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MYSTIC SELF:
MARGERY KEMPE AND THE MIRROR OF NARRATIVE

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Towards the end of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as Margery cries and sobs for the indignities Christ suffered on the cross, he reveals the reason for her devotions. Lamenting the stubbornness of her fellow humans in their refusal to repent their sins, he says:

Neuyr-the-less, Dowtyr, I haue ordeynd þe to be a merowr amongys hem [the people] for to han gret sorwe þat þei xulde takyn exampil by þe for to haue sum litil sorwe in her hertys for her synnys þat þei myth þerthorw be sauyd, but þei louyn not to heryn of sorwe ne of contricyon. (186)¹

Christ transforms Margery into a mirror that reflects not the faces or lives of those who look into it, but which represents the divine. Her suffering becomes an enactment of the tortures Christ suffered on the cross—she projects a set of behaviors that her fellow Christians should seek to emulate. As mirror, Margery becomes a “neutral prosthesis,”² an object wholly dictated by an invisible, divine referent. And yet she retains her historical body: she is Margery Kempe—the daughter of John Brunham, mayor of Lynn—a woman, subject to the laws and opinions of her fellows. As such, she becomes a misnomer, an oddity: Christ strands her in a no-man’s-land, in what one critic has called a “liminal”³ zone, somewhere between God and man.

Christ’s confession that no one ever likes to hear of sorrow and contrition and that he shall have to “make hem to knowe þe trewth

¹ All references will be to Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. Sanford Meech and Hope Allen (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), and will appear parenthetically by line number in the text.

² Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 208.

³ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994), 40.

whan thei arn dede and owt of þis world" (186) signals that this attempt at communication will fail. While his revelation reassures Margery as to the truthfulness of her experiences, Christ implies that her "truth" will go unrecognized and may even be subject to inquiry, censure, and violence. The problem, as Karma Lochrie observes, is that "mystical discourse [cannot fully] authorize its own utterance."⁴ Margery's status as mirror, as divine projection, rests finally upon a purely personal revelation, upon her direct experience of God, upon the secret, interior voice that she alone hears and to which she alone responds. The demand that Margery levels at her fellows is, as Christ's resignation to its futility implies, one of belief. And this demand accesses the central paradox of mystical experience; namely, that "the secret is characterized as a something that *is* without *appearing*. But, by that very fact, it is dangerously close to the lie or fiction, that is, to what *appears* without *being*. That which purports to conceal could turn out to be no more than a simulacrum."⁵ There exists always the threat that this mirror, this "neutral prosthesis," is not so neutral, that its author is human and not divine. In the end, it is up to the reader to decide whether she or he sees in Margery the reflection of an invisible, divine referent or merely a "simulacrum,"—the reflection not of God but of Margery herself.

This question of belief, of Margery's status as mirror—a woman whose actions clearly indicate some deep significance, but whose meaning is beyond verification—is the origin and organizing principle of Margery's text. It is also, I shall argue, the structuring principle of the text's reception by both her contemporaries and by her modern critics. As Sarah Beckwith writes, "The persistent implicit or explicit focus of [responses to her writings] seems to be this—can we believe her? Is she telling the truth? Is she *really* a saint, visionary, pilgrim, mystic, Lollard, orthodox Catholic, proto-feminist (delete as applicable—she has been claimed for all camps)."⁶ The inevitability of either a "yes" or "no" answer to these questions testifies to the polarization of responses to the text. Critics tend to line up either as be-

⁴ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of The Flesh* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 63.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 98. Italics his.

⁶ Sarah Beckwith, "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Language, Agency, and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 177. Italics hers.

lievers or as those to whom Christ will have to have explain things when they are dead.

In what follows, I want to examine what various critics see reflected in Margery and discuss the uses to which they put this "mirror." I want also to offer a way of negotiating Margery's status as a mirror, which avoids the polarization of Beckwith's question, "can we believe her?" Instead of basing my analysis on a positive or negative response to this question, I want to return to the text and treat the very uncertainty of Margery's status as a mirror as the governing trope of the text.

A Mirror for Critics

The publication of *The Book of Margery Kempe* by the Early English Text Society (1940) and its translation into Modern English by Penguin Books (1985) are only the latest chapters in the text's transmission and glossing by intermediaries. The text has always been treated as something of an oddity, a problem, a scandal. It begs too many questions and provides too few answers. Sanford Meech, for example, feels it necessary to qualify his analysis of the text's language by saying that "one cannot present the facts of the language in the extant manuscript...until one has given the best answer one can to the question 'Whose language is it?'" (vii). Hope Emily Allen, Meech's co-editor, records that she has "found no equivalent production [to *The Book of Margery Kempe*] anywhere" (lvii) and that she is unable to satisfactorily explain the text that they present. All too often, however, such confessions or qualifications become opportunities for censure: the gesture of explanation becomes instead an act of exclusion.

Sarah Beckwith has recorded the reactions of one less than enthusiastic critic, Father Thurston, who reviewed the text for a series of Roman Catholic periodicals in the 1930s. Outraged by Margery's theatricality and self-assertion, Thurston writes that "if she had really been an ancess, living secluded in her cell, [her] peculiarities would not have mattered. But she insisted on going everywhere following as she thought the special call of God."⁷ For Thurston, Margery's "proper" place lay in seclusion, in a complete dissolution of the self, in an attempt to transcend the distractions of everyday

⁷ Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 38. For a more detailed analysis of Thurston's attack on Margery Kempe, see 38-9.

life. He views her self-conscious dramatization of the divine as a perversion of the truly mystical approach to God through self-abnegation and meditation on his essential unrepresentability.

Like Thurston, David Knowles found Margery's experiences to be inferior to those of Julian of Norwich, and expressed the conviction that she "can only improperly and accidentally be classed among the English Mystics."⁸ Wolfgang Riehle's *The Middle English Mystics* goes even further. Characterizing her devotions as "pathologically neurotic traits,"⁹ he concludes that Margery was wholly unable to separate "the sensual from the spiritual" and adds that, in her writings, "the former is indeed almost more important to her than the latter." This strain of approbation culminates in Ute Stargardt's essay analyzing the decline of continental mysticism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which notes Margery's complete "misunderstanding of the concept of mystical participation in biblical events,"¹⁰ and concludes that "nothing testifies to the ultimate decay of continental mysticism more blatantly than *The Book of Margery Kempe*."¹¹ These critics' contempt for Margery's experiences represents another institutional attempt to silence her voice, this time by a modern, academic priesthood.

Clarissa Atkinson's work, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and World of Margery Kempe*, has done much to counter such attacks. By reconstructing Kempe's life within her social situation, Atkinson seeks to rehabilitate Margery as a positive female model, as a courageous, self-willed individual who represents a new realm of female involvement in religious life through the positions offered by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century affective piety. Atkinson's sympathetic account represents an altogether different position to that of Thurston, but it too treats Margery as an object that must be explained, if not explained away. The closing sentence of Atkinson's book highlights a desire to read Margery allegorically: "Ordained to be a mirror, Margery Kempe and her book reflect not only a singular life but an image of possibility." In particular, she reflects the fact that "for certain women, wives and mothers of families, the period

⁸ David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 142.

⁹ Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 11.

¹⁰ Ute Stargardt, "The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Germany and Margery Kempe," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas F. Heffernan (Knoxville: The Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1985), 294.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 301.

provided unprecedented opportunities to achieve autonomy, power and freedom."¹² Here, Margery becomes a historical mirror, an almost unmediated point of access to a lost world of female piety.

Beckwith's inspiring essay, "A Very Material Mysticism," likewise characterizes Margery as a mirror. But for Beckwith this is not a positive reflection. For her, Margery's meditation on the Passion reinscribes her within the oppressive social hierarchies she sought to escape, and her subjection and subjectification reflect the impossibility of her finding an authentic voice and subverting patriarchal structures. Instead, writes Beckwith, the female mystic's "access to the word...is a strategy that never attempts...to break the mould of its subjection." Subversion is impossible because of the "equation of victimization, passivity, subjection with femininity." The "underpinning of that subjection with a heavenly guarantor"¹³ completes the vicious circle. Beckwith answers Lochrie's question, "does female mysticism...surreptitiously reinforce the dominant patriarchal discourse of the medieval Church?"¹⁴ with a reluctant "yes." And thus Margery's experiences become a case study in the ideological construction of female subjectivity in mystical devotion: she becomes a "lesson to be learned," a mirror that reflects the past for us.

Nancy F. Partner's essay, "Reading the Book of Margery Kempe," addresses Margery's status as a "mirror" for both devotion and critical analysis directly. She points out the failure of past readings to register that we do not have unmediated access to Margery, but we must reach her through a reading of her text. She goes on to treat the text as recording something analogous to the "dreamwork" of Freudian analysis, in which a woman finds an ideal father, lover, and spouse in Christ. The text becomes a "working out" of her visionary experiences and, as such, is available to Freudian analysis. While I applaud Partner's desire to refocus our attention on the text, her conclusions constitute a highly ambivalent validation of female experience:

Margery was a literal-minded woman in many ways, which is why she makes such a good cultural mirror. She accepted at face value the possibilities offered by her life, and tried to grasp them. She had

¹² Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 220.

¹³ Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism," 54.

¹⁴ Karma Lochrie, "The Language of Transgression: Body, Flesh and Word in Mystical Discourse," in *Speaking Two Languages*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), 115.

no talent whatsoever for self-promotion; 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.¹⁵

In this meeting of critic and culture it is Margery who is erased, her psyche providing apparently unmediated access to the past. Partner deprives Margery of any autonomy, treating her as a transparent symptom of some larger social phenomenon. The "misunderstanding" of mysticism for which Stargardt and others discredited Margery here becomes the index of her usefulness. Partner embraces the fact that Margery is a mirror—an object dominated by its referent—but replaces divine "truth" with psychological "truth." She takes her "literal-mindedness" as evidence that Margery is a neutral screen, a blank surface that simply reflects and does not filter the past.

At this point it might be useful to take stock, and ask, in all seriousness: "How many Margeries are there?" We have Thurston and Riehle's embarrassing, hysterical female, Atkinson's mirror of female empowerment, and Beckwith and Partner's mirror of varying degrees of subjugation.¹⁶ Given that these positions are present in the text of Margery's life, in the form of popular censure, sponsorship and Christ's explanation—"I haue ordeyned þe to be a merowr" (186)—how should we understand the differences between them? The difference seems to lie in whether a critic chooses to read Margery literally or allegorically. "Literal" readers tend to construct her as a curiosity, an interesting but also perverse character from the past: they see only Margery and are compelled to explain her. To the allegorically-minded, she functions instead as a point of contact between two radically separated spheres or discourses: she becomes a

¹⁵ Nancy F. Partner, "Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Exemplaria* 3, no. 1 (1991): 66.

¹⁶ I say "varying" because Beckwith has since written that "identification with Christ's body may be seen as a subversive and dynamic private appropriation of an imagery that at least in eucharistic piety, was subject to intense and jealous clerical control." Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 91. More specifically, she reads *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a record of doctrinal disruption (the privatization of prescribed devotional practice) and as a symptom of local tensions between "the rich burghess class of Bishop's Lynn and the ecclesiastical community." "Could," she asks, "the appropriation of the daughter one of the most prominent burghesses of Lynn, her flamboyant 'subjugation' to clerical authority, be one way of sending a powerful message to that community of burghesses?" (98).

mirror in which we can alternatively read the divine, or the history of female subjection and subjectification.

In both cases, critics appropriate Margery as a mirror for their own narratives and put her to use either to discredit her or to legitimate a specific cultural and historical narrative. For literal readers, Margery marks the line between mysticism and hysteria, between acceptable devotion and female derangement. For allegorical readers, she becomes a surface that reflects the essential truth of divinity or of historicized female experience. In both cases Margery is used as a point of transition, a place where the critic is able to bridge an aporia, a gap in our knowledge of the divine or of history. Both these modes of reading do violence to Margery, constituting her as a figure that marks a boundary, an almost invisible point of crossings, subject to erasure in the act of crossing. The forgotten site of these boundaries is her book, Margery's textual remains, significantly titled *The Book of Margery Kempe*; which, metonymically, is at once Margery, the mirror, and an oddity that must be explained. Indeed, this text—the record of Margery's experiences—is the painted tain (literally the back of the mirror) which enables Margery-as-mirror to reflect.

I want now to turn to the text and focus on moments when, as Beckwith notes, the text disrupts "the mutuality and congruence of the soul with God, its function as echo, not answering voice,"¹⁷ and we witness the collision between "being" and "appearing," between Margery as reflection of the divine and as simulacrum. This approach entails looking to the text, not as a place where we get to or experience Margery directly, but as the place where "Margery" is constructed. I will first examine the composition of the text itself, its levels of intervening narration, and then discuss the tensions between hagiographical and self-representation present in Margery's description of her experiences and visions.

The Composition of the Text

I want to begin by insisting upon how difficult it was for women to compose written texts in the Middle Ages (Julian of Norwich being a notable English exception). The reasons for this difficulty were potentially manifold, but in Margery's case they were simple—she was illiterate.¹⁸ The text was dictated to scribes, who in every case

¹⁷ Beckwith, "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism," 176.

¹⁸ In her book-length study of Margery Kempe, Karma Lochrie argues that "Kempe demonstrates a knowledge of Latin texts at the same time that she privileges her own voice." Redefining the concept of literacy according to Brian Stock and Michael

were male, and who in one instance was a cleric. The proem to the work emphasizes the complicated process of its composition, and details Margery's initial revelation that a book should be written. It also charts her subsequent battle to find a scribe:

Than had þe creatur no wryter þat wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr ne
 zeve credens to hir felingys vn-to þe tym þat a man dwellyng in
 Dewch-lond which was an Englyschman in hys byrth and sythen
 weddyd in Dewchland and had þer boþe a wyf and a chyld, hauing
 good knowlach of þis creatur and of hir desyr, meved I trost throw
 þe Holy Gost, cam in-to Yngland wyth hys wyfe and hys goodys
 and dwellyd wyth þe forseyd creatur tyl he had wretyn as mech as
 sche wold tellyn hym for þe tym þat þei were to-gydder. And
 sythen he deyde. (4)

Margery's problem is not simply a scarcity of scribes, but a scarcity of scribes who will believe her stories. The curiously detailed biography of the Anglo/German scribe has unstated significance in this regard. Mystical writers, such as St. Bridget of Sweden, Marie d'Oignies, and Mechtchild of Magdeburg were better known on the Continent, and thus Margery must have seemed far less extraordinary to someone accustomed to this tradition. His secular position may also have made him less anxious about matters of orthodoxy and appropriate behavior.

After this man's death, Margery seeks another scribe. The new priest pronounces the text unreadable and insists that "it was neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben. Perfor þe prest leued fully þer schuld nevyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace" (4). The very body of the text, like Margery herself, is scandalous, perverse, errant, and only a miracle will enable its copying and completion. Margery's reputation again casts a shadow, however, with the result that "þe prest durst not for cowardyse speke wyth her but seldom, ne not wold wryten as he had be-hestyd vn-to þe forseyd creatur....He wold not he seyde, put hym

Clanchy's sense of being able to read, but not necessarily write, Lochrie "re-open[s] the case for [Margery's] illiteracy" (Lochrie, *Translations of the Flesh*, 6). The implications of this claim are of crucial importance to Lochrie's arguments that the text is a carefully constructed attempt to "steal" into language. I share Lochrie's admiration for Margery's reappropriation of biblical discourse and Latinate texts, but wonder whether our desire to redefine her as an "author" is not but one more attempt to inscribe her within a familiar set of categories. Is not Margery's literacy, however we reformulate the term, a question of belief, a detail that again forces a reader to decide between Margery as mirror and simulacrum?

in perel þerof" (4). The priest fears that association with Margery, or copying her text may bring accusations of Lollardy, or some similar scandal. He eventually suggests a third man, a friend of the Anglo/German scribe who began the work.

The arrangement now takes a different turn for, whereas before the scribes wrote because they were moved by the "Holy Gost," now Margery must pay a great sum of money for the labor (4-5). The writing of the text becomes a transaction, a compromise between divine revelation and popular reputation. The project fails, however, as the text is once more said to be "so evel sett and so vnreasonably wretyn" (4) that the scribe could not make it out. Again, the very letter of the text, like Margery's devotions, is excessive: it resists all attempts at transcription.

Ashamed of his prior reluctance to copy the text, the priest (second scribe) asks Margery to retrieve her book and promises to complete the task. He finds it somewhat easier now that he has faith in her, but old age intervenes:

Whan þe prest began fyrst to wryten on þis booke, hys eyn myssyd so þat he mygth not se to make hys lettyr ne mygth not se to mend hys penne. Alle oþer thyng he mygth se wel a-now. He sett a peyr of spectacles on hys nose and þan wast wel wers þan it was be-for. He compleyned to þe creatur of hys dysese. Sche seyde hys enmy had envye at hys good dede and wold lett hym yf he mygth and bad hym do as well as God wold 3eve hym grace and not levyn. Whan he cam a-geyn to hys booke, he myth se as wel, hym thowt, as evyr he dede be-for be day-lyth and be candellyghþ boþe. (5)

The scribe's failing eyes are suddenly able to read the text with absolute certainty. Human correction, in the form of spectacles, proves useless but divine grace renders the text readable. Notice also how the transmission of the text oscillates between different agents, human and divine, as a divine economy of revelation replaces the secular economies of money and technology. The act of copying the text becomes an act of faith, a confirmation of Margery's truth; as Staley observes, the scribes "function as witnesses to her holiness and singularity."¹⁹

The transcription of her memories was not without anxiety for Margery: she expresses concern at the text's inability to capture the essence of what she felt. More significantly, the writing of the book necessitated her staying at home working with the priest, and thus

¹⁹ Staley, 33.

reduced the amount of time she was able to spend in prayer. As the physical acts of dictation and writing increasingly interfere with Margery's devotions, she becomes anxious that this project may be an impediment to her real enterprise. God assures her that "þi stody that Du stodiist for to do writyn þe grace þat I haue schewyd to þe plesith me ryght meche" (216), characterizing the work as a devotional or instructional manual that contributes to his greater glory. The work thus becomes an act of penance and purgation, and the labor of composition and her devotions merge: "whil þe forseyd creatur was ocupijd a-bowte þe writyng of þis tretys, sche had many holy teerys and wepingys, and oftyn-tymys þer cam a flawme of fyer a-bowte hir brest ful hoot and delectabyl, and also he þat was hir writer cowde not sumtyme kepyn hym-self fro wepyng" (219). The experience of writing and the ecstasy of divine heat merge, dispelling any illness or discomfort Margery had.

Despite this cure, she cannot rid herself of the fear that her visions were "deceytis and illusyons" (219), confusions of spiritual and physical understanding. Nevertheless, the scribe concludes that her experiences—the "true sense" of the unreadable original—are "trewly drawyn owt of þe copy in-to þis lityl boke" (220). The second scribe has corrected Margery's original "excessive" text. The necessity of this correction has led some critics, notably John C. Hirsch, to argue that "the text seems to have been so badly written that we need to explain how it came to be written in that way at all."²⁰ Just as Margery's devotions attract censure and must be explained, so too does her text. Hirsch speaks of the original as a text that had to be erased, expurgated, and in effect rewritten. He states that "the evidence suggests that the second scribe did more than transcribe the earlier text, rather he rewrote it, from start to finish."²¹ Hirsch questions Margery's control of her text, not in order to complicate our perceptions of her as a historical figure, but to assert male authorship. Even on the textual level male critics have sought to exclude Margery from a discourse that she fought so hard to enter.

The process of composition and transmission thus involved numerous layers of mediation. As we have seen, the first scribe controlled Margery's access to the written word, and would only cooperate when he considered it appropriate. Margery's experiences

²⁰ John C. Hirsch, "Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medium aevum* 44 (1975): 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

were ultimately recorded by a second scribe who, after having heard a sermon attacking her and having sworn not to continue writing her book, read of a "woman clepyd Maria de Oegines and of hir maner of leuyng, of þe wondirful swetnesse þat sche had in þe word of God heryng, of þe wondirful compassyon þat sche had in hys Passyon thynking, and of þe plentyuows teerys þat sche wept" (153). Continuing to read and meditate on such texts (including the works of Richard Rolle and Elizabeth of Hungary), he began to weep uncontrollably, and finally accepted Margery to be a truly religious woman. The text's awareness of an alternative, continental tradition of female devotional practices and writings seems entirely self-conscious, and Margery herself invokes such comparisons. The text seems to invite us to write Margery into this tradition, in order to legitimize her role as a "mirror" for other people. But this imperative conflicts with "literal," everyday events, and marks a site of tension between hagiographical and autobiographical impulses in the text, between her status as a neutral mirror and as a desiring "I."

Hagiography or Autobiography?²²

The Book of Margery Kempe is structured by two competing and complimentary imperatives. The first, as the opening reference to Margery as this "creatur" (3) suggests, is hagiographical, representing Margery's life as a movement towards increasing intimacy with the divine. While the text casts Margery as a "sinful wretch" whom God refashions through mystical experience, it also records the traces of everyday events and her reactions to them. The second imperative is thus autobiographical. The book is both a authority and a record of individual desires and responses. Both hagiography and autobiography, the impersonal representation of Margery as the "creatur" often seems to speak with the voice of an "I." And this "I" threatens to undermine the exemplary qualities of the "creatur" as a "mirror" among men. This "I" exists as the residue of everyday experience and desire; it is the tain that enables the mirror to reflect.

We begin then with the tale of a sinful creature who suffers from an intensely traumatic depression after the birth of a child. Tempted by devils to renounce Christ, Margery slanders both herself and

²² When I use the term "autobiography" I do not mean that Margery's text reflects a complex "personality" or a stable subject. I use the term merely to refer to details in the text which, while they contribute to the hagiographical impulse, enforce an awareness of Margery's social and material position. I view "autobiography" as one impulse among many in this self-divided and hybridized text.

others and threatens to commit suicide. Christ intervenes, and she recovers sufficiently to have the keys to the buttery returned to her.²³ She continues to be dissatisfied, however, and insists that she "was comyn of worthy kenred" and that her husband "nevyr for to a weddyd hir" (9). In an effort to regain her past social status and wealth, she takes up first brewing, then milling; but, in each case, she fails. The brewing fails because the ale repeatedly soured—a common hazard in the world of beer, but one that marked Margery out as an incompetent worker. As Judith Bennett has commented, "for men commercial brewing and public power were closely linked; the wall that separated commercial success and public authority obstructed only women."²⁴ The only circumstance in which a woman came to acquire the same powers as a man was in the event that she outlived him. Brewing did not afford Margery any real autonomy or prestige: "an ale-wife," as Bennett says, "was a wife first and only secondarily an ale-seller."²⁵

Following these worldly failures, Margery hears heavenly music and loses all desire for sexual intercourse with her husband: "sche had leuar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn þe wose, þe mukke in þe chanel, þan consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyngs" (11-12). Margery begins a life of increasing asceticism, and petitions both her husband, John Kempe, and the clergy for the right to live chastely. Eventually Margery "buys her way out" of her marriage by settling John Kempe's debts. She creates what Nona Fienburg has called a "contractual widowhood."²⁶ By this arrangement, Margery "attains genuine independence" and continues her devotions. This independence is not secure, however, and Margery is continually plagued by self-doubt, malicious rumors—including accusations of lack of chastity—abuse, and threats of rape.

The book seeks to reconceive such acts of abuse by her neighbors and the clerical authorities as instances of testing that confirm Margery's exemplary status. In particular, Margery's interviews with

²³ Atkinson refers to this episode as Margery's "post-partum psychosis" (209). Such a diagnosis is more than a little problematic, given that it may contribute to the tendency to identify women, in general, and female mystics, in particular, as hysterics.

²⁴ Judith Bennett, "The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Nona Fienburg, "Thematics of Value in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Modern Philology* 87, no. 2 (1989): 134.

Repyngdon, the reformed Wycliffite, and Archbishop Arundel are deployed in order to confirm the truth of her devotions and highlight the personal difficulty she faced in travelling around the country. Her reputation—and rumor of her clothing—precede her, occasioning accusations of Lollardy almost as soon as she is recognized. While Margery begins to read her slander as analogous to the Jews' torture of Christ (103-4), thus incorporating herself into that exemplary narrative, the catalogue of recorded accusations and minute character sketches of her accusers creates a body of referential detail that dissipates the allegorical power of Margery as a mirror. In other words, those hostile responses enforce the literal, autobiographical elements of her story: they insist upon the fact of her existence and on her substance as the space where God's words appear.

The trials she faces at Leicester, York, and Berkeley are particularly revealing in this respect. Margery is asked to provide a letter of permission to travel from her husband, and when none is forthcoming, she is condemned as an errant wife. The mayor asks her the following question: "I wil wetyn why þow gost in white clothys, for I trowe þow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us and ledyn hem wyth þe" (116), presumably to become Lollards. The mayor perceives her preaching to be a direct attack on patriarchal authority, and contains the apparent threat she poses by insisting that she obtain a letter licensing her behavior from the "Lord of Lyncolne" (116). In the end, the mayor neither sponsors nor condemns Margery. When faced by this anomalous but orthodox woman, he defers to a higher authority and compels her to leave his lands and hence his jurisdiction. As a result, Margery shuttles from place to place, from lord to lord, as the authorities try to include her within existing hierarchies.

At York, the authorities tip their hand and reveal the problem she poses. One priest produces a book and quotes St. Paul to the effect that no woman should preach (124-5). Margery is allowed to continue on her way through the diocese on condition, however, that she not teach the people. The scandal that Margery represents is that of a woman speaking publicly. Her white clothes are a public sign of her devotion and also of her liminal status outside of established gender roles. Indeed the yeoman and friars who intercept her at Hessle read her in exactly this way, advising her to "forsake þis lyfe þat þu hast, and go and spynne and carde as oþer women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo. We wolde not suffir not so meche for no good in erthe" (129). Their advice seeks to

resituate Margery within the various roles prescribed for women. Their reference to "good" (money) highlights their inability to understand the significance of her clothes and the choices she has made. Unlike the yeoman and the friars, Margery no longer lives according to the time scale or value system of her brewing and milling adventures: secular time has been replaced by divine narrative.

It remains the case, however, that this new role supplies her with the marks of distinction that, as the wife of a man of lesser importance than her father, she lacked. Though her desire to dress in white clothes is divinely inspired, their function is not entirely dissimilar to the "showy clothes" and latest fashions that she previously had sought. White clothes identify her status with that of a virgin's, and mark her out for special attention: they enforce her social and spiritual superiority.²⁷ The text registers the multivalence of the clothes—the tension they encode between the desiring "I," and the hagiographical gloss. En route for the Holy Land, her fellow pilgrims parody the significance of the desired white clothes and attack her pretensions. They dress her in a "gown so schort þat it come but lytil be-neythen hir kne. [made of] whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle, for sche xuld ben holdyn a fool" (62).

A similar dynamic influences the style of Margery's devotions and results in her self-inclusion in the narrative that she contemplates. When instructed to focus on the Virgin Mary, Margery "mystically" becomes St. Anne's maid and is absorbed into the biblical text. The third person narration of her book passes seamlessly into the narrative voice of the devotional work, collapsing the distance between meditative reader and text:

And þan went þe creatur forth wyth owyr Lady to Bedlem and purchasyd hir herborwe euery nyght wyth gret reuerens, and owyr Lady was receyued wyth glad cher. Also sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swaythyn in hir Sone whan he wer born, and, whan Ihesu was born, sche ordeyned beddyng for owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssed Sone. And sythen sche beggyd mete for owyr Lady and hir blyssyd chyld. Aftyward sche swathyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassyon, haung mend of þe scharp deth þat he schuld suffyr for þe lofe of synful men. (19)

²⁷ For a consideration of the meaning of Margery's white clothes, see Gunnell Cleve, "The Semantic Dimensions in Margery Kempe's 'Whyght Clothys,'" *Mystics Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1986): 162-70.

As she becomes part of the spiritual narrative that is her subject, Margery's everyday experiences are erased. In the process, she, or the text—it is difficult to establish which—restructures her life according to the logic of the exemplum.²⁸ Margery becomes a "space" where the divine is staged. Her absorption into the biblical narrative transforms her into a representation of that narrative for her fellows. As such, Margery becomes a means of communicating the divine to men, a "mirror" that fulfills what Michel de Certeau has identified to be the central aim of mystical writing: "Mysticism is the anti-Babel. It is the search for a common language after language has been shattered. It is the invention of a 'language of the angels.'"²⁹ Clothed in white, traveling alone as a displaced woman, Margery promises revelation.

Such *exempla*, testings, and slander contribute to Margery's status as a "mirror," restructuring her life as an allegory. She is allowed to speak, to take center stage, but there is always the threat that she will be condemned. As Partner has suggested, though Margery was orthodox in every respect, "her style was Lollard."³⁰ This "style" marks Margery out as a devotional woman, and grants her access to self-expression. Margery's refusal to enter a nunnery, to become an anchorite or a recluse, led to her being repeatedly arrested and condemned on charges of Lollardy, heresy, and lack of chastity. By refusing the domestic duties of a wife as well as the cloistered role of the mystic, and by cultivating the expressive aspects of affective piety, Margery became a highly visible figure. Her desire to wear white clothes further compounded her notoriety; and, while both she and the text inscribe her within a hagiographical schema, she is unable to escape being defined in terms of the social roles of secular femininity. The mirror of mystical devotion still required the tain of a desiring "I." As Margery's response to the Virgin Mary signals, this tension is not limited to the text of her everyday life; it disrupts her visions and short-circuits the prescribed habits of devotional handbooks. Most important in this regard are Margery's responses to Christ's Passion.

²⁸ For a more detailed treatment of Margery's visions as part of a more widespread response to devotional texts, see Gail Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1989), 47-65.

²⁹ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 88.

³⁰ Partner, 33.

Visions of Excess

Margery's meditation on the body of Christ begins with her "gift of tears" and an instruction to weep at the thought of the Passion. She is Christ's "synguler loue" (52), and increasingly comes to equate the slander and threats she receives with the tortures he suffered. Having traveled to the Holy Land, Margery reaches the sites of the Passion itself, and her responses become increasingly intense. At the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and at Calvary, she collapses and writhes on the ground, spreading her arms wide, and begins to "cry" rather than weep (67-8).³¹ As she walks the route to the place of crucifixion, she begins to enact the event, and to participate in Christ's suffering. The devotional handbooks encourage spectatorship, but Margery actively seeks to identify with Christ's body. It may be useful to compare her descriptions of the Passion with those of Nicholas Love's translation of *Meditationes vitae Christi*, and with the visions of Julian of Norwich.³²

Nicholas Love focuses on the intense physicality of the crucifixion and positions the reader as a spectator:

And so hangeþ oure lorde onely by þoo tweyn nailes þorþ hees
handes without any sustenance of þe body, drawyng donwarde
peynfully þorþ the weicht þerof.³³

Julian, likewise, insists upon the intensity of the physical suffering, but meditates upon the meaning of his thirst and his wounds. Margery's descriptions are less physically direct than the handbooks and less meditative than Julian, who is careful to elaborate on the correct way in which to read these scenes. Instead, Margery focuses on the vision's affect:

...it was grawntyd þis creatur to beholdyn so verily hys precyows
tendyr body, alto-rent and toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wown-
dys þan evyr was duffehows of holys, hangyng up-on þe cros wyth
þe corown of thorn up-on hys heuyd, hys blysfyl handys, his ten-
dyr fete nayled to þe hard tre, þe reuerys of blood flowyng owt
plentevowsly of every membre, þe gresly and grevows wownde in
hys precyows syde schedyng owt blood and watyr for hir lofe and
hir saluacyon, þan sche fel down and cryed wyth lowde voys, won-

³¹ This is marked in the Middle English text by the use of the word "cry".

³² For a detailed examination of the importance of Nicholas Love to late medieval devotional practices, see Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 45-77.

³³ John G. Sargent, *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (New York and London: Garland Publications Inc., 1992), 177.

dyrfully turnyng and wrestyng hir body on every syde, spredeynge
hir armys a-brode as 3yf sche xulde a deyd... (70)

Margery's description revolves around a series of binary opposites: fragment/whole, tender/hard, torture/nurture. Her simple repetition of detail increases the pathos, and her reference to the domestic "duffehows" highlights the extent to which this vision is invested with her personal experience. What is especially striking about this vision is its third person narration, which inserts Margery into the narrative of the Passion. Christ suffered on the cross for her, and she in turn participates in his Passion, duplicating his physical posture with her body. Margery becomes metonymically linked with Christ's body: she is an extension of his experience. She becomes the "mirror" in Nicholas Love's title.

The suppressed "I"—the tain of Margery's experiences—again intervenes, however, disrupting the ideal course of Margery's devotions. When God shows her those who will be saved and those who will be damned, Margery has an ambivalent response. She is "ful glad and joyful, for sche desyred in as meche as sche durst alle men to be savyd" (144), but is overcome by "gret peyn" when forced to visualize the damned. Margery refuses this vision and rejects god: the mirror buckles and refuses to reflect. Margery refuses to believe that "it was God that schewyd hir sweech thyngys and put it owt of hir mende as mech as sche myth" (144). By way of punishment, God afflicts her with terrible visions:

And so þe Devyl bar hyr on hande, dalying vn-to hir wyth cursyd
thowtys liche as owr Lord dalyid to hir be-forn-tyme with holy
thowtys. And, as sche befor had many gloryows visyonys and hy
contemplacyon in þe manhod of owr Lord, in owr Lady...evyn so
had sche now horybyl sightys and abominabyll, for anything þat
sche cowde do, of beheldyng of mennys membrys and swech oþer
abominacyons. Sche sey as hir thowt veryly dyvers men of re-
ligyon, prestys, and many oþer, bothyn hethyn and Cristen comyn
be-for hir syght þat sche myth not enchewyn hem ne puttyr hem
owt of hir syght, schewing her bar membrys vn-to her. And ther-
wyth þe Devyl bad hir in hir mende chesyn whom sche wolde han
fyrst of hem alle and sche must be comown to hem alle. (145)

The devil now occupies the role that Christ did previously, afflicting Margery with sights that she desires to see, but which she can neither control nor censor. As punishment for insisting that salvation is

common to all men, Margery is made "comown" to all, be they Christians or heretics.³⁴

Beckwith would like to "take her hallucination as a symptom of her subversion...here she might be seen as lifting the veil, the priestly skirts that hide the phallus which reproduces priestly law as God...[showing] it to be just a penis," but concludes that "it is more a sign of her shame"—the return of the repressed.³⁵ In my view, the fact that this vision occurs in retribution for denying the divine, and clinging, if only implicitly, to an idea of universal salvation, demonstrates its force as a moment of resistance. The mirror begins to resist, to occlude its divine referent, and instead projects its own vision of the truth.

Most important in this regard is that Margery again reveals her desire for "universal salvation" in the prayer at the end of the book. Appended to the text with the note that "thys creatur, of whom is tretim be-forn, vsyd many 3erys to be-gynnyn hir preyerys on þis maner" (248), the prayer accesses the space of the mirror, the occluded space of Margery's devotions, and we hear Margery's voice uninterrupted by God or by gloss. The third person narration falls away as Margery's voice takes up the prayer:

Lord, make my gostly fadirs for to dredyn þe in me...make my wil þi wil and þi wil my wil þat I may no wil han but þi wil only...I crye þe mercy, blisful Lord, for þe Kyng of Inglond and for alle Cristen kyngys and for alle lordys and ladijs þat arn in þis world...I cry þe mercy, Lord, for þe riche men in þis worlde þat han þi goodys in weldyng; 3eve hem grace to spendyn hem to þi plesyng. I crye mercy, Lord, for Iewys and Sarazynys, and alle hethen pepil. Good Lord, have mende þat þer is many a seynt in Heuyn which sum-tyme was hethen in erde. (249-50)

The desiring "I" emerges and it is more eloquent than any previous hagiographical representation. It can only exist within the ritualized moment of prayer, however, where Margery confronts God and asks him to dissolve her selfhood and make her one with him. Such a dissolution would indeed resolve the tension throughout the book between the exemplary devotional woman and the desiring "I"—between "being" and "appearing," between mirror and simulacrum. It also results in the dissolution of Margery and the end of her text.

³⁴ I should like to thank Rebecca Lynn Winer for suggesting this possibility to me.

³⁵ Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism," 53.

The "mirror" which we, as readers, regard is not Margery herself, but the text that she has left us. Her relation to that text is ambiguous. We can neither call it her own, nor can we separate her desires from the experiences it represents. The tensions between autobiography and hagiography within it signal larger conflicts present in Margery's relationships with her contemporaries, her devotions, her induction into mystical traditions, and the book's reception by modern critics. Such tensions are productive, allowing Margery access to a "voice" with which to record her experiences, to a space within the Church, albeit "liminal", from which to speak and write. The real questions that we, as critics, should be asking then are: "How should we listen to this voice? And how should we understand the fragmented experiences it reports?"

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