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Date

THE HIDDEN JOURNEY OF MARGERY KEMPE

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the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors.

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## Table of Contents

Preface: Margery Divided	6
1. Margery of King's Lynn	11
Wold Not Leeuyn Hir Pride	11
þis Creature Forsoke Hir Pride	14
Aduersytes Comyng on Euery Syde	16
Make þi Wyl Knowyn to Me	19
2. Margery The Mystic	23
For I Haue Ordeyned þe	23
Flawme of Fyer Wondir Hoot	28
I Suffir Not So Mech	31
3. The Book's Underlying Monastic Motif	35
þis Wondyrful Chawngyng	35
Sche Wept Ful PLentevowsly	39
Were Clothys of Whyte	44
4. The Monks of Mount Grace	50
þei þat Worshep þe Worshep Me	50
Bibliography	60

## PREFACE

### MARGERY DIVIDED

If Margery Kempe were around today, I wonder how she would feel about the controversy that surrounds *The Book*. When it was discovered in 1934, many sharply criticized it. Father Thurston wrote “That Margery was a victim of hysteria can hardly be open to doubt (*The Month*, p, Nov. 1936, p. 452);<sup>1</sup> Hope Emily Allen called Margery “petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously over-strained;”<sup>2</sup> and Margaret Gallyon calls her (fondly) the “quaint and freakish figure.”<sup>3</sup>

More recent scholarship is mixed in its interpretations. While Clarissa Atkinson, Susan Dickman, Deborah Ellis, Karma Lochrie and Gail McMurray Gibson find the story “extraordinary” and see Margery as someone who “embraced her martyrdoms deliberately and self-consciously,”<sup>4</sup> others, like Dean Inge and Graham Greene view *The Book* as having “little...which can properly be described as mystical...certainly queer...having little religious significance.”<sup>5</sup>

Reading through scholarly articles on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, I found myself at odds with certain interpretations. I noticed that all of these critics, those supporting and those arguing against the figure Margery Kempe,

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<sup>1</sup> Hope Emily Allen, Prefatory Note for *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: EETS 1940), p. lxv. All quotations of *The Book* come from this definitive edition, with page number and line cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, p. lxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Gallyon, *Margery Kempe of Lynn and Medieval England* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson (*The Theater of Devotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra J. McEntire, *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. (New York: Garland, 1992), p. x.

base their arguments on particular sections of the texts. And though much of the criticism I read is designed to show the underlying strength in the character Margery, by concentrating either on her visions, her tears, her wearing of white, or her trials, it fails to tie the narrative together as a whole.

Janet Wilson's essay focuses on Margery's wearing of white. For Wilson, this is a sign of her victimization. Sidelined by her society, Margery needs some outward sign to promote herself. She succeeds by donning a white garment, which sparks much controversy among the people around her. This friction, says Wilson, is evidence of Margery's struggle to overcome her limited "space in society."<sup>6</sup>

Dhira B. Mahoney takes on the daunting task of explaining Margery's tears, weeping and screeching. Tears are one of the most problematic aspects of Margery's devotions recounted in *The Book*. Mahoney sees tears as an attempt to go "beyond language; her [Margery's] sobs substitute for the words she cannot find...the only words that are available to Kempe are patriarchal, the language authenticated by the male ecclesiastical establishment."<sup>7</sup> Mahoney views Margery as prefiguring the feminist movement and its struggle to find a "voice."

As persuasive as these arguments are, they limit the literary issues of *The Book* to purely academic interpretations. I think it is vitally important how we understand Margery. If we look at the narration in order to find purely political

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Wilson, "Margery and Alison: Women on Top" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language" in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, p. 40.

themes, we will miss the bigger picture. The mistake is in fragmenting Margery's actions as solitary deeds defining a single person. If this is true, then Margery will be seen as confused, hysterical, and perhaps a fraud.

There is another way of interpreting *The Book*. It lies in noting how this text continually reflects a very ancient and respected tradition, that of monastic customs. I believe *The Book* needs to be studied as a whole, in conjunction with such scholarship. The historical practices of monastics are pivotal in better understanding and appreciating how *The Book* is situated within the context of Medieval spirituality.

The first and most dominant theme in *The Book* deals with conversion: Pis lytyl tretys schal tretyn sumdeel in parcel of hys wonderful werkys, how mercyfully, how benyngly, & how charytefully he meued & stered a synful caytyf vn-to hys love" (1:12- 15). My research shows that such themes mirror a similar topic considered the bedrock of all monastic spirituality from earliest recorded time. Called μετανοια by the first known hermits of the Egyptian desert, conversion of heart defines and encompasses all who seek spiritual perfection.<sup>8</sup> The striking similarity between the customs and actions written in *The Book* and the foundational practice found in monastic tradition bring vigor to the story.

In monastic tradition, conversion of heart was signified by the leaving off of worldly garments and donning a religious garb. Seen in this light, Christ's

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<sup>8</sup> "The monk experiences a process which is one of the constant themes of the Bible and the liturgy: the process of conversion, which is at the very root of the monastic vocation." Claude J. Peifer, O.S.B., Monk of St Bede Abbey, (*Monastic Spirituality*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966) p 135.

command: “And dowtyr, I sey to þe I wyl þat þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colowr, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl” (32: 16-18) takes on a different significance. Margery is leaving off her fashionable and expensive clothing for something plain and simple.

Critics have often found Margery’s crying and screeching problematic. When viewed alongside conversion and vestiture, her tears are transformed into a sign of Margery’s true contrition. The practice, called compunction, goes back many centuries to the Abbas and Ammas of the desert.<sup>9</sup> When the *Book* states, “And in schort tyme ower merciful Lord vysytyd þis creatur wyth plentyuows teerys of contricyon day be day,”(2:20-22) it reveals the strong link between Margery’s tears and the revered custom of weeping for one’s sins.

In the many articles and books I have labored over for this project, I have not found scholarship dedicated to such parallels. I believe such a study is necessary, as it will shed new light on *The Book*. It is this link to monastic customs proven by centuries of practice that lends voice and authority to the story. Without this connection, the narrative remains a fragmented series of episodes for modern readers. And the numerous interpretations will continue, some making it a story of a hysterical woman of medieval times who cried out in churches and disrupted the normal flow of life, and others as a defiant woman seeking to make

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<sup>9</sup> Abbâ Poemen (around 370 or some say 449) is quoted exhorting his brethren “Whosoever wisheth to blot out his offences can do so by weeping, and he who wisheth to acquire good works can do so by means of weeping; for weeping is the path which the Scriptures have taught us, and the fathers have also wept continually, and there is no other path except that of tears”. Trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Vol. II (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907, reprinted from the original edition by St. Nectarios Press, Seattle, 1978), p. 34,

her place in the world. No matter how convincing these are, they are still missing the larger picture.

In the late Middle Ages, I argue, *The Book* gains authority from the monastic language and symbolism it uses, as we can see by the audience it attracted. An esteemed and well known establishment, the Carthusian monks of Mount Grace Priory in Yorkshire, obviously found something within the manuscript that resonated with their own life. They preserved and copied it, recording their own responses to *The Book* in their marginal glosses. The sole manuscript that survives is from their library.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper I have tried to bring together the three themes of conversion, compunction and investiture as a way of correlating Margery's narrative to the spirituality of monastics. I also note the ways in which the monks of Mount Grace identify with these themes. When thus situated, the narration of the life of "this creature" and the ancient practices of monastics begin to trace a pattern. Through the agency of the monastic audience, *The Book* gains authority and voice. Through them, one of its own prophecies is fulfilled: "I schal flowe so mych grace in þe þat alle þe world xal meruelyn perof (17: 14-16).

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<sup>10</sup> This manuscript is now in the British Library titled "MS 61823". Goodman, p. 1.

## CHAPTER ONE

## MARGERY OF KING'S LYNN

**Wold Not Leeuyn Hir Pride<sup>11</sup>**

Status takes a prominent place in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. From the beginning the preface states that this is “A schort tretys of a creature sett in grett pompe & pride of þe world, which sythen was drawyn to ower Lord”(9:10). To understand Margery’s transformation, we must first understand her position in her home town, King's Lynn. An esteemed figure, she reveled in status, vied for prominence among her fellow townsfolk, and gloried in her identification as the mayor’s daughter and as the wife of a burgess.

*The Book* tells us that Margery was born and raised in King’s Lynn. Margery often reminds her fellow travelers and accusers: “I am of Lynne in Norfolke, a good mannys dowtyr of þe same Lynne, which hath ben meyr fyve tymes”(111: 27-29). Such sentiments are repeated throughout the *Book*. Deborah S. Ellis says that "Kempe's deep identification with her town appears to have been established at an early age. She never stops identifying herself as John de Brunham's daughter, from a family in which both father and daughter represent King's Lynn."<sup>12</sup>

The narration impresses upon its reader the importance of rank to Margery. A striking passage is the moment she tells her husband again of her

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<sup>11</sup> *The Book*, 5: 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah S Ellis, “Margery Kempe and King's Lynn” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, Ed. Sandra J. McEntire, (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 140.

position. He obviously already knows who she is and needs no reminding. Yet Margery must drive her point home once again:

sche answeyrd schrewydly & schortly & seyð þat sche was comyn of worthy kenred, --hym semyd neuyr for to a weddyd hir, for hir fadyr was sum-tyme meyr of þe town N. and sythyn he was alderman of þe hey Gylde of þe Trinyte in N. And þerfor sche wold sauyn þe worschyp of hir kynred what-so-euyr ony man seyð”(9:19-25).

To better understand her station and why it meant so much to Margery, it is necessary to understand the place King’s Lynn enjoyed in fourteenth-century East Anglia. Margaret Gallyon says that it was “one of England’s busiest and most flourishing seaports,”<sup>13</sup> and Anthony Goodman says it was “a major site for trade and commerce, and therefore, an important center of the merchant society.<sup>14</sup> It enjoyed a large population and its commerce, especially its shipping industry, gave it “one of the largest concentrations of urban wealth in England.”<sup>15</sup>

In the King’s Lynn of Margery’s time, the church was also well established. It was “an ecclesiastical ‘peculiar’, with its own court, without the ordinary diocesan jurisdiction of the see of Norwich”<sup>16</sup> under which it existed. The large and beautiful church of St Margaret housed a small group of

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<sup>13</sup> Gallyon, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> “The Lynn of Margery Kempe was one of England’s leading ports. Its population in 1377 has been estimated as 4, 691, about 1,300 less than that of Norwich, which, with York and Bristol, ranked as the largest and most populous English towns after (a long way after) London.” Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*, (New York: Pearson, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Goodman, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Gallyon, p. 61.

Benedictine monks from the Norwich priory.<sup>17</sup> There were also two small chapels, one dedicated to St. James and the other to St. Nicholas, the protector of sailors and wayfarers.<sup>18</sup> The most numerous and conspicuous religious presence in the town was its friars. The Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites all had houses within the walls of King's Lynn; their remains can be seen to this day.<sup>19</sup>

Deborah Ellis sees Margery's obsession with her place in King's Lynn as a need for footing. She writes: "Kempe's own recollections and imaginings depend on her relationship with her town for her sense of her own powers."<sup>20</sup> As such, Margery's authority springs from this relationship. Her argument is based on Margery's continued identification with the town, long after she has turned from her husband, her business endeavors and her past way of life. In chapter nine of *The Book* we read:

þan þe Meyr askyd hir of what cuntre sche was & whos dowtyr sche was. "Syr," sche seyde, "I am of Lynne in Norfolke, an good mannys dowtyr of þe same Lynne, wech hath ben meyr fyve tymes of þat worshepful burwgh and aldyrman also many yerys, & I haue a good man, also a burgeys of þe seyde town, Lynne, to myn husbond"(111:25-32).

Ellis' argument is persuasive. Yet, the narrative doesn't fully support it. It tells us "and yet sche wust ful wel þat men seyden hir ful mech velany, for sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd & hir hodys wyth þe typettys were daggyd"(9: 12-15). If Margery's early attempts to gain esteem bring scorn, are we to believe she

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<sup>17</sup> Goodman, p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Goodman, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Goodman, p. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, p. 155.

will succeed in gaining esteem and authority later by reminding her townspeople of her rank? Especially this close-knit group that now can add mystical experiences, excessive sobbing, and the wearing of white to their list of complaints against her.

A better reading of these texts views them as the proper prelude to her conversion: the greater the sinner, the more admirable the conversion. What better way can one impress the readers of her transformation than by reminding them frequently how much Margery once gloried in her pride, her vanity and her connections? By doing so, *The Book* is consciously referring to the sinner that was. Such reminders empower, but that power is more concerned with the act of conversion rather than with Margery's agency.

### **Pis Creature Forsoke Hir Pride<sup>21</sup>**

The *Book* gives considerable attention to how Margery resisted changing. We are told she loved her status, yet desired to reform. The Proem describes her as weak and unfaithful: “whech synful cytyf many yerys was in wyl and in purpose thorw steryng of þe Holy Gost to folwyn <oure> Savyowr, makyng gret behestys of fastyngys wyth many oþer dedys of penawns. And euyr sche was turned a-gen a-bak in tym of temptacyon” (1: 16-20).

*The Book* reveals Margery's sinfulness as coming primarily from her weak and unresolved will. She knows what she should do. But at the least resistance she falters and fails. Her rich and worldly life brings too much satisfaction to her,

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<sup>21</sup> *The Book*, 11: 12-14.

and she is not willing to forgo that comfort and esteem. The remarkable determination she has in pursuing wealth seems not to translate into her spiritual life.

Margery is not passive or indecisive when negotiating her business adventures. She shows her entrepreneurship by running a very successful brewing house; she becomes “on of þe grettest brewers in þe town N a iij yer or iijj” (9: 31-32). For a brewery business to be one of the greatest in King’s Lynn spells phenomenal success. When that business folds, Margery doesn’t falter. Undaunted by failure, she proceeds with even greater determination to take up a new enterprise, corn milling. The *Book* tells us “Þus sche trostyd to getyn hir leuyng” (10: 13). Confident in this venture she proceeds to purchase two horses and a man to do her milling. Without specifying a time scale, we are told that this venture also falls short. Both horses refuse to work, and her worker, observing the situation, quits. He “wold no lengar abyden wyth þe fornseyd creatur” (10: 32-34).

Margery shows determination, even establishing her ventures against her husband’s advice. She succeeds with the brewing, and is not intimidated when it fails three or four years later. The text does not reveal what human error led to her downfall, but attributes her failure to “þe hey mercy of our Lord Ihesu Cryst” (11: 2). Still, Margery’s enterprising and industrious nature is evident.

The same drive she displays when embarking on these various adventures is strikingly absent when she resolves to change her life and attempt to practice

virtue and penance. Her desire for “conversion” fails to become a reality. She resolves to “follow Christ,”<sup>22</sup> but succumbs to every temptation.

This image of struggling with attempts to follow the Gospel message replicates a well known scriptural pattern in the figure of the Apostle Paul. Most Christians of Margery’s time would have been familiar with his Letter to the Romans: “What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate” (7:15). By setting Margery in her position in society and then revealing her inability to carry out her resolutions to do good, *The Book* places Margery among the saints of scripture. Like St. Paul, she finds herself unable to carry out her resolutions. As such, the recounting of her conflict serves a purpose. It is laying the ground work for the tremendous step of conversion, revealing the difficulties of this process and having Margery mirror the very texts that speak to this tradition.

### **Aduersytes Comyng on Euery Syde<sup>23</sup>**

When *The Book* narrates how drastically Margery’s life changes, it is setting a stage. After establishing Margery as a much-respected citizen of King’s Lynn, *The Book* uses her turn of fortune to signal an even greater change. She becomes a woman scorned. As *The Book* says, “Þan was pompe & pryde cast down & leyd on syde. Þan þat be-forn had worshepd her sythen ful scharply

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<sup>22</sup> The Gospels frequently use the phrase “Follow me” when speaking of the call of the disciples, and therefore, by extension, anyone who desires to live according to the Gospels. “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, “Follow me.” Mt. 9: 9 (New American Bible, 1987). All biblical quotes are taken from this edition.

<sup>23</sup> *The Book*, 11:5.

repreuyd her; her kynred & þei that had ben frendys wer now hyr most enmys.” (2: 12-16). This change too, aligns her situation with well-known scriptural passages, such as “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven” (Mt 5:11-12).

A. C. Spearing notes *The Book's* tendency to focus on Margery's fall from public opinion, and her reaction to it.<sup>24</sup> The amanuensis is aligning Margery with those saints who suffered persecution for their faith. Margery's courage is not outstanding, as we read that “Hyr þow[t] sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred for þe poynt of deth, & þerfor sche ymagyned hyr-self þe most soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, þat was to be bowndyn hyr hed & hir fet to a stokke & hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe” (30: 1-6). As Margery cannot conceive of herself as a martyr willing to suffer death for the love of God, not even within her own imagination, the reader gets a good picture of her humanness. So the narrative instead focuses on the courage she displays in suffering detraction, ridicule, and rejection.

Margery's sensitivity to public opinion remains much the same after her conversion as before. When she hears the remarks others make, she reacts to the voices that condemn her. When *The Book* says that she is commanded by Christ to wear white, she complains: “A, der Lord, yf I go arrayd on oþer maner þan

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<sup>24</sup> “Margery refers, again and again, not just to what she does but to how other people react to it—how she appears in their eyes.” A. C. Spearing, *The Book of Margery Kempe; Or, The Diary of a Nobody*. (*The Southern Review*, EBSCO Publishing, 2002) p. 630.

oþer chaste women don, I drede þat þe pepyl wyl slaw[n]dyr me. þei wyl sey I am an ypocryt & wondryn vp-on me” (32: 19-21). Margery is clearly not happy to play the people’s fool.

*The Book* clearly demonstrates other ways Margery suffers from rejection. When on pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem, she attaches herself to one certain man. He had lived with her confessor, the anchorite, and was considered holy and learned, a doctor of divinity. Upon hearing the pilgrims’ criticism of Margery as a heretic and a hypocrite, he abandoned her: “þan þe forseyd man was holdyn so holy a man & þat sche trustyd so mech up-on uttyrly repreuyd hir, and fowely despysed hir, & wold no forþer gon wyth hir.” (33: 14-16). We get a clear picture of how painful such abandonment is to Margery. Yet, she does not falter under such persecution, misunderstanding, or accusations. Instead, “þis creatur durst non oþer-wyse do þan sche was comawndyd in hir sowle” (32: 23-24). The words paint a picture of one suffering with resignation, but at peace within.

These struggles are an important part of the story. As we read further on about her fellow pilgrims: “hir felaschep was wroþar þan þei wer be-forn, whose wreth & vnkyndnesse to þis creature was mater of gret heuynes, for þei wer holdyn ryt good men, & sche desyred gr[etly] her lofe jyf sche myth an had it to þe plesawns [of God] (61: 26-31). She cries many tears over their unkindness, and seeking companionship and comfort, turns to the legate to uphold and support her. Such incidents situate Margery as struggling to carry out her conversion on a day-to-day basis.

### **Make Bi Wyl Knowyn to Me<sup>25</sup>**

There are different ways to look at Margery's experience in *The Book*.

William Provost believes much of Margery's rejection comes from her failure to fit the norm. In Margery's time, individuals occupied certain stations in life. Mystics were no exception. They usually lived in monasteries or became anchorites. Margery fails to fall into any one of these categories.<sup>26</sup> He believes it is this failure to conform that sparks confusion and criticism. Margery combines the role of wife with the role of mystic. Such a dual part was unheard of in this time.<sup>27</sup> Margery is controversial because she is "different." Had she stayed as wife and mother or as simply "mystic," she would be better understood.

Provost's point is well taken, and certainly speaks to the matter of roles. Yet, there is a deeper, underlying reason that rejection and persecution are an important part of this narrative. Margery begins as a woman of prominence. After she hears the voice within and initiates real change, her station changes. As the *Book* states, often she is accused of being a fraud, a heretic, a mad woman, and a demonically possessed woman. How is the reader to distinguish between the accusations leveled against her and her true (as presented) holiness?

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<sup>25</sup> *The Book*, 24: 32.

<sup>26</sup> William Provost, "But Margery: so like Alison [Wife of Bath] in her courage, persistence, struggling against the clerks; so like Julian in her troubling (to us and to her) visions, and the singular relationship with her Lord that the visions gave her; and yet so different from either, both in the muddled living of her life and in the muddled sense we have of her character and of what we think about her." from "Margery Kempe and Her Calling," p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Provost: "Our medieval ancestors...had exquisite perceptions that they were indeed being called individually and quite specifically by God to a particular state in life. And despite a good bit of variety in actual profession...the distinct types of vocation were not that many" p. 5.

Secondly, Margery's mission contains nothing really remarkable when compared with other mystics. Her courage cannot be labeled "extraordinary." It consists mainly of enduring the pain of words of "suspicion, disbelief, and antagonism among many of the in-the-ordinary-ways sort of folk about her."<sup>28</sup> Her calling has not brought her the kind of respect and esteem other mystics enjoy. Margery has left her lofty position of the mayor's daughter in King's Lynn only to become its problem.

Margery reflects the Gospel message when she suffers from loneliness. The narrative describes her abandonment several times during her pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Initially she accepts her solitude. But then she struggles and we read: "& þan sche seyde to oon of hem specyaly, 'Ye do me meche schame & gret greuawns'" (61: 31-32). The narrator reveals Margery's deep yearning to be part of the group. When abandoned, she cries many tears, complains to Jesus about their unkindness, and seeks out other companionship, in this instance, from the legate.

Later in this same journey, she arrives alone in Bologna. Dislike for her situation impels her to make an agreement with her former party of pilgrims. She accepts their conditions: "Yf ye wyl gon in owyr felawshep, ye must makyn a new comnawnt, & þat is þis, ye schal not [speke] of þe Gospel wher we come, but ye schal syttyn styll & makyn mery, as we don, boþin at mete & at soper" (61: 31-32). Margery tells us she not only consented, but diligently obeyed their

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<sup>28</sup> Provost, p. 11.

demands for a full thirteen weeks. It is only when she slips and breaks her promise that she is again forced to withdraw from their company.

Readers familiar with scripture would tie these incidents with the appropriate verses: “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Lk 9: 58). For Margery to be truly transformed, she must follow the counsels laid out in the Gospels.<sup>29</sup> This is the guide for all men and women who seek holiness. In this way, Margery’s transformation can be seen as consistent with those already acknowledged and honored in the Church. It is the ruler that measures all claims of holiness.

Margery comes closest to the scriptural Jesus when she is brought before the ecclesiastic authorities. When she goes to York and is required to stand before the Archbishop’s court, she attempts a joyful countenance. “I haue cawse to be ryth mery & glad in my sowle þat I may any-thing suffyr for hys lofe, for he suffryd mech mor for me” (123: 24-27). Yet, when actually standing before the Archbishop, enduring his rebuke and the accusations of heresy, the narrative says “& hir flesch tremelyd & whakyd wondirly þat sche was fayn to puttyn hir handys vndyr hir cloþis þat it schulde not ben aspyed” (124: 24-26).

The sequence of this incident follows the sequence in the well-known narrative of Passion of Christ. First, Jesus accepts the Father’s will in John 17:4

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<sup>29</sup> Other Gospel passages that speak to Margery’s suffering include the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5: 10: *Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*; the Last Supper discourses in Jn 15: 18 *If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first*; and Lk 9:23-24 *Then he said to all, If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*

(*I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do*); then he vacillates when in the Garden of Gethsemane, so fearful he sweats drops of blood (Matthew 26: 36-46; Mark 14: 32-42; and Luke 22: 39-46). Finally, Christ stands before the Sanhedrin to answer questions about his teaching and his beliefs (Mark 14: 55-65; Luke 23: 66-71; John 18: 19-24).

For *The Book* scriptural echoes in various elements in the narrative re-enforce Margery's authenticity. By linking Margery with the well-known and respected texts in scripture, *The Book* shows how such a proud, vain and vacillating woman has turned from her sinful ways to practice true virtue and penance. The *Book* is full of these scriptural references, some of them<sup>30</sup> quoted directly, others hinted at. The parallel between Margery and well-known verses help present Margery as a truly spiritual being.

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<sup>30</sup> B. A. Windeatt's translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* identifies over thirty-eight straight quotes from scripture. There are many more motifs within the text that reference scripture themes.

## CHAPTER TWO

## MARGERY THE MYSTIC

**For I Haue Ordeyned Þe**<sup>31</sup>

Margery's story gains some authority through association with accepted and respected scriptural traditions. But the *Book* goes even further; it presents Margery as a mystic. If she is the recipient of special graces, it must be for some mission beyond herself. The mystic is expected to possess a special relationship with God that translates into spiritual "power." This power comes because the mystic is "in touch with the Other: he or she could function like a lens to concentrate and refract the spirit shining through."<sup>32</sup>

The late medieval period saw a shift in devotional attitudes. This change also affected the mystics of this time. Such moves came about because of the "shifting boundaries within the Church: a lay reading public and an audience for contemplative literature outside the cloister."<sup>33</sup> Such changes affected how *The Book* was written, as it would have a readership that is "immeasurably more complex"<sup>34</sup> than earlier audiences may have been.

The *Book* mentions Margery's ties with many associated with the Church, such as monks, friars, anchorites and recluses. "Þan went Þei forth to Brydlyngton-ward and also to many oþer of owyr Lordys louerys, wyth many worthy clerkys, doctorys of dyuynyte, & bachelers also in many dyuers placys"

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<sup>31</sup> *The Book*, 20:10.

<sup>32</sup> Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language," p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, "Convention and Conversion: Patterns in Late Medieval Piety" (*Church History*, Vol. 67, No. 1, March, 1998), 33-34.

<sup>34</sup> Kieckhefer, p. 33-34.

(25: 19-24).<sup>35</sup> Chapter five gives us information on her confessor, a holy man whom Christ himself “bid þe gon to þe ankyr at þe Frer Prechowrys” (17: 31-32). Chapter twelve and thirteen relates how Margery often spent time with monks, speaking to them about the love of God. Chapter eighty-four tells how the “Abbas of Denney, an hows of nunnys, oftyn-tymys sent for þe sayd creatur þat sche xulde come to speke wyth hir & wyth hir sisterys” (202: 6-8). The portrayal of Margery ranks her among many members of its Church.

No one gives Margery more authority than the two mystics mentioned in *The Book*, Birgitta of Sweden and Julian of Norwich. These women are established mystics, both receiving revelations, both fulfilling a mission. By placing Margery alongside these two prominent and well-known personages, *The Book* gives Margery greater recognition. It is the link that can identify her with others proven by time and recognized by the broader Church.

Birgitta was particularly attractive to Margery. Margery is thought to have been born the same year Birgitta died, 1373. By the time Margery had visions, Birgitta’s revelations were well known and held in great acclaim all over Europe.<sup>36</sup> She shared with Margery the role of wife and mother, giving birth to eight children. Birgitta’s life as a mystic develops primarily after the death of her husband, when she spends a great deal of time in prayer and going on pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This is just one example. It is frequently mentioned throughout *The Book*.

<sup>36</sup> *Birgitta of Sweden*, Ed. Marguerite Tjader Harris, Trans. Albert Ryle Kezel, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Tjader Harris, p. 1. The distinction between Margery and Birgitta comes with Birgitta living

Birgitta is mentioned early on in the narrative, in chapter twenty, brought to the fore by Jesus himself: “For I telle þe forsoþe rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to þe dowtyr” (47: 31-33). The connection is obvious, and the reader is aware that a parallel is being drawn between Margery and her spiritual guide. As Birgitta is recognized for her mystical favors, the reader is asked to believe Jesus had also favored Margery with revelations of no less importance or validity.

Margery shows a deep devotion to the Swedish mystic. Chapter thirty-nine gives intimate details of Margery’s experience in Birgitta’s Rome, a time when Birgitta’s canonization is being considered. She seeks out Birgitta’s maid to learn how the mystic was “goodly & meke to euery creatur & þat sche had a lawhyng cher” (95: 17-18). She speaks to “þe good man” who tells her Birgitta was “euyr homly & goodly to alle creaturys þat woldyn spkyn wyth hir” (95: 21-22). She visits the chapel where Birgitta died, and “knelyd also on þe ston on þe wech owr Lord aperyd to Seynt Brigypste and teld hir what day sche xuld deyn on” (95: 25-27). Margery thus reveals a visible connection with Birgitta. The similarity is not accidental.

Further proof of Margery’s likeness to Birgitta is made in the same chapter. Margery is asked to be the godmother of a child of a gentle woman. The child is given the name Birgitta, after the saint. Immediately we learn that “God

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out one role at a time, whereas Margery’s husband is still alive when she decides to live chastely and go on pilgrimage to distant places.

haf hir grace to haue gret lofe in Rome” (94: 28-29). Even in her love of place, Margery is made to resemble Birgitta.

There are other more subtle links to Birgitta. In chapter three, we read that “sche was schreuyne sum-tyme twyes or thryes on þe day” (12: 23-24). B. A. Windeatt’s translation notes that such frequent confession was notable in the life of Birgitta.<sup>38</sup> Margery’s prayer that all sexual desire be “sodeynly sle” in her husband so that they might live chastely directly reflects Birgitta’s chaste relationship with her husband (21: 12). In this same chapter (nine) we learn of a “worschepful doctowr of dyuynite” (22:11) who is recorded as making indexes of the revelations and prophecies of Birgitta.<sup>39</sup> As someone who knew Margery, he undoubtedly shared his knowledge of Birgitta with her.

In a small way, Margery also shares Birgitta’s concern for the affairs of the world. In chapter twenty when she is told there will be an earthquake, her first question to Our Lord is “Alas, derworthy Lord, what xal I do for þe pepyl?” (48: 10). Windeatt notes on this exclamation that “St Bridget of Sweden and St Catherine of Siena were the most celebrated examples of medieval women mystics whose visionary life also included a concern for the affairs of the world.”<sup>40</sup> Margery’s similar concern is meant to invoke theirs.

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<sup>38</sup> Note five for chapter three, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Trans. B. A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 303. Windeatt’s translation will be used throughout this paper when noted.

<sup>39</sup> Windeatt, note four, “This Carmelite friar, Alan of Lynn (born c. 1348), was a Cambridge doctor of divinity and, among his writings, is recorded as having made indexes of the revelations and prophecies of St Bridget of Sweden....A native of Lynn, he was to prove a good friend to Margery.” p. 305.

<sup>40</sup> Windeatt, note three for chapter twenty, p. 309.

The second mystic instrumental in *The Book* is Julian of Norwich. The narrative leads the reader to this relationship with the anchoress when “sche was bodyn by owyr Lord for to gon to an ankres in þe same cyte whych hyte Dame Ielyan” (42: 7-9). She spends considerable time with Julian, telling her “þe grace þat God put in hir sowle,” (42: 10) of her devotions, meditations, holy speeches and wonderful revelations. Margery is seeking approval from the anchoress, because she was expert in “swech thyngys & good counsel cowd geuyn” (42:16).

Julian answers Margery’s questions, and her advice is recorded in detail. First, Julian “hyly thankyd God wyth al hir hert for hys visitacyon” (42: 18). Then she urges the creature to be “obedyent to þe wyl of owyr Lord God” (42:19-20). The *Book* is specific about the kind of counsel Julian gives Margery, how she is to distinguish between the working of the Holy Spirit, and how she is to discern voices that come from the devil. She approves of Margery’s tears, telling her that “God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, deuosyon, er compassyon” (42: 37-38).

The conversation, we are told, lasts many days. It gives the reader a look at the personal encouragement and advice Julian gives to Margery. Up until now, we have seen Margery suffer quite alone in her humiliations and rejections. Jesus has encouraged her, but she is often abandoned by her fellow companions, who were once thought to be her friends. Julian addresses Margery’s sufferings directly with words that are both scriptural and resonant with the words of Jesus:

“feryth not þe langage of þe world, for þe mor despyte, schame, & repref þat ye haue in þe world, for þe mor is yowr meryte in þe sygth of God” (43: 14).

This account not only connects Julian and Margery, but shows Margery absorbing Julian’s spirit. It is a reminder that the two share “time, geography, mystical experience and the confirming fact of actual historical contact and conversation.”<sup>41</sup> Like Julian, Margery is a woman experiencing the Divine. And like Julian, she will record those experiences. Despite Julian’s life as an anchoress, she understands Margery’s challenges. And readers of Julian’s accounts will recognize her style and words in this narrative.<sup>42</sup>

### **Flawme of Fyer wondir Hoot**<sup>43</sup>

There are many accounts in *The Book* that mirror another very popular devotional of her time, Richard Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris*. To understand the importance of these references, it is important to first to understand the status enjoyed by Rolle (+1349). As a writer of religious devotionals,<sup>44</sup> he is considered the “first great writer of the English school of the fourteenth century.”<sup>45</sup> Having spent time living as a hermit, Rolle’s work carries “the same eremitical character and the same desire to apply oneself without impediment to contemplation [as

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<sup>41</sup> Provost, “The two women are so close in so many ways—time, geography, mystical experience, and the confirming fact of actual historical contact and conversation (Ch. 18)—that we naturally link and compare their works”, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Provost, “The style and tone of the recounting reminds the readers very much of Julian’s voice.” and “many readers of both Julian and Margery have noted that Margery’s recounting sounds very much like Julian’s voice” p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *The Book*, 88: 28.

<sup>44</sup> Religious devotionals are distinct from tracts devoted to more theological or philosophical questions. They offer advice on how to practice virtue rather explain Christian doctrine.

<sup>45</sup> *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, Vol. II, Eds. Dom Jean Leclercq, Dom François Vandenbroucke, Louis Bouyer, English Trans. The Benedictines of Holme Eden Abbey, (New York: Seabury 1961), p. 417.

*Ancrene Riwe*].”<sup>46</sup> His book, the *Incendium Amoris*, was widely popular at this time, having been translated into English by Richard Mysin in 1434-5.<sup>47</sup> Direct mention is made of it in chapters seventeen and sixty-two of *The Book*, and hinted at in chapters three, twenty-eight and thirty-five.

One of the Rolle’s most evident influences in *The Book* deals with love’s ability physically to consume and enflame the heart. We read in chapter thirty-five that Margery experienced a burning fire within her breast, a fire so “wondir hoot & delectabyl & ryth comfortabyl” that anyone could reach up and touch her breast and feel the burning heat.<sup>48</sup> If we turn to page one in *Incedium Amoris*, we read, “I was more amazed than I can express when first I felt my heart wax warm, not in imagination but in fact, as it were with a sensible fire”.<sup>49</sup>

In chapter twenty-eight we find an image used by Margery coming, as it were, directly from Rolle’s meditations. The pilgrims are in Jerusalem, and Margery is visiting the holy shrines. When she comes to Mount Calvary, she has a vision of Jesus on the cross, and beholds him “hys precyows tendyr body, alto- rent & toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of wowndys Pan euyr was duffehows of holys” (43: 14). In B. A. Windeatt’s translation of *The Book*, he notes that these words are taken from Rolle’s *Meditations on the Passion*:

Sweet Jesu, thy body is like unto a dove-cote.  
For as a dove-cote is full of holes, so is thy  
body full of wounds. And as a dove pursued by a

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<sup>46</sup> Vandenbroucke, *New Milieux, New Problems*, p. 417.

<sup>47</sup> Vandenbroucke, p. 418.

<sup>48</sup> *The Book*, 88: 28-29.

<sup>49</sup> *The Fire of Love*, a translation of the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle, Hermit, Trans. G. C. Heseltine (London: Burn Oates & Washbourne, 1935), p. 1.

hawk, if she may reach a hole of her house, is safe enough, so sweet Jesu, in temptation thy wounds are the best refuge for us. (modernized from Allen, *English Writings*, p. 35).<sup>50</sup>

Windeatt considers Margery's familiarity with Rolle as a sign of her religious sensibility "saturated in this kind of tender devotion to the manhood of Christ, found among the works of St Anselm and embodied in the most influential *Meditationes Vitae Christi*."<sup>51</sup> Such devotions were popular at this time, but Margery makes particular use of Rolle's imagery.

The strongest reference made to Rolle is made in chapter sixty-two. First we learn of the preacher who caused Margery much suffering by his accusations. Even her amanuensis is affected, disillusioned and taken aback. The account says that our Lord bestowed upon this priest the same abundance of tears, so that "ne he myth not restreyn it ne wel stande þerwyth at þe awter" (153: 21-22). The reader is first told how Jesus treats those who mistreat Margery. Then, a long list of sources is given to support Margery's tears and loud cries. The first is a very long quote from *Þe Prykke of Lofe* written by Bonaventura. The second makes direct reference to Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*: "And his shout, excited and bursting out from the core of his longing love, goes up, of course, to his Maker...I have not the wit to describe this shout or its magnitude..."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> From Windeatt's translation, note ten for chapter twenty-eight, p. 313.

Windeatt's translation will be used throughout this paper when noted.

<sup>51</sup> Windeatt, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Windeatt, quoting from a Penguin translation of the *Incendium Amoris* (tr. C. Wolters, 1972) note four for chapter 62, p. 323.

*The Book* evidently takes many of its themes and devotional aspects from Rolle's devotional. Margery compares many of her visions with what she experiences when Rolle's work is read to her. Margery gives herself some standing by aligning herself with Rolle's work, as it promotes a popular and accepted spirituality. But *The Book* also makes clear that Margery's mystical visions raise her experience above Rolle's:

“sumtyme alle thre Personys in Trinite & o substawns in Godhede dalyid to hir sowle & informyd hir of hir feyth & in hys lofe how sche xuld lofe hym, worshepyng hym, & dredyn Hym, so excellently þat sche herd neuyr boke, neþyr Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne Stimulus Amoris, ne Incendium Amories, ne non oþer þat euyr sche herd redyn þat spak so hyly of lofe of God but þat sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle yf sche cowd or ellys mygth a schwyd as sche felt” (39: 19-28).

*I Suffir Not So Mech*<sup>53</sup>

Birgitta, Julian and Rolle reflect Margery's devotions, prayers and visions. These similarities are placed side by side for the reader to compare. But, as much as Margery imitates her fellow mystics, she is strikingly different as well. Unlike Birgitta, Margery is not commanded by Jesus to found a religious group (Birgitta founded the Birgittine Order), or gather women around her. Nor does she withdraw from the world once she establishes her relationship with the “voice,” as Julian does. She continues to live among the same friends and family, listening and responding to the voice within. She is never far from them except when they abandon her.

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<sup>53</sup> *The Book*, 129: 38.

The late medieval period was ripe with other lay groups, such as the beguines and the tertiaries, groups that offered some form of spiritual life without obliging members to join a religious order.<sup>54</sup> Had Margery joined such a group, she could have enjoyed greater respect and protection. She would also have found comfort from a broader form of communal sharing, which would have tied her to others who were striving toward similar goals and practicing like devotions. Most importantly, Margery would have gained at least some status by being in an officially recognized religious affiliation. Yet Margery never expresses a desire for such communal solitude.

Even her visions, though Christ instructed her to write them down, carry no profound revelation. Her manuscript, which *The Book* tells us plainly she resisted writing for much of her life, is devoid of the deeply theological insights of other mystics, like Julian of Norwich. William Provost says that Julian's works "show her great learning and powerful intellect" and her words "teach profoundly and preach cogently."<sup>55</sup> One could not say the same for Margery's *Book*.

Margery's experience is strikingly different from Julian's. Margery's mystical experiences are simple, down to earth, and almost banal. Provost admits that readers of Julian's *Revelations* find in them a "marvelous understanding...of the...mystic, theologian...[signs of a] celibate, recluse."<sup>56</sup> Julian writes

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<sup>54</sup> Kieckhefer, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> Provost, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Provost, p. 8.

concisely, clearly, and in an orderly fashion. She follows a well-established arrangement that seeks to enlighten others. Margery's *Book* carries almost none of these qualities. Unlike many other mystical writing which tends toward "knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying love,"<sup>57</sup> *The Book* combines Margery's visions with intimate autobiographical material.<sup>58</sup> It tells of visions of Jesus, Mary, St Elizabeth, the Father, St. Mary Magdalene and the twelve apostles, and describes her relationship with them.

Elizabeth Armstrong notes that Birgitta, whose writing also employed a vernacular, appears very different from Margery's:

The *Book* has hardly anything in common with the rigorous, didactic rhetoric that marks...Bridget's addresses to the Church and its erring clergy. In fact, their [Birgitta and Catherine of Siena's] texts are centered in God's voice whose rhetoric of argument and admonition takes precedence over the dialogue between the writers and God; these writers present themselves almost exclusively as mouthpieces for God's word".<sup>59</sup>

Margery's *Book* does not present her as God's "mouthpiece." She is a "plain witness"<sup>60</sup> whose chronicles are straightforward, direct, down to earth and simple as they declare her gifts of prophecy, miracles, or visions. Despite her connection to scripture and her attachment to well-known mystics, Margery has

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<sup>57</sup> From Jean Gerson: *Theologia mystica est experimentalis cognitio habita de Deo per amoris unitivi complexum*", taken from the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1967), p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> Gallyon writes "As a religious treatise Margery Kempe's *Book* stands in a class of its own...she embeds that teaching into an autobiographical framework. This the other medieval writers of devotional treatises do not do. They give us systematic guides to the spiritual life and describe the stages by which the soul may attain to union with God..." p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, "Understanding by Feeling in Margery Kempe's *Book*", p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Armstrong, p. 20.

not the powerful word or mission to distinguish her. The narrative must therefore link her to something more secure, solid, and fundamental.

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE BOOK'S UNDERLYING MONASTIC MOTIF

*Pis Wondyrful Chawngyng*<sup>61</sup>

The dominant pattern in *The Book* is not its scriptural imagery. Nor is the spirituality of the mystics, found in Margery's ties to Birgitta, Julian or Richard Rolle, the fundamental subject matter. Another set of themes, those of conversion, compunction, and vestiture appear over and over again in *The Book*. Such a design indicates an underlying focus on certain spiritual truths that a particular audience would understand. Examining the history of these themes, one can see that this audience is the monastic community. Such a group would recognize the patterns in Margery's narration, and appreciate their significance. This audience exercised real power and influence, and through the legitimate authority it possessed, it would pass judgment on those claiming spiritual experiences.

From the first pages of the *Book* the motif of conversion, as we have seen, is clearly set before the reader. Margery is a sinner, as shown prominently in the first two chapters: "Sche knew no vertu ne goodnesse; sche desyryd all wykkydnesse; lych as þe spyrytys temptyd hir to sey & do so sche seyde & dede" (7: 35-37). As a sinner, Margery needed redemption, and would attain it only through a complete conversion.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Book*, 2: 16.

Conversion stories were popular in ancient culture, and became the bedrock of the ancient monastic tradition, called “metanoia”. As we read in a sermon, “...the word repentance is a rendering of the original Greek μετανοια which means literally a “change of thinking” or a “transformation of the spirit.”<sup>62</sup> Monastic formation included stories concerning conversion as found in the desert fathers and mothers, as well as popular saints of earlier times.

Claude J. Peifer says that the entrance to monastic life begins with a deliberate choice to turn one’s life around. “A man’s [or woman’s] decision to embrace the monastic life demands a shift in his [her] values and a change in the direction of his [her] life.”<sup>63</sup> Traditionally, this monastic change of heart was referred to as “metanoia”, because it was a reversal: one left off former cares and concerns to live a new way of life. For the monastic, *metanoia* began with entrance into a monastery. As such, it is considered the foundation of all monastic orders.<sup>64</sup>

One cannot exaggerate the importance of this point. All monastics, be they enclosed within a cloister or living out their monastic traditions actively (i.e., the friars), are acutely aware of the importance of conversion. Stressed “from the moment of his profession, the monk’s life becomes a continual process of turning

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<sup>62</sup> Matta El-Meskeen was spiritual father of the Monastery of St. Macarius, located in the desert of Scetis, Wadi El-Natroon, Egypt. He is a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The following quote was taken from one of his sermons, collected in *Communion of Love* (New York: Athens Printing Company, 1984), p. 86.

<sup>63</sup> Peifer, OSB, *Monastic Spirituality*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), p. 135.

<sup>64</sup> Peifer, “When he crosses this bridge [monastic profession], the monk experiences a process which is one of the constant themes of the Bible and the liturgy: the process of conversion, which is at the very root of the monastic vocation,” p. 135.

away from sin and turning toward God.”<sup>65</sup> Volumes of spiritual works address this issue. And volumes on spiritual formation are filled with stories from the desert Fathers and Mothers giving examples of those faithful souls that carried out this conversion of heart, some of them quite extraordinary.

As a basic monastic requirement, *metanoia* can be traced as far back as the Eastern monks in the desert. All who wished to leave the city and retire to a cell needed to change. The major transformation took place within oneself, one’s own heart. Such an act mirrored scripture. The concept was inspired from Old Testament stories. The most famous conversion story comes from the second Book of Samuel, chapter eleven. King David has sinned first by taking another man’s wife, and then by placing that man on the front lines of battle so he will be killed. When confronted by the prophet Samuel, David repents. We are told his grief for this sin and his sincerity was so great that he composed Psalm fifty-one. It is the model for all who convert, and starts out with the words “Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion blot out my offense” (Ps 51:1). Such sentiments are at the heart of those in need of repentance, who often carry out rites to prove their change of heart. Some signs include fasting, the wearing of sackcloth and the sprinkling of ashes upon one’s self. The use of such actions signaled that the individual was turning [or changing] her heart.

In the New Testament, conversion of heart was directed toward a more personal and loving God. As in the Old Testament, God was the initiator of that

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<sup>65</sup> Peifer, 135.

change. New Testament texts abound in recommendations to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 1:2). Peifer notes that “the vocation of every Christian demands such a conversion: no one can be a follower of Christ unless he wills to turn from a life of sin to a life of love and service of God.”<sup>66</sup>

Conversion was a central theme in the life of the abbas and ammas of the desert. Abbâ Anthony admonishes his followers that “there are many who fall and who rise up to an attitude of rectitude... better is he who falleth and riseth up than he who standeth and then falleth.”<sup>67</sup> The monastics’ duty was to dedicate themselves to this *metanoia* in a more radical way.

Chapter twenty-one of the *Book* mentions some of the best-known sinners in Christian tradition. The chapter begins with Jesus and Margery in dialogue. Margery complains that she is with child; therefore, she is unworthy to hear him speak because she is still making love with her husband. Jesus reassures her that “Þer may no man let me to lofe whom I wele & as mech as I wyl, for lofe, dowtyr, qwenchith al synne” (49: 8). As this dialogue continues, Jesus reminds Margery of Mary Magdalene, St. Paul, and Mary of Egypt. All are famous sinners turned saints. Mary of Egypt is especially popular with monastics for her austere life after her conversion, living as a hermit in the desert.

The theme continues in chapter twenty-two. Margery is again in dialogue with Jesus, and telling him that she regrets that “I haue ronnyng a-wey fro Þe, & Þow hast ronnyng aftyr me” (50:27-29). Jesus replies with words of assurance,

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<sup>66</sup> Peifer, 135.

<sup>67</sup> *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 140.

adding a long line of virgins to his list of saints: St Katherine, St. Margaret and St Barbara. Adding well-known virgins to the list assures Margery (and the reader) that if her repentance is truly sincere, she will be made as pure as the virgins (another popular trope in monastic literature). As proof of this, Jesus then promises Margery great reward in heaven, and the power to intercede for others. All of these are familiar markers of holiness, making Margery an example of someone who is powerful because she has repented.

*The Book* draws from the well-known tradition of conversion to appeal to an elite audience, the monastics. Familiar with the concept of *metanoia*, they would instantly recognize these markers in the narrative of Margery. This is especially true because *The Book* speaks of Margery's repentance over and over again, which also replicates the monastic practice of daily conversion of heart.

***Sche Wept Ful Plentevowsly*<sup>68</sup>**

No devotion piqued the nerves and patience of others quite as much as Margery's tears. Gail McMurray Gibson notes that "it was the extravagant weeping of Margery Kempe that was most noticeable and troubling to her contemporaries and which has continued to preoccupy modern critics."<sup>69</sup> The narrative repeatedly tells of Margery's inability to control these tears; they came against her will, and they gave her great distress. "sche myt not kepe hir-self fro krying & roryng þow sche xuld a be ded þerfor" (68: 22-23). They also greatly disturbed those around her, her fellow travelers, neighbors, family and clergy.

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<sup>68</sup> *The Book*, 20:5.

<sup>69</sup> *From The Theater of Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 15.

Everyone was moved by Margery's emotions, though not all positively. "Þe cryeng was so lowde & so wondyrful þat it made þe peply astoynd" (68: 27-28).

Dhira B Mahoney interprets Margery's tears as a type of defiance to male authority. She suggests that for Margery, weeping became her only form of expression that was not in patriarchal language, "an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in defiance of the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system."<sup>70</sup> Mahoney believes that Margery is in a battle against the institutionalized church, headed and ruled by males. Margery's only defense is her tears.

These tears, Mahoney says, become Margery's sign of power. They afford her a type of separation from others, tantamount to the anchorite's cell or a nun's monastery wall. They link her to "the many thirteenth- and fourteenth-century continental female saints and mystics who also distinguished themselves by uncontrollable weeping."<sup>71</sup> They inform others of Margery's extraordinary grace, "signs of the visionary experiences that she alone is privileged to witness, and that are denied to her ordinary contemporaries."<sup>72</sup>

Mahoney's interpretation ties Margery to feminist needs of women to find a voice, and attempting to gain such voice through bodily actions. Yet, the link of Margery's tears as "tears equal prayers which equal power"<sup>73</sup> conflicts with how Margery perceives herself according to *The Book*, which gives us a picture of a

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<sup>70</sup> Mahoney, p. 40.

<sup>71</sup> Mahoney, p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> Mahoney, p. 30

<sup>73</sup> Mahoney, p. 41.

woman plagued with doubts about herself, worried if her visions were from God or from the devil; a woman who, though ready to give constructive criticism to monks, priests and even bishops, still faithfully seeks the blessing of her confessor. Such an interpretation also fails to see that such tears brought Margery into the spiritual world of her contemporaries, her monk, friars, and mystic friends. They would read tears differently, identifying them with the ancient monastic tradition of compunction.

From the times of the fathers and mothers of the desert, tears were considered signs of true contrition. In a book of stories from the desert, Abba Pachomius is recorded admonishing his brothers and sisters to “weep and mourn for yourselves because thereof in such wise that ye be edified thereby, that which hath happened shall be forgiven you.”<sup>74</sup> The Greek Church called this gift *penthos*, while Abba Cassian referred to it simply as *compunctio*.<sup>75</sup> Desert father Abba Philimon admonished his followers to grieve over their past sins by “weeping over them day and night.”<sup>76</sup> In time, such mourning came to be called the gift of tears.

Such a gift stems automatically from conversion. It looks upon tears as “the attitude of the saint who fully realizes the depths of his own misery and the reality of the evil of sin.”<sup>77</sup> The psalms give abundant examples of this attitude of

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<sup>74</sup> The following story is taken from a book of sayings of the Abbâs and Ammas of the desert, called *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Vol I, p. 284.

<sup>75</sup> Peifer, p. 209.

<sup>76</sup> *The Philokalia*, Trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware. Vol. II (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 354.

<sup>77</sup> Peifer, p. 109.

weeping for sin,<sup>78</sup> and are further reinforced in 2 Cor 7-10, *I rejoiced...if I saddened you...because you were saddened into repentance*, by Mt 5:4 *Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted*, and by many other writings of the Abbâs, Ammas and Doctors in the church.

Compunction is the natural outflow of conversion.<sup>79</sup> The adage comes from the ancients, who felt that the monastic's principal task was to weep, and that prayers accompanied by such tears were far more powerful than sterile devotions. Cassian highly esteemed these acts of contrition, and the Syrian monks were so well known for their gift of tears that they were not called monks or monastics, but *penthikoi*, which means simply, "mourner."<sup>80</sup>

The Father of monasticism, St. Benedict, recommended compunction to his monks. In his rule, he insists that "we shall be heard not because of much speaking, but for our purity of heart and tears of compunction."<sup>81</sup> Such words echo Pachomius, Philimon, Cassian, and other well-known Desert mystics. Peifer comments on this section of the rule, saying "St. Benedict is not interested in a cold and speculative kind of prayer, which can too easily be sterile because it does not affect the will, but prefers an affective prayer in the form of a tender dialogue between God and the monk."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Among the best known is Ps. 126:5, *Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy.*

<sup>79</sup> Peifer says that "Ancient monasticism eagerly adopted the ideal of compunction, because it was the perfect expression of the habitual attitude of conversion," p. 210.

<sup>80</sup> Peifer, p. 210.

<sup>81</sup> *The Holy Rule of Our Most Holy Father Saint Benedict.* (St Meinrad Abbey: Grail Publications, 1937), p. 37

<sup>82</sup> Peifer, p. 210.

Compunction goes further than penance. The *Ancrene Wisse* admonished one to consider the need for such sorrow: "...these and many more are the reasons why someone should be bitterly sorry for their sins, and weep very bitterly. And it is well if they do so; for weeping is the soul's healing."<sup>83</sup>

When Margery's tears are placed within the tradition of compunction, they link her to a well-known and revered tradition. Monastics could "read" these actions of weeping and identify with them in ways the ordinary laypeople might not. By speaking extensively of Margery's weeping, *The Book* is assured of transmitting the greater message of Margery's holiness and intercessory power with God. Then it doesn't matter if Margery's works are less theological or erudite than Julian or Birgitta's. She has no need of a mission because her life is mirroring the monastic's; it is given over to loving and serving God in a spirit of conversion.

To interpret these tears otherwise circumvents a leading marker of Margery's journey into the realm of the deeply spiritual. If she was concerned with her voice being heard, she showed no interest in attempting any form of writing for over twenty years. Perhaps she was looking for the proper time, or the right words, or the amanuensis that she could trust. But *The Book* only states that she resisted writing because "...sche was comawndyd in hir sowle þat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone" (3: 27-28).

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<sup>83</sup> *Anchoritic Spirituality, Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*. Trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 163.

Margery's tears not only confused and annoyed her fellow citizens; they have been a source of embarrassment to readers of her *Book*. Many have tried to ignore this part of Margery's life, and concentrate on the more "usual" mystical experiences such as miracles, revelations and prophecy. But tears form a major part of the Margery story. The words of Julian of Norwich, "And mech mor, whan God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, deuosyon, er compassyon, he may & owyth to leuyn þat þe Holy Gost is in hys sowle" (42: 36-37; 43: 1) most resonates with monastics, as well as words ascribed to Jesus: "And I schal sey to hem whan þei arn passyd owt of þis world, 'Lo, I ordeynd hir to wepyn for hir synnes, & ye had hir in gret despite..." (158: 36-37; 159: 1-2).

Margery's gift of tears, so problematic for many, was considered the ultimate gift of a monastic in medieval times. It was a sign of true conversion, a gift often ardently prayed for. Margery received this gift while living in the world, dealing with angry pilgrims, suspicious priests, and jealous monks. Margery's tears disturbed many of the faithful of her time. Yet that does not diminish the symbolism of these tears. Jesus tells her "for terys of compu[n]ccyon, deuocyon, & compassyon arn þe heyest & sekerest gyftys þat I geue in erde" (31: 3-5).

#### *Were Clothys of Whyte*<sup>84</sup>

Even as Margery's tears are problematic, so is her wearing of white. In Margery's time, such a custom was carried out solely by consecrated virgins.

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<sup>84</sup> *The Book*, 32:17.

Margery, with fifteen children, could hardly fit into this category. Yet, the *Book* states definitely that Margery is instructed by Christ to wear white, beginning in chapter fifteen, after her conversion.

As with Margery's tears, her wearing of the white garment has puzzled many. Janet Wilson concludes that Margery's white garment is a "figure of excess, capable of dislocating social boundaries and of disrupting society's norms."<sup>85</sup> In her essay Wilson draws out how medieval women, subjected by a patriarchal society, had to find means of communicating. She sees the white garment as one such means for Margery to communicate and proclaim her spiritual experiences. And so, "the very theatricality of her devotions...suggest at one level a consummate actor living out her mystical experiences in a mode of self-dramatization which is close to mime."<sup>86</sup>

Such actions are referred to as carnivalesque. Wilson quotes from Russo, who interprets exaggerated actions as so many types of masks utilized by the actor for a reason. Such theatrical actions helped destabilize established society, thereby opening the way to gaining an audience in an otherwise closed culture.<sup>87</sup> Wilson situates Margery within a society of repressed women of medieval times, who, because she did not have a voice, sought to express herself outwardly through bodily actions.

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<sup>85</sup> Janet Wilson, "Margery and Alison: Women on Top", p. 225.

<sup>86</sup> Wilson, p. 224.

<sup>87</sup> Wilson, p. 224.

Clothing plays a big part in this carnivalesque mode. It is very public, and therefore it gains a broad audience. Wilson puts dress in the category of “grotesque realism” on account of its conspicuous nature. She concludes that by dressing in white Margery “redefines this antifeminist stereotype in her attempt to gain ‘absolute perfection’...as a symbol of virginity she begins to wear white clothes.”<sup>88</sup>

Such non-verbal utterances are important, says Wilson, because Margery must use masculine clerical authorities both to “validate her piety and to record her story.”<sup>89</sup> She cannot get her real message across because even her words will be re-interpreted and recorded according to patriarchal guidelines. Margery’s only resource is her non-verbal behavior, external and masquerading as novel actions and deeds.

Wilson’s argument interprets Margery’s actions as a “symbolic model of transgression.”<sup>90</sup> Yet Margery does not go far enough, in her opinion. And, she believes, this is the reason Margery’s *Book* never receives the admiration or authority that continental mystics such as Birgitta of Sweden, Dorothea of Montau or Angela of Foligno gain. Yet, she says, Margery might be seen “to have created space for the subversive potential of the disorderly woman.”<sup>91</sup>

Wilson is correct in questioning Margery’s wearing of white. Yet, her solution finds Margery more subversive than *The Book* portrays. If *The Book* was

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<sup>88</sup> Wilson, p. 228.

<sup>89</sup> Wilson, p. 233.

<sup>90</sup> Wilson, p. 236.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson, p. 237.

written with the hope of gaining status, could it possibly have gained it as a narrative of a disorderly, hysterical woman? There has to be a deeper symbolism, one that would speak to some section of the perceived medieval audience. As Margery followed the monastic traditions of conversion and compunction, so her wearing of white can be seen as her form of adopting the custom of leaving off the world by changing her garb.

Chapter fifteen starts with these words: “Thys creatur, whan owyr Lord had foryouyn hir hir synne as is wrete be-forn...” (32:1). Once Margery’s state of conversion is firmly established, the narrative can proceed to bring in other symbolic models. And so, it continues with the words of Jesus: “And dowtyr, I sey to þe þu were clothys of whyte & non oþer colowr, for þu xal ben arayd aftyr my wyl” (32:16-18). The concept is consistent; first the sinner repents and turns from sin, then the sinner shows the sincerity of this change by replacing her own garments with those indicative of a certain spiritual state.

Like *metanoia*, vestiture is an ancient and venerable tradition. By having Jesus command Margery to wear white, the narrative is situating Margery within such a tradition. Ludwig Münster writes about the symbolism of this monastic custom: “The symbolism of the garments [given at such ceremonies] shows a deep connection with the history of salvation.”<sup>92</sup> Such ceremonies draw from the biblical accounts of Adam and Eve. The Genesis story says that after Adam and Eve had sinned, they hid because they were naked. Before they were driven out

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<sup>92</sup> *Christ in His Consecrated Virgins*, Ludwig Münster, Trans. Basil Stegmann, OSB & Sister M. Margretta, OSB (Collegeville: 1957), p. 28.

of the Garden of Eden, “the Lord God made leather garments [for them] with which he clothed them.”<sup>93</sup> This action is often interpreted as the sign of the covenant made by God with humankind, a foreshadowing of the promise of salvation to come.

Monastic clothing seeks to mirror that covenant, borrowing from the garden story and giving it a spiritual value. The monastic ceremony is similar to the baptism rite, when the baptized receive a white garment and are “promised the garb of salvation and the robes of eternal bliss.”<sup>94</sup> Such ceremonies are meant to portray how sin makes us naked, and how Christ renews us by clothing us. The idea is expressed in scripture in 2 Cor. 5:2-5: “For in this tent we groan, longing to be further clothed with our heavenly habitation,” and 1 Cor. 15:5: “And when this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about.”

Margery herself resists Christ’s first command to wear white. She protests that others will judge her unkindly if she presumes to dress in a white garment, as they will know she is not a virgin, and “þei wyl sey I am an ypocryt & wondryn vp-on me” (32:21). Such resistance shows that even Margery is initially unaware of the deeper spiritual significance of changing her garments.

It is only after Margery is finally given official permission to dress in this way by the Archbishop of York that she seems to understand its significance. The

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<sup>93</sup> Gen. 3: 21.

<sup>94</sup> Münster, p. 28.

Episcopal approbation parallels the monastic's rite of passage. Margery can then be judged authentic, her prayers, visions and tears a true sign of her interior spirit of contemplation. Then what others call hysteria, dementia or lunacy can be dismissed. Margery's clothing in the white garment states her genuine mystical experiences.

In *Christ and His Consecrated Virgins* we read the words sung by the virgins as they receive the white garment: "The kingdom of the world and all worldly ornaments have I despised for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, whom in love I have chosen."<sup>95</sup> These words echo many passages found in the narration of Margery, wife, mother, and mystic.

Important in this interpretation is the audience that would recognize this description. Every monastic of this time would have undergone clothing. Each would readily recognize Margery's new garb as some form of initiation, some to their annoyance, others in admiration. In both cases, Margery's message would not be so much one of subversion as of conversion. If Margery is to be accepted as an authentic mystic, the motif of true conversion of heart was central to her portrayal of her experiences.

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<sup>95</sup> Münster, p. 39.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## MOUNT GRACE PRIORY

*Pei Pat Worshep Pe Worshep Me*<sup>96</sup>

I have maintained throughout this paper that the underlying themes of conversion, compunction and clothing found in *The Book* speak to a specific audience. It is the same audience that obtained, preserved and copied the manuscript. When the manuscript re-appeared in 1934, the heading signified that the copy was from the library of the Carthusian monks of Mount Grace in Yorkshire, North Riding. After the dissolution of the monastery in 1539 *The Book* was kept by the Butler-Bowdon family of Pleasington Hall, Lancashire.<sup>97</sup> Understanding the history of the Carthusians will shed light on why the monks would keep and copy *The Book*.

By the eleventh century, Benedictine monasteries had not only become huge centers of learning, but were also wealthy, powerful and involved in many matters of secular life. LeClercq notes that John of Fécamp spoke out against monastic corruption, accusing abbots of being “wealthier than bishops...there is no longer a great enough difference between the great ones of this world and the abbots who cultivate their friendship.”<sup>98</sup> With a growing number of monks and nuns desirous of living in true poverty and prayer, new institutions came into

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<sup>96</sup> *The Book*, 23:1.

<sup>97</sup> Goodman, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> LeClercq, p. 129.

being. Prominent among these were Cistercians, Premonstratensians, and Carthusians.

Carthusians give St Bruno credit for their establishment, though Guigo wrote the *Customs* that eventually became their "Institutions" (rule).<sup>99</sup> Bruno was not the first to attempt a revitalization of monastic life. Yet, his group specialized in two noteworthy points: they were centers for intellectuals and their main work was copying manuscripts.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the extreme solitary and ascetic life led by Carthusians, the monasteries flourished. Coppack says that "scholarship was highly prized" in Carthusian monasteries, and LeClercq notes that Carthusians attracted men of character and depth, and became "a centre of interest for the greatest spiritual men of the age."<sup>101</sup> The Carthusians exemplified what the faithful expected to find in a monk, given to "the most adequate synthesis of the contemplative ideal, an absolute love of God."<sup>102</sup>

The unique manuscript of *The Book* discovered in 1934 has inscribed on the top of the first page, *Liber Montis Gracie*. The boke is of Mountegrace."<sup>103</sup> It is striking that Margery's story was kept by a monastic group founded specifically to revive true asceticism. It strongly suggests that the monks found some intrinsic value in the narrative.

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<sup>99</sup> Leclercq, p. 154.

<sup>100</sup> Leclercq, p. 157 and Glyn Coppack, *Mount Grace Priory* (London: English Heritage, 1991), "from the earliest days a high priority was given to the collection and copying of books." p. 38.

<sup>101</sup> Leclercq, p. 156.

<sup>102</sup> Leclercq, p. 156.

<sup>103</sup> *The Book*, p. 1.

Anthony Goodman gives great detail about the historical time and setting of the Priory of Mount Grace. It was a vibrant community, well known in England, an “influential community, twenty-seven strong at the dissolution of the priory in 1539.”<sup>104</sup> Like monks of other orders, many if not most of these were drawn from “the literate upper levels of society.”<sup>105</sup>

Reading is considered an essential element in monastic tradition. The spiritual writers of the twelfth century gave great prominence to *lectio*, as it is called, especially as society shifted from oral histories to written texts and a greater percentage became literate.<sup>106</sup> Guigo II recommended *lectio* to the Carthusians as a way of gaining holiness.<sup>107</sup> In time, *lectio* became for the Carthusians, “the very locus of the encounter between man and God.”<sup>108</sup> As such, the books that filled monastic libraries were carefully chosen to help facilitate this task. Reading should spark some spiritual enlightenment for the monks.

Goodman believes Mount Grace’s subsequent transference of Margery’s work after the dissolution signals a “precious devotional testimony” since possession of the manuscript would have been used “to support accusations of subversiveness.”<sup>109</sup> He also believes the *Book* disappeared during the Tudor period because public discourse was increasingly focused on “the propriety of

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<sup>104</sup> Goodman, p. 1.

<sup>105</sup> Coppack, p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> “St Bernard...sought in many areas of monastic life to return to a simpler and more rigorously ascetic spirituality...[to] conceive of reading as an indispensable aid to spiritual growth.” Monica Sandor, “Lectio Divina and the Monastic Spirituality of Reading” *The American Benedictine Review* (40:1-March 1989), p. 83.

<sup>108</sup> Sandor, p. 102.

<sup>109</sup> Goodman, p. 2.

harmonious obedience to hierarchical prescriptions... Women should know their place – which, *The Book* shows, some of Margery’s contemporaries thought on occasion she did not.”<sup>110</sup>

Evidence of the monastic’s ability to identify with Margery comes through the marginal glosses found in the manuscript. In the introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, S. B. Meech says of the marginal and interlinear writings: “I therefore incline to the opinion that all these writings in red ink are by one man.”<sup>111</sup> He further writes that he is of the opinion, from the subject matter and the persons referred to, that this man was a monk at Mount Grace, writing his annotations in the early sixteenth century.<sup>112</sup> Many of these marginal glosses are at points in the narrative where the transcriber agrees with a particular point, giving further evidence of the monk’s ability to identify with *The Book*.

The first notable gloss comes in chapter thirteen. The narrative is describing Margery in Canterbury, where she is despised and reprovved by both monks and priests because of her excessive weeping. It recounts Margery’s trial with a few of the monks, and how the people around her are stirred up against her. When she leaves the monastery, these same people cry out that she should be burned as a heretic and a Lollard. Margery, terribly distressed by the accusations, trembles with great fear, and asks Christ for help.

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<sup>110</sup> Goodman, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> *The Book*, Introduction, p. xxxvi.

<sup>112</sup> *The Book*, Introduction, p. xxxvi.

When she retires from these companions, her prayer is answered. We read:

Sche was in gret rest of sowle a gret whyle & had hy contemplacyon day be day & many holy spech & dalyawns of owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst boþe a-for-noon & aftyr-noon, wyth many swet terys of hy deuocyon so plentyvowsly & contynually þat it was meruayle þat hir eyne enduryd er how hir hert mygth lestyn þat it was not consumyd wyth ardowr of lofe, whych was kyndelyd wyth þe holy dalyawns of owyr Lord..." (29: 11-19).

Along the margin, a hand writes in red "R. Medlay. V. was wont so to say."<sup>113</sup>

Windeatt explains in the note in his translation that Methley was a Carthusian mystic of Mount Grace (b. 1451), and had done a number of translations, among them *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Mirror of Simple Souls*.<sup>114</sup> Such annotation proves that this paragraph resonates within this community, as it repeats the experience of one of its own.

In this same chapter on the same page, there is a drawing of a pillar in the margin to the right of this paragraph, toward the end. Windeatt explains in a footnote that this symbol was used by some "medieval German women mystics" who thought of themselves as chosen by God as pillars of the faith and of the Church.<sup>115</sup> The marginal pillar again reaffirms someone recognized Margery as a companion to other mystics of this time.

The next notable gloss comes in chapter twenty-eight. This chapter deals primarily with Margery's tears. She is on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. When she reaches the Mount of Calvary, she has a vision of the crucifixion. We read

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<sup>113</sup> *The Book*, note three for chapter thirteen, p. 29.

<sup>114</sup> Windeatt, note four for chapter thirteen, p. 306.

<sup>115</sup> Windeatt, note five for chapter thirteen, p. 306.

“...sche fel down þat sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in þe cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed” (68: 12-17). The gloss notes that “so fa RM & f Norton & of Wakenes of þe passyon” is written in red.<sup>116</sup> Windeatt comments that both Richard Methley and John Norton are Mount Grace mystics who reportedly “also experienced this weakness in association with the Passion.”<sup>117</sup>

The fourth important marginal gloss comes in chapter forty-four. In this chapter Margery finally fulfills the request of Jesus to wear white. An unnamed gentleman buys the white cloth for her, and has it made into a gown, a girdle, a hood and a cloak. After she dresses in the white garments, we read that “...sche was howselyd al in white, & sithen hath sche sufferyd meche despyte & meche schame in many dyuers cuntreys, cyteys, & townys, thankyd be God of alle” (104:24-26).

The chapter goes on to describe how Margery suffered much from the cold that winter in Lynn. While suffering shame and abuse for wearing white, she is again visited with the gift of tears, and “...sche cryed so lowde whan owr Lord yaf hyr mend of hys Passyon” (105: 5-6). Matters get worse, as the people of King’s Lynn decide she must have a devil. Margery patiently suffers their slander, and continues to shed abundant tears when in prayer. The narrative

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<sup>116</sup> *The Book*, 68, note seven.

<sup>117</sup> Windeatt, note nine for chapter twenty-eight, p. 312.

describes Margery's weeping, accompanied by her bodily rolling on the ground. Here the gloss is inserted, saying "so dyd prior Nort in hys excesse" in red ink, "with the t of Nort flourished."<sup>118</sup> Prior Norton, as has been noted above, was a prior of Mount Grace.

All of these marginal glosses confirm how at least one monastic of this monastery identified with the spirituality Margery describes in *The Book*. The manuscript is kept in the monastery library. It is faithfully copied out by one of the monks. And the hand that copied the manuscript leaves notes on how Margery's narrative correlates with the experience of several of the monks. These similar experiences deal with Margery's sorrow for past sin (sign of conversion), her copious tears (her form of compunction) and the devotional graces she receives after suffering for wearing the white garment (mark of Margery "vestiture").

After the dissolutions of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, *The Book* disappeared until the twentieth century. Excerpts appeared in two printed extracts.<sup>119</sup> One appeared in a printing of 1501 by Wynkyn de Worde, "a seven-page quarto pamphlet of extracts from the more devotional parts of the book, *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of*

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<sup>118</sup> *The Book*, 105, note four.

<sup>119</sup> Preface from *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p. xvii.

*the boke of Margerie kempe of Lynn.*<sup>120</sup> Henry Pepwell reprinted these same extracts in 1521, describing Margery Kempe as “a devoute ances.”<sup>121</sup> These texts concentrated solely on the spiritual experience of Margery.

When *The Book* reappeared in 1934, many were surprised by its contents. Margery was not an anchoress, like Julian. In fact, her writings wrought with spiritual insight also included mundane autobiographical materials. Scholars found such revelations disappointing. Karma Lochrie says it is this disappointment, “rather than any full understanding of Kempe’s place in mystical history, which has shaped contemporary evaluations of her.”<sup>122</sup>

Butler-Bowdon, the owner of the manuscript, offered his own modernized version of the text in 1936, in which he re-arranged the contents. The longer of the two prefaces, the concluding prayer, and thirteen chapters detailing Margery’s mystical encounters with Christ were put in an appendix.<sup>123</sup> A note explaining the reason for this edition simply stated that such material “would prove wearisome.”<sup>124</sup>

Another early reviewer, Graham Greene, discounted the mystical experiences entirely, and hailed the *Book* for giving modern society a chance to see realistically into the medieval world: “Nowhere else can we find so vivid a picture of England in the early years of the fifteenth century...her book is a kind

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<sup>120</sup> Windeatt, p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Windeatt, p. 9.

<sup>122</sup> Karma Lochrie *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> Barry Windeatt’s Introduction to *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Windeatt’s Introduction, p. 2.

of Froissart of civil life...she had a sense of *this* world.”<sup>125</sup> This view fails to find any importance to the spiritual aspects of this narrative.

Attempts to edit *The Book* may explain why the monastic themes have not been recognized. Removing or moving sections of the narrative unbalances the whole, putting undue attention on Margery’s tears, or her wearing of white, or the confusion she generates by not fitting into a known and accepted role. Consequently the shape of the *Book* is distorted. It must be read as a whole if the themes that flow through the entire narrative are to be recognized.

What is clearly present throughout *The Book* but almost always overlooked is Margery’s interaction with monastic culture. Several chapters deal with Margery’s contact with various types of religious: monks and cloistered nuns, friars and anchoress Dame Julian. Chapter twelve notes her visit to monks in King’s Lynn, and tells us that her confessor was a Dominican, one who would have followed the monastic traits of conversion, compunction and investiture. Chapter eighty-four details her invitation by the Abbess of Denny to come and speak with the nuns. These details inform the reader of Margery’s dealings with those familiar with the monastic viewpoint, beliefs and customs.

I believe *The Book* adopts monastic themes in order to gain the interest of monastic communities like the ones she interacts with. By so doing, the *Book* establishes its own authority. In medieval times no group had deeper roots or greater sway than the monastic orders. As centers of power, they exerted

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<sup>125</sup> Windeatt, p. 3.

influences beyond a single country or region. Monastics who recognized the ties between Margery's life and their own spirituality would value the narrative.

The tendency to read *The Book* simply as a literary text limits its influence. So far literary scholarship has failed to examine one crucial area, the tie between the spiritual practices of the character, Margery, and well-known monastic traditions. These ties are important because they add weight and authority to the religious narrative. If the scribe is presenting Margery as a holy woman like St. Birgitta, Julian of Norwich, or St. Katherine, he must support that presentation. He does so by linking Margery's devotional practices to time-honored and well-established traditions exercised by the ancient monks and nuns.

The three major themes of the *Book* deal with the monastic customs of conversion, compunction and investiture. Researching into these forms, it can be seen that the ancient monastic traditions carry a striking similarity with the basic practices and devotions noted in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Viewing the text from this point, one can observe just how successful the narrative becomes. The audience that sought out, preserved, and copied the manuscript were monastics, the Carthusian Monks at the Priory of Mount Grace. By placing *The Book* on the shelves of their monastic library, they honored the narrative and gave credence to its story.

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