

The Crucifix, The Pietà, and the Female Mystic: Devotional Objects and Performative Identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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Introduction: Desirable Objects and Performative Texts

Any scholar who sits down to write about the objects of medieval devotional life, from crucifixes to statues, stained glass windows to wall paintings, necessarily encounters the paradox at the heart of material culture theory: in order to explore and articulate the meaning of material things, the three-dimensional objects of our enquiry are inevitably transformed into texts, metamorphosed in language, illustrated only by two-dimensional photographs or sketches or left to the imagination of the reader. Rather than shy away from this paradox, however, the material culture theorist Christopher Tilley embraces it not just as a necessity but a desirable prerequisite for any historian of the past. In his book *Material Culture and Text*, he argues:

No archaeological text is anything more or less than a flood of words so the question becomes which ones are deemed desirable as metaphoric transformations of the material reality being studied. You seem to think that telling stories is not my proper purpose but I regard any attempt to understand the past as fundamentally involving narrative. Narrative is not an option, it is an ontological status: we all live narratives.¹

For Tilley, the trend in material culture studies to employ and enact the linguistic analogy-reading an object, writing its biography- is not a regrettable state of affairs in which the “thingness” of things is buried beneath a mountain of words. Rather, the textual and, more importantly, narrative transformation of an object is indicative of the author’s desire: the author becomes a user of the object and their narrative becomes a product of that use, combining not only individual desire but the communal, cultural, and historical impulses that coalesce when object and user meet. The narrative which this encounter generates, whether an academic analysis or a text such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, then functions as a

record of the cultural consumption of material reality, a performance of the significance of an object in a specific time period and cultural context, and an indication, in W. J. T. Mitchell's formulation, of what an object "wants" us to do when we encounter it.²

Over the past two decades art historical approaches to religious images have increasingly focused on the relationship between the art object and the user in the production of meaning. In *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England*, Richard Marks characterises the devotional image as "an artefact defined by its relationship with its viewers":

The devotional image does not enjoy autonomous existence but only derives meaning- as in the label- from the process of its cultural use by the devotee. Actions take place before these images which were prompted by their presence.³

David Freedberg concurs and argues that it is essential that we also attend to the expectations that the devotee has of the object before them:

We must consider not only the beholders' symptoms and behaviour, but also the effectiveness, efficacy and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as a result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expected imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all.⁴

The symbiotic relationship between the image and beholder creates what Freedberg calls a "potentiality," predicated on sight as the primary sensory engagement. He asserts that the exchange between the "attentive or fetishizing beholder and an image regarded as attractive in one way or another" produces a feeling of arousal, a fetishization of the object which, he suggests, is especially characteristic of the crucifix in the Middle Ages.⁵ Both the sense of arousal and the expectation of potentiality that Freedberg identifies are present when the fifteenth-century lay mystic Margery Kempe sees the crucifix in her parish church in King's Lynn. Her *Book* tells us that following her initial conversion to the spiritual life, Margery experienced a period of temptation, during which:

Sche was smet wyth the dedly wovnd of veynglory and felt it not, for sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in tokyn of lofe.⁶

There are two perspectives at work here: Margery's desire for the crucifix to loosen its hands from the cross and embrace her, the importance of which I will return to in a moment, and the *Book's* representation of this desire as proceeding from a deadly wound of vainglory.⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe* is the product of a complex collaboration between Margery and her scribes, and here Margery's desire is held in check by the narrative's categorisation of it as vainglorious.⁸ The use of this word, which in Middle English means "boastfulness, self-importance" and a "desire for honour, praise, or renown," suggests that Margery's response to the crucifix is entirely self-serving and therefore should be dismissed as a sign of pride, but a closer examination reveals a more favourable reading.⁹ In her book *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages*, Kathleen Kamerick has argued that unlike priests, Lollards, and in this case, the narrative voice of Margery's *Book*, the laity were not worried about potentially idolatrous responses to images: "holy images formed a crucial and completely commonplace element in their piety, as familiar material artifacts and as links to the supernatural."¹⁰ The narrative might present Margery's desire as proceeding from vainglory but this does not undermine either the feeling that the crucifix arouses or the opportunity which it represents for Margery.

Sarah Salih argues that the body of Christ was the "prime sight of affective gazing" in the Middle Ages and that in the narratives in which Christ embraces the viewer from the cross, "erotic and spiritual affect" become "indistinguishable: to be kissed by Christ is to be forgiven by him."¹¹ I will examine such narratives below but this is also true of Margery's engagement with the crucifix when she desires that the figure of Christ should "halsyn" her, a polysemous word which means to "embrace, caress (a part of the body) as a sign of affection, embrace or fondle, sexually, spiritually, or mystically."¹² Margery's desire is both erotic and spiritual but significantly, this complex state of arousal is transferred onto the crucifix itself,

which is endowed with human agency through the use of the masculine possessive pronoun, “*hys handys*” (italics mine). In a contemporary Middle English life of one of Margery’s mystical models, the Beguine Marie d’Oignies, it is Marie who “halsed” the “fete of the crucifixe.”¹³ In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it is the figure of Christ that is made to project such desires and this facilitates an exchange between the devotional object and the devotee which is empowering to both. Margery’s attribution of agency to the crucifix portrays it as a desirable and potentially miraculous object; the possibility that the image of Christ might “halsyn” Margery in “tokyn” of his love for her validates the intensity of Margery’s devotion and highlights the opportunity that an interaction with a devotional object provides for the performance of holy identity. In her study of the relationship between the Beguines, lay religious women in the Low Countries, and the pietà, Joanna Ziegler has described this phenomenon as a “transference,” that is, an “exchange of identity between the beholder and the object via the sense of touch.”¹⁴ Margery desires that Christ should express his love for her through the physical embrace of the crucifix, thus reciprocating and making manifest her own feelings in the public space of the church through a miraculous performance or “tokyn of lofe.” In Middle English, a “tokyn” is a physical object, a symbol, and an act: a “visible indicator of an inward state”, “an act performed in confirmation or recognition of a contract or an agreement” and a “marvel or an event assumed to signify the favour of a supernatural power.”¹⁵ If the crucifix were to embrace Margery as she desired, it would indeed be a “tokyn” of divine favour: an act performed by a physical object in public to confirm her identity as a holy woman. Such a “tokyn” would be especially welcome at this stage of the *Book* when Margery is just embarking upon her newfound religious life.

The definition of “tokyn” as an act or marvellous occurrence ties in to the material culture theorist Dan Hick’s suggestion that we should view objects as “events.”¹⁶ In this reading, objects are not static, unresponsive matter, they are agential, interactive, and

performative and this is precisely how devotional objects were understood and described in late medieval England. This is the “expectation” that Freedberg argues we must consider when analysing such objects and in the first half of this article I will examine popular exempla from the literature of pastoral care to show, firstly, that Margery Kempe’s desire for the crucifix to embrace her is a reflection of what she had been taught to expect from such an encounter. But secondly, and more importantly, that such narratives deliberately transform material objects into events that provide opportunities for devotional self-fashioning. The vitality of medieval imagery is well attested by scholars such as Freedberg and Marks, but what has not been recognised is that encounters with devotional objects provide powerful opportunities for identity-producing performances that are especially important, and necessary, for holy women such as Margery Kempe.

My use of “performance” here needs to be contextualised. It is informed by Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender identity and the characteristics that Butler identifies are crucial for my assertion that devotional objects such as the crucifix and the pietà functioned as a model for religious identity. In the second half of this article I will focus on Margery Kempe’s encounter with the pietà, the image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ, in order to show how Margery imitates and embodies the emotional states represented by the object- the sorrow of Mary and the suffering of Christ- and thereby presents herself not only as a proficient reader of devotional objects but also as a powerful re-enactor of the meaning of that particular object. The good lady who witnesses Margery’s performance is included in the *Book’s* narration of the event and she declares that it is a “good exampyl to me, and to other men also, the grace that God werkyth in hir sowle” (286), thus validating Margery’s status as a holy woman whose performance is worthy of imitation. In Butler’s formulation, gender identity is performative in the sense that it is a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”¹⁷ Gender

identity is a “doing” rather than a “being”; it is produced and constituted in the individual moment of performance.¹⁸ The same, I would argue, is true of religious identity, especially for a lay woman such as Margery Kempe who, as a married mother of fourteen children, cannot assert her piety and holiness in the traditional ways available to women in the period, i.e. as a virgin, nun, or anchoress. Unlike men who could fix a religious identity through the ritual of ordination, for lay women with religious aspirations, as Mary Suydam argues, the only option is to stage “continuous performances of extraordinary piety.”¹⁹ And these performances must be recognised as such, that is they must be citational, to use Butler’s term. They must be a “re-enactment and a re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established.”²⁰ Margery Kempe performs a range of socially established practices that are indicative of piety and sanctity as part of her attempt to reinvent herself as a “self-styled saint,” to quote Gail Gibson.²¹ She wears white clothing, goes on pilgrimage to the most sacred sites in medieval Christendom, talks publically about God and, with the help of her scribes, transforms her experiences into narrative form in her *Book*. But she also draws upon the “set of meanings” established in devotional objects such as the pietà and it is her performance of extraordinary piety modelled on religious imagery that will be my focus here.

Such performances also have an important impact upon the space in which they are staged. Butler argues that gender identity is “tenuously constructed in time, *instituted in an exterior space*, through a stylized repetition of acts” (italics mine).²² In my primary example from the *Book*, Margery Kempe encounters the pietà in the church and her performance, which is validated by the good lady but criticised by the priest, demonstrates the flexibility and availability of ecclesiastical space as a space of devotional autonomy and community for pious laywomen.²³ In my second example, however, Margery’s performance is instituted in domestic space, in the house of a poor woman in Rome, and is inspired not by a material object but by the sight of a living woman and her child. Although Margery’s performance is

once again citational in that she views the woman and child through the lens of familiar devotional imagery- the pietà and the Madonna and child- the performance reinvents the house, with its living occupants, as an alternative space of devotion to the church. This is confirmed by Christ himself who bears witness to Margery's performance and declares "this place ys holy" (202). Mary Suydam highlights the relationship between female mystical performance and space when she argues that "on an on-going basis Beguine women had to construct, embody, and enact both their own holiness *and the spaces in which it could be expressed*" (italics mine).²⁴ As I will demonstrate in the conclusion of this article, Margery Kempe's enactment of her own holiness constructs a sacred space that is outside ecclesiastical control and that has important consequences for the ways in which we read lay holy women and their texts.

Expectations of Materiality: Devotional Objects as Devotional Events

Before moving on to Margery Kempe, it is essential to examine the expectations that medieval laypeople had of the images they encountered in their local churches and the ways in which an encounter with such an object was represented as an opportunity for devotional self-fashioning. Margery's desire for the crucifix to embrace her was not the fantasy of an overenthusiastic devotee, it was an expectation that was promoted and sanctioned by the exemplary narratives of sermons, penitential handbooks, and story collections designed to educate the laity in the faith. In these pastoral care texts, the crucifix is transformed into a devotional event by narratives that foreground not only the agency of the object but also its role in delivering moral judgement and inspiring a concrete demonstration of faith from devotees. The image becomes a performative event with the didactic potential to edify the community and, in a period in which misplaced devotions could result in accusations of heresy, to act as a guide to appropriate devotional conduct within the church. The narratives that I will explore here teach the laity to become proficient readers of imagery, a skill that, as

becomes apparent in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, becomes a litmus test for spiritual understanding on the part of the clergy as well as the laity.

Stories abound of crucifixes that acted precisely as Margery Kempe desired at the beginning of her *Book*. The narrative of the Merciful Knight, who granted mercy to his father's murderer rather than taking revenge, tells of the crucifix embracing the knight as an embodied imitation of the knight's virtue. In the version in the fifteenth-century sermon collection *Jacob's Well*, when the knight kisses the cross:

þe crucyfixe halsyd hym abowtyn his necke, & seyde, “þou for3yue þis kny3t þi faderis deth for my loue, & kyssed hym; þer-fore I for3eue þe alle þi synnes and kysse þe.”²⁵

The verb “halsyn” is again prominent and the crucifix's embrace is a direct imitation of the knight's embrace of his father's murderer. The traditional *imitatio Christi* is reversed as the crucifix imitates the knight and the encounter with the object becomes a devotional event in which pledges of forgiveness are exchanged. In John Mirk's *Festial*, the most popular sermon cycle in the fifteenth-century (originally composed in the 1380s), the practice of imitation is extended as Mirk narrates the exemplum in order to promote the ritual of creeping to the cross on Good Friday. He explains that the cross is brought into the church “þe wyche yche cristen man and womman schal worschep þis day, in worchep of hym þas as þis day dyed on þe crosse.”²⁶ Mirk relocates the initial encounter between the knight and the murderer from the forest to the sacred space of the church itself and establishes a chain of imitation based on embodied performance. When the knight enters the church “wyth his swerde drawn,” the murderer not only begs his forgiveness but also falls to the ground “wyth his armes spradde abrode, as Cryste sprade hys armes on þe crosse” (1:109). This embodied imitation causes the knight to realize that it “hade bene a to horybul synne for to haue don o3te amyse to hym þare in þe chirche” and he is merciful (1:109). The crucifix's embrace then takes place

publically in front of the congregation during the ritual for which the audience of Mirk's sermon has gathered:

Pen, whan þys knythe come crepyng to þe crosse and kyste þe fette, þe ymage [losud] his armys and klyppud þe knythe abowte þe nekke and kyste hym, and sayde þus, þat alle þe chyrche herde: "I for3eff þe, os þow hast for3euen for me." (1:109)

The imitation has now come full circle and Mirk's audience is urged to stage a similar devotional performance by worshipping the crucifix on Good Friday and embracing each other as a community in their own church. "Klyppon and kysson and ben frendus," Mirk declares, "and þan wil Cryste klyppon and kysson 3ow and 3effon 3ow þe ioþ þat sal laston" (1:109). The knight refrains from committing sacrilege by shedding blood in the church and the story is narrated by Mirk in order to promote the benefits of creeping to the cross. The gesture of imitative embrace therefore constitutes a "stylized repetition of acts," to return to Butler, that is performed to the direct advantage of the "exterior space" in which it is instituted.

The miraculous animation of the crucifix is not limited to the imitation of virtuous behaviour, however. Encounters with the crucifix are also transformed into devotional events that demonstrate vice. In the Middle English *Gesta Romanorum*, from the first half of the fifteenth-century, when a woman goes to kiss the feet of Christ, as Marie d'Oignies did, "the crucifix drewe a-wey his fete" and berates the woman:

Go from me, for thou arte not worthy to kysse my fete, for the synne thou beres in thyn herte, for shame, and longe haste done.²⁷

As in the Merciful Knight exemplum, the crucifix is miraculously animated and speaks directly to the women but here Christ's gesture is an embodied sign of a *lack* of devotion. In another fifteenth-century collection of exempla, *The Alphabet of Tales*, the crucifix responds to a sinful man who has died unrepentant. When the priests are performing the mass and saying prayers for the deceased during his funeral, the crucifix on the rood screen "lowsyd his

handis fra þa rude, & stoppid his eris þat he sulde nott here þaim.” The priest then explains to the congregation “whatkyn a tokyn þis is”:

He this at lies here had neuer will in all his life to here þe wurd of Godd, nor at no man sulde speke off Hym.²⁸

The priest, as God’s representative, is able to read the crucifix’s behaviour, transforming its action into a desirable narrative that serves the needs of his church. When the priests “lefte þer prayers,” “the crucifix putt vp his armys as þai war befor.”²⁹ The crucifix imitates the deceased’s sinful behaviour in refusing to listen, deliberately ignoring the funeral mass as the deceased ignored the word of God. In the version in *Jacob’s Well*, a “voys fro a-boyn” makes the connection to church ritual more explicit:

Pis cursyd man wolde neuere for slauthe heryn my woord, ne don þer-after, ne heryn my seruyse in holy cherch deuoutly; þerfore, his soule is in powere of feendys dampnyd. Þerfore, myn ymage on þe cros stoppyth his erys, to schewe þat I, god, stoppe myn erys in heuen, þat I here no prayere, prayed for hym in holy cherche.³⁰

Here God identifies himself and explains that “myn ymage on þe cros” stopped its ears not only because the man neglected the word of God for “slauthe” but also because he did not “heryn my seruyse in holy deuoutly.”³¹ The “deuout” response distinguishes the virtuous man from the sinner and as we shall see in Margery Kempe’s *Book*, the importance of responding “deuoutly” to imagery also comes to distinguish between the pious lay woman and the indifferent parish priest.

Such intense devotion to images and belief in their miraculous potential was not, of course, accepted without question in late medieval England. Indeed the status, use, and inherent qualities of images were subject to some of the most passionate scrutiny of the period, especially in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the Lollards.³² Whereas John Mirk speaks for orthodoxy when he declares that “crosses and oþer ymages ben necessary in chyrches, whatte-euer þeis Loleris [Lollards] seyn” (157), the anonymous author of the treatise on images and pilgrimage in the early fifteenth-century anthology

British Library Additional 24202 asserts that “þe puple is foul disceyeyd by veyn trist in þes ymages.”³³ This text creates an alternative narrative in which the laity are deceived and exploited by supposedly miraculous images:

For summe lewid folc wenen þat þe ymagis doun verreyly þe myraclis of hemsilf, and þat þis ymage of þe crucifix be Crist himself.... And herby þe rude peple tristus vtterly in þes deade ymagis, and louen God and hese comandementis þe lesse, for men skateren þere loue in siche stokkis and leeuen precious werkis of mercy vndone til here pore ne3eboris, whiche ben Cristis ymagis. And, as to þe myraclis of þese ymagis, men knowen þat many of hem ben foule leesyngis for to disseyue þe comune puple for coueytise of worldly muk. (87)

The Lollards were concerned that the “lewid folc” would mistake the image for Christ himself and that they would put their faith in dead material images, loving God less and performing fewer works of mercy for the true images of Christ, the poor. Misplaced trust in material images would cause individuals to neglect the opportunity for devotional self-fashioning provided by performing good works, such as feeding the hungry or clothing the naked. But the text’s fear that the laity would “wene þat þe ymagis doun verreyly þe myraclis of *hemsilf*” (italics mine) is rather more complex as it seems reluctant to condemn the miraculous potential of images entirely. The author declares that “*many* of hem” are “foules lesynges” designed to deceive the laity but, importantly, not *all* and indeed at the beginning of the passage the author does not deny the miracles but the misconception that they are performed by the power of the image, rather than the power of God. The attribution of miraculous power to the image itself could, of course, lead to idolatry and discussions of the danger posed by overenthusiastic adoration of devotional imagery focused on the need to avoid offering either *latria* (the devotion due to God alone) or *dulia* (the reverence due to the saints) to the image itself.³⁴ In the early fifteenth-century treatise on the Decalogue *Dives and Pauper*, the constant refrain is that prayer should be made “*afor* þe ymage but not *to* þe ymage” (italics mine) but in practice that kind of devotional fine line was difficult to draw.³⁵

Even *Dives and Pauper* itself is conflicted on the issue. When Dives asks Pauper “how shulde I rede in þe book of peynture and of ymagerye?”, Pauper declares of the crucifix:

As Seynt Bernard byddy3t, take heid be þe ymage how his heid is bowyd down to the, redy to kyssyn the and comyn at on wyt the. See how hese armys and hese hondys been spred abrod on þe tree in tokene þat he is redy for to fangyn the and halsyn the and kyssyn the and takyn the to his mercy.³⁶

The crucifix is transformed into a desirable object, it is ready to “kyssen the and comyn at on wyt the,” just as Margery Kempe wished, but eight lines later, Pauper repeats no less than five times that prayer should be made “*afor* þe ymage and nought *to* þe ymage” (italics mine) because “it seeith the nought, it hery3t the nought, it vnderstony3t the nought.”³⁷ St Bernard no doubt read the image’s gestures as signifying those of Christ and Pauper concurs that the crucifix’s arms are spread abroad “in tokene” that Christ is ready to embrace the viewer. But as discussed above, a “tokene” is both a symbol and an act, and there remains the suggestion that it is the image itself, referred to consistently in the passage with the masculine pronoun, that is “redy” to respond. Indeed in the disclaimer in which the image is relegated back to the status of an inanimate object, “*it* seeith the nought,” the crucifix itself still remains the grammatical subject of the sentence.

Even Lollards who were determined to prove once and for all that images were neither miraculous nor necessary could not do so without implicitly acknowledging their powerful position at the centre of medieval devotional life. Moreover, although they might not believe in their efficacy as spiritual aids, an encounter with a devotional object could still provide an opportunity for performative self-fashioning. John Burrell, for example, testified in his heresy trial to aggressively attacking a crucifix with a fagothook, declaring that “no matter how strongly or sharply I strike this cross, even with a sharper instrument, this cross will never bleed.”³⁸ Attempting to demonstrate through empirical experiment that narratives of bleeding crosses are “foule lesyngis,” as the anonymous treatise put it, Burrell’s encounter

with the crucifix still operates as a devotional event as his attack upon the object enables him to perform his identity as a Lollard. Not all such performances were as clear-cut as Burrell's, however. Richard Marks references an intriguing case of a Lollard from the village of Bergh Apton in Norfolk who decided to burn an image but, rather than targeting one from his own parish church, he took a patronal image from the neighbouring village of Trowse Newton before returning home to carry out his incendiary scheme.³⁹ Statues of Bergh Apton's patron saints, Peter and Paul, do survive and Marks wonders whether it was the "fear of incurring the wrath of [his] orthodox fellow-parishioners" that prevented the man from burning them instead.⁴⁰ This incident may additionally betray a lingering attachment to the local image of the saint, an almost superstitious reluctance to consign to the flames an object that had not only been a part of the man's devotional life in his parish church but that, as a patronal image, represented the community and its source of protection.⁴¹

Despite the increased pressure upon imagery, the late Middle Ages saw a rise in the production and mechanical sophistication of devotional objects. Indeed Richard Marks sees the proliferation of images in this period as evidence of a concerted effort to strike back at the threat posed by Lollard iconoclasts such as John Burrell.⁴² At the same time as the quantity of imagery was on the increase, developments in material production and operation meant that devotional objects were able to mechanically simulate the movements depicted in narratives such as the Merciful Knight. The nuns at Barking Abbey, for example, had a crucifix with moveable arms from the 1370s and Amy Knight Powell demonstrates that such objects were being produced at the end of the thirteenth century.⁴³ Powell examines articulated crucifixes that were designed to facilitate the staging of the deposition from the cross on Good Friday, a ritual that placed the devotional object at the centre of a symbolic performance in the church.⁴⁴ When not in use for this particular ritual, jointed figures of Christ still contained the potentiality for movement and could be co-opted into a devotional event in the imagination of

the individual, especially an individual like Margery Kempe whose exposure to the kinds of narratives I have explored here encouraged a view of devotional objects as both agential *and* available for performative engagement.⁴⁵

So what has been gained by viewing objects such as the crucifix as devotional events? The devotional event foregrounds the availability of the object as a site of devotional self-fashioning for both the virtuous and sinful, orthodox and heterodox participant. An encounter with an image is a dynamic and interactive performance in which the gestures and emotional state of both object and devotee are available for imitation and citation. The Merciful Knight embraced his father's murderer, the crucifix embraced the knight, and in John Mirk's *Festial*, the audience is encouraged not only to embrace one another but to embrace church ritual as well. Virtuous behaviour safeguards sacred space from sacrilege and in his sermon, Mirk transforms the crucifix into a desirable narrative that supports the space in which it is situated, the parish church. In the second half of this article I will move on to examine Margery Kempe's encounter with the pietà as a devotional event that enables her to stage a performance of "extraordinary piety" in a Norfolk church and to offer that performance for imitation by both her internal audience and the audience of the *Book* itself. Whereas in the pastoral care narratives explored above, the crucifix becomes animated and speaks directly to the devotee, in the *Book* Margery reads her own performance herself and evaluates the response of the good lady and the priest who are present. Margery becomes a spectacle and places herself at the centre of the church in a devotional event that establishes her own authority as a holy woman and challenges the parish priest. As a result, Margery reshapes the exterior space of her performance, the church, as a locus of female community and extraordinary, performative piety.

“Who can not wepe com lerne att me”: Margery Kempe as Devotional “Merroure”

In Chapter 60 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery is in Norwich when she meets a lady who wishes to take her for dinner. “As honest wolde [as good manners required], sche went to the cherch ther the lady herd hir servyse, wher this creatur sey a fayr ymage of owr Lady clepyd a ‘pyte’” (285). The image that Margery encounters is a *pietà*, known in English as a ‘pyte,’ a representation of the Virgin at the foot of the cross holding the dead body of her son. The *pietà* became popular in England and the continent at the beginning of the fifteenth century and it was represented in a wide variety of media, from statues and wall paintings to stained glass windows and Books of Hours.⁴⁶ The image even inspired a small but significant group of lyric poems in the *planctus Mariae* tradition that provide an important context for Margery Kempe’s encounter with the *pietà*.⁴⁷ Rosemary Woolf comments that fifteenth-century authors could “reasonably expect their readers or audience to recognise the iconographic form from their own brief verbal descriptions” but the relative newness of the form also made it a desirable object for devotional innovation and appropriation.⁴⁸

Presenting the Virgin at the foot of the cross holding the dead body of her son, the *pietà* operates on the threshold of death and resurrection, sorrow and salvation, and as such it drew upon, and was strengthened by, multiple iconographic traditions. When Margery Kempe sees the image, she experiences Christ’s death and the Virgin’s grief simultaneously: “hir mende was al holy ocupyed in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesus Crist and in the compassion of owr Lady, Seynt Mary” (286). The coexistence of Passion and compassion associated the *pietà* with the *imago pietàtis*, Christ as the Man of Sorrows, an iconography which conferred upon the *pietà* additional power and significance.⁴⁹ The *imago pietàtis* had gained an indulgence as a result of the miraculous appearance of the wounded Christ during the Mass of St Gregory and in a late fourteenth-century Book of Hours at Keble College, Oxford (MS 4 fol. 10v) the *pietà* is accompanied by an indulgence, perhaps inspired by the

presence of Christ's wounded body in the scene.⁵⁰ Kathleen Kamerick has also identified a late fifteenth-century printed primer which includes an indulgence available for reciting the Pater Noster, Ave Maria, and Creed while beholding an "ymage of pyte" and the *arma Christi*.⁵¹ The suggestion that contemplation of the pietà garners remission for sins demonstrates that it was an image with considerable devotional potentiality and efficacy for the viewer.

This potentiality also found expression in the pietà's appearance in visions in *planctus Mariae* lyrics. In the lyric known as "Who Cannot Weep Come Learn of Me", the narrator is in a dreamlike state when he comes across a weeping woman holding her son in her lap, who suddenly "vanyshyt Away" at the end of the lyric.⁵² In "To Calvery He Bare His Cross", the encounter with the Virgin of Pity is similarly framed as a dream vision and the dreamer suddenly wakes up when Christ casts his "dedly loke" upon Mary as he dies.⁵³ These lyrics transform the statue into an interactive event in which the dreamer is directly addressed by the Virgin and invited to participate in the scene. The Virgin presents herself as an exemplar of sorrow to be imitated, making the didactic potential of the pietà abundantly clear: "who can not wepe," she declares, "come lerne at me" (p.17, l. 9). This didactic potential is presented in the lyric known as *De Arte Lacrimandi* through the popular educational metaphor of the mirror:

Purtreyid and peyntid piteously
 This ymage was with terys of blode
As for a meroure veryly
Of oure Lady I vnderstode. (italics mine)⁵⁴

The pietà is a "meroure" of the Virgin's sorrow and, as "Who Cannot Weep" makes clear, the devotional response of the narrator then transforms him or her into a "meroure" for the reader. A mere five lines after asserting "I cowd not wepe I was so hard hertid," the narrator declares "forsooth þan I sobbid" when he sees the Virgin with her dead son on her lap (pp.17-

18, lines 10 and 16). The Virgin then confirms the narrator's transformation into a devotional mirror when she varies the poem's refrain, declaring "who cannot wepe may lerne at *pee*" (p.18, line 18, italics mine). In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery also becomes a devotional mirror when she sees the pietà: her tears educate her immediate audience and her readers, and she speaks of the emotional immediacy of the death of Christ just as the Virgin does in the lyrics: "syr, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyed this same day" (286). Later in the *Book*, after the pietà episode, Christ makes it clear that Margery should be viewed as a devotional mirror when he declares:

I haue ordeyned the to be a merowr amongys hem, for to han gret sorwe, that thei schulde takyn exampil by the for to have sum litel sorwe in her hertys for her synnys, that thei myth therthorw be savyd; but thei lovin not to heryn of sorwe ne of contricyon. (338-9, italics mine).

The use of the term "ordeyn", with its specialised meaning of appointment into holy orders, and the assertion that sinners might be saved as a direct result of her example presents Margery as a mediator with the ability to save her community from their sins, a role typically associated with the Virgin or indeed with the parish priest.⁵⁵ Margery's encounter with the pietà is presented in her *Book* as a devotional event in which she not only makes manifest the meaning of the sculpture- the importance of experiencing sorrow for the death of Christ- but also stages a devotional performance through which her holy identity is "ordeyned" by her peers and her readers without priestly intervention.

Before turning to the details of Margery's encounter, it is important to reflect upon what we know about the image itself and the location of the event as it is narrated in Margery's *Book*. The encounter takes place in Chapter 60 when Margery is in Norwich, having been "steryd" to visit the burial place of the devout vicar Richard Caister in St Stephen's church. Having wept in the churchyard and at the high altar beside the grave of Caister, a group of local priests invite Margery to a tavern, where she meets the good lady who desires to have dinner with her:

And therfor, as honeste wolde, sche went to the cherch ther the lady herd hir servyse,
wher this creatur sey a fayr ymage of owr Lady clepyd a 'pyte'. (285)

The narrative does not state whether “the cherch ther the lady herd hir servyse” is St Stephen’s or another local church. The text describes the priests who met Margery as from “the same place”, i.e. St Stephen’s, but the church where the pietà is located is specified as “ther the lady herd hir servyse,” a perhaps extraneous detail if the party were returning to St Stephen’s, underlined by the distal deixis “ther.” The priests from St Stephen’s are also described as knowing “hir maner of werkynge,” that is her way of acting, directly after the people in the church criticise her tears for Caister: “What eylyth the, woman? Why faryst thus wyth thiself?” (295).⁵⁶ The good lady’s priest in the pietà episode that follows this event is surprised at her reaction to the image, exclaiming “damsel, Jhesu is ded long sithyn,” which might suggest that the *Book* has a different priest and a different church in mind. There is evidence that there was a pietà in the Lady Chapel of St Mary Coslany in Norwich by the 1460s and this church is less than a mile north of St Stephen’s.⁵⁷ Richard Marks notes that by 1391 a pietà in Norwich Cathedral, also less than a mile away, “was attracting substantial oblations” and that by the early sixteenth century, the cathedral had two freestanding pietàs, one in the nave and one in the Bauchun Chapel.⁵⁸ In a will of 1460-61 the Bauchun Chapel was described as “the Chapel of the Blessed Mary of Pity” and the space also boasts a carving of the pietà on a corbel.⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that Margery Kempe’s encounter with the pietà took place in either Norwich Cathedral or St Mary Coslany; indeed Marks’ argument that pietà iconography was “universally popular” in England, especially in the fifteenth century, could suggest that it is just as likely that Margery saw the image in St Stephen’s.⁶⁰ There is evidence that there may have been a pietà at St Stephen’s, perhaps in the north chancel aisle which had an altar to the Virgin, but this image is not extant and cannot be securely dated.⁶¹ Margery’s *Book* is ambiguous when it comes to the precise location of the pietà but it is also silent regarding its form. Rather than describing the object’s

visual appearance and medium, the narrator instead describes the devotional effect it had upon Margery: “thorw the beholding of that pete hir minde was al holy occupyed in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist and in the compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary” (286). There is no indication as to whether the image is a painting, sculpture, or stained glass representation of the pietà. Nor is its position within the church or function specified: whether it was in the nave, “the favoured emplacement” for pietàs according to Marks, or whether it was a statue on an altar.⁶² But while the lack of specificity as to the location and precise form of the image might be frustrating in an academic analysis, for the reader of Margery’s *Book*, the gap which is left is both productive and inviting. In her discussion of the pietà and *arma Christi* indulgence that I mentioned above, Kathleen Kamerick suggests that the lack of a specific image to accompany the pardon could indicate that the printers assumed that both images were “so common that any reader might easily refer to one at home or in church” or, I would add, in in their imagination or memory.⁶³ The *Book’s* refusal to pinpoint the precise location and form of the pietà that Margery encounters enables the reader to map his or her own visual memory of the image onto Margery’s account, thereby rendering it more readily available for devotional appropriation and personalisation.

If we turn, then, to the encounter itself, Margery’s response to the pietà is a feeling of intense sorrow that is generated by the vision that she receives when she beholds the image:

And thorw the beholdyng of that pete hir mende was al holy occupyed in the Passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist and in the compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be wech sche was compellyd to cryyn ful lowde and wepyn ful sor, as thei sche schulde a deyd. Than cam to hir the ladys preste seying, "Damsel, Jhesu is ded long sithyn." Whan hir crying was cesyd, sche seyde to the preste, "Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyd this same day, and so me thynkyth it awt to be to yow and to alle Cristen pepil. We awt evyr to han mende of hys kendnes and evyr thynkyn of the dolful deth that he deyd for us." Than the good lady, heryng her communicacyon, seyde: "Ser, it is a good exampyl to me, and to other men also, the grace that God werkyth in hir sowle." And so the good lady was hir avoket and answeryd for hir. (286)

As is evident from Margery's weeping, the Passion of Christ and the sorrow of Mary both possess her and are appropriated by her. She mirrors Christ's suffering and death by crying "as thei sche schulde a deyde" and the narrator conflates Margery's weeping grammatically with that of the Virgin when he declares that "sche was compellyd to cryyn ful lowde": the immediate antecedent of "sche" in the clause is Mary. The events of the *pietà* are present in both her mind and her body, and her devotional response is declared to be a "good exampyl." When she sees the image her mind is "al holy occupyed," that is "possessed or seized," a word often used of an illness that "takes over" and is "made present" in the body.⁶⁴ The *pietà* takes possession of Margery's body and her feelings are so severe that the power of her sorrow is almost fatal. The intensity and volume of her weeping are criticised by the priest who declares that "Jhesu is ded long sithyn" but Margery only responds "whan hir crying was cesyd," indicating that she is impervious to external interaction for the duration of the experience. In his discussion of her tears, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that Margery's weeping "signal[s] her full bodily participation in events from the life of Christ," Margery "does not simply imitate Christ (*imitatio Christi*) but fully inhabits his world."⁶⁵ It is clear in the *pietà* episode that her crying is an embodied event through which Margery not only inhabits Christ's world but incarnates that world, with its sorrow and suffering, for all to see.

The verb "occupien" also means to be engaged or intent upon something, as well as to be possessed by it, and the word is used of the practice or exercise of a craft, including the performance of prayers. In *De Arte Lacrimandi* the Virgin's weeping becomes a "craft" which can be learnt and this is precisely how Margery's tears operate when she explains to the parish priest that "we awt evyr to *han mende* of hys kendnes and evyr *thynkyn* of the dolful deth that he deyde for us" (270, italics mine).⁶⁶ Indeed, the importance of Margery's advice is attested by the red ink annotator of the *Book* who has written "nota" in the inner margin of the manuscript next to "han mende," indicating to the reader that we should learn

from Margery's example and similarly remember and reflect upon Christ's death, despite the priest's scepticism (447). Indeed, the good lady makes the significance of Margery's devotional response abundantly clear when she declares: "Ser, it is a good exampyl to me, and to other men also, the grace that God werkyth in hir sowle." Margery's "good exampyl" presents her as a mediator between the events of the Passion and the faithful on earth but in addition, the good lady's assertion validates her identity as a holy woman when she reads the encounter as evidence for the "grace that God werkyth in hir sowle." In the *pietà* itself, Mary is our access point for the appropriate devotional response to Christ's death and, as a woman and a mother, Margery can readily place herself in Mary's position. But Margery goes further and makes the devotional response explicit in her embodied tears and therefore becomes an exemplary image herself.⁶⁷ She turns the *pietà* into a devotional event by making Christ's death "as fresch," that is as recent and vivid, as "he had deyde this same day." Joanna Ziegler argues that the *pietà* is not tied to a defined temporal and narrative context and as such its emotional appeal enables it to "transcend the restrictions of time and space."⁶⁸ Margery Kempe achieves precisely this kind of historical and spatial transcendence when she makes the death of Christ present in the contemporary time and space of the medieval church.

Margery's emotional performance has an important consequence in the *Book*. It enables Margery to establish a relationship of mutual cooperation and validation with the good lady that bypasses the authority of the lady's priest and reorients the sacred space of the church as a place of female devotional community that exists independently of ecclesiastical ministrations. After declaring Margery's performance to be a "good exampyl" she becomes her "avoket" (advocate), a word that encompasses protection and support, mediation and intercession (especially by Christ or the Virgin) as well as legal power (referring to a professional pleader in a court of law).⁶⁹ Kathy Lavezzo has explored the relationships between women in Margery's *Book*, arguing that Margery's sobs "render Margery herself an

object of both female same-sex identification and homoerotic desire.”⁷⁰ The good lady in the pietà episode clearly identifies with Margery, although not in an explicitly homoerotic way here, and Lavezzo goes on to argue that Margery’s tears often present her as a “spectacle” that threatens to “deflect attention away from Jesus himself to the writhing figure of Margery.”⁷¹ Attention is attracted by Margery but the good lady’s support enables the spectacle of her devotions to contribute to her performance of holy identity while simultaneously directing the reader back to the image itself and its significance. The image remains a crucial part of the devotional event as it is the presence of the pietà that sets off the chain of imitative devotional practice. Margery imitates the Virgin in her sorrow and the good lady imitates the Virgin by becoming an intercessor on Margery’s behalf and verbally supporting her performance of the image’s meaning.

The female audience that Margery establishes, based on emotional empathy and the correct understanding of the significance of the pietà, is also explored by a pietà lyric specifically addressed to a female audience known as “An Appeal to All Mothers”:

Off alle women þat euer were borne,
 That berys childur, abyde an se
 How my son liggus me before
 Vpon my kne, takyn fro tre.
 Your childur 3e dawnse vpon your kne
 With la3yng, kyssyng, and mery chere;
 Be-holde my childe, be-holde now me,
 ffor now liggus ded my dere son, dere.⁷²

The Virgin goes on to address an individual woman (“O woman, woman, wel is the”, p.13, line 9) and then urges all women to think upon “my son” when they see their own children (p.15, line 52). The poem proceeds on a principle of imitation and revision: the Virgin portrays her actions as a macabre parody of those of earthly mothers, where they place a cap on their child’s head, she picks out thorns from the crown, for example. But at the end of the

poem, the Virgin transfer this mirroring beyond the immediate audience of the lyric when she declares:

Now, alle wymmen þat has your wytte
 And sees my childe on my knees ded,
 Wepe not for yours for wepe for hit,
 And 3e shall haue ful mycull mede.
 (p.15, lines 73-6, italics mine)

The address to all women that have the “wyttē” of the immediate female audience encourages them to weep when they see the pietà (“my childe on my knees ded”) and they will have “ful mycull mede,” that is spiritual reward, as a result. This reciprocal weeping, with the pietà at the centre, constructs a female community based upon a shared emotional response on the part of mothers that has no need of priestly intervention. Mary acts rather like a Eucharistic monstrance here, presenting the body of Christ directly to the reader, whose devotions he will repay with salvation:

He wolde agayne for your luf blede
 Raþer or þat 3e damned were.

 To luf my son and 3e be fayne
 I wille luff yours with hert entere,
 And he shall brynge your childur & you sertayne
 To blisse wher is my dere son, dere.
 (p.16, lines 77-80 and 85-88)

Christ’s desire to bleed again for “your luf” brings to mind the *imago pietatis* and the mass of St Gregory but here it is the Virgin herself and the female readers’ devotions that facilitate salvation. In Margery Kempe’s encounter with the pietà, a similar circumvention of ecclesiastical authority takes place but crucially, it takes place within the church itself. It is Margery who becomes the monstrance offering the body of Christ to her female audience, not the priest who derides her affective response.

The potential that the devotee has to appropriate both the pietà and the sacred space in which it operates was recognised by John Lydgate in his poem “On the Image of Pity.” Shannon Gayk has explored how Lydgate deliberately resists promoting a solely affective

devotional response in his *pietà* lyrics, reinforcing instead their figural and textual potential as a “reformist alternative to both heterodox literalism and iconoclasm and dangerously subjective forms of affective piety.”⁷³ The “dangerously subjective” forms of affective piety are indicative of an anxiety about the personal autonomy that the image grants, evident in the poem’s command that as soon as the viewer has recognised their own sin after meditating upon the image, they must “with hasty pace”:

Rene to a prest whill this is in thi mynd,
Knelynge down lowly withe hert contryt,
Telle out both crophe & rote, leve nought behynd-
Thy synnes all, be they gret or lyte.⁷⁴

The “hasty pace” with which the devotee must run to a priest, presumably within the very church in they viewed the image, prevents any personal devotional impulses from getting out of hand. In her study of the *pietà* in the Low Countries, Joanna Ziegler argues that the image has a measure of devotional autonomy because its “function is not determined primarily by ecclesiastical or other churchly rites.”⁷⁵ In England *pietà* sculptures frequently did stand upon altars for the Virgin but this did not preclude them from generating personal, devotional responses. As Katherine French has argued, the English parish church was a flexible and fluid space that allowed for a multiplicity of lay devotional activity but Lydgate’s lyric does, nevertheless, suggest that this potential for spiritual independence was a cause for ecclesiastical concern.⁷⁶ Kathleen Kamerick asserts that disputes over images should be seen as “part of a larger ongoing struggle to define areas of control and responsibility in the daily operations of the Christian Church that often pitted laypeople against priest” and she goes on to argue that:

Once painted or sculpted, an art object was open to the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual perceptions of the individual beholder. Because they could be venerated or provide a focus for pious mediation without the immediate intermediary of priest, husband, confessor, or preacher, images granted women a unique freedom from male intercession in their religious activities. Floating free from the constraints of verbal interpretation, holy images were hospitable to women’s spiritual longings.⁷⁷

Kamerick interprets Margery Kempe's encounter with the *pietà* in this context as an episode that "proclaimed her spiritual freedom," despite the priest's attempt to reassert control by challenging her response.⁷⁸ In two manuscripts of the "Appeal to All Mothers" lyric that I discussed above, an attempt has also been made to relocate the statue and its devotions into a space of ecclesiastical control. In Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 and Rawlinson C.86, an additional three stanzas are prefixed to the poem, the first of which reads:

In a chirche as I gan knele,
 This enders day to here a masse,
 I sawe a sighte me liked wele,
 I saw a pite in a place,
 Owre lady and her sone in feere;
 Ofte she wept and sayde, "Alas.
 Now lith here dede my dere sone dere."⁷⁹

Rosemary Woolf suggests that this "attempt to adapt the poem" is an "unmistakable sign of the decay of the tradition" of *pietà* lyrics but I would argue that this adaptation is a deliberate move to re-place the devotion which the Virgin's complaint generates into the public and ritual space of the church.⁸⁰ But it is an attempt that backfires. The second stanza of the adaptation is addressed to "all women" but the third is directed to "al mankynde." Woolf seems to take it as read that the first person speaker is a man: "the meditator is not to imagine *himself* in the historical scene, but in a chapel" (*italics mine*)⁸¹ As the primary mode of address of the poem makes clear, however, the Virgin is speaking to women as a group and at the beginning of the poem to an individual female devotee. The redacted poem therefore places a *woman* in the church and this is a woman who is in attendance to "here a masse." But rather than hearing a mass, the ministrations of the priest are replaced by the direct address from the Virgin who presents Christ's body to the reader unmediated by male, ecclesiastical authority. The sacred space of the church is reoriented around a devotional object in which the body of Christ is presented by and to *women*. This is precisely the "spiritual freedom" that Kamerick identifies and it is a freedom, moreover, that Margery

Kempe is able to learn from and take with her when she visits the house of a poor woman in Rome.

In this model, the pietà becomes a powerful devotional, exemplary, and community-building event that reshapes sacred space and those who control it. In *The Book of Margery Kempe* this renegotiation is not limited to the official sacred space of the church. The pietà event also acts as a model for the construction of sacred space in a domestic setting in which the performance of the female mystic once again takes centre stage. When Margery goes to Rome she enters the house of a poor woman where the following scene takes place:

And sche [the poor woman] had a lytyl manchylde sowkyng on hir brest, the which sowkyd o while on the moderys brest; another while it ran to this creatur, the modyr syttyng ful of sorwe and sadnes. Than this creatur brast al into wepyng, as thei sche had seyn ovr Lady and hir sone in tyme of his Passyon, and had so many holy thowtys, that sche myth nevyr tellyn the halvendel, but evyr sat and wept plentyvowsly a long tyme, that the powr woman, havng compassyon of hir wepyng, preyd hir to sesyn, not knowyng why sche wept. Than ovr Lord Jhesu Crist seyde to the creatur: “Thys place is holy.” (202)

Margery’s perception of the interaction between the mother and child is clearly framed by her experience of devotional imagery. Margery’s memory of the iconography of the pietà- and its mirror image, the Madonna and child- is mapped onto the house of the poor woman and her devotional response is activated. She weeps “plentyvowsly a long tyme” as though “sche had seyn ovr Lady and hir son in tyme of his Passyon.” The woman and child are transformed into the Virgin and Christ through Margery’s devotional sight and although the woman does not understand the reason for Margery’s weeping, she does feel a reciprocal “compassyon” for her and thus the women are linked together through their shared emotional response. The efficacy of Margery’s performance in domestic space is then validated when Christ declares: “thys place is holy.” Margery’s performance has once again made Christ present in contemporary time but in this case a domestic space is consecrated as a result. The presence of Christ is also not limited to Margery’s immediate context as the space is brought into

proximity with the reader through the deictic “thys”: the poor woman’s house *and* this place within Margery’s *Book* are holy.

The implications of Christ’s assertion for the location and control of sacred space are considerable. Margery maps her memory of the devotional patterns encoded within religious objects onto their living image, the poor woman and her child, within domestic space, and the devotional event which this creates inspires Christ to consecrate the space. Margery’s tears represent a performance of “extraordinary piety,” to return to Suydam, both because of her ability to transform a living woman and child into a devotional image and because of the effect that her performance has on her readers. Her performance is a citational repetition of the devotional response that she has learnt from the pietà but by performing in domestic space, she creates an alternative sacred space that authorises her identity as a holy woman and enacts a measure of devotional independence from the church. Mary Suydam writes that in addition to performing in public, liturgical space, the Beguines often produced their own temporary sacred spaces as a result of their visions. But such spaces relied upon audience validation:

In order for others to recognise this temporary sacred space and the beguine who occupied it as holy, it was critical for such women to have audiences for their visions. Moreover, the visions had to be ‘verified’ by having some tangible effect upon those audiences.⁸²

Margery’s vision of the woman and child is verified by the woman herself, who imitates Margery’s tears despite her lack of understanding, and by Christ’s speech act. Margery’s vision of Christ is so powerful that he enters the space and speaks.

As efficacious as Margery’s performance is for her own identity and for the creation of sacred space, however, the episode is not without interpretative complications. Margery’s replacement of material images with their living counterparts resonates with Lollard calls for the replacement of dead images with the true image of Christ, the poor. *The Twelve*

Conclusions of the Lollards, attached to the doors of Westminster Hall during the 1395 parliament, declared that God “openly schewith, comanding to don almesse dede to men þat ben nedy, for þei ben þe ymage of God in a more likenesse þan þe stok or þe ston” of a material image.⁸³ In the poor woman’s house in Rome, Margery Kempe’s devotional performance produces an alternative sacred space that is centred upon a living “likenesse” of Mary and Christ, instead of a devotional object, and that is removed from the richly decorated churches that “bringeþ in necligence of goostli maners” and “iape meenes i3en,” as the polemical treatise *The Lanterne of Li3t* asserts.⁸⁴ Reading Christ into the image of the poor is not in itself unusual. Derived from Christ’s speech in Matthew 25:35-40, performing the Corporeal Works of Mercy, such as feeding the hungry or giving drink to the thirsty, were all acts that aided the poor and Christ himself.⁸⁵ The poor woman and her child in Margery’s *Book* are not recipients of the Corporeal Works of Mercy but Margery’s tears of compassion do fit into the category of comforting the sorrowful and having pity for the poor in the Spiritual Works of Mercy.⁸⁶ P.H. Cullum examines Margery’s engagement in both corporeal and spiritual acts of charity and argues that the *Book*’s “accounts of its charitable acts implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) serve to show the superiority of the Spiritual over the Corporeal Works of Mercy,” quoting Christ’s declaration that in contrast to fasting and praying, “thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is þe best lyfe in erthe” (195).⁸⁷

In this context, then, Margery’s performance enacts multiple contemporary viewpoints on images, devotional performance, and sacred space. Her tears are an act of spiritual mercy inspired by her recognition of Mary and Christ in the poor woman and child, a recognition that is made possible due to her knowledge of devotional imagery. Yet no material images are present and the performance occurs in a domestic space that Christ consecrates as holy. In Rome, Margery might be operating outside the jurisdiction of English bishops keen to eliminate any trace of Lollardy, but as this episode demonstrates, the

performance of religious identity in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is far more complex than a simple binary notion of orthodoxy and heresy would allow.⁸⁸ Michael G. Sargeant has recently proposed that rather than detecting “heresy” or “orthodoxy”, we should instead view texts as social practices and analyse the “many different kinds of work that they do in the cultural economy in which they are situated.”⁸⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe* operates within an extremely rich cultural economy in which devotional performances not only enact but reimagine both the identity of the lay religious woman and the spaces in which she might stage her devotions.

“Here is Christ’s True Cross”: Margery Baxter and Margery Kempe’s Desirable Narratives

In the Norwich heresy trials in 1429, Johanna Clifland testified against another enthusiastic religious lay woman called Margery, this time Margery Baxter who, “sitting and sewing near the fireplace with the witness in the witness’s room,” provocatively asked Johanna if she wanted to see “Christ’s true cross . . . right here in your own house”:

The witness replied that she would love to see the true cross of Christ. And then Margery said “Look,” and she stretched out her arms from her sides saying to the witness, “Here is Christ’s true cross; this is the cross you should look at and adore every day in your own house. In fact, you waste your time when you go to churches to adore or pray before any images or dead crosses.”⁹⁰

Margery Baxter embodied the cross of Christ by spreading her arms out and bolding declaring that “this,” her own body, is the cross that her friend should worship. It is a “waste of time” to worship dead images in the church when there are living images of Christ here in the home. This episode stands as a powerful performance of religious dissent in a heresy trial in East Anglia, a hotbed of Lollard activity, far removed from Margery Kempe’s performance in the poor woman’s house in Rome. But although Margery Kempe’s performance is far more subtle and nuanced, and it does not ultimately replace her devotions in ecclesiastical

space as Margery continues to be an enthusiastic church-goer, she still reinvents the home as a space of efficacious devotional performance, just like her namesake, Margery Baxter.

Both performances are citational in that they depend upon prior knowledge of the gestures represented in devotional images: Baxter's on the crucifix, Kempe's on the pietà and the Madonna and child. While many Lollards performed their identity in opposition to imagery, as we have seen, the models which they provided were still a source of performative potential, evident from Baxter's *imitatio Christi*. Shannon McSheffrey suggests that the devotional traditions associated the saints, including imagery, were "one area of religious practice that women could control and make their own. Lollardy did not offer women the same autonomy."⁹¹ In the case of Baxter and Kempe, we see both women drawing upon visual imagery as a source of autonomy that enables them to create an alternative space for worship in the home.⁹² But whereas Baxter's more provocative performance, substituting her own body for the cross and dispensing with devotional imagery entirely, was interpreted as heresy, Kempe's was not only validated as exemplary by Christ but also directly imitated by the woman who has compassion for her tears. Baxter's performance is transformed into a desirable narrative of heresy by her accusers, Kempe's functions as another instance of extraordinary piety in her *Book*.

Devotional events inspired by religious imagery function in both accounts as an opportunity not only for identity-producing performance but also for building female communities. Both accounts show how women can attain devotional autonomy and come together in a community of female worshippers- should they choose to do so. For Joanna Clifland, her neighbour's bold assertions were ultimately too dangerous to entertain, but in Margery Kempe's *Book*, the poor woman's compassion and the good lady's validation testify to the power of her tears, as Lavezzo suggests, to bring together a female audience through shared emotional response. For Margery Kempe, the opportunity offered by a performative

response to devotional objects enables her to become a devotional mirror at the centre of a female community that evades ecclesiastical control and renegotiates the location of sacred space itself. Reading devotional objects as devotional events in the texts of religious women such as Margery Kempe and the literature of pastoral care enables us to see how spiritual identity, like gender identity for Judith Butler, is “tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space, through a stylized repetition of acts.”⁹³ That stylized repetition of acts is the foundation upon which a woman like Margery could build her religious life, staging performances in the church and in the home that combine to produce a desirable narrative of holy identity, culminating in the most potent authorization that Christ can offer. As a result of Margery’s performance, “thys place,” both the space of Margery’s devotions and the *Book* itself, is truly “holy.”

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¹ Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 174-75.

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ Richard Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 13.

⁴ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii.

⁵ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 306-7.

⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 66.

Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

⁷ In using the word “perspective” I am following Felicity Riddy’s suggestion that we should treat the *Book* as “polyvocal” and consider through whom the events are focalised, see Felicity Riddy, “Text and Self in *The Book of Margery Kempe*”, in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 435-53, at 437 and 439.

⁸ In her discussion of the range of possible responses to the crucifix, Sara Lipton comments that many of the texts she is discussing “also breathe fear that the artwork they address might say too many uncontrolled and contradictory things, and say them too forcefully. *Writing about the art object helps contain this threat*: responses can be acknowledged and then redirected; impressions can be exploited and reinterpreted; the gaze can be guided, controlled, and arrested” (italics mine). Sara Lipton, “‘The Sweet Lean of His Head’: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages,” *Speculum*, 80 (2005), 1172-1208, at 1202.

⁹ Middle English Dictionary s.v. “vein-glorie” b).

¹⁰ Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 3 and 111.

¹¹ Sarah Salih, “Erotica,” in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ruth Evans (Oxford: Berg, 2011), vol. II, 181-212, at 208.

¹² Middle English Dictionary s.v. “halsen” (v.2).

¹³ Jennifer N. Brown, ed. *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis, and Marie d'Oignies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 138, line 396.

¹⁴ Joanna Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 172.

¹⁵ Middle English Dictionary s.v. “token” 1a), 3a), 4a), 6a), and 2b) respectively.

¹⁶ Dan Hicks, “The Material Cultural Turn: Event and Effect,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, ed. Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25-98, at 30.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: London, first published 1990; this edn. 1999), 33.

¹⁹ Mary Suydam, “Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances,” in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna Ziegler (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 169-210, at 179.

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178.

²¹ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 64.

²² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.

²³ For the dynamism of the parish church, see Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

²⁴ Mary Suydam, “Women’s Texts and Performances in the Medieval Southern Low Countries,” in *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Elina Gertsman (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 143-59, at 148.

²⁵ Arthur Brandeis, ed. *Jacob’s Well*, Early English Text Society o.s. 115 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900), 253.

²⁶ John Mirk, *Festial*, ed. Susan Powell, Early English Text Society o.s. 334 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1:108. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

²⁷ Sidney J. H. Herrtage, ed. *The Gesta Romanorum*, Early English Text Society e.s. 33 (London: N. Trübner and co, 1879), 393.

²⁸ Mary Macleod Banks, ed. *An Alphabet of Tales*, Early English Text Society o.s. 126-27 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904-5), 67.

²⁹ Banks, ed. *Alphabet*, 67,

³⁰ Brandeis, ed. *Jacob’s Well*, 110.

³¹ Brandeis, ed. *Jacob’s Well*, 110.

³² See Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984); Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman, eds., *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and James Simpson, *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Chapter 2, “Learn to Die: Late Medieval Images before the Law”, 49-83.

³³ Anne Hudson, ed. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 87. Hudson notes that this anthology contains works that are “critical of the contemporary church though not all overtly heretical,” 179.

³⁴ Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 141.

³⁵ Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed. *Dives and Pauper*, Early English Text Society o.s. 275 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I:85.

³⁶ Barnum, ed. *Dives and Pauper*, 83 and 84-85.

³⁷ Barnum, ed. *Dives and Pauper*, 85.

³⁸ Norman Tanner, ed. *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich 1428-31* (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1977), 76. Translated in Ruth Nissè, “Grace under Pressure: Conduct and Representation in Norwich Heresy Trials,” in *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Robert A. L. Clark (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 207-25, at 220.

³⁹ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 257.

⁴⁰ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 257.

⁴¹ Kamerick notes that the laity often formed “distinctive relations with their parish church images,” particularly because they “played a far more consistent and important role in their lives” than the images that they might encounter on pilgrimage, for example. *Popular Piety*, 70.

⁴² Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 90.

⁴³ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 286 and Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 81.

⁴⁴ Powell, *Depositions*, 81-101.

⁴⁵ Powell argues, conversely, that such crucifixes are “mobile in the sense that they can be made to move” but they “cannot move independently.” For Powell, a moveable crucifix therefore calls “attention to the fact that- as moveable as it may be- this image is powerless to move itself,” *Depositions*, 89 and 81.

⁴⁶ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 77 and Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 393.

⁴⁷ Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa also discusses *planctus Mariae* lyrics in *Margery Kempe’s Meditations: The Context of Medieval Devotional Literature, Liturgy, and Iconography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 87-90.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 394.

⁴⁹ Sarah Stanbury discusses the elision of the *pietà* and the *imago pietàtis* in a stained glass window at Holy Trinity, Long Melford, in *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 203-8.

⁵⁰ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 125, fig. 3.

⁵¹ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 173. Kamerick includes an indulgenced woodcut of the *pietà* and *arma Christi* as fig. 6.5, 174.

⁵² Carleton Brown, ed. *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 17-18, line 36. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page and line number.

⁵³ Woolf, *English Religious Lyrics*, 394.

⁵⁴ R. M. Garrett, “De Arte Lacrimandi,” *Anglia* 32 (1909): 269-94, at 270.

⁵⁵ Middle English Dictionary s.v. “ordeinen” 4g).

⁵⁶ Christ commands Margery to visit St Stephen’s in Chapter 17 when Caister is still alive and the *Book* tells us that “notwythstondyng the rumowr and grutchyng of the pepyl ayen hir, this holy man. . . evyr held wyth hir and supportyd hir ayen hir enmys” (116). This suggests that St Stephen’s is a place in which Margery usually receives ecclesiastical support.

⁵⁷ For records of the pietà in Norfolk see Ann Eljenholm Nichols, *The Early Art of Norfolk* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 85-86. For St Mary Coslany, see 85.

⁵⁸ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 140.

⁵⁹ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 140. See also Nichols, *Early Art*, 85.

⁶⁰ Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 123. St Mary Coslany is not otherwise mentioned in Margery’s *Book* but she does visit Norwich Cathedral in Chapter 26 and make an offering at the high altar dedicated to the Holy Trinity (150).

⁶¹ Dundas Harford identifies an altar to St Mary the Virgin in *A Norwich Parish 500 Years Ago: A Sketch of St Stephen’s in 1405* (Norwich: Frank H. Goose, 1905), 17. Nichols includes an entry for a lost image of pity in the north chapel at St Stephen’s, *Early Art*, 85. This is based on Francis Blomefield’s research but Blomefield does not date or securely locate the image, merely commenting in an aside that “there were the altars of St *Nicholas*, and of the *Holy Trinity* in this church, besides the images of St *Mary of Pity*, &c. with lights burning before them, as also before the Holy Sepulchre” (italics original). Francis Blomefield

and Charles Parkin, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vol. 4 (London: Printed for William Miller by W. Bulmer and Co, 1806), 162.

⁶² Marks, *Image and Devotion*, 139. Woolf suggests pietà statues were commonly found on altarpieces, especially those associated with the Virgin, *English Religious Lyrics*, 394. For a survey of the visual iconography of the pietà, see Marks, 123-143. He notes that the English pietà “exhibited considerable variation” in form and iconography (134).

⁶³ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 174.

⁶⁴ Middle English Dictionary s.v. “occupien” 1 and 6d). Also used of Margery’s son’s illness (390).

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 166.

⁶⁶ Garrett, ed. “Arte Lacrimandi,” at 274.

⁶⁷ Virginia Raguin and Sarah Stanbury have argued similarly that Margery draws upon the visual patterns encoded in church art such as stained glass windows and funeral brasses as a powerful authorizing strategy in her *Book*. See Raguin, “Real and Imaged Bodies in Architectural Space: The Setting for Margery Kempe’s Book” and Stanbury, “Margery Kempe and the Arts of Self-Patronage”, in *Women’s Space: Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church*, ed. Virginia Raguin and Sarah Stanbury (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 105-140 and 75-104 respectively.

⁶⁸ Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion*, 16. Cf Shannon Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform in Fifteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

⁶⁹ Middle English Dictionary s.v. “advocate” a), b) and c).

⁷⁰ Kathy Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs between Women: The Homoerotics of Compassions in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Kathy Lavezzo (New York: Routledge, 1996), 175-98, at 177.

⁷¹ Lavezzo, "Sobs and Sighs," at 181.

⁷² Brown, ed. *Religious Lyrics*, 13, lines 1-8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page and line number.

⁷³ Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 109.

⁷⁴ "On the Image of Pity," in Henry Noble MacCracken, ed. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, Early English Text Society e.s. 107 (Oxford: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911), 298, lines 16-20.

⁷⁵ Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion*, 156.

⁷⁶ French, *People of the Parish*, chapter 1, 20-43.

⁷⁷ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 123 and 90.

⁷⁸ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 90.

⁷⁹ Helen Estabrook Sandison, ed. *The Chanson d'Aventure in Middle English* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr College, 1913), 104.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 257.

⁸¹ Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, 257.

⁸² Suydam, "Women's Texts and Performances," at 148.

⁸³ Hudson, *Selections*, 27.

⁸⁴ Lilian M. Swinburn, ed. *The Lanterne of Li3t*, Early English Text Society o.s. 151 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1917), 40 and 37. For a discussion of *The Lanterne of Li3t*'s attitude towards church buildings and their relationship to the community see Laura Varnam, "Church," in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 299-314, at 305-6.

⁸⁵ In the York Doomsday play when the Good Souls ask "when did we thee this dede?", Christ replies that "when any that need hadde, nyght or day, / askid you helpe and hadde it sone". Clifford Davidson, ed. *The York Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), 389-90, lines 308 and 311-12.

⁸⁶ P. H. Cullum, "Yf lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce": Margery Kempe, Lynn, and the Practice of Spiritual and Bodily Works of Mercy," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 177-193, at 177-78. C.f. W. Francis Nelson, ed. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, Early English Text Society o.s. 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 200-1 and 203, "to haue pitee and rewþe of sinful and of hem þat ben in agre & teene or *in pouerte* or *sekenesse*" (italics mine).

⁸⁷ Cullum, "Yf lak of charyte," 185.

⁸⁸ John Arnold discusses the complexity of Margery's position with regard to Lollardy in his essay "Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent," in Arnold and Lewis, eds. *Companion*, 75-93.

⁸⁹ Michael G. Sargeant, "Censorship or Cultural Change? Reformation and Renaissance in the Spirituality of Later Medieval England," in *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 55-72, at 67.

⁹⁰ Tanner, *Heresy Trials*, 43; translated by John Shinnars, ed. and trans., *Medieval Popular Religion 1000-1500: A Reader* (1997; repr. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1999), 492.

⁹¹ Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities 1420-1530* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 148.

⁹² As Margaret Aston and Shannon McSheffrey have demonstrated, the household was a crucial location for Lollard teaching and learning; it was a space in which women were the gatekeepers and could even aspire, like Margery Baxter, to be teachers themselves. See Margaret Aston, "Lollard Women," in *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Oxbow, 2003), 166-85, and McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*.

⁹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.