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The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing

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Book DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL052179188X>

Online ISBN: 9780511999123

Hardback ISBN: 9780521791885

Paperback ISBN: 9780521796385

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Chapter DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL052179188X.016>

Cambridge University Press

Margery Kempe

One of the many ironies surrounding *The Book of Margery Kempe* is its now canonical status in English literary history. Identified in the modern era only in 1934, it remained an eccentricity, and a relatively obscure one, until about twenty years ago. Not that it was entirely neglected: J. P. Morgan is reported to have read it on his deathbed.¹ But now it is a staple of American undergraduate English literature education, included in the major anthologies of English literature and routinely taught in introductory classes. Sparkling new editions for the classroom recently have been produced, not to mention a website and postmodern gay novelistic adaptation.²

But if her *Book* has achieved a place in the literary canon, Margery Kempe herself has not been taken entirely seriously as a visionary, let alone a candidate for canonization by the Church. Being proved divinely inspired was never far from her mind: she paid a visit to Julian of Norwich, her contemporary, precisely to be reassured as to her contact with the divine. And canonization was perhaps not absent from the minds of the men who wrote down her book as she dictated it, shaping her reminiscences to fit into a long line of holy women. But Margery's mystical and prophetic experiences have not been subjected to much serious consideration; the inevitable comparison with Julian of Norwich's austere and theologically ambitious *Revelation* has heretofore worked to the disadvantage of the rambling *Book of Margery Kempe*.

What, then, has made it so popular now? What are its claims to modern secular canonicity? It is the earliest extant autobiographical work in English. That alone stakes its claim to importance. It is full of the minutiae of everyday life in late medieval England, and in particular the life and self-fashioning of a woman – increasingly popular arenas of inquiry after twentieth-century feminism's impact on the curriculum. Moreover, even as it is comprised of elements that are entirely of their time, the *Book* is unique, revealing a woman both deeply situated *in* and profoundly *out* of her time. We demand both such

elements in a canonical literary work, asking that it tell us something specific as well as something general. *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only depicts in brilliant detail the historical moment of a bold late medieval woman, but also tells us about the status of history itself and, further, about our place in it. If Margery is not considered a potential saint, her *Book* nonetheless ‘illuminat[es] a life possibility for the present’,³ and its visionary nature is crucial to its new place in the twenty-first-century literary canon.

It was crucial to its sixteenth-century reputation as well. The *Book* as we have it exists in a unique manuscript that is a copy of the mid-fifteenth-century original. (Compare the over forty extant manuscripts of *Incendium amoris* [The Fire of Love], the phenomenally popular devotional work by Richard Rolle that Margery herself mentions.) This copy was owned in the late fifteenth century by the Carthusian abbey of Mount Grace in Yorkshire, the same abbey with which the famous mystic Richard Methley was associated. A brief extract of mystical passages was printed around 1501 by Wynkyn de Worde and reprinted by Henry Pepwell twenty years later; Pepwell identifies Margery as an anchoress.

But Margery was not in fact an anchoress, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* is an immense, sprawling chronicle consisting of stubbornly earth-bound as well as visionary materials: eighty-nine chapters in Book 1 (written between 1436 and 1438) plus an additional ten chapters in Book 2 (written starting in 1438) describe her life from early adulthood into old age. Margery was born in East Anglia around 1373, if we can trust internal clues to dating, and died sometime after 1438. Her father was a notable figure in Bishop’s Lynn (now known as King’s Lynn), having been five times mayor of the town and then alderman of the Trinity Guild. Married at about the age of twenty to a man of lesser social status – Margery indignantly reminds him of her family’s importance when he tries to correct her – and with child shortly thereafter, she had a difficult pregnancy and labour, and feared for her life. Chapter 1 tells us the details, and the *Book* unfolds from there: she called for her confessor, because she had something on her conscience – an unconfessed sin. Before she had said what she meant regarding that sin, though, her confessor rebuked her sharply, and she said no more; she therefore feared she would not be saved. She went crazy for over eight months, threatening to hurt herself violently until a vision of Christ restored her to her mind and community. Though she was stirred by this grace to be God’s servant, it took more to turn Margery towards a devout life: chapter 2 tells us she continues in her proud and covetous ways, dressing ostentatiously and taking up business as a brewer and then miller. Failing spectacularly in these endeavours, she feels chastised by God, and is eventually converted to a passionately

devout life. She thereupon spends her years travelling, witnessing, ministering to people, and furthering her spirituality. Margery is a controversial figure, loud, demonstrative, and disruptive in her devotion, suspected of heresy by some but supported by others, dismissive of secular authority and quick to chide the most powerful churchmen for their spiritual laxness. Her *Book* records meetings and run-ins with just about everyone who was anyone in fifteenth-century ecclesiastical England, among them Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury; Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln; Henry Bowet, Archbishop of York; and the learned Carmelite doctor of divinity Alan of Lynn.

The *Book* is above all a spiritual autobiography: Margery's awakening into the devout life, the content of her devotion, and her struggles to follow Christ's dictates form the matter of the book. 'Dis lytyl tretys [treatise] schal tretyn [treat] sumdeel in parcel [in part] of hys wonderful werkys', says the Proem, 'how mercyfully, how benyngly, & how charytefully he meued & stered [moved and stirred] a synful caytyf [wretch] vn-to hys love'.⁴ In this way it does not closely resemble what we call autobiography today. Margery specifically mentions but one of her fourteen children and tells little, for example, about the quotidian ardours of her considerable, long-range travels (pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and sites in Germany). As Sarah Salih remarks, 'Margery and her amanuenses assume that she is of interest only insofar as she is not a housewife.'⁵ Furthermore, the principle of narrative ordering is obscure: a chronology can be derived from the text, and at least one medieval reader, commenting in ink in the manuscript margins, cared about an orderly temporal arrangement of events. But ordinary chronology, this date following that date and that one, is not the principle here. The *Book* is composed of remembered events; the movement of Margery's mind provides the narrative motion. Thus, even as its primary concerns are devotional, the book is filled with incidental everyday detail that now supplies much of its richness and fascination: what the weather was like on the day she discusses a vow of chastity – really, argues about sex – with her husband, for example; what they were carrying, what they would eat.

Very frequently, individual anecdotes – such as the argument about sex, in chapter 11 – vividly condense Margery's larger concerns in her *Book*. Given the loose overall structure it is not a violation of narrative integrity to single out one chapter and see what its preoccupations are; in fact, such looseness encourages us to do just this. In this essay, then, I shall use chapter 60 as a jumping-off point, to see what it tells us about Margery's *Book* and her world. Finally I shall turn to explicitly methodological questions of how to place this book – and ourselves – in history.

Chapter 60: a visit, with weeping and roaring, to Norwich

Chapter 60 begins with a mention of the ‘good preste’ who was her ‘lystere’ – the good priest who read aloud to Margery. He had fallen sick and people despaired of his life. Margery is stirred in her soul to take care of him; as she prays for him, while hearing Mass one day, the Lord tells her that he will indeed recover and thrive. In an action that points to the complex temporalities of her life, Margery thereupon decides to visit the grave of a good vicar, recently deceased, to thank him for the (future) recovery of the priest. This vicar was Richard Caister of St Stephen’s, Norwich, Margery’s frequent confessor and supporter. Taking leave of her confessor at Bishop’s Lynn, she proceeds to Norwich, a town 40 miles (64 km) to the southeast.

When Margery arrives in the churchyard of St Stephen’s, she begins the unsettling vocal and bodily devotion that has become her trademark. Her performance continues as she enters the church and approaches the high altar: she is overwhelmed by the spiritual comfort of the Lord, who worked such great grace for his servant, the vicar. But the violence of her weeping and wailing, beyond her own ability to contain, irks the people around her, suspecting her of inappropriate attachment and a prideful sense of her own singularity:

Whan sche cam in þe chirch-zerd [churchyard] of Seynt Stefyn, sche cryed, sche roryd, sche wept, sche fel down to þe grownd, so feruently þe fyer of lofe brent in hir hert. Sithyn [Afterwards] sche ros vp a-zen [again] & went forth wepyng in-to þe chirche to þe hy awter, & þer sche fel down with boistows [boisterous] sobbyngys, wepyngys, & lowde cryes be-syden þe grave of þe good Vicary . . . And þerfor þe pepil had gret merueyl [marvel] of hir, supposyng þat sche had wept for sum fleschly er erdly [fleshly or earthly] affeccyon, & seyde vn-to hir, ‘What eylith [ails] þe woman? Why faryst þus with þi-self? We knew hym as wel as þu.’

But several priests are already acquainted with her extreme devotional style and are respectful and hospitable to her, as is a lady from the area. Margery proceeds with this woman to the latter’s church, where she sees an image of the blessed Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ – a *pietà*. As she is by other visual experiences of the holy, Margery is overcome by this sight, which puts her in mind of Christ’s Passion and Mary’s compassion.⁶ The woman’s priest, however, holds a more distanced perspective:

And thorw þe beholdyng of þat pete [*pietà*] hir mende was al holy occupyed in þe Passyon of ovr Lord Ihesu Crist & in þe compassyon of ovr Lady, Seynt Mary, be wech sche was compellyd to cryn ful lowde & wepyn ful sor, as þei [as though] sche xulde a [should have] deyde. Þan cam to hir þe ladys preste seying, ‘Damsel, Ihesu is ded long sithyn [ago].’

Margery is provoked by this dismissal, rebuking him for his detachment.

‘Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyed þis same day, & so me thynkyth it awt [ought] to be to ȝow & to alle Cristen pepil. We awt euyr [ever] to han mende of hys kendnes [kindness] & euyr thynkyn of þe dolful deth þat he deyed for vs.’

The woman agrees, finding in Margery an ‘exampyl’ of God’s grace – whether she means that Margery’s behaviour conforms to her expectations, or that it is a spectacular exception is not clear – and becoming Margery’s ‘auoket’ (advocate). When Margery returns home to Lynn, her good priest has indeed recovered, as God had told her he would.

This well-structured episode, ordered around her prophetic foresight and its fulfilment, cues us to major preoccupations of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and gives a good indication of her controversial manner of living.⁷ First, the chapter tells us about Margery’s relationship to reading and the written word. The ailing priest had been her reader for about seven years. It seems that Margery herself could neither read nor write; *The Book of Margery Kempe* was dictated by Margery and written down by three different men. But if Margery was illiterate in our modern terms, she was nonetheless deeply engaged with the written word – even, perhaps, fashioning her life as a text. Second, as we see Margery bustling about to care for her reader, shuttling to and from Norwich, and hear her sharp retort to the priest, the event provides a vivid picture of Margery’s mobility, reputation, and interactions with others, and details her aggravating form of devotion. And finally, it suggests that she exists in some sense out of her world’s time, in a spiritual time frame (the everlasting *now* of the divine) that is radically separate from the secular chronology governing others around her.

Reading with Margery: books and the *Book*

Margery shows herself deeply committed to this unnamed and ailing priest/reader. Theirs was an important spiritual bond. We get a hint of the intensity of their reading sessions in chapter 58: at their first meeting, the priest invited Margery to his chamber (where he lived with his mother), and read to her about Christ. When Margery heard that Christ wept, she wept too, and loudly. Neither the surprised priest nor his mother knew why, and they marvelled at all the tears and cries. But they were convinced that she was a good woman, and the priest thereafter read to her the scriptures and glosses upon them, in addition to works of devotion in English and in Latin.

Litteratus by the late Middle Ages meant having at least a minimal competence in Latin. Like other lay women, Margery was generally excluded from

Latin ‘written culture of commerce and public transactions’, as Karma Lochrie has observed, though lay women were increasingly able to read vernacular texts.⁸ There are pervasive indications throughout the *Book* that Margery could neither read nor write in either Latin or the vernacular. When she is imprisoned in Leicester under suspicion of sexual misconduct, heresy, and deception, for example, she states that she does not understand when the Steward of Leicester speaks to her in Latin (pp. 112–13). He may be merely trying to intimidate her, of course, since the text mentions that there were many people around waiting to hear how she would respond; and she may be cannily trying to call his bluff. Nonetheless, she still may not know Latin. And in a touching vision narrated late in Book 1 that suggests she cannot read in the vernacular, Margery is granted sight of an angel looking like a child clothed in white, ‘beryng an howge boke be-forn hym [bearing a huge book before him]’. It is the Book of Life, she is told. She recognizes the Trinity, all rendered in gold. ‘Pan seyð sche to þe childe, “Wher is my name?” Þe childe answeryd & seyð, “Her is þi name at þe Trinyte foot wretyn [written]”’ (pp. 206–7). This vision neatly expresses Margery’s spiritual gifts and her earthly limitations: she is vouchsafed a vision, and moreover is placed in the heavenly scheme of things at the very foot of the Trinity; yet she needs help finding her own name. Perhaps she just hadn’t located it yet; she certainly does recognize the power of writing, as Julia Boffey notes.⁹ But it may be that she cannot read her own name.

Margery’s struggles to get her *Book* written down likewise demonstrate her spiritual gifts and her material constraints. The Proem provides a detailed account of first one, then a second, then a third amanuensis. She initially shared her secrets – her revelations, ‘hyr meuynggys & hyr steriingys [her movings and her stirrings]’ (p. 3) – with clerks and anchorites, trying to discern their origins and fearing they might be sent by spiritual enemies. These authorities confirmed divine inspiration and urged Margery to have them written down. Some even offered to write them down themselves, but Margery felt commanded in her soul not to write so soon. Indeed, as Alexandra Barratt has demonstrated, such writing would have been virtually unexampled in England at this time.¹⁰ It would be twenty years and more from her first revelations before the Lord commanded her to make her visions and devotion known to all the world through writing.

And then arose the problem of finding a writer who would give credence to her experiences. After her first scribe (perhaps her son) died, a beloved priest promised to rewrite the book, but problems intervened: he could not read it, finding the language and the letters indecipherable (the first scribe lived in German-speaking lands). Moreover, the priest capitulated to the evil talk swirling about Margery, refusing to imperil himself by association with

her. Finally, after yet another scribe had tried his hand at the task, the priest agreed to take another look, newly willing to risk his reputation. So at last *The Book of Margery Kempe* could be recopied, and in fact ten new chapters produced. The resultant *Book* contains not only Margery's narrative but the imbedded story of the priest's convictions about her as well.

Producing the *Book* was thus a long and arduous process, political as well as spiritual. Margery seems not merely dependent upon but really at the mercy of others – particularly men – to authorize her and produce her book. Margery's controversial status exacerbated the difficulties. But her need for a scribe, and her aural contact with texts, were not unusual; reading in a manuscript culture was very often an oral (and aural) experience. Even solitary reading was conducted aloud, while reading (hearing) spiritual treatises during meals was common. Margery claims that she has learned scripture through sermons and discussions with clerks (p. 29). Furthermore, composition was often performed orally as well, by dictation; the particular skill of writing down letters and words was more separate from the concept of authorship in Margery's day than in our own. So to say that Margery could neither read nor write does not indicate that she had no access to textual culture. And as Boffey points out, no one seemed to expect that Margery herself would learn to read or write, though these were the obvious solutions to her problems of 'defawte of redyng [inability to read]' (p. 143) and lack of a willing and able scribe to record her experiences for posterity.¹¹

Reading and writing were in fact highly fraught activities in Margery's England. The hereticated Lollard sect, opposing clerical privilege in all its forms, advocated direct communication between all Christians and God. One means of such communication was the Bible translated into the vernacular and thus available beyond the clergy. The association of scriptural translations in the vernacular with heresy became so strong that in 1409 it was declared heretical not just to make, but even to own, without diocesan permission, a single biblical verse translated into English. By the late 1430s, as Lynn Staley points out, it was 'dangerous to produce vernacular devotional prose'.¹² Margery, though doctrinally orthodox, was associated with Lollardy because of her direct communication with the divine, her circumventing and correcting clerical authorities, her speaking in public (Lollards considered all Christians to be themselves priests, so that everyone – even women – should be able to preach; Margery was often perceived to be preaching as she travelled around England bearing witness to her Lord), and her generally unofficial and disruptive devotional style. Any priest who undertook to support her, not to mention write down her *Book*, was taking a considerable risk: the reluctance of the second scribe to write down Margery's tale stems not only from his inability to read the manuscript but also his

fears – the text calls it cowardice – in the face of what people were saying against her. And since the *Book*, as Kathleen Ashley has shown, was produced outside clerical sanction and through divine grace, it became a ‘prototype of the kinds of writing that would eventually undermine clerical textual authority’ – thus its relation to Lollardy while being explicitly *not* a Lollard text.¹³

Written texts, Latin and English, are in fact crucial in Margery’s *Book*. They not only teach Margery, but they also provide occasions for Margery to exert influence, even perhaps to teach, in turn. In the case of her reader, the priest who became ill in chapter 60, the *Book* stresses not only that Margery’s hunger for the word was sated when he read to her, but also that the priest’s own knowledge and merit increased. ‘Aftywardys he wex benefysyd & had gret cur of sowle [was beneficed and had a large cure of souls], & þan lykyd [it pleased] hym ful wel þat he had redde so meche [much] be-forn’ (p. 144). Books authorize Margery in her own eyes and in the eyes of others. In one early passage, Margery visits Richard Caister: though he doubts that any woman can occupy the space of an hour in talking about God, she tells him at length how the Godhead dallies with her, instructing her to love, worship, and revere him, ‘so excellently þat sche herd neuyr boke, neþyr Hyltons boke, ne [B]ridis boke, ne Stimulus Amoris, ne Incendium Amoris, ne non oper þat euyr sche herd redyn þat spak so hyly of lofe of God’ (p. 39). In a later passage, her priest/amanuensis had begun to believe slanderous talk about Margery’s hypocrisy after a friar preaches against her and many people turn away from her. But this priest/scribe regains his belief in her after he reads of the tears and cries of other holy people, including Mary of Oignies, Richard Rolle, the author of ‘Pe Prikke of Lofe,’ and Elizabeth of Hungary (pp. 153–4).

At least two of these latter accounts are ones the unnamed priest read to Margery, and we see that they also feature among the works Margery uses to authorize her revelations when she speaks to Caister. As Margery learns of the high contemplation and devotion of these holy men and women through reading, she compares herself to them and understands herself in relation to them; she may live her life as versions of them. Her priest/amanuensis may well use them not only to justify Margery’s own experiences in his mind but also actually to fashion her written story on the model of these visionaries.

Margery’s resemblance to Saints Mary of Oignies and Bridget of Sweden is particularly compelling: though both were of higher class status than Margery, they were married and persuaded their husbands to live in chastity.¹⁴ Marie, the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century beguine from Liège, was given to unrestrainable tears, devotion to the Passion, bodily mortification, and miraculous visions. St Bridget, who died around the time

of Margery's birth and was canonized in Margery's lifetime, emerges in the *Book* as the most explicit saintly model for Margery. She was a married mystic who lived chastely with her husband for two years, then bore him eight children. When he died on a pilgrimage to Santiago with her, Bridget took up the devout life full-time. She experienced visions, which she dictated, like Margery, to a cleric; she made pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to Rome, where she lived the last two decades of her life. It is in Rome, on her own pilgrimage, that Margery later encounters traces of Bridget, meeting her maidservant and others who knew her and visiting the chamber where she died.

Margery was particularly devoted to Bridget, whose inspiration was doubted by the powerful and authoritative Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, and whose canonization was confirmed in Rome when Margery was there. Typically, though, Margery's devotion to the saint is somewhat self-serving. One day Margery sees the Sacrament shaking and flickering like a dove; she is astonished by this miracle and wants to see more. Christ then says to her, 'My dowtyr, Bryde, say me neuyr in þis wyse [My daughter, Bridget, never saw me like this].' When he goes on to confirm that this is a token of an earthquake (Bridget was renowned for her prophecies), he adds: 'For I telle þe forsoþe rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to þe, dowtyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe euery word þat is wretyn in Brides boke' – and here comes the Margery touch: '& be þe it xal be knowyn [by you it shall be known] for very trewth' (p. 47). Through Margery, 'Brides boke' will be proven.

The interplay of written texts and lived lives here is profound. It renders impossible attempts by scholars to separate out the 'learned' elements of the *Book* from the experiential and the everyday. And it forces us to rethink the relationship between text and life. As Mary Carruthers points out, 'A modern woman would be very uncomfortable to think that she was facing the world with a "self" constructed out of bits and pieces of great authors of the past, yet I think in large part that is exactly what a medieval self or "character" was.'¹⁵

Margery clearly understands some Latin words and phrases, and it may be that she knows how to read Latin after all: Lochrie, tracing the Latinity of the *Book*, suggests that we entertain the possibility.¹⁶ Julian of Norwich's statement about her own unlearned status has not stopped scholars from attributing Latinity to her. But even if this suggestion seems too much for Margery, the point is clear: learning is not just the property of Margery's literate scribes, and the very concepts of literacy and text need to be extended. There is a fascinating blend of voices – written and spoken – in the *Book*. Margery is referred to throughout the text in the third person singular; she

is ‘þis creature’; but the text includes at least two remarks in the first person, as well as the possessive adjective ‘owyr’ throughout, and at times it is impossible to untangle the referent. Is it the scribe giving his own brief point of view, or rehearsing Margery’s account of someone else’s words, or recording Margery’s own self-reference? What difference might there be, finally?

‘Hir maner of werkynge’

Complicated as the voice of the *Book* is, the persona of Margery Kempe nonetheless emerges powerfully. It comes through loud and clear in chapter 60, with its picture of a parish community that bickers and takes sides, a community whose members have long histories with one another. Margery is indeed a polarizing figure.

The immoderate nature of Margery’s devotional display at the vicar’s grave causes irritated onlookers to demand, ‘What eylith þe woman? Why faryst þus with þi-self? We knew hym as wel as þu’ (p. 147). The text explains that her tears respond to divine grace worked in the vicar’s life; in fact Margery is ‘rauyschyd wyth gostly [spiritual] comfort in þe goodnes of owr Lord’, the word ‘ravished’ suggesting her transportation into a spiritual dimension (as was St Paul in 2 Corinthians). But her neighbours are mired in the flesh, and they accuse her of exaggerating her devotion to the holy man. In the narrative, designed very much from Margery’s point of view, their words are snide backbiting, and Margery does not deign to reply; indeed, her spiritual stock rises because of it. As Julian of Norwich told her, ‘þe mor despyte, schame, & repref [reproof] þat 3e haue in þe world þe mor is 3owr meryte’ (p. 43). When people call her a hypocrite for wearing white (the colour of a virgin), though she has borne children, for example; or when there are rumours about her chastity even after she and her husband have taken a vow, her spiritual worth is all the higher: ‘þe bettyr xal [shall] I lofe þe,’ says Christ (p. 48).

Margery’s paroxysm at the sight of the pietà occasions another dismissive remark, this time by the friendly lady’s priest. In Margery’s memorial rendition here, the cleric comes off as indifferent to the reality of Christ, and Margery is set up for a scorching reproof of him and a ringing declaration of the faith. But viewed from a larger perspective, their interchange may in fact play out theological issues associated with Lollardy and orthodoxy – or even, from a longer historical view, emergent evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism. The priest’s words are not necessarily secular when he claims, ‘Lady, Jesus died a long time ago.’ His liturgical office is oriented around that death,¹⁷ and indeed only the Church has been able to conserve access to that body over the centuries. For Margery, however, as for evangelical Protestants,

the point is immediate access to Christ *now*. The conflict here may have theological roots or implications, but for Margery the moment tests her whole reason for living – and she wins. She not only picks up an advocate – someone who speaks for her – but her prophecy proves soon afterwards to be true.

The essence of Margery's piety, in fact, is her living in the presence of the divine. In her first vision – the one that dramatically brings her back to her senses and restores her to community after she has gone out of her mind – Christ appears to her 'in lyknesse of a man, most semly [handsome], most bewtyuows [beautiful], & most amyable þat euyr mygth be seen with manys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke' and says, 'Dowtyr, why hast þow forsakyn me, and I forsoke neuyr þe?' (p. 8). Such an experience (so intimately tied to her own story, yet repeated from Nicholas Love's translation of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*) focuses on Christ's humanity and is characteristic of her many 'dalliances' with the divine. On a daily basis she has conversations that are deep, familiar, and spiritual. Margery experiences other divine manifestations – she performs miracles, for example (ch. 67) – but according to late medieval devotional traditions, her visions mark her as saintly, and dalliances (with the Lord, Christ, the whole Godhead, our Lady, Saints Peter, Paul, Katherine, and other saints in heaven) are often part of them.¹⁸ Her predictions (as when she foresees in chapter 60 that her ailing reader will recover) channel what God has revealed to her. Such dalliances kindle in her breast the fire of love, a phrase we see in chapter 60.

This direct experience of the divine brings with it tears – of contrition, devotion, and compassion, as Julian of Norwich categorizes them. These dalliances were so sweet, holy, and devout that Margery 'myt not oftyn-tymes beryn it but fel down & wrestyd [wrestled] wyth hir body & mad wondyrful cher & contenawns [wondrous faces and countenance] wyth boystows sobbyngys & gret plente of terys' (p. 40). Later, on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, she experiences an even more intense form of tears that was to last for years (this is what we see in the church in Norwich in chapter 60): on Mount Calvary she fell down, wrestling with her body, '& cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr [as though her heart should have broken to pieces]' (p. 68). Since she already lives in the presence of Christ, experiencing him in daily conversation, she is overwhelmed when the pilgrimage brings her to the very place where he suffered his agonies: she sees 'veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucified'. She cannot keep herself from 'krying & roryng þow sche xuld a be ded [even though she should have died] þerfor.' Efforts to hold it in only turn her 'blo as any leed [blue as lead]' (p. 69; also p. 140). A test imposed by uncertain priests proves that these cryings are not done for the sake of publicity (p. 200).

In its emphasis on Margery's emotional experience of the divine, the *Book* finds its place in the tradition of late medieval affective devotion, deeply felt forms of piety focused on the humanity of Christ and often practised by women. Her contemplative experiences contrast with the more austere form of contemplation associated with *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In contrast to what has been called 'negative' mysticism – the work of unknowing that puts a 'cloud of forgetting between you and all the creatures that have ever been made' and that suspects emotionalism and rejects extreme or unnatural uses of the body¹⁹ – 'affirmative' mysticism uses the pictorial imagination in contemplation, focuses the affects on the divine, and experiences other sensory phenomena like sweetness, heat in the breast, and melody. The *Incendium amoris* by Richard Rolle, hermit of Hampole, espoused these affective forms of devotion, and its influence on both Margery and her scribe is pervasive: the work itself is mentioned three times, the phrase 'the fire (or ardour) of love' – popular with mystics – appears throughout the *Book*, and Margery experiences olfactory, auditory, and tactile phenomena such as Rolle describes.

Margery's intricate Passion visions owe much to the tradition of *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the enormously popular devotional work that directs the worshipper to envision in her soul the Incarnation and life of Christ. Nicholas Love's translation, authorized by no less than Arundel himself as a way of officially controlling such emotional and personal devotional practices (these meditational exercises were originally addressed to a woman, a Franciscan nun), was available in Margery's day. The *Meditations* develops a style of spiritual exercise that contemplates actions in the Lord's life 'as they occurred or as they might have occurred according to the devout belief of the imagination and the varying interpretation of the mind', a contemplative latitude that resonates with Margery's self-authorizing style.²⁰ Though this emphasis on the visual and affective throughout Margery's book goes much against the negative grain of the contemplative practice of Walter Hilton in his *Scale of Perfection*, Margery mentions 'Hyltons boke' as among those books of high contemplation read to her. (Hilton translated *The Prike of Love*, also mentioned by Margery.) Indeed, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is not without its own negative side, doubt about her corporeal expression of spiritual inspiration being suggested at the very end of Book 1 (p. 220); thus the polarizations around Margery are embedded in the work itself.

'A sort of infection of sensualised mysticism'

Often linked philosophically with Hilton, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* feared that 'a sort of infection of sensualised mysticism was creeping

over English devotion', as Hope Emily Allen put it.²¹ The term 'sensualised' is carefully chosen here, the word applying not only to the senses but to sexual passion as well. For one of the foci of Margery's struggle for spirituality is chaste relations with her husband, while her relation with Christ is expressed in amorous terms: 'dalliance' in Middle English denotes not only spiritual conversation but also sexual union. In this focus Margery is not unique – female mysticism in this period, particularly on the continent, expressed itself often in terms of ecstatic union with the humanity of Christ, perhaps because of the ages-old association of femininity with carnality – but she puts her characteristic spin on it.

Early in the *Book* sex with her husband John has become odious to her. Margery wishes to be chaste, and even before her husband finally agrees to chastity she wears a hair shirt under her garments. Physical relations with John are not so intimate that he even notices. But Margery is increasingly oppressed by her sexual and childbearing duties: 'Lord', she declares, 'I am not worthy to heryn þe spekyn [hear you speak] & þus to comown [have sex] with myn husbond' (p. 48). She grieves that the devout life of dallying with Christ belongs to holy virgins, and that is not she. Contrary to theological tradition, Christ reassures her that he loves wives as well as virgins. Margery at last manages to strike a deal with her husband: if she pays his debts and eats at his table, he will live chastely with her. A measure of their previous physical pleasures is given late in the *Book* when John falls ill in old age and Margery, no longer living with him any more, takes care of him, her penance (she says) after taking venial pleasure in his body earlier.

But if there is no longer human wedded sex, sex, variously understood, is still very much in Margery's life. In an early period of temptation, she yields to a man's demand for sex, only to have him humiliatingly rescind it. Margery constantly fears rape – justifiably – in her travels in England and abroad. But if earthly arrangements are unsatisfying or threatening, in Christ she has found an ideal intimate: she is married mystically to the Godhead (p. 86), but it is the Manhood, Christ himself, who invites Margery into bed with him, reasoning that it is only right that a husband be 'homly' with his wife (p. 90). Margery, he declares, will be the perfect intimate, in turn, 'a very dowtyr to me & a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse' (p. 31). Margery's spiritual life redeems an unsatisfying earthly life, even as the 'ghostly [spiritual] labour' of her body in the throes of writhing, tears, and sobs redeems her multiparous body by re-enacting childbirth on the spiritual level. Margery is so rapt by the manhood of Christ that she weeps and roars if she sees a boy child when she is in Rome, 'as þei [as though] sche had seyn Crist

in hys childhode' (p. 86). Screaming on the streets of Rome and causing people to wonder at her, she looks eagerly at handsome men, lest she see him who was both god and man. Indeed, '[t]he threshold between Margery's physical and her spiritual lives is thin', as Ashley puts it, porous or even nonexistent in these instances.²²

Even the Lord's punitive withdrawal from her is experienced in sexual terms. When Margery (in chapter 59) is deprived of holy thoughts and dalliance for twelve days of vexation, her torment takes a particularly sexual form: among foul thoughts of lechery and prostitution, she thinks various men of religion come before her and bare their genitals. The devil urges her to choose whom she will have first, for she will be common to them all. These horrible sights are delectable to her against her will.

When Margery is deprived of the spiritual element of her devotion, vicious carnality is all that remains. But she has another sort of revelation here as well: she sees through clerical authority as masculine domination, and her vision thus comments on the many ways she *as a woman* is subject to clerical men – from the sharp rebuke of her confessor in chapter 1 at a moment of uniquely female danger (childbirth), to the need for her confessor's permission to travel, to the condescension of Richard Caister. Yet finally it is crucial to the sex/gender dynamics of the *Book* – and a rebuke to simplistic readings of her as a protofeminist – that Margery experiences this clerical demystification as a *horror*.

Margery then and now

The union Margery experiences with Christ, expecting to see him on the streets of Rome, returns us to the priest's comment in chapter 60: to the freshly bereaved Margery he remarks dryly that Jesus died a long time ago. While calendrical time governs the lives of those around her, Margery dwells – at least some of her days – in another time frame altogether, the time of the mystic who inhabits the spirit and participates in the life everlasting of Christ. Aron Gurevich has remarked that all medievals in fact felt themselves 'on two temporal planes at once'.²³ Thus, as do her contemporaries, Margery participates in pilgrimages, retracing the steps of Christ and his family and disciples in the Holy Land, and in Easter pageants, bringing biblical time into the present. Gurevich analyses several different and sometimes contradictory kinds of time perception operating at once in the Middle Ages: agrarian, genealogical, cyclical, biblical, historical. And Ruth Evans in this volume has analysed the weird cultural logic of virginity, its temporality disrupting historical chronology, before and after.²⁴ But Margery

repeatedly experiences herself as set apart from her peers, as she does in chapter 60, joined with the holy but differentiated from her earthly companions. She is an anachronism even in her own (temporally heterogeneous) time.

This condition poses questions for the historian who seeks to place Margery in time. Whose time? The time of the historian, who, while understanding the heterogeneity of medieval chronologies, would nonetheless fit her into a rational historical narrative? Or the time of the mystic, in her everlasting now? I have already suggested that Margery's encounter with the priest adumbrates a historical struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Moreover, we could interpret her early failure at business in terms of a lack of adequate life models among bourgeois women. Margery's life, from this point of view, would be seen in terms of the emergence of women's secular models of living. Or we could place Margery in a tradition of English women authors, extending the line already established from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf. In these latter examples we would enlarge the narrative of history to include previously ignored social formations of gender and sexuality. Margery would thus be understood to signify another era, another place, another society, another system of beliefs, and the task of the historian would be to include previously marginalized stories like hers. Such an enlarged history (which includes these 'minority' histories of sex and gender) works in the service of social justice and democracy.

But can we interpret Margery by engaging her own concept of time? I am drawing here on historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between 'good histories' and what he calls 'subaltern pasts'. Good historical narratives, he writes – those intended to foster democracy and social justice by their inclusiveness – cannot depart from basic disciplinary assumptions and protocols, including the necessity that there be a rational point of view from which the history is told, and that the historian be the subject of inquiry and the archive the object.²⁵ Good history, even good minority history, cannot be written from inside Margery's own beliefs, that is, from inside the belief that Christ is present physically in the here and now, that humans can touch the divine, that the Godhead motivates all events, public and private. Good history cannot take the supernatural as a cause.

But what if, in addition to fitting Margery into a history inclusive of gender and sexuality, we also asked, following Chakrabarty: 'Is [her] way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present? Does [Margery] help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances?'²⁶ Robert Glück, in his 1994 novel *Margery Kempe*, clearly believes that she does, and thus that her *Book* illuminates a 'subaltern past'. His novel takes seriously her claim to have been invited to sleep with Christ:

it is written from within her belief that she makes daily sensory contact with Christ. Glück adapts her story of passionate love of Christ to his story of a devastating love affair with a handsome boyfriend. What kind of understanding subtends this novel, which mixes fact and fiction? Not rational historical knowledge: it insists on the presence of the divine in the everyday; it believes that a human can touch the divine. Margery becomes ‘Bob’’s contemporary. To quote Chakrabarty, substituting our medieval English woman for his Indian peasant:

To stay with the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with [the medieval woman] is, then, to stay with the difference between these two gestures. One is that of historicizing [Margery] in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicize and of seeing [Margery] as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present. Taken together, the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present.²⁷

‘[W]hy bother to remember a past that cannot be made into a present?’ Kierkegaard’s question about biblical interpretation might as well be Margery’s. She lives in a multitemporal, heterogeneous *now*. It might also be *ours*, as we read *The Book of Margery Kempe* and both see her place in a history of medieval women’s lives and also experience her contemporaneity with us, understanding her to offer a life possibility for the present. This experience of contemporaneity, Chakrabarty argues, in fact makes historicism possible: if we did not already in some sense connect with her, we could not understand her.²⁸

The Book of Margery Kempe allows us to see that modern historical consciousness is but a ‘limited good’.²⁹ In another context its first editor wrote, ‘I seem to have always a craving to touch the great human mystery of Time.’³⁰ In joining the literary canon, the *Book* highlights precisely how a canonical work – if not Saint Margery herself – exists both in and out of time.

NOTES

1. New York *Herald-Tribune*, 13 March 1943, pp. 1, 13; the incident is noted in John C. Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1988), p. 133.
2. Mapping Margery Kempe
<<http://sterling.holycross.edu/departments/visarts/projects/kempe/index.html>>; Robert Glück, *Margery Kempe* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1994).
3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts’, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 97–113, at 108.

4. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS os 212 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 1. All subsequent quotations will be indicated in parentheses in the text. All translations into Modern English are mine.
5. See Sarah Salih, 'At Home; Out of the House', ch. 8 in this volume, p. 124.
6. On Margery's relationship to the visual, see David Wallace, 'Mystics and Followers in Siena and East Anglia: a Study in Taxonomy, Class, and Cultural Mediation', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984), pp. 169–91.
7. See Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), p. 28, on the *Book of Margery Kempe's* self-fulfilling narrative ordering of such episodes.
8. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 97–134, esp. 103.
9. Julia Boffey, 'Women Authors and Women's Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 159–82, at 164.
10. Alexandra Barratt, 'Continental Women Mystics and English Readers', in this volume, pp. 240–1.
11. Boffey, 'Women Authors', pp. 163–4.
12. See the *Constitutions* of Thomas Arundel, excerpted in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 187–96, and Staley's introduction, p. xi.
13. Kathleen Ashley, 'Historicizing Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe* as Social Text', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998): 377.
14. For fuller discussion of these figures, see Barratt, 'Continental Women Mystics and English Readers'.
15. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 180. Quoted by Felicity Riddy, '"Women Talking about the Things of God": a Late Medieval Sub-culture', in *Women and Literature*, ed. Meale, pp. 104–27, at 125 n. 72.
16. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe*, pp. 114–27.
17. Thanks to Robert Edwards for this point.
18. Ashley, 'Historicizing Margery', p. 378.
19. See Preface, Introduction and chapter 5, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). The quotation is from p. 128.
20. *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 5.
21. Allen in a letter to E. I. Watkin, excerpted in *Hope Emily Allen*, p. 158.
22. Ashley, 'Historicizing Margery', p. 379.
23. A. J. Gurevich, 'What is Time?' in *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. G. L. Campbell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 93–151, at 139.
24. Ruth Evans, 'Virginities', in this volume, pp. 27–8.
25. Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories', pp. 98, 108.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Chakrabarty quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt in his 1821 address 'On the Task of the Historian': 'Where two beings are separated by a total gap, no bridge

of understanding extends from one to the other; in order to understand one another, they must have in another sense, already understood each other' ('Minority Histories', p. 109).

29. Ibid., p. 112.

30. Hope Emily Allen, 'Relics', in John C. Hirsh, 'Past and Present in Hope Emily Allen's Essay "Relics"', *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 24 (1989): 49–61, at 54.