



Historicizing Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe* as Social Text

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The *Book* and the canon

The Book of Margery Kempe, usually regarded as “the first autobiography in English,”¹ is one of those richly enigmatic texts about which much has been written but whose circumstances of initial production and reception we know mainly from internal textual evidence.² It has been difficult to locate the *Book* with any specificity in a late medieval setting, and we might even say that this text, like its subject Margery, has been in search of an appropriate and appreciative interpretive community.³ Here, after briefly reviewing its reception history, I will propose a way of reframing our reading of Margery’s *Book* so as to emphasize the text’s usefulness in representing a process of ideological formation characteristic of the transition from medieval to early modern culture.

The most significant intertext for Margery’s *Book* has been provided by hagiography, the narrative of a saint’s life. Sidonie Smith argues that the “*Book*’s very legibility (for herself, her amanuensis, and her projected reader) derived from its resonance with biographical and hagiographical representations of female mystics.”⁴ Margery’s autobiography is, we might say, “failed hagiography”—a substitute for the sacred biography no one else would authorize. The narrative makes a case for Margery as a holy woman who could be officially recognized as a saint. It must be seen, therefore, not simply as the protest of an embattled woman against a system that excludes her, but more specifically as a text whose rhetorical strategies are impelled by the political goal of obtaining canonization from the Church. Conveniently located at the intersection of hagiography, autobiography studies, and social history, this unusual account of one woman’s spiritual pilgrimage through fifteenth-century Europe has proved an irre-

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sistible subject for contemporary academic discourse since its rediscovery earlier in this century.

The entire work has been available only since 1934, when the unique manuscript of the *Book* was brought to public attention. During its first forty years (until 1974), the *Book* generated a mere nineteen published responses, including an Early English Text Society edition,⁵ articles in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, and scholarly discussions of the new text as an example of either Middle English language or the English mystical tradition. In 1975, Sheila Delany inaugurated a new age in critical reception of the text with her Marxist-feminist analysis of "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*,"⁶ but it was 1979 before the *MLA Bibliography* shows more than one entry for Margery Kempe in a single year. For 1979, 1980, 1982, and 1983, the two or three essays that appeared were still primarily interested in Margery's mysticism. Since 1984, however, seven or more essays—most from a feminist perspective—have been published each year, and Margery's autobiography has been included in innumerable course syllabi. Margery Kempe has achieved her long-sought goal: she has been canonized!

I have itemized the critical reception of the past sixty-plus years because Margery's *Book* is a social text for our time as well as her own. The scholarly response to this controversial work reveals the interpretive communities we variously inhabit, as well as the role of ideology in constructing those communities. The resistance to identifying Margery Kempe as an authentic mystic, a theme in the scholarship until recently,⁷ has given way during the past fifteen years to serious study that uses methodologies of contemporary women's history and regards the *Book* as a complex literary document capable of giving unusual insight into the situation of spiritually aspirant laywomen in late medieval society.⁸

Building on these recent interpretations, which have emphasized Margery's gender and spirituality, I would like to position the *Book* centrally as a key text for our understanding of other cultural changes also taking place in the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. We could well apply to Margery Kempe's text the description Mark Amsler gives of Chaucer's Wife of Bath: "the narrative performance of the Wife of Bath, the only secular female on the pilgrimage, marks the textual space of the urban and commercial bourgeoisie whose power and autonomy are defined largely by lay literacy, economic mobility, revised inheritance laws, consensual marriage, and religio-political reform in the fourteenth century."⁹ Analyzed within this broad historical framework, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is, to use

Fredric Jameson's definition, "a form of social praxis . . . a symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation."¹⁰ It is a liminal text we can read for its unintentional representation of the profound shift that validated the new set of practices—lay literacy, economic mobility, revised inheritance laws, consensual marriage, and religio-political reform—by producing what I will call a "bourgeois ideology."¹¹

Bourgeois dilemmas

Margery's representation of female mystical experience has a crucial relationship to the urban bourgeoisie of which she was a member, for—despite first impressions to the contrary—Margery's social class is not incidental to her story. She was the daughter of John Brunham, a leading citizen and several times mayor of Lynn, she was the wife of another bourgeois, and she was an active member of commercial society in her youth.¹² Sheila Delany first pointed out that the "cash nexus" permeated Margery's consciousness and language, whether she was buying spiritual benefits or paying off her husband's debts in exchange for her sexual freedom; and Sarah Beckwith notes that in Margery Kempe the worlds of the sacred and the secular "are incomprehensible other than through their mutual relation. Her *habitus* is one that readily converts symbolic capital into economic capital and economic capital back into cultural capital."¹³ David Aers has also emphasized Margery's economic autonomy as a member of this new commercial class:

Despite being a woman, Margery's own access to the market as owner of money enabled her to act as a relatively free agent, and to act in the public sphere of production and exchange. She invested capital, organized public work, employed men, defied her official domestic master, made thoroughly individualistic and independent choices . . . and exercised power which was inextricably bound up with her specific class and its position in a pre-capitalist market economy.¹⁴

Though she critiques her own greed and that of others, and though she appears to reject commerce for contemplation,¹⁵ Margery's saga can be read as offering metaphorical resolution to ideological dilemmas faced by the urban middle classes in the late Middle Ages. The bourgeoisie had won both economic and political power in urban settings by the fifteenth century, but that power had not yet produced a positive class identity to rival its well

established competitors—ecclesiastical and aristocratic ideologies—both of which still had cultural caché in the fifteenth century.¹⁶ An essentially monastic value system that underpinned religious ideologies denigrated involvement in the world and privileged withdrawal from the active life to contemplation.¹⁷ In the secular realm aristocratic values were still hegemonic as objects of cultural desire, although the actual economic and political powers of the aristocracy had dwindled considerably.

As social text, Margery's *Book* has little to say about aristocratic values, but it is intensely revealing of the boundary between religious norms and bourgeois values. Sarah Beckwith's formulation is that the *Book* "can be considered a complex examination" of the "interconnection [between clerical and bourgeois values] across the body of a bourgeois religious woman, and the struggle for cultural hegemony by means of it."¹⁸ I would emphasize the still-conflicting associations of the concepts of "bourgeois" and "religious" in the fifteenth century and read the text as praxis; Margery's autobiography symbolically enacts a solution to the cultural dilemma of how to achieve spiritual validation while remaining an active member of mercantile society. This is not just a female problem, but *the* late medieval ideological dilemma for the bourgeoisie.

The discourse of "woman" and the liminal text

The centrality of gender to social change in the fifteenth century has been suggested by Alice Jardine, who says that the transition between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance was "a period when 'woman' was at the height of discursive circulation."¹⁹ As most critics have noted, Margery's *Book* represents her gender as controversial since Margery refuses to model her conduct either on anchorite behavior (enclosed in a sacred space) or on that of the urban goodwife (enclosed in the domestic space). Instead, Margery roams across eastern England and the Continent in her restless search for fulfillment and justification beyond accepted female roles.²⁰ Following the dictum of cultural anthropology that what is socially marginal is often symbolically central, many critics have assumed that the symbolic potency of gender issues in the *Book of Margery Kempe* correlates with Margery's literal marginality, a position from which Margery offers critiques of both the religious establishment and secular values.²¹

Even granted that her marginality is self-elected, I'd argue that the binary language of *margin* and *center* is not adequate to capture the complexity of late medieval constraints and possibilities within which Margery

Kempe acted. Scholars like Clarissa Atkinson, David Aers, and Anthony Goodman have called attention to the far from monolithic religious and social context of Margery's various activities.²² The religious authorities did not speak with one voice but articulated diverse and competing positions, especially on female spirituality. If Margery encounters resistance from one churchman, she is able to find another who supports her. The picture of her fellow pilgrims that emerges from her narrative is similarly fragmented. Some of the groups or individuals she travels with recognize her spiritual gifts while others reject her. Even her husband is at times supportive and at others resistant to her devotional goals. A reader of this text would be hard pressed to find coherent communities of any kind in fifteenth-century Europe.

While her rhetoric emphasizes her hard won "singularity,"²³ Margery moves through the multiple fissures of her society in a mode more characteristic of liminality than marginality (where marginality connotes only negative exclusion from normative categories).²⁴ In Victor Turner's definition, *liminality* is the mediating state between customary categories in a transformative process. It is characterized by ambiguity or paradox, and—as a "realm of possibility"—allows for new cultural combinations and new paradigms.²⁵ Not only is Margery a liminal character, the text itself is liminal as a narrative that represents a cultural transformation and models the construction of validating ideologies.

The text as authorizing document

Margery's autobiographical narrative, like the phenomenon of female mysticism, prefigures the kind of text that will allow individuals and groups to authorize themselves—a crucial step beyond the mediated structures of late medieval authority. To see this, we need to read mysticism as a socially symbolic language and focus on the necessity of producing a *written* text. Margery may invoke ineffability topoi in claiming inability to describe her mystical experiences,²⁶ but the materiality of the written document is crucial to the personal validation of her life; she must produce a hagiographic text to record her mystical visions and substantiate her claims to sanctity.²⁷

Margery's personal need represents the late medieval cultural mandate of literacy upon which the bourgeoisie based its evolving status. The clerical monopoly on writing was no longer a literal fact, but it remained an ideological trope in the fifteenth century. The writing of the laity—especially of women—remained culturally invisible, although of course the livelihoods of urban artisan and bourgeois often depended upon literacy and

numeracy. The rise to power of these new classes was predicated upon independent control over written texts and documents.

My rereading of mysticism as cultural text suggests that the mystic who could either write her own life experiences or, more often, gain the support of others to write a hagiographic text was appropriating clerical powers of literacy. The Church attempted to control religious experiences like visions through the confessional, individual supervision, and other monitoring techniques, but the ability of literate nonclerics to circulate a written text challenged ecclesiastical authority.²⁸ Though eminent theologians like Jean Gerson warned against the multitude of silly women who ran to their confessors to chatter about their latest vision or revelation, even Gerson had to acknowledge that mysticism had developed a force independent of clerical sanction and that the Church would attack it to its own detriment.²⁹ Textual documentation of miracles or visions was essential to the ecclesiastical canonization procedure, but it also provided social validation whether or not the holy person received official recognition. The ability to produce the written discourses of mysticism in the late Middle Ages brought independent social power.

The prefatory narratives in *The Book of Margery Kempe* represent the autobiography as a text produced outside regular ecclesiastical or clerical structures. The *Book's* introduction, composed by Margery and her priest-amanuensis, shows how the writing of Margery's life and revelations was itself founded on divine sanction, beyond the advice and power of mere humans. She tells her reader that because "þis creatur" was afraid of delusions of the devil, she went by the "byddyng of þe Holy Gost" to various worthy clerks, "bothe archebysshops & bysshoppys, doctowrs of dyvynyte & bachelers," as well as anchorites, to confide to them her mystical experiences:

Summe of these worthy & worshepful clerkys tokyn it in perel
of her sowle and as þei wold answer to God þat þis creatur was
inspyred wyth þe Holy Gost and bodyn hyr þat sche schuld don
hem wryten & makyn a booke of hyr felyngys & hir revelacyons.
Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys,
& sche wold not consentyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in
hir sowle þat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone. & so it was xx ȝer
& mor fro þat tym þis creatur had fyrst felyngys & revelacyons er
þan sche dede any wryten. Aftyward, whan it plesyd ower Lord,
he comawnded hyr & charyd hir þat sche schuld don wryten hyr
felyngys & revelacyons & þe forme of her levyng þat hys good-
nesse myht be knowyn to alle þe world. (3–4)

Margery's account of beginning her text emphasizes her independence from clerical writers and her response to the mandates of God.

When she does decide the time has come to produce her text, she has further difficulties. The first amanuensis dies, leaving a messy manuscript that her next amanuensis cannot decipher. The writer's eyesight fails, delaying him a further four years; Margery urges him on, reminding him that he does the task by God's grace, and finally his eyesight is providentially restored so that he can copy her *Book*.

Neither the urgings of religious authorities (which she resists for twenty years) nor the hostility, ineptitude, and physical incapacity of her amanuenses (which delay her for several more years) are shown to inhibit production of Margery's *Book*. Rather, by the power of divine instruction given directly to Margery the narrator and through her scribes—who function as internal witnesses to Margery's holiness³⁰—the text of her holy life is finally written. The text contains its own authorization as it seeks to validate Margery's experiences, and thus may be seen as a prototype of the kinds of writing that would eventually undermine clerical textual authority. Furthermore, the life it describes is ostensibly directed toward the sacred to the exclusion of mundane social obligations, but it ultimately represents the active life as one of the bases for Margery's claim to sanctity.

Mysticism as cultural text

Accounts of mystical experiences (which might seem individual and private) nevertheless provided a privileged site for testing *social* identities in the later Middle Ages. Laurie Finke has recently summarized research suggesting that the discourse of late medieval mysticism empowered women to speak with an authority that challenged that of the institutional church. She sees mysticism as a "site of struggle between the authoritative, monologic language of a powerful social institution and the heteroglossia of the men and women who came under its sway and sometimes resisted it."³¹ Finke's argument remains bound to a model of the church as controller of dominant discourse, against which women mystics' words and bodies became "the sites of a struggle to redefine the meaning of *female* silence and powerlessness [my emphasis]."³² I'd propose instead a model in which late medieval female mysticism becomes a site of *cultural* struggle to redefine social ideologies, with mysticism and gender as languages in which the conflicts are articulated.

For both genders religious experience was a site of contention, where the late medieval crisis of interpretation and authority could be

enacted in the symbolic language of mystical experience. Margery's devotional behaviors provide texts for contested interpretation—in her century as well as ours. Earlier scholars were puzzled by the phenomenon of Margery's "cryings," her socially disruptive expression of affective devotion to Christ; her loud wailing was also an idiosyncratic sign of holiness for Margery's peers. Even her amanuensis had difficulty interpreting her behavior until he discovered, to his relief, the precedent of Marie d'Oignies in Jacques de Vitry's hagiographic text.³³ The trope of copious tears recurs in a majority of the chapters of Book One, and in each case it triggers an examination not only of *how* to interpret the phenomenon but of *who* is authorized to do so.

What the *Book* shows is a society with no common ground for understanding Margery's "roarings." In the absence of coherent interpretive communities, authoritative interpretation can only be found by displacing it from the conflicting views of her contemporaries to Margery's visionary conversations with Christ. There Christ reassures Margery with monotonous regularity that her tears are "fre ȝftys of God" apart from her merit, for "terys of compunccyon, devocyon, & compassyon arn þe heyest & sekerest ȝftys þat I ȝeve in erde" (30, 31).

The tears resolve the paradoxes of Margery's social identities into a multivalent yet unified relationship with Christ:

Whan þow stodyst to plesse me, þan art þu a very dowtyr; whan þu wepyst & mornyst for my peyn & for my Passyon, þan art þow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan þow wepyst for oþer mennys synnes and for adversytes, þan art þow a very sytter; and, whan thou sorwyst for þow art so long fro þe blysse of Hevyn, þan art þu a very spowse & a wyfe. (31)

The explicitness of Christ's comforting resolutions only highlights the social disagreements over Margery's behaviors and identities, and reveals how little consensus there was about the role of lay female mystics in the fifteenth century.

Within the late medieval hagiographic code that Margery's text employs, visions were the mark of the holy person.³⁴ Given that fact, Margery's visions (and within them her conversations with Christ) have elicited surprisingly little critical analysis except to note that Christ as male authority figure is unfailingly supportive and helpful to Margery. What I would emphasize is Margery's fluent access to divine assistance, which pro-

vides her with a strong sense that she can become her own spiritual interpreter and agent despite external harassment and skepticism.

The threshold between Margery's physical and her spiritual lives is thin, and she can "cross over" virtually at will. In one memorable incident, she and her husband are coming from York on a Friday, Midsummer's Eve, "in very hot weather." She is carrying a bottle of beer and her husband has a cake tucked inside his clothes. He urges her to resume marital relations, but she tells him she wants to take a vow of chastity before a bishop. He presses his case urgently; he wants to sleep with her, wants her to pay his debts before she goes off on pilgrimage, and wants her not to fast on Friday but to eat and drink with him. When she refuses to break her fast, he threatens to force her to have sex. At this point in the tense marital argument, Margery—who obviously fears rape—kneels down to pray and ask Christ for a resolution to her dilemma. As if immediately at her side, he tells her that the fast can be a negotiating tool; she can now break her fast in return for her sexual freedom. Although these features of Margery's visionary conversations appear distinctive—the lack of conventional meditative apparatus and an intimate spiritual advisor available whenever Margery needs it—they were also features of the visions of Bridget of Sweden, whose canonization was being debated during the early fifteenth century.³⁵ What they convey is the privileged and independent position of the female mystic, whose spiritual needs are being met without ecclesiastical mediation.

Typically, too, the conversations with Christ reinterpret social and religious conventions, putting in place new definitions that are consistent with the needs of lay piety. When Margery laments to Christ, "A, Lord, maydenys dawnsyn now meryly in Heven. Xal not I don so?" (50), she registers her distress that her marital and maternal roles have removed from her the possibility of being holy according to the norms of late medieval Christianity. Christ replies, however, that "for-as-mech as þu art a mayden in þi sowle, I xal take þe be þe on hand in Hevyn & my Modyr be þe oper hand, & so xalt þu dawsyn in Hevyn wyth oper holy maydens & virgynes" (52). The external definition of virginity given by conventional religion has been replaced by a chastity of soul which can coexist with the demands of married life in the world.³⁶

Margery's problems often center on conflicts between her social roles of wife and mother and her religious mission. The narrative describes a time, "whyl thys creatur was beryng chylde & sche was newly delyveryd of a chylde, owyr Lord Cryst Jhesu seyde to hir sche xuld no mor chylde beryn, & þerfor he bad hyr gon to Norwych" (38). She resists at first, claim-

ing to be weak from childbirth, but he promises to give her strength for the trip. Similarly, on another occasion (48), Christ promises to find Margery a babysitter when he asks her to take on a spiritual task at a time when she has just had a baby that needs care. Margery's conversations with Christ focus on the problematics of the active life in the *female* terms of childbearing, childrearing, and marital obligation.

In a text ostensibly about a female's desire to abandon her family responsibilities to serve God, we have a vivid representation of the opposite position: the validation of holiness as an outcome of the active life. David Aers argues strenuously that "Margery's religious identity involved a rupture with the earthly family, an energetic struggle against the nuclear family, its bonds, its defenses in the lay community and its legitimating ideologies."³⁷ He notes that her imaginary life "enabled both an affirmation of her community's conventional stereotypes and their negation."³⁸ This reading of Margery's paradoxical resolution reduces her dilemma to a female dilemma. Mary Mason, too, has identified the "dual sense of vocation: the wife-mother, pilgrim-mystic roles which were continuous throughout Margery Kempe's life." Mason sees the duality as a "common pattern of women's perception of themselves."³⁹

I would reinterpret Mason's feminist insight in more broadly cultural terms: the *Book* may talk about the problematics of a "dual sense of vocation" in the female terms of childbearing, childcare, and marital sexual obligation, but for late medieval bourgeois culture those were the very terms in which it was defining a new family- and work-centered ideology that would allow them to be pious without leaving their secular activities. In one of the more extended visionary sequences of the *Book*, Margery becomes the attendant to St. Anne on the birth of Mary, and to Mary on the birth of Christ. She is included in the sacred events, and she is appreciated for her role as assistant to childbirth. On the birth of John the Baptist, which she witnesses, she asks Elizabeth to recommend her to Mary as a servant. Elizabeth tells her, "Dowtyr, me semyth . . . þu dost ryght wel þi dever" (19), a comment that validates the role of charitable service in the active life.

Despite Margery's repeated gestures of separation from her social roles as urban bourgeoisie and wife in order to pursue her vocation as a holy woman, she is finally to play out her spiritual commitments through nursing her ill and senile husband. This episode is usually interpreted as a step backward into the role of human wife for Margery, who wants to serve Christ alone.⁴⁰ Margery certainly articulates those fears when she holds a conversation with Christ on the subject and he tells her, "I bydde þe take

hym hom & kepe hym for my lofe" (180). She responds that she cannot do that for she would have to neglect her spiritual husband: "I xal þan not tendyn to þe as I do now." Christ then offers a resolution to her dilemma: "þu xalt have as meche mede for to kepyn hym & helpyn hym in hys nede at home as yf þu wer in chirche to makyn þi preyerys. . . . I preye þe now kepe hym for þe lofe of me." In serving him, her *Book* shows, she serves "as sche wolde a don Crist hym-self" (181).

By the end of her first book, Margery as exemplary figure through her active service has become a mediator for others. Christ assures her that "for þe gret homlynys þat I schewe to þe þat tyme þu art mekyl þe boldar to askyn me grace for þi-selfe, for þin husbond, & for þi childryn, & þu makyst every Cristen man & woman þi childe in þi sowle for þe tyme & woldist han as meche grace for hem as for þin owyn childeryn" (212). In this long culminating speech, which articulates a new ideology of spiritual value through the active life, he also tells her that he thanks her for all the ill people she has cared for in his name, "& for al þe goodnes & servyse þat þu hast don to hem in any degre, for þu schalt havyn þe same mede wyth me in Hevyn, as þow þu haddist kept mym owyn self whil I was her in erde" (213–14). It is not necessary, in other words, to reject the world totally in order to achieve holiness. As the ultimate authorizing voice in this text, Christ confirms that service in this world "counts" spiritually.

To put Margery's *Book* in broad historical perspective, we might contrast its ideological situation to that of Augustine's *Confessions*, written one thousand years earlier. Augustine represents the ideal of personal chastity as his solution to the battle against lust—this at the very moment when Ambrose and other leaders of the early Christian church were making celibacy the mark of the spiritual elite. Augustine's narrative, like Margery's, can be historicized. Both portray the struggles of an individual that are at the same time illustrations of ideological programs being enacted in their societies. In Augustine's case, the new Christian elites were attempting to undermine dominant Roman family and civic ideologies. One thousand years later, Margery's autobiography is part of a bourgeois rewriting of the cultural script, which by the seventeenth century had reinstated family ideologies very similar to Roman ones that analogously linked family and state in patriarchal governance.⁴¹

Margery's *Book* culminates not with a rejection of history but with an immersion in it. Her social text thus speaks for her contemporaries, lay men and women who were seeking to validate their secular lives according to dominant religious norms. In historicizing Margery, that is, in reading her

Book and life as social texts, we can see that her gender and her mysticism are “about” not just the status of Margery the individual female mystic, but are products of the symbolic imagination of Western culture at a crucial moment of transition. During that several hundred year period—from roughly 1300 to 1650—a new group we now call the “middle class” consolidated their socioeconomic power by developing a self-conscious identity. As a window onto this process, Margery Kempe’s *Book* is invaluable. An unsuccessful piece of autohagiography that was never sanitized or polished by cult followers, it remained as it was originally produced: for this reason, it is one of our most revealing texts for the crisis that broadly affected medieval society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This was a crisis in interpretation and authorization, as clerical ideologies and institutions that had inspired a set of practices by an ascetic elite were appropriated—and in the process transformed—by a lay and predominantly bourgeois class that sought an explicit validating ideology for their own economic and political power.

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Notes

- 1 The term is Mary G. Mason’s in “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 207–34; repr. in *LifeLines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 19–44.
- 2 Two severely abridged versions of the *Book* were made, one printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 and then reprinted by Henry Pepwell in 1521, both within a framework of devotional reading; see the analysis of Sue Ellen Holbrook, “Margery Kempe and Wynkyn de Worde,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (London: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 27–46. The unique complete manuscript of Margery’s *Book* includes a Carthusian reader’s marginal comments in a late-fifteenth- or early-sixteenth-century hand and three other sets of notes that, according to Karma Lochrie, provide us with “early readings” of Kempe’s text. For insightful discussion of this stage of reception, see Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 120–23, 203–28.
- 3 The phrase was popularized by Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- 4 Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 66.
- 5 All quotations will be from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech (with notes by Hope Emily Allen) EETS o.s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940; repr. 1961).

- 6 Reprinted in Sheila Delany, *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature Medieval to Modern* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 76–92.
- 7 Many of the excellent books and articles on Margery Kempe and her text have devoted a section to the topic of reception history, pointing out the ideological bases of the often negative readings of Margery. See, for example, Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 195–220; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 224–28; and extensive analysis by Sarah Beckwith in *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), esp. chap. 1 on the discourse of mysticism, 7–21, and chap. 4 on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 78–111.
- 8 In opposition to earlier views that Margery's *Book* is the naive and confused production of an uneducated woman, the literarily artful “constructedness” of the work and its dense network of allusions to devotional literature are argued by, among others, Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), chap. 3 “St. Margery,” 47–65; Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, chap. 3 “From Utterance to Text: Authorizing the Mystical Word,” 97–127; and Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), chap. 1 “Authorship and Authority,” 1–38. Staley reads the *Book* as a “fiction”: a deliberately constructed “sacred biography” dictated by Margery, “a writer” who “exploits” and reshapes literary traditions (39), including the “trope of the scribe” (37).
- 9 Mark Amsler, “The Wife of Bath and Women's Power,” *Assays* 4 (1987): 72.
- 10 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 117. For a discussion of the Marxist term *praxis*, see *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 384–89.
- 11 According to Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, ideology fixes “the individual in place as subject for a certain meaning. This is simultaneously to provide individuals with a subject-ivity, and to subject them to the social structure with its existing contradictory relations and powers.” See *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 76. As I am using the term *bourgeois ideology* here, it refers to the incipient articulations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of a construct that will be fully functional only in the seventeenth century, when it would be called the *Protestant ethic*. As Thomas M. Safley puts it, “Max Weber hypothesized that the ‘ascetic’ individual—the person who could view material success as a sign of divine election—was the unique Protestant contribution to capitalist, economic development.” See “Civic Morality and the Domestic Economy,” in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 174. My rereading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as an early example of this emergent “bourgeois ideology” was enabled by my current research on the history of conduct books addressed to women from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth century—a project that reveals the ideological centrality of gender to the self-definition of urban bourgeois elites.

- 12 Local documents naming Margery's father or her husband are included in Appendix 3 of the EETS edition of the *Book*, 358–75. Only one extant document mentions a Margery Kempe who joined the most prestigious guild in King's Lynn in 1438; otherwise, Margery herself does not appear in civic or ecclesiastical records. Despite the many topical references in her narrative, Margery's controversial activities are "not referred to in any contemporary source," as Staley has observed (*Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 173).
- 13 Delany, *Writing Woman*, 86; Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 110.
- 14 David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 77–78.
- 15 Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, makes a strong case that the author of the *Book* (whom she calls Kempe) characterizes her community as "stifling, conformist, mercantile, violent, and superficial" (40), and deploys her persona (Margery) as the distracting foreground of her narrative. In other words, "Kempe avails herself of the freedom of the social critic by drawing upon the conventional elements of female sacred biography" (40). Staley argues that Margery is not marginal, as critics have suggested, but is represented as "a figure whose liminal status is ultimately resolved, not by reintegration into the community, but by her rejection of its demands and practices" (40 n. 2).
- 16 See comments by Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 148–49, that preachers' attitudes toward the new professional groups (public officials, lawyers, merchants, etc.) in this period are uniformly negative.
- 17 Obviously, in making this statement, I am ignoring the existence of the fraternal orders, who led mixed lives of religious commitment and social activity in urban settings; but I would suggest that the paradigm of religious withdrawal from the world was still ideologically hegemonic and may account for the popularity of satires against these liminal religious. On the late medieval *mentalité* that excluded the merchant and professional classes from approbation, see essays in Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Le Goff comments on the merchants who were "irked that they did not occupy a place in the social hierarchy commensurate with their economic strength" and defines the pre-fifteenth-century tendency for revolts against the Church to take the "form of mystical religiosity, one of whose principal characteristics was to exclude material, and consequently professional, life from integration into the religious universe" (109).
- 8 Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 102.
- 9 Alice Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 93. Cora Kaplan, writing as a cultural materialist critic about nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature in *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), has critiqued contemporary feminist criticism for overvaluing gender and ignoring class and race: "for without the class and race perspectives that socialist feminist critics bring to the analysis of both literary texts and of their conditions of production, liberal feminist criticism, with its emphasis on the unified female subject, will unintentionally reproduce the values of mass market romance. In that fictional landscape the other structuring rela-

- tions of society fade and disappear, leaving us with the naked drama of sexual difference as the only scenario that matters" (148). A similar critique has been made by Margaret Ezell, "Re-visioning the Restoration: Or, How to Stop Obscuring Early Women Writers," in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, ed. Jeffrey Cox and Larry Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 136–50. Ezell notes "the emotional impact of material which is perceived as transhistorical and autobiographical" (143). The tendency to de-historicize writing by women and discover female commonalities in a "feminist retelling of the past" has also characterized the criticism of Margery Kempe. In this essay I will be following Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, who has investigated the "interaction of sex-based differences and politics" as she studies "how a set of gender-based symbols came to be written into a good part of history." See *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Florence*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), iv.
- 20 Sidonie Smith notes that "the rather stable story of spiritual conversion is syncretized by the constant mobility, the unending quest to gain exoneration, blessing, and support and to avert condemnation and burning" (*A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 79).
 - 21 See especially Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 177–78: "Just as the *Book's* testimonies to Margery's sanctity at once provide an image of holiness and comment upon the society that will not recognize what is in its midst, so Kempe's emphasis on the gender of her protagonist—and thus upon gender conflict—gives her the scope to glance at the foundations of both spiritual and civil authority. . . . Moreover, both parts of the *Book* conclude with depictions of Margery as having attained a necessary and objective distance from her world."
 - 22 Anthony Goodman, who is unsympathetic to Margery's eccentricity, notes the spiritual and political patronage provided her mysticism by clerics in Lynn and Norwich: "*The Book of Margery Kempe* reveals a glimpse of what may have been a significant division of opinion between conservative-minded burgesses and the people of Lynn, encouraged by like-minded clerics, and a group of clerical radicals drawn together from various religious disciplines." See "The Piety of John Brunham's Daughter, of Lynn," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 357; also Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, 103–28. Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, says it is "noticeable that we get an image of a clerical community whose responses to her were so far from homogeneous that they could range from the most intimate and reverential support to the most aggressive dismissal" (109).
 - 23 The term is Lynn Staley's, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 33.
 - 24 Barbara Babcock writes, "All too often 'marginality,' like 'deviant,' has connoted being outside in a solely negative sense, being dangerous to or somehow below 'normal' boundaries." "A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11 (1975): 149. Nevertheless, Babcock prefers to use the term *marginal* with a meaning closer to Victor Turner's *liminality*. Karma Lochrie uses the term *marginality* to describe Margery in "*The Book of Margery Kempe: A Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16 (1986): 33–56.
 - 25 See my introduction to *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism*:

Between Literature and Anthropology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xviii. Without using anthropological terminology, and within a feminist framework, Nona Fienberg in "Thematics of Value in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Modern Philology* 87 (1989): 132–41, perceives that Margery, "through a subtle and dynamic series of calculated transactions," transforms herself (132). Those changes in her "personal economy" are correlated to the liminality of late medieval society.

- 26 Margery says in her opening remarks, "Ne hyr-self coud nevyr telle þe grace þat sche felt, it was so hevenly, so hy a-bouen hyr reson & hyr bodyly wytrys, and hyr body so fehyll in tym of þe presens of grace þat sche myth nevyr expressyn it wyth her word lych as sche felt it in hyr sowle" (3).
- 27 On the context in which she does this, see Aviad Kleinberg, "Proving Sanctity: Selection and Authentification of Saints in the Later Middle Ages," *Victor* 20 (1989): 183–205. For a male mystic using similar strategies, see Nicholas Watson, "Translation and Self-Canonization in Richard Rolle's *Melos Amoris*," in *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 167–80.
- 28 The most striking example of this is heretical movements like Lollardy, with their deliberate deployment of vernacular literacy to enable the laity to resist ecclesiastical control. See Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon, 1984), especially chapters on "Devotional Literacy" and "Lollardy and Literacy," 101–33, 193–217; also Anne Hudson, "Lollardy: The English Heresy?" and "Some Aspects of Lollard Book Production," in her *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon, 1985), 141–63, 181–91. Given her transgressive liminality in religious matters, Margery is often accused of being a Lollard. See Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 106–13. However, what is at issue is preaching and teaching, not Margery's writing. Lochrie argues that Margery privileges "her own voice—and the oral/aural text of her dialogues with Christ—over the textual witness of her *auctoritates*" (204), but I would suggest that the imperus to produce her own written narrative recording those authorizing dialogues is not less important to Margery's self-authorization.
- 29 Jean Gerson wrote the *De probatione spirituum* at the Council of Constance in 1415, where papal schism and mysticism were discussed. In section 49, Gerson says, "If the visionary is a woman, it is especially necessary to learn how she acts toward her confessors or instructors. Is she prone to continual conversations, either under the pretext of frequent confession or in relating lengthy accounts of her visions . . . ?" trans. in Paschal Boland, *The Concept of Discretio Spirituum in John Gerson's "De Probatione Spirituum" and "De Distinctione Verarum Visionum a Falsis"* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 36. In sections 11–12, Gerson writes, "Of special interest is the case of Bridget (of Sweden), who claims to have enjoyed visions not only of angels, but also of Jesus Christ, Mary, Agnes, and other saints, who talk to her with the familiarity of friends, or as a bridegroom to his bride. . . . Truly there is danger here, either in approving or in disapproving such writings. For what would be more disgraceful or incongruous for this Sacred Council than to declare that false, imaginary, or foolish visions are true and genuine revelations? On the other hand, to denounce those revelations which are declared authentic in many

places and by different peoples, after various and numerous examinations, would pose a threat, perhaps great, of spiritual harm to the Christian faith and the devotion of the faithful" (28).

- 30 See Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, 33–38. She summarizes her arguments by saying that "the scribe is an integral component of the fiction, for by his very existence *in the text* he testifies to the local eminence of the holy, the exemplary" (38).
- 31 Laurie Finke, *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 78.
- 32 Ibid., 98.
- 33 See the *Book*, 152–53; also on responses to Margery's tears by inscribed readers and later manuscript annotators, see Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 118–27. Lochrie points out that Margery's "boistrous weeping" dates from her visit to Mount Calvary and "suggests a continual engagement in meditation on Christ's crucified body" (172, 177).
- 34 In earlier hagiography, miracles were a more significant sign of holiness, as André Vauchez has shown in *La Sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1981). By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *miracula* had largely been replaced by visions as the requisite sign of sanctity, as Margery's *Book* demonstrates. Margery does work a few miracles, including the snowstorm that quenches a fire at St. Margaret's Church in response to her prayer (162–64).
- 35 Margery's pilgrimage to Rome in 1414 coincided with ceremonies reaffirming Bridget's canonization and prompted visions obviously modeled on Bridget's. The tone of Margery's visionary scenes is, like Bridget's, "homely" and intimate; see quotation from Gerson on Bridget's revelations in note 29 above.
- 36 On this topic, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass': The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983): 131–43. Without making the same argument I do that Margery's autobiography demonstrates a new "bourgeois" ideology. Janel Mueller has seen how the text sponsors a spirituality in which "there is no inherent incompatibility between becoming a bride of God and being acknowledged as the wife of John Kempe, burgess of Lynn, and the mother of his fourteen children." See "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," repr. in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 155–71.
- 37 Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 99.
- 38 Ibid., 108.
- 39 Mason, "The Other Voice," 22.
- 40 See, for example, Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, who says that Margery serves her husband as "a martyr of Christ rather than as a wife" (72). Lynn Staley in *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* interprets Margery's return to the household as caretaker of her ailing husband as hinting at "a conception of Christian community" that accepts social bonds (63), though one limited by the constraints of the surrounding social environment (64). Staley does not explicitly connect this concept of community with bourgeois ideologies.

- 41 John Freccero argues that Augustine's *Confessions* is the founding text of (traditional male) autobiography, where the conversion from and total rejection of the sinful self leads to the atemporal or allegorical self that authors the book: "Autobiography and Narrative," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Welbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 16–29. Margery's *Book* seems to provide an alternative (female) model for autobiography as a text that remains firmly within history. But I would suggest that the differences between Augustine's and Margery's autobiographies have little to do with gender as an implicit poetic structure and everything to do with their ideological positions within a culture which was—in Augustine's case—breaking with secular and familial norms of Roman culture and—in Margery's case—reinstating them. On early modern "domestic politics," see Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), esp. 34–66.