional Literature, Liturgy and Iconography* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2001).

¹⁹ Margery gives a similar list in her interview with Julian: 'sche dede & schewyd hir þe grace þat God put in hir sowle of compunccyon, contricyon, swetnesse & deuocyon, compassyon wyth holy meditacyon & hy contemplacyon, & ful many holy spechys & dalyawns þat owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wondirful reuelacyons' (chap. 18, p. 42, lines 9-14).

²⁰ *Middle English Dictionary* (hereafter *MED*), ed. by Hans Kurath, Sherman Kuhn, and Robert Lewis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954-), Part M.2, p. 255.

²¹ *MED*, Part C.5, p. 555.

²² *The eygte blessynges of Jhesu Crist, Reliquiae antiquae: Scraps from Ancient Manuscripts, Illustrating Chiefly Early English Literature and the English Language*, ed. by

Thomas Wright and James O. Halliwell, 2 vols (London: William Pickering, 1841-1843; repr. New York: AMS, 1966), I (1841), 39.

²³ John Gower, 'Confessio Amantis', *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. by G.C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81/82, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1900; repr. 1969), II, Book 8, 435, lines 1833-39.

²⁴ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (hereafter NCE), 18 vols (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 'meditation', IX, 620.

²⁵ NCE, 'contemplation', IV, 258.

²⁶ See Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-27.

²⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermo 20.6, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. by Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, 4 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971-1980), I (1971), 152. For the Latin text, see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum, Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. by J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-), 1-2 (1957-1958).

²⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermo 41.4, *On the Song of Songs*, II (1976), 207.

²⁹ Cf. Thomas H. Bestul, 'Antecedents: The Anselmian and Cistercian Contributions', in *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, ed. by William F. Pollard and Robert Boenig (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 1-20 (pp. 12-13).

³⁰ Richard Rolle, *The Form of Living in English Writings of Richard Rolle: Hermit of Hampole*, ed. by Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), chap. 12, p. 117, line 16.

³¹ Rolle, *Form of Living*, chap. 12, p. 118, lines 35-42.

³² Rolle, *Form of Living*, chap. 12, p. 118, lines 46-47.

³³ Rolle, *Form of Living*, chap. 12, p. 119, line 69.

³⁴ Richard Rolle, *The Mending of Life, or The Rule of Living in The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life or The Rule of Living*, trans. by Richard Misyn and ed. by Ralph Harvey, EETS o.s. 106 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896; repr. Millwood, NY: Kraus, 1973), chap. 12, p. 127, lines 2-7.

³⁵ *The Mending of Life*, lines 8-10 and 14-15.

³⁶ See Baker, pp. 29-30.

³⁷ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, trans. by John P. H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), Book I, chap. 5, p. 80, hereafter *Scale*.

³⁸ Baker, p. 31.

³⁹ *Scale* I, chap. 6, p. 81.

⁴⁰ *Scale* I, chap. 7, p. 81. Margery reviews her meditative experience in chap. 87 and recounts that she had 'contemplacyon' in great quietness of soul through long exercise.

⁴¹ 'Ravishen' means 'to transport (somebody into an ecstasy, a vision, contemplation, etc.)'. See *MED*, Part R.1, p. 179.

⁴² Windeatt argues that this is the culmination of all the preceding absorption in hearing and practising meditation upon the Passion. See *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, p. 163, n. 2212.

⁴³ According to *MED*, 'haven in meditacioun' means 'to ponder something, contemplate something; also, pray for (the soul of somebody)'. See Part M.2, p. 255.

⁴⁴ Instead of using the term 'vision', she sometimes reports that she sees Christ in her ghostly sight.

⁴⁵ *MED*, Part V, p. 647.

⁴⁶ Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 1999), p. 16.

⁴⁷ See BMK, chap. 3, p. 11.

⁴⁸ See also BMK, chap. 85, pp. 206-08.

⁴⁹ NCE, 'visions', XIV, 717.

⁵⁰ *MED*, Part D.1, p. 827.

⁵¹ See Cleve, "'Dalyawns" with the Lord', pp. 12-17.

⁵² See BMK, chap. 30, p. 74; chap. 35, p. 86, etc.

⁵³ See Cleve, p. 20.

⁵⁴ *MED*, Part D.1, p. 827.

⁵⁵ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 117. *Bl Henry Suso: Wisdom's Watch upon the Hours*, trans. by Edmund Colledge, *The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation*, IV (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 275.

⁵⁶ Cleve, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *MED*, Part R.4, p. 617.

⁵⁸ *MED*, Part F.1, p. 474.

⁵⁹ See BMK, chap. 19, pp. 46-47.

⁶⁰ As the spiritual nucleus of her existence, her meditational experience affects the way she handles the events of her life in her creative act of recollecting them. See my doctoral thesis.

⁶¹ I am grateful to Marion Glasscoe for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.