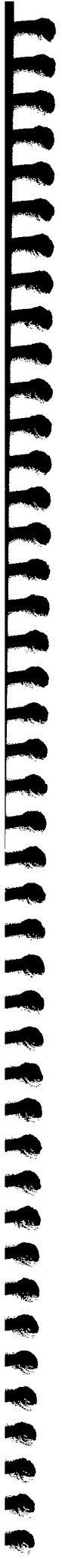


“Art Thu a Mayden?”:
Margery Kempe as Martyr and Virgin
by
Megan L. Cook

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Abstract

Much has been written about the *Book of Margery Kempe* in recent years and while a substantial portion of this work deals with the influence of sacred biography on the text, and on Margery's attempts to present herself as a saint-like figure, to date relatively little has been written about the specific influence of virgin martyr narratives on the *Book*. In this thesis, I explore the relationship between the *Book* and late medieval concepts of virgin martyrdom as expressed in sacred biography. Ultimately, I seek to discover the ways in which Margery both adopts and alters elements from these texts into her own narrative.

My first section aims to establish the conventions of the hagiographic genre with which Margery would have been familiar and examines the virgin martyr narratives of two of Margery's fellow East Anglians, Osbern Bokenham and John Capgrave. Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* tends to characterize these women in ways that severely limit their possibilities for action within the text. Often, virginity is equated with submission to God, and this, in turn, is opposed to marriage and subservience to an earthly husband. Capgrave's *Life of Saint Katherine* depicts a stronger and more independent heroine, but also shows the ways in which the hagiographic genre itself, with its emphasis on death and sacrifice, constrains women to a relatively narrow sphere of action. Nevertheless, in both texts, the virgin martyr is shown to have unique possibilities for resistance, both to social and religious norms.

The second section of my thesis looks at the ways, explicit and implicit, that Margery appropriates elements from virgin martyr narratives and incorporates them into her own story. This appropriation includes not only mention of specific martyrs within the *Book* and Margery's own negotiation of chastity with her husband, but also her bluntly confrontational style and insistence on demonstrating her uniqueness through physical signifiers like the wearing of white clothes. These strategies, I argue, align Margery with virgin martyrs both in the mind of the reader and in the eyes of her fellow Englishpersons.

In the third and final section, I look at the ways in which Margery alters the categories of virgin and martyr. These categories must be revised and enlarged if Margery is to align herself with them, since she is physically neither a virgin nor a martyr—facts that Margery makes very clear in the text. Ultimately, the *Book* challenges the narrow vision of women's spirituality expressed in works like *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* and *Life of Saint Katherine*. Margery relocates the concept of virginity from the physical to the spiritual realm, and likewise transforms the idea of martyrdom by presenting the relationship between Margery and God as one in which her good intentions, as well as her physical actions, carry weight.

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Short Titles

Book: Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Lynn Staley. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996

BMK: Staley, Lynn, trans. and ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001.

Legendys: Bokenham, Osbern. *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Ed. Margy Serjeantson. London: Early English Text Society, 1938.

Katherine: Capgrave, John. *The Life of Saint Katherine*. Ed. Karen Winstead. Kalamazoo MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999.

Introduction

On its surface, *The Book of Margery Kempe* tells a relatively straightforward, if somewhat unusual, story. The first known autobiography in English, it recounts the life of Margery Kempe, a laywoman living in King's Lynn, England, in the early- to mid-fifteenth century. Of bourgeois heritage (her father was a member of the prestigious Guild of the Trinity and had served as mayor), Margery married John Kempe, a man of somewhat lesser social and economic standing, and bore him fourteen children before committing to a life of chastity and pilgrimage around the age of forty. The *Book* interests modern scholars for a variety of reasons—Margery's experiences as a brewer, for example, provide valuable insight into the emerging capitalist system in England—but it becomes clear in the course of reading that Kempe intended for the *Book* to be read primarily for devotional or spiritual purposes. The Proem that prefaces the *Book* makes this clear, saying,

Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherin
thei may have gret solas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and
unspecabyl mercy of ower soveryn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu, whos name be
worschepd and magnifyed wythowten ende, that no in ower days to us unworthy
deyneth to exercysen hys nobeley and hys goodnesse. (*Book*, Proem, ll. 1-5)

[Here begins a short treatise and a comfortable for sinful wretches, wherein they
may have great solace and comfort for themselves and understand the high and
unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Savior Christ Jesus, whose name be

worshipped and magnified without end, that now in our days to us, unworthy, deigns to exercise his nobleness and his goodness. (*BMK*, 3)]

The *Book* itself begins by recounting the madness that Margery—from the outset referred to not by name or in the first person, but by the humbler “this creature”—experienced after the birth of her first child. A miraculous vision of Christ ends this madness, and starts Margery on a path of religious devotion that she will follow for the rest of her life. She receives tears of compunction, copious weeping that earns her the respect of some and the scorn of many, and has visions of the Virgin and Christ both at the nativity and the crucifixion. Kempe records her travels throughout England and her pilgrimages to sights in Rome and the Holy Land. The *Book* tells us of Kempe’s critics and supporters, her conflicts with religious authority figures like the Archbishop of York, and her relationship with her husband, John. Finally, in a kind of epilogue, Kempe describes a trip to Germany to visit the son whom she has formerly cursed and concludes with the prayers of Margery, by now an old woman, as she again travels on pilgrimage throughout England. In addition to recounting this already busy life, Kempe records more than a dozen of her “conversations” with God throughout the course the *Book*. These conversations are alternately joyful, erotic, reassuring, and sad, but remain always emotional.

Sprinkled among the ninety-nine short chapters that compose the *Book* are numerous allusions to female saints known for their chastity. Some, like Mary of Oinges and St. Bridget, are historical personages whom Margery or her clerical supporters would have known through devotional literature of the period. Others, like St. Katherine, Margaret, and Barbara, are martyrs, legendary figures dating from the early centuries of Christianity who may or may not have a historical basis. These stories, too, were circulated via hagiographic literature like the

anonymous *South English Legendary* or *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine. Among the most popular literature of the late Middle Ages, the stories contained in these books would have been accessible via sermons or oral retellings even to a woman like Kempe, who remained illiterate throughout her life.

Even when Kempe does not invoke the saints by name, elements from virgin martyr hagiography echo throughout the *Book*. Soon after her initial visions of Christ, sexual intercourse becomes intolerable to Margery and, after some time, she is able to negotiate abstinence between herself and her husband (*Book*, Chapter 11). Later, this agreement is formalized in a ceremony before the Bishop of Lincoln, at which time Margery asks to take a ring and mantle symbolizing her commitment to Christ and begins to wear white clothing—both markers of Margery’s special status (though the Bishop does not, ultimately, allow her to take formal vows of married chastity) (*Book*, Chapter 15). Margery fantasizes about dying a martyr’s death (*Book*, Chapter 14), and, though God does assure her that he “lofe wyfes also, and specyal tho wyfys whech woldyn levyn chast, yyf thei mystyn have her wyl” (*Book*, Ch. 21, ll. 115-6), the *Book* stresses that, in heaven, Margery will receive the same grace promised to the virgin martyr saints Katherine, Margaret, Barbara, and Paul (*Book*, Ch. 22, ll. 1187-1190). Most pervasive throughout the text, Kempe’s depiction of the conflict between Margery and figures of religious authority evokes the antagonistic relationship between the saint and representatives of the pagan social order.

The *Book*, of course, is far from a hagiographic legend. Margery is not a virgin but a mother and wife, and, rather than dying at the hands of a pagan executioner, she lives to an age far beyond the average life expectancy of a fifteenth-century Englishwoman, even after giving birth more than a dozen times. She receives her spiritual calling as an adult rather than in

childhood, while most of the virgin martyrs she venerates first come to their faith in girlhood or adolescence. The society that surrounds her worships not a pantheon of gods, but rather is thoroughly permeated with Christian thought, imagery and practice. If Kempe's world is so far removed from that of the virgin martyrs, why does she choose to include so much hagiographic imagery, placing herself in the role of martyr?

To answer this question, we must begin by imagining Kempe in dialogue with the hagiographic milieu that would have surrounded her. The impact of Margery's hagiographic posturing lies not so much in what is retained from the legends—miraculous occurrences, chastity, persecution, references to popular saints—but the ways in which those familiar symbols of saintliness are altered and revised. Ultimately, these subtle changes to familiar motifs work to expand the idea of holiness to include a woman like Margery, who is by turns humble and aggrandizing, plagued by self-doubt and aggravatingly stubborn, but who remains always and thoroughly human.

The first section of this thesis focuses on the hagiographic writing of two of Margery's fellow East Anglians, the clerics Osbern Bokenham and John Capgrave. I examine Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, a collection of lives of thirteen female saints, ten of whom are virgin martyrs. In his treatment of the virgin martyr legends, I argue, Bokenham deploys strategies of containment and control that belie the way in which the virgin martyr constituted a uniquely reinterpretable figure in late medieval religious discourse. Capgrave's *Life of St. Katherine*, on the other hand, moves beyond some of the conventions used by Bokenham to create a more nuanced portrait of its protagonist, but nevertheless is constrained by generic convention to an ending that forecloses on many of the alternative possibilities posed by the rebellious and articulate figure of Katherine.

In my second section, I outline the ways in which Margery adopts the trappings of a virgin martyr both explicitly, through the institution of chastity in her marriage and her antagonistic relationship with authority figures, and implicitly, through discussions of virginity and martyrdom in her dialogues with God and appeals, by name, to virgin martyrs. I also cite textual evidence that suggests that those around Margery received her behavior in such a way that the parallels between her life and that of a virgin martyr must have been evident.

The third and final section of my thesis offers an analysis of the ways in which Margery, having constituted herself as virgin and martyr, subtly and not-so-subtly reworks those constructions. I posit that in the *Book*, Kempe attempts to relocate virginity from the physical sphere into the social sphere and make the status it confers available not only to physical virgins, but to a woman such as Margery. At the same time, the non-linear structure of the narrative and the absence of a final *passio* return meaning and significance to everyday acts of spiritual devotion, rather than rendering all other events insignificant beside the ultimate sacrifice of a martyr's death.

Virgin Martyrs in Verse: Control and Resistance

Contemporary power relations theory suggests a reading of hagiography as yet another means through which the Church, in a relatively dominant position, could exert control over the limited ways in which spiritual women might be viewed while at the same time denying women a voice in the construction of their own identities. The predominance of male clerics as the authors of spiritual standards for women is nearly total: with a few notable exceptions like Julian of Norwich, it is men and not women who depict women's spirituality for a wider audience and control the representation of spiritual women in texts.

One possible interpretation of this situation is to see medieval women as in a largely powerless position with regard to their religion, where the male cleric is free to construct feminine spiritual experience to suit his own ends and where women have little say in the process. Certainly, the *Book* presents us with scenes that might sustain this reading: Margery's tears of compunction, a central component in her own meaningful spiritual experience, draw scorn from priests and laymen alike, and even her more orthodox spiritual practices are the subject of criticism by the ecclesiastate. For example, in Margery's confrontation with the Archbishop of York, the ecclesiastical court takes her knowledge of Scripture and Church doctrine as grounds for charges of heresy; the evangelical stance that Margery sees as integral to religious life is interpreted by the Church as grounds for criminal charges. The questions posed by the court at York focus on those aspects of Margery's behavior that run most contrary to expectations of a "good" Christian wife, particularly one of Margery's social class and status: "Why gost thou in white? Art thou a mayden?" "Why wepist thou so, woman?" (*Book*, Ch. 52, ll. 2923, 2943). To understand why these questions are so pressing, we might turn to hagiography contemporary to the *Book* and to the writers' complex relationships with their female subjects.

...

Osbern Bokenham: *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*

Hagiography becomes particularly important to the story of women's spirituality in England during the late Middle Ages, as the institutional church and the general Christian tradition provided few female role models for women to emulate apart from these. For the clerical writer of the lives of female saints, the stakes were quite high: he (or, rarely, she) was in a very real sense constructing the idealized Christian woman. Many of the writers of hagiography were clerics, and by way of their religious vocations we might assume they were well attuned to what constituted "proper" depictions of these religious figures. Osbern Bokenham was such a cleric; his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* was completed in or around 1447, probably within ten years of the *Book's* date of composition.¹ Though Bokenham was only one of a number of hagiographic authors who flourished in the fifteenth century, like John Capgrave, his temporal and geographic proximity to Margery Kempe makes *Legendys* a convenient case study of hagiographic conventions in this period. And while Mary Serjeantson writes in the preface to the Early English Text Society edition of the *Legendys* that her "treatment of such questions as Bokenham's sources, literary value, and so forth" will be brief due to the fact that "though [she] is much attached to Bokenham, [she] is not at all sure that he is worth extended study from these points of view," (*Legendys*, vii) studies such as Sheila Delaney's book *Impolitic Bodies* reveal considerable depth and complexity in Bokenham's *Legendys*.

As previously noted, ten of Bokenham's thirteen stories feature virgin martyr saints. Within these ten short stories, virginity functions in a number of different contexts. The most

prevalent setting is the social sphere, where the martyr lays claim to her virginity as a means of resisting marriage and integration into the larger, pagan society. Margaret cites her Christian faith as the reason why she cannot marry Olibrius; he eventually has her killed for her refusal to marry, despite his appreciation for her beauty. In an interesting conflation of familiar and civic authority, Christina is confined by her father, a pagan and a prefect in the city of Antioch, after refusing to accept any of her many suitors. After her father's death the new prefect continues and intensifies Christina's persecution. A third prefect completes the triad and actually arranges Christina's martyrdom, fulfilling the prophecy that she would be tried by three judges. Ursula, the daughter of a Christian king, refuses to marry the King of England's son until he converts to Christianity. Anges, likewise, refuses to marry the prefect's son for religious reasons, the same grounds on which Katherine of Alexandria refuses marriage to Maxentius and on which Lucy rejects her fiancé. Saint Cecilia, though married, does not consummate the marriage but instead converts her husband to a similar program of Christian virginity. Only three of Bokenham's virgins, Faith, Dorothy, and Agatha, are not faced with some kind of marriage proposal, a fact that speaks powerfully to the degree to which marriage and virginity were interrelated concepts in the late Middle Ages.

For all of the virginal women in *Legendys*, their commitment to virginity is also a marker of their religious commitment to Christ. Two of the legends, that of Faith and that of Anges, emphasize the overtly religious nature of the virgins' dedication to chastity explicitly stating the fact that virginity in the service of a pagan god is worse than martyrdom while maintaining the Christian faith. The officer Dacyan offers Faith the following bargain:

¹ In addition to giving us a sense for hagiographic conventions at the time of Margery's writing, *Legendys* also provides us with concrete evidence of female, lay readership of saintly literature. A number of Bokenham's legends

'Yf algate chastyte thou wylt han
 Of body, furst do cryst forsake,
 And than the offer to seruyn dyan,
 Lych the in kynde, & clothys blake
 Vse in hyr temple, & I the shal make
 [S]o hye in worshype & ryches growe
 That men to the shul goon ful lowe.' (*Legendys*, ll. 3685-91)

[If total chastity thou will have
 Of body, first do Christ forsake
 And then thee offer to serve Diana
 Like thee in kind & clothes black
 Use in her temple & I thee shall make
 So high in worship & in riches grow
 That men to thee shall become full lowe.]²

Bokenham reports Faith's answer as follows:

'By thi promissys ne by thi feyr speche
 Plenely I set ryht noht,' quod she;
 'For, as holy fadrys doctryne doth teche,
 Noht ellis your goddys but deuyllys be.

name lay female patrons.

² All translations in this section are my own.

Wehre-fore I merueyle that thou conselyst me

Very god & hys true feyth despise,

And to fals goddys to do sacrifice.'

(*Legendys*, ll. 3692-8)

["By thy promises nor by thy fair speech

Plainly I set right not," quoth she;

"For, as the holy fathers' doctrine doth teach,

Naught else your gods but devils be.

Wherefore I marvel that thou counsels me

Very God and his true faith despise

And to false gods make sacrifice."']

Rhetorically, this exchange relocates the debate between Faith and Dacyan from a sexual sphere into a religious one. Faith's response makes it clear that this debate is not about the physical state of her body; rather, her uncorrupted body is to be a stand-in, a physical representation of her uncorrupted soul. In a similar way, Agnes is offered a choice between service to the goddess Vesta and confinement in a brothel:

'oon of two thingys chese,' quod Sympronyan,

The prefect, 'o anneys, after my decree:

Or wyth othier uirgyns the goddess serue uestan,

Or with comoun wmmen thou shal abused be,'

(*Legendys*, ll. 4288-91)

["One of two things choose," quod Sympronyan
The prefect, "O Agnes, after my decree:
With other virgins serve the goddess Vesta
Or with common woman thou shall abused be,"]

Like Faith, Anges chooses to risk her sexual purity rather than renounce her religious beliefs. She is stripped as she stands before the tribunal, but her hair miraculously grows long and thick enough to cover her. She is then taken to a brothel but remains protected by a miraculous light that blinds all who look on it.

The story of Agnes points the way to a third understanding of virginity: as a sexual and/or physical state. Though the fact of the hymen was no doubt on the mind of every hagiographer of virgin saints, the physical reality of virginity is stressed far less often than its social or religious components. In the case of Margery, this is exactly what allows her to aspire to the status of a virgin martyr, but within *Legendys* it is potentially problematic.

Bokenham and his colleagues engage in a number of strategies that might be read as attempts to foreclose on the sort of reinterpretation undertaken by Kempe. Among the most interesting, perhaps, is the recurrent strategy of presenting the virgins as the instruments of a decidedly masculine God, without any particular agency of their own, a strategy that also works towards reintegrating the virgin into a heterosexual discourse. When Katherine of Alexandria converts a hundred and fifty of the king's scholars, for example, the credit is not given to her intelligence or even to her service as God's mouthpiece. Rather, according to the legend, these

miraculous conversions were possible because God clouded the minds of the audience, making Katherine's words appear more persuasive than they really were.

Though Bokenham makes ample use of this technique, it is by no means his alone. Earlier virgin martyr legends provide even more striking examples of this tendency. In the thirteenth century legend of St. Katherine associated with the *Ancrene Wisse*, the spokesman for the scholars explains the persuasiveness of Katherine's argument with the following:

This girl's argument is not to be underestimated, for, if I must tell the truth, nothing human speaks in her, because it is no human argument she voices, nor is it she who has tamed us, but there is a heavenly spirit in her so much against us that we do not know how to throw a word against her in war—and even if we knew how, we would not want to or dare to—nor enrage him in whom she trusts. For as soon as she called on Christ and named his name, and the great strength of his sublimity, and then showed clearly the depth and the secret mystery of his death on the cross, all our worldly wisdom went away, so that we were afraid of his majesty. (Anchortic Spirituality, 273)

Into that same strategy falls the practice of declaring of the virgin as the “Bride of Christ,” a trope that appears many of the lives included in *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, and which John Capgrave will rework and expand upon in his massive *Life of St. Katherine*.

...

John Capgrave: *Life of St. Katherine*

Like Kempe, John Capgrave's "countré is Northfolke, of the town of Lynne" (*Katherine*, ll. 240). A prominent cleric as well as a prolific writer, Capgrave produced several saints' lives in the mid-fifteenth century of which the *Life of St. Katherine* is the longest, at approximately eight thousand lines (compared to the *Books* five thousand). However, *Katherine* has more than length to distinguish it from Capgrave's other works: as Karen Winstead points out in her introduction to the TEAMS edition, *Katherine*'s vernacular style distinguishes it from Capgrave's other works and this, in turn, points to a broad audience, women included (*Katherine*, pg. 7). *Katherine* probably post-dates the *Book*, making it unlikely that Kempe herself would have been familiar with the text. Still, references to spiritual figures like Saint Barbara, Margaret, and Katherine in the *Book* make it clear that Kempe was familiar with the generic tradition from which Capgrave's *Katherine* emerges. Additionally, as a resident of Lynn during the early fifteenth century, Capgrave would certainly have known of Margery, if not known her personally. It is perhaps not so surprising then that more than one reader has drawn comparisons between Capgrave's *Katherine* and the *Book*³, as both texts feature a strong female protagonist who resist the dictates of social norms.

In this way, Capgrave does transcend some of the limitations in Bokenham's work. His *Katherine* is literate, educated, and rules a kingdom. The ability to imagine a woman in a position of earthly authority is enough to distinguish Capgrave from many of his predecessors. Still, as Karen Winstead notes in *Virgin Martyrs*, he demonstrates considerable ambivalence towards Katherine's preoccupation with reading and the extent to which her reluctance to marry may have contributed to the downfall of her kingdom.

³ See, for example, Anthony Goodman, "The Piety of John Brunham's Daughter of Lynn" in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, p. 354, and Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994, p. 37.

Ultimately, *Katherine* shares with *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* a narrative structure that forecloses on many of the possibilities that the *Book* allows Kempe to explore. Since Margery's martyrdom, as we will see, is rooted in the social rather than in the physical, the *Book* allows her, in a certain sense, to explore life after martyrdom. On the other hand, the climax of Capgrave's *Katherine* is unequivocally her death at the hands of a pagan executioner, mentioned for the first time a mere twenty-five lines into the Prologue. Although Capgrave manages to fit a wealth of background material into his eight-thousand-line poem, the whole of Book 5, or nearly two thousand lines, is devoted to the martyrdom of Katherine and the philosophers whom she has converted. This teleological focus gives the narrative much of its driving force, but, at the same time, it leaves Katherine unable to explore other avenues of resistance to Maxentius beside submission to the executioner's blade.

The *Book* has no clear climactic moment. The non-chronological structure of the book makes it all the more difficult for the reader to identify one single moment to which the story leads and this, in turn, makes each episode seem independently important. In *Katherine* however, every other episode is subjugated to the moment of her death. As the poem progresses, the plot slows until, at its climactic moment, Capgrave requires two full stanzas simply to describe the miraculous milk that flows from the fatal wound on Katherine's neck. The narrator seems unable to look away from Katherine, even during the spectacle of her violent death, and his gaze lingers on the body and the wound long enough to report that the milk "ran so plenteuously, it wattered all the grounde / That lay aboute hir. O most mervelous wellle: Here is the hede, the mylke aboute all rounde" (*Katherine*, ll. 1905-7). The intensity and emotional charge of the passage describing Katherine's death assures the reader that this is the moment to which the entire poem has been leading.

Another central trope in much of late medieval virgin martyr hagiography, Capgrave's *Katherine* included, is that of the martyr as the Bride of Christ. In the case of *Katherine*, there are numerous references to Katherine's status as the spouse of Christ (growing particularly plentiful in the passages leading up to her martyrdom), and the bulk of Book 3 is devoted to a long description of Katherine's mystical marriage to Christ, a contrast to the earthly marriage parliament described in Book 2. Like Margery, Katherine is to be both maiden and wife, and, like Margery, her spiritual status (for Katherine, marriage to Christ) is to be the inverse of her material situation (virginal and unmarried). In addition, in chapter 35 of the *Book Kempe* reports a marriage to Christ that echoes strongly the Katherine legends. Although it is easy to see the virgin martyrs' situation as far removed from that of a woman like Margery Kempe, it is important to remember that they, too, blur the boundaries between married and unmarried women.

Yet however inspiring this trope may be in certain circumstances, it has other implications that shape and influence our understanding of the virgin martyr and her situation. This formulation neatly avoids the question of woman's resistance to man by establishing a construct wherein she submits to a masculine spiritual authority and in which her resistance to pagan society is presented not as resistance *qua* resistance but as submission to God. The metaphysical language in which these stories are told is no different than what one would expect from religious literature in general, but it is also important to realize the ways in which putting the conflict into such terms downplays the material resistance of the martyr (i.e., she will not sacrifice to an idol, she will not marry the king) while at the same time giving added significance to the physical violence against the body of the woman. It becomes not only violence against the martyr, but violence against something that belongs to God as a woman belongs to her husband.

And, insofar as the martyr is the “property” of God, violence against the martyr is violence against God.

The ways in which the concept of “the martyr as Bride” might be problematic for modern readers come to the fore when Capgrave reintroduces the trope at the hour of Katherine’s death. As Katherine is led to her execution, a “swete voys” calls her to heaven, saying to Katherine, “Myn owne spowse, My wyffe and mayde holy / Come now to Me, com now onto thi rest, / For in My feuth thu hast labored as best.” (*Katherine*, ll. 1860-2) In *Katherine*, Capgrave shows the reader a woman who is intelligent, educated, courageous when necessary, and steadfast in her principles. And yet her final sacrifice is presented not as springing from any voluntary will on her part but rather as an obedient response to God’s command. Katherine herself simply says, “I am called to fest no of God almyth,” defining her own death not in terms of her actions, but in terms of her response to God’s command. (*Katherine*, ll. 1885) Again, the language of marriage and Katherine’s submissive response makes it difficult to ignore the gendered aspect of this relationship.

...

Legendys of Hooly Wummen and *Katherine* encounter all of the difficulties inherent in the virgin martyr as a subject for religious writing. On the surface, the saints’ lives are dramatizing a conflict between the Christian and the pagan, but at the same time, the centrality of debates over marriage and the prevalence of feminized concerns about virginity make it difficult to ignore the gender aspect. In a reversal of what one finds in most Christian literature, the female is consistently identified with the Christian and the moral good while a male becomes the chief representative of the corrupt, sensual, pagan society. What is on the surface a relatively straightforward account of the martyr’s resistance to the persecuting king can also be read as the

resistance of a woman to a man. Within the context of a hagiographic narrative, the resistance is explicitly justified, since the king, prefect's son, or other persecutor does not have proper dominion over the woman, and she is acting in accordance with her religious beliefs and with scriptural commandments concerning disobedience to secular authority when it conflicts with religious mandate.

The potential danger of these legends for the medieval author lies in that for the reader the distinction between a male with justified dominion over women and the male who uses his authority unjustly in the power of Satan is a ultimately subjective one that occurs within the mind of the reader. The example of the virgin martyr provides women with a template of resistance to power structures that are viewed as immoral, but that does not mean the distinction between moral and immoral made by the reader will be congruent with the interests of those writing the text. Furthermore, virgin martyrs in particular are always presented as an individual against a larger society; an individualism that stands in contrast to the communal emphasis of much of medieval Christianity. Martyrs are a particularly tricky subject to integrate safely into the discourses of medieval spirituality, and it is precisely this openness to reinterpretation that makes their stories such a rich discourse for Kempe to draw upon.

“Art thou a mayden?”: Margery Kempe and Hagiographic Performance

In her book *Versions of Virginity*, Sarah Salih explains the weight that the category of “virgin” carried in late medieval English society: “If being a woman is inseparable from being a wife and mother, female persons who do not play these roles are not part the cultural category of ‘woman’. Gender is thus acknowledged to be a social construct, and gendered identities constituted in action within a social context” (Salih, 24). A woman, such as the saints discussed in the previous section, is in a certain sense removing herself from the heterosexual gender economy by claiming the status of virgin, and this may account for at least some of the controversy surrounding Margery in the *Book*.

These movements toward virginity on the part of Margery are not incidental: Kempe’s account of her struggles, as others before me have argued, draws heavily on hagiography.⁴ Margery’s use of particular hagiographic tropes from the stories of virgin martyrs functions as an implicit criticism of the construction of women’s spiritual experience offered by dominant voices within the Church and points the way toward a new form of spirituality that might accommodate religious experience like Margery’s.

In a later chapter entitled “Like a Virgin? *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” Salih discusses at length the particular ways in which Margery reconstructs virginity, including her specific attachment to virgin martyr legends. Salih writes that “there are enough explicit references, however, to show that Margery is an active and engaged reader of virgin martyr legends” (Salih, 195). This familiarity, moreover, need not have been obtained exclusively through written texts, as Margery would have undoubtedly been familiar with visual representations of these stories as well (Salih, 196).

Of all the virgin martyrs named in the *Book*, Margery seems most attached to Saint Margaret, with whom she shares, among other things, a name. Not only does Margaret's position as a patron of childbirth suggest a link with Margery's experience, but as Salih writes,

A less direct connection can be found in the account of Margery's imprisonment in Beverley. Having, like Margaret, meekly gone along to prison, Margery uses prison as an authorizing location. Margaret in her prison received food from her fostermother and gave holy counsel in exchange. Margery repeats these details exactly; she is given wine by her jailer's wife, and tells edifying tales through the window to a sympathetic crowd of women.... This is, I think, sufficient evidence of Margery's devotion to her namesaint. Margery's pursuit of sanctity is to a large extent an *imitatio Margaretae*. (Salih, 198. Ellipses mine.)

Another saint for whom Margery has a strong affinity is Katherine of Alexandria, one of the most popular of late medieval saints.⁵ The *Book* echoes of the story of Katherine of Alexandria in Margery's confrontations with authority figures and in her mystical marriage to Christ. She writes "the opposition of several men against one woman, formal learning against direct inspiration, and the men's acknowledgement of their inferior access to knowledge of God, thus validating the woman's inspiration, exactly replicate St. Katherine's legend" (Salih, 198). As noted in the previous section, at least some medieval depictions of Katherine pressed at the

⁴ For more on the influence of specific hagiographic texts (particularly Nicholas Love's *Meditationes*, *The Mirrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesus Christ*) on the *Book*, see Gail McMurray Gibson's *St. Margery: The Book of Margery Kempe in The Theater of Devotion*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, 47-53.

⁵ For more on medieval representations of Katherine of Alexandria, see Katherine Lewis, *The Cult of Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2000.

boundaries of acceptable female behavior; modern scholars have noted this and in some cases connected it with Margery's behavior in the *Book*.

Within the *Book* itself, others beside Kempe herself seem to recognize Margery as a parallel to the virgin martyrs of legend, at the same time as they seek to point out the ways in which her behavior, real or perceived, deviates from established convention. When Margery is questioned in Leicester, the mayor responds to her identification of herself saying, "seynt Kateryn telde what kynred sche cam of and yet ar ye not lyche, for thu art a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals decyuer of the pepyl, and therfor I xal haue the in preson" (Book, Ch. 46, ll. 2625-7).

The heavenly protector that Margery invokes in her negotiation of chastity with her husband John recalls the heavenly protection provided to Cecilia or Agnes in their own hour of sexual vulnerability and underscores the need for a holy woman's sexuality to be carefully regulated. If Margery is to reconstruct herself in the manner of these women, she must not only present herself as martyr, but as sexually pure. The apotheosis of sexual purity is, of course, virginity. Recent scholarship confirms the centrality of ideas of chastity in late medieval religious discourse. Caroline Walker Bynum writes, "chastity has been the *sine qua non* of religious status, as the reflection on earth of the life of angels, and as a requirement that laid a heavy burden of self-hatred on those individuals—especially women—who were unable to assert control over their own lives" (Bynum, 7). If Margery is to successfully present herself as an acceptable figure of spiritual authority, she must first renegotiate the terms of chastity: how can a married mother of fourteen achieve admission into that elite level of heaven reserved for virgins?

The answer, in the *Book*, is to use elements from virgin hagiography to lay claim to the status of a virgin, even if physical virginity is lacking. This idea is not entirely new: in his treatise *On Holy Virginity*, Augustine of Hippo suggests that virginity arises not out of physical incorruption, but out of the desire to remain pure. Margery's actions in the *Book* suggest a still more radical view, that virginity, once physically lost, might be spiritually regained if the individual truly desires that purity. Virgin martyr hagiography, with its emphasis on the religious and social dimensions of virginity, provides Margery with a template for that reinterpretation. Salih writes, "[Margery] is exactly what the patristic theorists of virginity wanted to make impossible: a woman who uses virginity to evade wifely obedience and feminine subjection" (Salih, 199).

Margery's use of white clothing and extravagant weeping echo the virgin martyr's own unusual behaviors, although white clothing itself would not have been associated with virginity in the fifteenth century (Salih, 220). Salih suggests that white clothing is "Margery's approximation of the nakedness of the virgin martyrs, of the novice during her profession, of the reformed prostitute in the desert, the nakedness identified by Ronal Maisonneuve as typical of the holy fool; it is her sign of fitting nowhere, of having no secure identity in secular society." (Salih, 223). The image of Margery dressed in white in fetters before a hostile court is reminiscent of a saint facing a pagan tribunal. By presenting us with such an image, Kempe has detoured the standard interpretation of a hagiographic trope, and turned it from a narrative about the hostile relationship between a Christian martyr and a hostile pagan world into a story about a woman facing a supposedly allied community that nevertheless cannot, will not, understand her experience. Kempe's prose may, admittedly, be somewhat awkward at times, but her command of imagery, and its ability to evoke an emotional response in the reader, is never lacking.

Perhaps because of this intuitive understanding of what will move the reader most, the body is Kempe's favored site for the depiction of power struggles in the *Book*.

“Nay, ser, I am a wyf.”: Hagiographic Revision in the *Book of Margery Kempe*

Lynne Staley devotes an entire chapter in her book, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, to the relationship between Margery's use of hagiographic posturing and her implicit social criticism. While Staley's concern is mostly with Kempe's use of hagiographic tropes and posturing as a way of describing Margery's social criticisms as coming from the position of outsider, I feel that many of her observations speak to the questions I have already raised. In reference to the work of Thomas Heffernan, she writes that, “sacred biography is a fiction meant to shape a reader's understanding of what constitutes holiness” (Staley, 41). In other words, the hagiographic genre has the ability to shape the discourse of holiness itself. Kempe's use of hagiographic conventions invariably acts as a comment on religious discourse and the criteria for membership in the sisterhood of “hooly wummen.” The *Book* certainly does contain the sort of tensions about which Staley is concerned, but where Staley focuses on the impact of these conflicts on the relationship between Margery and the community, I would posit that these tensions arise in part from Margery's relationship to religion itself, an institution that simultaneously excludes her on the basis of her membership in categorical “womanhood” and provides her, through the trappings of affective piety, with a means of achieving spiritual authority.

Given Heffernan's points about the interrelationship between hagiography and religious norms, a revision of Staley's terms may help give a better understanding of the issues I hope to raise here. Staley describes Margery as inhabiting two worlds: the first, anchored in private internal experience, is the spiritual world and the second, based on observable external action, is the communal, material world that rejects her based on the same standards that grant her authority within her spiritual realm (Staley, 40). The questions that Margery raises about the

individual's role within medieval Christianity transverse this internal/external distinction—a move that complicates but ultimately deepens our understanding of the social dynamics at work within Kempe's book.

Communal and individual modes of religious devotion require very different actions on behalf of the subject, both internally and externally, but the same subject engages in their both. What Kempe as a writer is concerned about in the *Book*, as much as if not more so than the relationship of the individual to the larger community, is the relationship of the individual to religion itself and the conflict that arises when an individual feels that her internal spiritual state is at odds with communal expectations. When we begin to understand how complex the demands on a “good woman” are in medieval Christianity, then we can begin to understand the necessity of Margery's radically individual stance. The overriding categories of hagiography that neatly denote ranks of holiness cease to function in a real social situation where the strands of the political, the personal, and the religious, which hagiography often conflates into a single discourse, cannot be mapped on to one another in a one-to-one correspondence but must instead be negotiated on an individual basis.

As John Hirsh shows in his study on the origins of affective devotion, religious discourses are overlaid with a number of other discourses—gender or class relations, or the status of individual interests versus those of the larger community (Hirsch, 11-16). An individual may identify strongly with a particular movement within Christian religious practice, but if his or her social situation is at odds with what is expected from that discourse, there will be tensions. It is these tensions, arising from an individual's relationship with an institution, that complicate Margery's relationship to her community, and as a picture emerges from Kempe's book that challenges the way we think about hagiography, and its possibilities as a model for holy living,

its narrative continually asks the reader to reconsider not only the relationship of the individual to the community, but to religious discourse itself.

...

In the Proem, Kempe does initially lay out the conflict that the book will expand upon in terms that Staley uses, those of the individual versus the larger community. Describing the social rejection that follows her religious conversion, she write, “thei that befor had worshepd her sythn ful scharply reprevyd her; her kynred and thei that had ben frendys wer now hyr most enmys” (*Book*, Proem, ll. 26-8). However, she immediately shifts her focus from social dynamics to religious allegiances and establishes her identification both with the institutional Church and practices associated with affective piety.

Than sche, consyderyng this wondyrful chawngyng, sekyng socowr under the
wengys of hyr gostly modyr, Holy Cherch, went and obeyd hyr to hyr gostly
fadyr, accusyng hyrself of her mysdedes, and sythen ded gret bodyly penawns.
And in schort tyme ower mercyful Lord vysytyd this creatur wyth plentyouws
teers of contricyon day be day, in so mech that sm men seyden sche mygth wepen
whan sche wold and slawndered the werk of God. (*Book*, Proem, ll. 28-33)

[Then she, considering this wonderful changing, seeking succor under the wings
of her ghostly mother, Holy Church, went obediently to her ghostly father,
accusing herself of her misdeeds, and afterwards did great bodily penance.

And in short time our merciful Lord visited this creature with plenteous tears of contrition day by day, in so much that some men said she might weep whenever she wanted and slandered the work of God. (*BMK*, 3-4)]

Initially, the *Book* reads like most hagiography in that there is no evident tension between Margery's individual spiritual practices and the religious practices of the institutional church to which the larger community subscribes, or anxiety about Margery's inability to successfully fulfill the religious role created for her by the church. She writes of "many worshepfu clerkys, bothe archebyssshopys and byssshopys, doctowrs of dyvynyte and bechelers also" who "counseld hyr to folwyn hyr mevynggys and hyr steringgys and trustly belevyn it weren of the Holy Gost and of noon evyl spyryt" (*Book*, Proem, ll. 49-51).

However, this picture of perfect congruence between individual spiritual needs and desires and the pronouncements of social and religious authorities is troubled even as she describes it. Kempe tells of a singular sin of which she has been unwilling to be shriven; ill after the birth of her first child, she finally calls upon a priest to hear her confession. But "whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing which sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye and gan scharply to undyrnemyn hir er than sche had fully seyd hir entent, and so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he mygth do" (*Book*, Ch. 1, 144-148). Not only has Margery already failed to uphold the absolute standard of virtue to which a saint would be held, both by committing the sin and failing to be shriven, the representative of the Church, too, fails to uphold his own duties.

Almost immediately, then, we are presented with a picture of a church whose clergy is unable or unwilling to meet the spiritual needs of its congregation, perhaps because the real

needs of its congregants are not the needs perceived by the church. It is this lack, real or perceived, that provides the impetus for the spiritual journey described in the remainder of the *Book*—after the traumatic incident with the priest, Margery endures a period of madness, reprieved, ultimately, by a vision of Christ that renews her spirituality. She writes, “what this creatur was thus gracyowsly comen ageyn to hir mende, sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God and that sche wold ben his servawnt” (*Book*, Ch. 2, ll. 189-90). Initially, Kempe refrains from presenting this change as a independent alternative to the sort of spirituality Margery has been practicing up to this point, devotion strong in public piety and propriety, but, in Kempe’s view, lacking in individual spiritual sincerity. Rather, we see it as response to the difficulties with religion experienced by Margery, and an indication of God’s special plan for her. But this change is not as dramatic as it might seem. Indeed, Margery relapses into pride and vanity several times at the outset of the *Book*, before solidifying her commitment to a spiritual vocation. Eventually, however, spiritual experience will provide Margery with the needed instrument with which she can claim the authority necessary in order to demand that her needs be met.

Even after she settles into her new vocation, Margery’s transformation into a saint-like figure who regularly meets with Archbishops and is on “homely” terms with the Godhead is not immediate. Indeed, things get worse before they get better. Kempe reports,

And anoon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days (*Book*, Ch. 1, ll. 147-50).

[And anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderfully vexed and labored with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some odd days.(*BMK*, 7)]

That Kempe here opposes the fear of spiritual damnation against the reaction of the priest speaks to both Hirsch's statements about the way in which the communal church (here, the ecclesiastical figure of the priest) might be conceived as antagonistic to the health of individual's relationship with God, and also the degree to which Margery, throughout the *Book*, remains concerned not only with the state of her soul but always mindful of the way in which her actions are received by others.

We see, then, that the terms on which Margery engages with religious discourse are much more complicated than a simple opposition of an outsider to the larger community. Rather, the *Book* presents us with an individual who, like the virgin martyr, is socially very involved in the larger community and yet who, because of the depth of her religious conviction, remains somewhat alienated from it. The *Book* never leaves off its consideration of its bourgeois, mercantile milieu; however, an examination of the relationship of Margery to religious discourses tells an equally compelling story, one that is inflected heavily with the rhetoric of medieval hagiography.

...

Though the *Book* echoes hagiography, there is always some distortion in that echo. Often, that twist on a familiar theme serves to underscore Margery's humanity. The torments visited upon Margery during her period of madness are not so different from the trials undergone

by some of the saints in Bokenham's text: Margaret, one of Margery's favorite saints, faced demons and dragons in her prison cell. However, unlike the virgin saints of antiquity, Margery is unable to resist their temptations. The devils she sees tell her to slander and deny God, Mary, the saints, her family, and her friends. "And so sche dede" (*Book*, Ch. 1, ll. 156-7). From the outset, Kempe presents the reader with a picture of Margery that is wholly human, fallible, and very often sinful. The saintly spiritual status that Margery eventually seeks to claim for herself results from her initial individual failings and faults overcome, not the extraordinary ability to withstand external persecution. This stance is a notable departure from the virgin martyr saint, from whom the ability to withstand torture and submit to a violent death is paramount.

In the late antiquity setting of many martyr narratives, as presented in late medieval hagiography, Christianity functions as a unitary discourse. To be a Christian in these circumstances is to risk death, and anyone who does not accept death as a possible consequence of their religious devotion is not, in fact, a true Christian. In fifteenth century England, however, things are different. To be a Christian is no longer to risk death, and an individual can safely express a lesser degree of devotion or even outright hypocrisy without the fear of being cast out of the devotional community.

The consequence of this shift to a more stable society is that the state of the individual's soul becomes his or her own responsibility. In the virgin martyr narratives, the only indication of one's religious status that has any real currency within the text is whether or not one denies Christ. The willingness to die for Christ is the only necessary, sufficient, and reliable confirmation of the saint's status as a true Christian. In the *Book*, on the other hand, there are few opportunities for such dramatic confession, and instead one's status as a believing Christian rests partially on approval from the larger religious community, and partially in the individual's

own conception of being “right with God.” As we see in Margery’s case, it is possible to be fully integrated into the community without having a proper individual relationship with God, just as it is possible to face rejection from the community upon making oneself “right with God.” Margery knows this, but the religious community seems unwilling to accept the possibility of dissonance between the individual view of spirituality and the communal standard of behavior for a Christian, preferring instead an easy conflation of faith and action of the sort found in Bokenham and Capgrave’s writings. For the religious persons, always alert to possible heretics, who speak out against Margery, communal acceptance and the actions that warrant it, are the *sine qua non* of spiritual status.

...

In saintly writing, we are very rarely shown the failings and the humanity of the saints in question. While some writers, such as Capgrave, may demonstrate a degree of ambivalence towards the wisdom of their subjects’ actions, the saints’ moral rectitude remains unquestioned. That they should be provided by God with extraordinary fortitude and grace is not particularly surprising because the reader has seen so little that suggests the fallibility or humanity of virgin martyr saints—if anyone deserves the special grace of God, it is these women. In the case of the *Book*, however, we see a woman who has not lived a perfect spiritual life from childhood or conversion onward but instead has committed some unnamed sin so awful that the priest cannot accept her confession without rebuke, a far cry from the saintly beginnings of Bokenham’s women.

Margery seems eager to provide ample evidence of the incompatibility of hagiographic example with lived experience. In Chapter 11, we see Margery at her most human, drinking ale on her way home from York, engaged in protracted negotiations on the subject of chastity with

her husband. The sort of marital give and take we witness between Margery and John differs radically from the absolute stances on chastity taken by some other late medieval recluses such as Christina of Markyate. There is flexibility and compromise: “Sere,” says Margery, “yf it lyke you, ye schal grawnt me my desyr, and ye schal have yowr desyr” (*Book*, Ch. 11, 566-7). This differs strongly not only from the attitude of other medieval mystics and spiritual writers, but also from the stance on chastity espoused by the virgin martyrs of legend for whom any deviance from the standard is tantamount to a denial of the faith.

Moreover, in Margery’s case, the successful negotiation of this issue involves material as well as spiritual considerations, a far cry from the typical martyr’s utter disregard for earthly concerns. Ultimately, Margery is granted her desire to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to be freed from her marital debt to John, thereby allowing her to fully practice chastity while acknowledging the social necessity of maintaining their union. In exchange, she will repay all of John’s monetary debts, and resume eating and drinking on Fridays. Each leaves off some of their original demands—Margery does not get an agreement of chastity before a bishop (at least not at this time), and John’s request that Margery again share a bed with him is likewise denied (see *Book*, Ch. 11). Not only is Margery’s spiritual state under negotiation, but her physical proximity to her husband and her economic resources are under negotiation as well, and these are issues which must be treated somewhat separately, a sign that things are a bit more complicated than they appear to be in analogous scenes in hagiography.

Unlike the virgin martyr hagiography of Capgrave and Bokenham, then, in the *Book* the conflict surrounding chastity is framed not in terms of good and evil but rather as a conflict between incompatible interests with acknowledged economic dimensions. Though the economic angle is no doubt present in most hagiographic narratives, it is ever subsumed by the stress

placed on the religious implications of chastity. Certainly, Margery's status as a wife, whose economic fortunes are already linked to her husbands, makes this change in emphasis easier and in some ways necessary to her story. In this passage, Kempe explores the possible existence of a middle ground between the strict asceticism she has been practicing and the relatively lax piety of her life prior to her conversion experience and suggests that such a compromise may indeed be possible. Importantly, this softening in stance arises not of Margery's own desire but instead is explicitly approved by God, who says to Margery as she prays,

"And he schal han that he desyreth. For, my derworthy dowtyr, this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for thu schuldyst the sonar opteyn and getyn thi desyr, and now it is grawntyd the. I wyl no lengar thow fast, therfor I byd the in the name of Jhesu ete and drynk as thyn husbond doth." (*Book*, Ch. 11, 561-4)

[“And he shall have what he desires. For, my worthy daughter, this was the cause that I bade you to fast, for you should the sooner obtain and get your desire, and now it is granted to you. I wish no longer for you to fast, therefore I bid you in the name of Jesus eat and drink as your husband does.” (*BMK*, 19-20)]

This bargain of chastity, far from being a betrayal of spiritual principles, seems to have been foreordained by God. The fact God makes no comment about John's request that Margery repay all his debts before going on pilgrimage may also suggest implicit approval of this monetary exchange, a dimension not usually found in religious literature.

Though, as this passage shows, Kempe's book suggests a more flexible view of chastity than contemporary hagiography does, the issue of chastity and abstinence remain central in the first portion of the *Book*, up until Phillip, Bishop of Lincoln, formally witnesses a vow of chastity between Margery and John (see *Book*, Ch. 15) Even afterwards, Margery remains concerned about her previous sexual experiences within the bounds of marriage:

"A, Lord, maydonys dawnsyn now meryly in hevyn. Schal not I don so? For because I am no mayden, lak of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe; me thynkyth I wolde I had ben slayn whan I was takyn fro the funtston that I schuld nevyr a dysplesyd the, and than schuldyst thu, blyssed Lorde, an had my maydenhed wythowtyn ende." (*Book*, Ch. 15, 1150-4)

[“Ah, Lord, maidens dance now merrily in heaven. Shall not I do so? For, because I am no maiden, lack of maidenhood is to me now great sorrow. It seems to me I wish I would have been slain when I was taken from the font stone so that I should never have displeased you, and then should you, blessed Lord, have had my maidenhood without end.” (*BMK*, 38)]

Again, as is the case elsewhere in the *Book*, we are presented with a picture of a God who ameliorates Margery's anxieties, anxieties that, in a time and place when extraordinary and, for many, unattainable acts of devotion seemed to be most prized, must have been shared by others in similar positions. This portrait of an accepting and understanding God allows Margery to

petition for acceptance of ideas—virginity based in spirit rather than the flesh, for example—that a more judgement God would likely have rejected.

Kempe changes the terms of hagiography by refusing to gloss over her material circumstances, and in doing so she expands the idea of virginity. The typical virgin martyr legend begins in girlhood, at which time the saint is already drawn to a life of devotion, virtue, and chastity. The *Book* begins when Margery is twenty years old and has already given birth to a child. Salih explains, “By refusing the drama of the loss of virginity, the *Book* thus refuses to stress virginity as a physical state. Because Margery’s virgin girlhood plays no part in the *Book*, her virginity is always non-physical and openly constructed. Virginity and the lack of it are not permitted to be natural, bodily states; the focus instead is on virginity enacted and reclaimed” (Salih, 203).

...

If one can look past Margery’s extremely deep sense of calling and special vocation, the intensity of which some readers cannot help but see as symptomatic of megalomania, we see a woman who, though remarkably stubborn, is in many ways still humble. Even in her most spiritual and intimate moments with God, Kempe does not paint an overly aggrandizing picture of herself. In Margery’s conversations with Jesus, she shows us a woman given to self-doubts, minor lapses of faith, and uncertainty. Especially early in the text, she displays a pointed lack of the extraordinary devotion and fortitude found in most hagiographic texts. Indeed, Margery goes so far as to admit that she fears a martyr’s death:

Sche ymagyned in hirself what deth sche mygth deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr thowt
sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred of inpacyens, that was to be

bowndyn hyr hed and hir fet to a stokke and hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp
ex for Goddys lofe. (*Book*, Ch. 14, ll. 677-81)

[She imagined to herself what death she might die for Christ's sake. She thought she would have been slain for God's love, but dreaded the point of death, and therefore she imagined for herself the softest death, as she thought, for dread of her lack of endurance—that was to be bound by her head and feet to a stock and her head to be smote off with a sharp axe for God's love. (*BMK*, 23)]

The beauty of this admission, within the terms laid out in the *Book*, is the opportunity it provides for the grace of God, a grace that is here not restricted to extenuating circumstances, but rather one to which a lay reader might also have hopes of receiving. After Margery's confession of her fear of death, Kempe writes,

Than seyde owyr Lord in hir mende, "I thank the, dowtyr, that thou woldyst for my lofe, for, as oftyn as thou thynkyst so, thou schalt have the same mede in hevyn as thou thu suffredyst the same deth [as a martyr]. . . I schal nevyr ben wroth wyth the, but I schal lovyn the wythowtyn ende. (*Book*, Ch. 14, ll. 682-7, Ellipses mine)

[Then said our Lord in her mind, "I thank you, daughter, what you would do for my love, for, as often as you think so, you shall have the same reward in heaven

as though you suffered the same death [as a martyr]. . . I shall never be angry with you, but I shall love you without end. (*BMK*, 23)]

As we have already noted, in the hagiographic milieu the willingness to die for Christ without fear is the sole determinant of one's "true" Christianity. For Kempe to present the reader with a scene like this one indicates a radical restructuring of the terms of the devoted individual's relationship with Christ. Margery is beloved by God *despite* her fear of death, whereas the hagiographic saint is beloved of God *because* of her *lack* of fear of death.

This shift in terms also influences the way the reader interprets Margery's more extravagant displays of spiritual fidelity. The traditional hagiographic saint cannot really express gratitude towards God since the final death scene has the effect of rendering everything before it, including the martyr's previous devotion, insignificant in light of the final sacrifice. The act of dying becomes not so much as an extraordinary act on the part of the saint, but rather as a fulfillment of the martyr's duties to God, as with Capgrave's Katherine, who goes to her death saying, "I am called to fest now of God almyth" (*Katherine*, ll.1886). In Margery's case, however, her acts of devotion remain meaningful whenever they occur, because we know, from this early point in the *Book* (Chapter 14, slightly more than one tenth of the way through the text) onward, that there will be no final sacrifice that will render all previous devotion insignificant.

Finally, at the end of the chapter, Margery receives assurance from Christ that even her failed efforts remain pleasing to God: "Whan thou stodyst to plese me, than art thou a very dowtyr" (*Book*, Ch. 14, 715-6). What God values, under the paradigm of the *Book*, is not the actual act, but the willingness to perform that act, if necessary, especially if one fears that death. We have shifted away from the public physical devotion practiced by the virgin martyrs of

antiquity in texts like *Katherine* and *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* into a mode of spirituality that, while it certainly has a public and physical component, is nonetheless predicated not in public performance but in the affective state of the devotee's mind. Likewise, virginity is no longer a means of evaluating a woman's social position (Margery, after all, remains married to John until his death), but is above all else a spiritual state accessible to those who are neither physically nor socially regarded as virgins.

This conceptual change from the physical to the spiritual has been anticipated as early as Chapter 5, where God releases Margery from the more conventional (and physical) forms of piety she has adopted thus far but also asks her to affect different forms of devotion which (according to Kempe) are more meaningful to God:

“Therfor I bydde the and comawnd the, boldly clepe me Jhesus, thi love, for I am thi love and schal be thi love wythowtyn ende. And, dowtyr, thu hast an hayr upon thi bakke. I wyl thu do it away, and I schal give the an hayr in thin hert that schal lyke me mych bettyr than alle the hayres in the world. Also, my derworthy dowtyr, thu must forsake that thow lovyst best in this world, and that is etyng of flesch. And instede of that flesch thow schalt etyn my flesch and my blod, that is the very body of Crist in the sacrament of the awter. Thys is my wyl, dowtyr, that thow receyve my body every Sondag, and I schal flowe so mych grace in the that alle the world schal mervelyn therof.” (*Book*, Ch. 5, ll. 374-82)

[“Therefore I bid and command you, boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love and shall be without end. And, daughter, you have a hair cloth upon

your back. I want you to take it away, and I shall give you a hair cloth in your heart that shall please me much better than all the hair cloths in the world. Also, my worthy daughter, you must forsake what you love best in this world, and that is eating of meat. And instead of that flesh you shall eat my flesh and my blood, that is the very body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar. This is my will, daughter, that you receive my body every Sunday, and I shall flow so much grace into you that all the world shall marvel thereof.” (*BMK*, 14)]

The replacement of a physical hair-shirt with the “hayr in thin hert” provides a wonderfully succinct metaphor for the replacement of asceticism with affective devotion dependent on internal, rather than external, proof of devotion. In addition, the command to replace the social activity of eating meat with the more private and overtly religious ritual of the regular reception of the Eucharist indexes the familiar injunction to forsake the things of the world for that which is more holy. And while this quotation avoids the strictures of extreme aesthetic devotion, it also serves to connect Margery’s devotion with emerging trends in affective piety.

Reiterating this point later in the passage, Christ says to Margery,

“And dowtyr, I wyl thow leve thi byddynge of many bedys and thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in thi mend. I schal gevyn the leve to byddyn tyl sex of the cloke to sey what thow wyld. Than schalt thow ly styll and speke to me be thowt, and I schal gefe to the hey medytacyon and very contemplacyon.” (*Book*, Ch. 5, ll. 389-94)

[“And daughter, I want you to leave off your bidding of many beads and think such thoughts as I will put into your mind. I shall give you leave to pray until six of the clock to say what you wish. Then you shall lie still and speak to me by thought, and I shall give to you high meditation and very contemplation.” (*BMK*, 14)]

The injunction to abandon the externally observable practice of saying many prayers and the counting of beads, e.g. saying the rosary, parallels the institution in this same passage of a new form of devotion—thinking thoughts such as God puts into her mind—that eludes such external observation.

...

As Lynn Staley observes, Margery has a keen understanding of the role of the spiritual woman in the tradition of sacred biography. Speaking of Margery, Staley writes, “by deliberately placing themselves on the margins of society, the holy men and women of the Middle Ages dramatized the nature of their spiritual quest for perfection in terms of their separation from conventional modes of life” (Staley, 40). In York, as in her relationship with her husband and in her depictions of her conversations with God, Margery draws on images and elements from virgin martyr hagiography in order to negotiate a position of relative power and freedom. This position, necessarily, includes a separation from convention and social norms.

Though much of society perceives Margery’s separation as a threat, the real danger in Margery’s position lies not in the fact that she is heretical or that she challenges the authority of the Church in any direct way. Rather, she seems to be seeking religious approval and endorsement at every turn. Oftentimes this approval is given only reluctantly, and even after it is

given, there remains a certain anxiety about her conduct on the part of certain members of the clergy and many laypersons. Kempe is certainly aware of this nervousness and seems conscious that it stems from the fact that Margery embodies *too well* the teachings of the Church, and by inhabiting those constructs so fully, she displays the inherent contradictions in the real-world implementation of an idealized woman.

The duality of Christianity and paganism present in *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* and even residually in Capgrave's *Katherine* has been transformed. Here, we are not presented with the opposition of a lone Christian woman to an entire pagan society. Rather, we see a Christian woman in an ostensibly Christian society who faces just as much persecution as the virgin martyrs of the past. Whether we are in the ecclesiastical court of the Archbishop of York or in the royal court of Maxence in Egypt makes little difference, Kempe implies, because both societies are equally antagonistic to the individual who wants to practice Christianity to the fullest extent, particularly if that individual happens to be female.

...

In addition to subverting dominant conceptions of piety and chastity, the *Book* relocates Margery's saint-like martyrdom from the realm of the physical penance into the realm of the social, which Salih calls "martyrdom by slander". She writes, "like the virgin martyrs, Margery identifies and deploys martyrdom as the ground of her identity. By enacting her martyrdom in social space, rather than engaging in private penitential practices, Margery places sanctity and identity in society. She thus recognizes the cultural production of sanctity and foregrounds the formation of identity" (Salih, 217). Although it is medieval society that provides the milieu for

the conflict that Margery uses to define herself, her portrayal of herself echoes not examples of medieval piety, but the virgin martyrs of antiquity.

The Book of Margery Kempe certainly does not lack examples of moments where her expressive spirituality seems at odds with the communal interests of the institutional Church, but one scene in which the stakes are particularly high, both for Margery and for her clerical opponents, and where Margery truly seems in danger of “martyrdom by slander,” is her meeting with the Archbishop of York.⁶ Margery, once again an accused heretic (specifically, as a Lollard, a sect that advocated, among other things, preaching by women), is brought before the Archbishop and most of his household in the Archbishop’s chapel. Though Margery demonstrates a confrontational bravado throughout this scene, even eventually winning over the Archbishop to a sort of grudging acceptance of her position, Kempe includes details that hint at an underlying nervousness that further serves to differentiate Margery from her saintly predecessors. She admits that while “sche mad hir prayers to owr Lord God almythy for to helpyn hir and socowryn hir ageyn alle hir enmyis” “hir flesch tremelyd and whakyd wondirly that sche was fayn to puttyn hir handys undyr hir clothis that it schulde not ben aspyed” (*Book*, Ch. 52, ll. 2927-30). Even so, her first reported words, in response to careless swearing among the Archbishop’s men, are bluntly confrontational: “Serys, I drede me ye schul be brent in helle wythowtyn ende les than ye amende yow of yowr othys sweryng, for ye kepe not the comawndementys of God. I wolde not sweryn as ye don for al the good of this worlde” (*Book*, Ch. 52, 2916-9). Immediately, Margery positions herself as morally and religiously antagonistic

⁶ *BMK*, Book 1, Chapter 52. The positioning of this account just over the halfway point in the text suggests that Margery herself had an appreciation of the potential dramatic impact of this account and consequently renders it in quite dramatic terms. Of the purely narrative and non-visionary accounts in the *Book*, this passage includes more dialogue and, incidentally, more humor than any other.

to the dominant institutional authority using emotional, rather than rational, appeal, a strategy that echoes the rhetorical maneuvering of Katherine during her trial.

Upon entering the chapel, the Archbishop begins to question Margery, asking, “why gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?” His questions center not, as one might expect, around the allegations of heresy, but rather around those aspects of Margery’s behavior that most visibly identify her marginal status. His address suggests a deep confusion and anxiety about Margery’s behavior and a need to locate her on one side of a virgin/wife dichotomy. Indeed, it seems that this dilemma must be resolved before the interview can continue any further.

In order to answer these questions satisfactorily, Margery is pressed to locate herself within the framework of social mores upheld within the religious and social community, and to do so in a way that to identify with one necessarily means to dissociate oneself from the other term. On the surface, she responds to those pressures and answers the question, “art thu a mayden?” with “nay, ser, I am no mayden; I am a wife” (*Book*, Ch. 52, ll. 2924). Margery’s spirituality and social identity, however, are much more complicated than the categories of “mayden” and “wife.”

Up until this moment, and even in this moment, Margery has identified strongly with the image of the virgin martyr. She has invoked the martyrs by name, given herself over to social scorn, adopted unusual and extravagant forms of devotion, and negotiated an agreement of chastity with her husband. When directly asked about her status, she replies that she is “no mayden” at all but rather “a wife,” and Margery’s behavior and speech in this scene at York evoke the virgin martyr as strongly as any. Her actions at York, when combined with her speech, insist on a reinterpretation of the distinction between virgin and wife not as a dichotomy, but as a continuum. At the same time, however, it is important to note that Margery never says whose

wife she is. Virgin martyrs in narrative often identify or are identified as Brides of Christ; given this interpretation, Margery's response echoes the story of Saint Agnes, who fends off a would-be suitor by asserting her affection "a-nothir louere" who is richer and stronger than her wealthy and powerful admirer. The potential lover cannot think of anyone more wealthy and powerful than he; Faith's "louere," of course, is Christ himself.⁷

The Archbishop, who finds Margery's answer less than satisfactory, perhaps for the reasons mentioned above, calls her a heretic and orders that she be fettered. Not only do the physical restraints provide an additional point of commonality with the virgin martyr legends, but also they suggest the anxiety produced by a figure such as Margery who, like the virgin martyr, blurs the boundary between the maiden and the wife.

After interviewing Margery, and hearing her story about the priest, the Archbishop's stance toward Margery softens somewhat and he tries simply to convince her to leave his diocese. She resists, saying that she must go back into York to take leave of her friends. The Archbishop asks her to "sweryn that thu schalt ne techyn ne chalengyn the pepil in my diocyse" (*Book*, Ch. 52, ll. 2963-4). Margery refuses, and at this point the discussion moves into more theologically oriented terrain, giving Margery a chance to display her own grasp of doctrine in a scene that strongly echoes Katherine's debates with the scholars in Alexandria. The Archbishop attempts to use the Pauline injunction against women preaching the Gospel as a basis of conviction, suggesting that if she does indeed preach, then she is likely possessed. Margery replies that she has, in fact, never spoken from a pulpit and therefore cannot be accused of preaching. By taking this approach, Margery acknowledges the difference between preaching from a pulpit (a spiritual vocation closed to women) and persuasion through conversation and good works (an area where women are thought to have especial advantage) and uses it to her

⁷ See *Legendys*, ll. 4141 and following.

advantage. Though the infrastructure of the Church places restrictions on her due to her sex, the spiritual discourse outside of institutions contains no such prescription and, indeed, can provide a space for individual expression beyond the strict wife/maiden distinction that the Archbishop seeks to enforce. This space becomes a place where Margery can secure a position of individual authority from which she can offer certain criticisms of church and society without straying into heresy and forfeiting her life because of it.

This incident, especially when viewed in conjunction with Margery's careful turn of phrase at the beginning of the chapter, suggests a final observation about Margery's behavior throughout the *Book*. Though she identifies strongly with the figure of the virgin martyr saint, Margery never repudiates her status as "wife." She preserves her union with John, despite their living in separate quarters, and apparently keeps up a relationship with at least one of her children, the son who moves to Germany. In the scene at York, Margery readily calls upon the status and safety ensured by her membership in the category "wife" in order to minimize the danger to herself in a potentially harmful situation, just as in the later exchange with the Archbishop she is able to exploit the distinction between public and private religious action to her advantage. Margery's use of social categories like these is clearly an act of will, certainly not an unconscious sublimation of themes from popular devotional literature. The *Book* suggests the ways in which women's spirituality in the late Middle Ages could be much more than simply received experience by showing Margery again and again as actively engaged in shaping her own spiritual identity. A wife and mother like Margery may have pre-scripted identity, but by combining with elements from the *vitae* of virgin martyrs, Margery creates a wholly new realm of possibilities for spiritual expression.

Conclusion

The Book of Margery Kempe was an appropriation of virgin martyr narratives an implicit revision of the texts by which late medieval women's spirituality might be understood. In her characterization of herself, in the structure of the book, and in her refusal to deny herself membership in the category "wife" while claiming membership in the category "virgin," Margery consistently challenges society's expectations for a religious woman, expectations that would have been shaped in many ways by the representation of female saints in hagiographic literature. Moreover, Margery's use of tropes from virgin martyr hagiography represents not a wholesale adoption of a particular persona, but rather a way in which Margery can construct a spiritual practice that meets her real, experienced needs rather than her needs as perceived by the Church.

Despite my best efforts, this thesis only scratches the surface of the *Book of Margery Kempe*. In my writing, I have elected to focus mainly on the first half of the text, and a few specific episodes within that, but Margery's story is much larger than this relatively narrow view can show. I've not discussed Margery's travels on the Continent or her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the ways in which affective piety infuses both of those trips. Margery's care for John late in her life is skimmed over, as are numerous encounters with clerical opponents and supporters of Margery's spiritual project. Any full study of the hagiographic nature of the *Book* would necessarily include a discussion of its somewhat tortuous production via several different circumstances, and that, too, is lacking.

Nevertheless, though this thesis does not fully answer every existing question about the *Book*, I remain hopeful that it raises new questions that have not yet been fully explored. Not only does the influence of virgin martyr narratives on the *Book* open up new ways of

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The *Book* contains within its appropriation of virgin martyr narratives an implicit revision of the terms by which late medieval women's spirituality might be understood. In her characterization of herself, in the structure of the book, and in her refusal to deny herself membership in the category "wife" while claiming membership in the category "virgin," Margery consistently challenges society's expectations for a religious woman, expectations that would have been shaped in many ways by the representation of female saints in hagiographic literature. Moreover, Margery's use of tropes from virgin martyr hagiography represents not a wholesale adoption of a particular persona, but rather a way in which Margery can construct a spiritual practice that meets her real, experienced needs rather than her needs as perceived by the Church.

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understanding Margery's sense of her own spirituality, it also points the way toward new interpretations of Margery's use of examples from married spirituality, as well as toward a deeper knowledge of the spirituality of laywomen in general. Furthermore, individuals like Margery who straddle the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy have much to teach us about religious beliefs and practices in any culture. Ultimately, I hope that this thesis will lead the reader to the same conclusion that I have reached over the course of this project: that women's spirituality in late medieval England was a rich and complex discourse, and that, though Margery Kempe's voice remains loud and distinctive while other, equally singular voices have indubitably been lost, there existed the possibility for a wide variety of spiritual and religious experience for women.

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