

HOLY MATTER MAKING HOLY MEANING: FASHIONING MEMORY,
COMMUNITY, AND DISSIMILAR SIMILITUDE IN MIDDLE DUTCH SISTER-BOOKS
AND *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

In the late fourteenth century, a fashionably attired woman glides through her parish church.¹ “[T]railing her brightly colored, floor-length mantle and dress” across the floor, she displays her high socioeconomic status to her fellow parishioners.² This vignette will call to many



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² “Hier Beghint dat Leven en Starven Onses Eerwerdighen Vaders Heer Johan Brinckerinck,” Ms. 101 E 26 KL, Athenaeumbibliotheek, Deventer, 152r. This manuscript witness (“DV”) was composed by Sister Griete Essinches, a sixteenth-century canoness regular from Diepenveen. I am deeply grateful to Wybren Scheepsma for his scholarly generosity providing me with a transcript of DV, which will form the basis of his forthcoming edition and English translation. Another, shorter witness (“D”) constitutes a redaction of the sister-book and is available in an early twentieth-century edition: D. A. Brinkerink, ed., *Van den*

medievalist minds the moment in which Margery Kempe (1373–after 1439) struggles to renounce her modish dress in the early chapters of the Middle English *Book of Margery Kempe*.³ The splendidly dressed, devout woman actually is a close contemporary of Margery's from the Low Countries, Sister Trude van Beveren (d. 1428), as portrayed in a Middle Dutch, female-authored collection of *Devotio Moderna* sisters' lives, the sister-book of the convent in Diepenveen, a village in the eastern Low Countries. The text then stresses that Trude participates in Christ's dragging his cross through Jerusalem: "[S]he would in this manner help our dear Lord carry his cross in her heart. That was a sign that the outer splendor, with which the body was covered, did not possess that noble dwelling of her heart."⁴ This scene promises tantalizing points of divergence and convergence between continental biographies of holy women and Margery Kempe's *Book*. It also gestures towards a blurring of boundaries between inner and outer, represented here by clothes and meditation on Christ's Passion, and a tense interplay between materiality and devotion. Trude's trailing a magnificent mantle across the church floor facilitates her participating in Christ's suffering,

Doechden der Vuriger ende Stichtiger Susteren van Diepenveen, Biblioteek van Middelnederlandsche Letterkunde (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1904). Apart from this opening citation, quotations from the sister-books will be given in the original Middle Dutch and in English. Translations from the Middle Dutch are my own.

³ All Middle English quotations will be taken from the edition by Barry Windeatt. The translation by Anthony Bale will be used throughout. Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe: Annotated Edition* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004); Anthony Bale, trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴ MS DV, 152r.

and the narrator reassures us that her splendor did not affect her heart. Accordingly, inner devotion (in the shape of meditation) and outer display (in the form of the textiles on her body) fuel one another, but can obliterate one another as well.

Juxtaposing two Middle Dutch sister-books (from German *Schwesternbücher*) and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, this essay examines communal sartorial devotion in these quasi- or autohagiographical texts.⁵ I argue that in all three texts, rich and ascetic clothes instill a memory of the community as a dissimilar similitude (an analogy imaging by unlikeness the unrepresentable transcendent reality to which it refers) of Christ in his Incarnation and his Passion. The materiality of the clothes, however, also resists this memorial process, setting particular women apart in the communal memory by stressing the dissimilarity between the materiality of the textiles and their significance. This distinctiveness has risks and benefits. Unravelling this textile of mind and matter unveils how texts by medieval women negotiate gendered associations of somatic devotion and circumscribe the boundaries of their communities.

A dissimilar similitude (or “dissimilar similarity”) is a seemingly incongruous term, image, or description (for instance, “worm”) applied to the Divinity or other celestial entities that through unlikeness signifies the ineffable. This paradox was coined by the early sixth-

⁵ Amiri Ayanna deploys the term “quasi-hagiographical” to characterize the German sister-books in “Bodies of Crystal, Houses of Glass: Observing Reform and Improving Piety in the St. Katharinental Sister Book,” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 43, no. 1 (2017): 24–57 at 24. In 1984, Richard Kieckhefer coined the designation “autohagiographical,” which has been repeatedly applied to the *Book* since. Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

century mystical theologian-theorist known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite.⁶ He asserts: “By describing [these heavenly ranks] with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance with what they really are ... we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality.”⁷ A dissimilar similitude depicts what God is like by depicting what God is *not* like. Thus, it propels the mind into thinking in an imageless manner about these beings instead of dwelling on these similes or phrases.⁸

This discussion twins the prisms of medieval *memoria* (the art of memory) and New Historicism-indebted literary analysis. After outlining grounds for comparing the sister-books and the *Book* and adumbrating their memorial enterprise, I first demonstrate how, in the Middle Dutch sister-books, both fashionable clothes and tattered, threadbare clothes imprint a corporate memory of the earlier sisters as making manifest Christ by constituting a dissimilar similitude. Through the matter of their dress, however, their dissimilitude from Christ also sets particular women apart from this memory. I then turn to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, illustrating how her re-embodiment of Christ by way of her pre-conversion fashionable array

⁶ “Dissimilar similitude” translates the Greek phrase “ἀνομοίους ὁμοιότητας,” which Colm Lubheid translates as “dissimilar similarity.” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Paul Rorem, trans. Colm Luibhéid, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 117, 149–53. For the Greek, see Pseudo-Dionysius, *La Hiérarchie Céleste*, introduction by René Roques, ed. Günter Heil, and trans. Maurice de Gandilac, Sources Chrétiennes 58 (Paris: Cerf, 1958), 81, 82, 41D.

⁷ Luibhéid, *Complete Works*, 150.

⁸ Luibhéid, 117, 149–53.

enfolds her in her idealized textual community.⁹ The ascetic garments worn later (her sackcloth garment and white clothes), in contrast, fail to transform into a dissimilar similitude, rendering her dissimilar from Christ, which excludes her from her fellow holy women but also allows her to compete precariously with them. My discussion concludes by drawing out convergences and divergences between the texts' sartorial *memoria*, particularly as they entangle with somatic spirituality.

The current discussion conceptualizes clothes as a metonym of embodied devotion. By examining clothes as dissimilar similitudes, this discussion extends recent scholarship likewise theorizing medieval devotion through this paradoxical notion. Caroline Walker Bynum, for instance, adopts "dissimilar similitudes" to encapsulate how a religious object both resembles and differs from the divine not in how it looks, but in what it accomplishes (instantiating or mediating Heaven, for example) and in what it constitutes (matter with particular physical properties, for instance). According to Bynum, a dissimilar similitude is "both like and unlike that which it instantiates ... It images and is presence and absence."¹⁰ I am interested in this liminal space between appearance and heavenly referent created by

⁹ I deploy "textual community" to refer to the in-text community, an imaginary construct crafted by the text, following Rebecca L.R. Garber's emphasis on the in-text community in German sister-books as a "literary construction ... not a historical reality, but a textual one." *Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Woman Writers, 1100–1375*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture, vol. 10 (Routledge: New York, 2003), 62. My interest in dissimilar similitudes as re-presentation in the sense of rendering present once more owes much to Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020).

¹⁰ Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 55, italics in original.

dissimilar similitudes, which also functions as a space of co-production and co-destruction of memory and community. Furthermore, this exploration develops recent debates on textiles' counter-narratives, stitching together textile agency, as the editors of a recent special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* on medieval materiality urge us to do.¹¹ Regarding the agency of textiles in medieval religious culture, Kathryn M. Rudy underscores that textiles “mediate between the secular and the divine” and “mark, absorb, and transmit holy status.”¹² My discussion also supplies a comparative dimension to treatments of Margery's clothes and expands recent scholarship on textiles and gender in medieval literature, which hypothesizes that textiles build connective networks.¹³ Therefore, when we pair the *Book* with Middle Dutch sister-books, clothes knit holy women together across texts and borders.

¹¹ Amy Burge et al., “Introduction: New Approaches to Medieval Romance, Materiality, and Gender,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 56, no. 1 (2020): 5–17 at 7, 8.

¹² Kathryn M. Rudy, “Introduction: Miraculous Textiles in Exempla and Images from the Low Countries,” in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and Their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert, *Medieval Church Studies* 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 1–36 at 3.

¹³ See, e.g., Hannah Lucas, “‘Clad in Flesch and Blood’: The Sartorial Body and Female Self-Fashioning in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 45, no. 1 (2019): 29–60 at 31. For textiles in medieval literature, see Bettina Bildhauer, “Textiles, Gender, and Materiality: A Response,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 56, no. 1 (2020): 70–83.

A MEETING OF MINDS: COMPARING MEMORY IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE* AND THE SISTER-BOOKS

The sister-books and the *Book* have not been brought into dialogue before.¹⁴ This is surprising, given that critics have increasingly maintained that the Middle English female mystics were not entrapped in an “English mystical vacuum” but rather took part in a “transnational tradition of feminized affective piety,” as Liam Temple observes.¹⁵ Accordingly, scholars have paired Margery with a veritable calendar of Continental holy women.¹⁶ Despite these internationalization efforts, language boundaries have constrained the

¹⁴ The closest parallel is Diana Denissen’s work, which juxtaposes Margery with a fellow informal reformer, *Devotio Moderna* mystic Alijt Bake (d. 1455). Diana Denissen, “Social Exclusion and Female Friendships in the Late Medieval Low Countries and England: The Works and Lives of Alijt Bake and Margery Kempe” in *Medieval Women across Borders*, eds. Filip Krajnik and Klara Petrikova (Rybko: Masaryk University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Liam Peter Temple, “Returning the English ‘Mystics’ to Their Medieval Milieu: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Bridget of Sweden,” *Women’s Writing* 23, no. 2 (2016), 141–58 at 142.

¹⁶ These juxtapositions include Beguine Marie d’Oignies (1177–1213), mentioned in the *Book*; Helfta visionary Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240/1241–1298); Dominican tertiary and visionary Catherine of Siena (1347–1380); Dominican nun and visionary Elizabeth of Hungary and Naples (ca. 1260–1322), likewise mentioned as an exemplar in the *Book* but conflated with the noblewoman Elizabeth of Thuringia (1207–2131); and, most frequently, Saint Birgitta of Sweden (ca. 1303–1373). The entries on these women in *The History of British Women’s Writing (700–1500)*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, History of British Women’s Writing vol. 1 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) present several of

comparative literary study of medieval holy women, at times confining scholars to texts available in translation and texts in the medieval antecedents of their native tongue.¹⁷ Doing so isolates texts and their characters from their textual peers and fellow holy women. As transformative conversation partners, I argue, the *Book* and the sister-books can tease out from one another confidences and counsel. By bringing these texts into discussion, this article mirrors how, in the texts, medieval women counsel one another. Furthermore, such a conversation cautions against an overemphasis on the *Book*'s perceived idiosyncrasy.

Overlaps in theme, project, and form encourage a comparative reading of these texts, as do extratextual trends. (Near-) contemporary vernacular autohagiographies, the sister-books and *The Book of Margery Kempe* all chronicle devout burgess women's laborious climb towards the perceived apex of a holy life and strive to re-imagine internationally known narratives of sanctity with great fervor and anxiety.¹⁸ Revealing the stark contrast between

such conversations. For further Continental comparisons, see the supplement to this article <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8542cabe-f87b-473f-b5aa-10d2b8710a54>.

¹⁷ Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, "Introduction," in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c.1100–c.1500*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, Brepols Collected Essays in European Culture 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 1–9 at 5.

¹⁸ Among the many excellent studies on Margery's autohagiographical endeavours, see e.g. Juliette Vuille, "'I Wolde I Wer as Worthy to Ben Sekyr of Thy Lofe as Mary Mawdelyn Was': The Magdalene as an Authorizing Tool in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture. Conflicted Roles*, ed. Peter Loewen and Robin Waugh, (London: Routledge, 2014), 208–28. For the *Devotio Moderna* sisters and hagiography, see Mathilde van Dijk, "Ik Was Daar Meesteres in de Zonde: Heilige Zondaressen in Windesheimer Kring," in *"Een Boec Dat Men Te Latine Heet Aurea Legenda"* *Beiträge Zur*

their autohagiographies and traditional hagiographies, they cannot avoid conceding to their subjects' immanent roots in East Anglian and Low Countries soil. The form reflects these women's entrapment in a local bourgeois texture shot through with the twinned threads of devotion and commodification. To illustrate, the *Book* and the sister-books shuttle between a colloquial register brimming with humor and pithy exchanges and a lofty, Latin-infused register. Extratextual trends, too, clamor for a comparison. Medieval devout women participated in a pan-European religious culture not bound by linguistic and regional borders. They undertook pilgrimages to holy places, joined convents abroad, and read translations of texts by and for women. Margery, for instance, passed through the Low Countries on her way to Aachen. The Diepenveen sisters reform another German female community through teaching and probably through the transmission of Modern Devout manuscripts.¹⁹ Likewise, galvanized by Saint Birgitta's (ca. 1303–1373) book of revelations, Margery models the cult she envisions for herself on this religious celebrity venerated in various countries on the Continent.

The texts also converge in the memorial project that fuels them. *Memoria* underpins the form and content of medieval religious texts directly and indirectly.²⁰ Memory, moreover,

Niederländische Übersetzung Der Legenda Aurea, ed. Amand Berteloot, Hans van Dijk, and Jasmin Hlatky (Münster: Waxmann, 2003), 181–94.

¹⁹ MS DV, 409v–410v.

²⁰ Classic mnemonic techniques informed the texts' guiding meditations, and these meditations, in turn, prompted devotional and visionary writing. Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 80, no. 1 (2005): 1–43; Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog, eds.,

undergirded communities' self-understanding and the conceptualization of the self.²¹ As Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog note, "identity and character were ... understood as rhetorical inventions employing the arts of memory."²² This mnemonic identity extends to individual and collective identity, blurring distinctions between the group and the single "subject-who-remembers" (Mary Carruthers's alternative term for the "individual").²³ I, therefore, attend to how textiles act upon memory and community, which *memoria* will help theorize.

A brief introduction to the sister-books and their Low Countries context may be helpful. One of the two sister-books under discussion originates from the convent of Saint Mary and Saint Agnes in Diepenveen, which housed a community of Augustinian canonesses regular. The other originates from the Master Geert's House in Deventer (a Hanse city close to Diepenveen). The Master Geert's House was home to a female, semi-religious community,

Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²¹ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 34 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Annelies van Gijzen, *De Vertroosting van Memoria: Geheugen en Mnemotechniek in de Nederlanden van de Late Middeleeuwen*, Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen 81 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2019).

²² Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog, "Introduction," in *Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women*, 1–11 at 2.

²³ Carruthers, *Book*, 226.

the Sisters of the Common Life. For the Diepenveen sister-book, I rely on the most extensive manuscript witness, DV, finished in 1524 as indicated by Sister Griete Essinches, the scribe-editor or “writing sister,” as Anne Bollmann terms her.²⁴ An anonymous writing sister or several writing sisters copied the Deventer sister-book manuscript in the late 1480s.²⁵ The communities depicted belong to the *Devotio Moderna*, a spiritual reform movement of both professed religious and semi-religious that flourished between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries in the Low Countries and bordering regions, including northern Germany. Scholarship and popular conceptions have long considered cultivation of interiority as characteristic of the *Devotio Moderna*.²⁶ However, the *Devotio Moderna* also externalized

²⁴ Anne Bollmann, “Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur in der *Devotio Moderna*: Volkssprachige Schwesternbücher in Literarhistorischer Perspektive” (PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2004).

²⁵ My discussion relies on Dirk de Man’s early twentieth-century edition of the Deventer sister-book. *Hier Beginnen Sommige Stichtige Punten van Onsen Oelden Zusteren*, ed. D. de Man (’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1919). For divergences in form and ideational emphasis between the two sister-books, see Mathilde van Dijk, “‘The Pearl Lay Hidden in the Dung’: Reaching for God in *Devotio Moderna* Sisterbooks,” in *Common Bodies: Everyday Practices, Gender and Religion*, ed. Maaike de Haardt and Anne-Marie Korte, *Theologische Frauenforschung in Europa* 6 (Münster: LIT Verlag Münster, 2002), 43–58.

²⁶ For surveys, see, e.g. Rudolf van Dijk, “Het Vrouwenklooster Diepenveen in Zijn Historische Context,” in *Het Ootmoedig Fundament van Diepenveen: Zeshonderd Jaar Maria en Sint-Agnesklooster, 1400–2000*, ed. Wybren Scheepsma, *Publikaties van de IJsselacademie* 152 (Kampen: IJsselacademie, 2002), 15–39; Anna Dlabáčová, Rijklof Hofman, and Koen Goudriaan, “Wat is de Moderne Devotie?,” in *De Moderne Devotie*:

devotion and interiorized the outer world, in which it overlapped with other late-medieval religious movements.²⁷ The sister-books therefore share with the *Book* a concern with public self-styling and community formation. Furthermore, like German sister-books, the Middle Dutch sister-books seek to socialize sisters into conforming to the norms of a reform movement, consisting of the *Devotio Moderna* ideals of humility and self-denial.²⁸ The habits that they wore materialize these ideals.²⁹

Community formation through memory animates the sister-books. Sister-books compile biographies of women from a particular convent or semi-religious community and are composed by the same female community, for that selfsame community.³⁰ Collectively

Spiritualiteit en Cultuur vanaf de Late Middeleeuwen, ed. Anna Dlabáčová and Rijcklof Hofman (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2018), 12–15; Koen Goudriaan, “Beeldvorming Tot Nu Toe,” in *De Moderne Devotie: Spiritualiteit en Cultuur vanaf de Late Middeleeuwen*, 22–23.

²⁷ John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 6.

²⁸ For German sister-books and reform, see Ayanna, “Bodies of Crystal”. For the *Devotio Moderna* ideals, see Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The “Modern Devotion,” the Canonesses of Windesheim, and Their Writings*, trans. David F. Johnson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 147.

²⁹ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 147.

³⁰ I follow John Van Engen and Anne Bollmann in conceiving of the sister-books from the German-speaking lands and the Low Countries as roughly a single textual family. I deploy the term “sister-book” throughout to indicate that the Middle Dutch texts chronicle the lives of canonesses regular as well as semi-religious women (all “sisters”). John Van Engen,

written, compiled, copied, edited, and read, they constitute “in-house” productions with a distinct, intimate sense of collective narration.³¹ Nearly always written in the vernacular, they blend historiography, hagiography, and mysticism to recount the convent’s foundation, evolution, and (earlier) sisters’ lives in a deceptively unadorned style.³² Springing from an “in-house memorial culture,” as John Van Engen observes, these texts encourage the sisters reading them to remember an idealized “community composed solely of exemplary women,” as Rebecca L. R. Garber notes, alive in an imagined past.³³ Through memory, the texts furnish models for communal life as well as exemplars for individual emulation of particular

“Communal Life: The Sister-Books,” in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c.1100 – c.1500*, 105–32; Bollmann, “Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur,” 184; Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany*, Studies and Texts 125 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 32–57.

³¹ Van Engen, “Communal Life,” 109; Lewis, *By Women*, 32, 41–42; Bollmann, “Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur,” esp. 223–28; Anton G. Weiler, “Het ‘Oetmodighe Fondament van Diepenveen’: Geestelijke Begeleiding in Een Windesheims Vrouwenklooster,” in *Het Ootmoedig Fundament van Diepenveen: Zeshonderd Jaar Maria en Sint-Agnesklooster, 1400–2000*, ed. Wybren Scheepsma, Publicaties van de IJsselacademie 152 (Kampen: IJsselacademie, 2002), 113–28 at 126.

³² Susanne Bürkle, *Literatur im Kloster: Historische Funktion und Rhetorische Legitimation Frauenmystischer Texte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Bibliotheca Germanica 38 (Tübingen: Francke, 1999), 317. Lewis, *By Women*, 48–50, 56–57.

³³ Van Engen, “Communal Life,” 109; Garber, *Feminine Figurae*, 62; Bürkle, *Literatur*, 317.

spiritual virtues.³⁴ The “writing sister” thus crafts communal memory.³⁵ Communal memory, in turn, forges a collective identity.

In the Middle Dutch sister-books, the *vitae* follow a characteristic tripartite structure.³⁶ First, the *vita* chronicles the sister’s life before her conversion, followed by the conversion itself. Then, it turns to how she joins the House or convent, the challenges she experienced, and her great devotion. Finally, the *vita* will conclude with a long illness patiently borne and the sister’s spiritually edifying death, sometimes followed by an apparition in the convent as a soul *en route* from Purgatory to heaven. Frequently, the holy woman will wear sumptuous fashions before her conversion, only to replace her glad rags with actual rags when living in the convent or sister-house, to the awed surprise and admiration of many.

Mnemonic community construction also fuels *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Written in the 1430s, the *Book* purports to recount the life of a laywoman from Lynn, dictated by its subject to several scribes. The earliest English autobiography, the *Book* presents Margery’s visions, pilgrimages, and exuberant devotion as well as the opposition she encountered. My discussion blends historicization and literary analysis; I therefore adopt Lynn Staley’s famed

³⁴ Scheepsma refers to this exhortation to aim for spiritual virtue as *paraenesis*. Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 146; Thom Mertens, “Het Diepenveense Zusterboek Als Exponent van Gemeenschapstichtende Kloosterliteratuur,” in *Het Ootmoedig Fundament van Diepenveen: Zeshonderd Jaar Maria en Sint-Agnesklooster, 1400–2000*, ed. Wybren Scheepsma, IJsselacademie (Kampen: 2002, 2002), 77–94.

³⁵ Bollmann, “Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur,” 210–17, 223–31; Anne Bollmann, “Memoria für die Zukunft. Zur Gestaltung von Erinnerung in den Schwesternbüchern der Devotio Moderna,” *The Medieval Low Countries* 2 (2015): 155–85.

³⁶ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 142; Weiler, “Oetmodighe Fondament,” 113–114.

distinction between Kempe, the author-function in the *Book*, and Margery, the constructed holy woman, to demonstrate that *memoria* crafts Margery's idealized community.³⁷ This idealized community consists of the Continental holy women whom the *Book* presents as Margery's models. *Memoria* undergirds the *Book*'s autohagiographical enterprise.³⁸ Lucas's treatment of Margery's "textile artefacts" as tools for "ritualized, performative religious identity" illuminates the multiple functions of clothes in this endeavor.³⁹ My discussion twins these debates with a different emphasis, that of Margery as a European, as outlined earlier. I now turn to this conversation between British and Low Countries' *vitae*.

THE SISTER-BOOKS: FROM RICHES TO RAGS AND BACK AGAIN

In the sister-books, sartorial splendor as matter and metaphor brims with the potential to serve as a dissimilar similitude of Christ's patient suffering. The Diepenveen *vita* of Trude van Beveren, already briefly introduced in the opening vignette, gestures towards such a fashionable Passion.⁴⁰ The sister-book presents Trude as already a contemplative before her

³⁷ Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 3. For Margery and the formation of a textual community, see also Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 3.

³⁸ Brad Herzog, "Portrait of a Holy Life: Mnemonic Inventiveness in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women*, 211–33 at 218.

³⁹ Lucas, "Clad in Flesch," 26, 27.

⁴⁰ I follow the dates of death and normalizations of names provided by Scheepsma in *Medieval Religious Women*.

vows. The description bears repeating for the sake of analysis and to highlight its blend of meditation and spectacle:

Als sie staetlick na hore heerlicheit toe karken plach toe ghaen, al sleppende mit hore bonter hoycken ende tabberde, soe plach sie onsen lieven heren sijn cruce helpen toe draghen in hore harten. *Dat* was een *teijken* dat die cierheit van buten, daer dat licham mede bedecket was, dat edele stedeken des harten niet beseten en hadde, *dat* zeer groet was ende volle mensschen niet ghegheven en wort.⁴¹

(When she went to church, as was her wont, in a manner suiting her nobility and high status, trailing her brightly colored, floor-length mantle and dress [across the floor], she would in this manner help our dear Lord carry his cross in her heart. *That* was a *sign* that the outer splendor, with which the body was covered, did not possess that noble dwelling of her heart, *which* was [a] very great [grace or a sign], not given to many people.)

At first glance, Trude's garments simply signify Christ's passion by imitation or similitude. They map her passage through her parish church onto Christ's resigned *Via Dolorosa*, as dramatized in the reiterated "heer" ("L/lord") in her "heerlicheit" (nobility, "the state of being a lord or lady") and in "heren" ("I/Lord"; accusative case) underscoring her imitation of

⁴¹ MS DV, 152r–152v; emphasis added.

Christ.⁴² With “al” amplifying the durative aspect, the adverbial phrase “al sleppend” (“trailing” or “dragging”) also invokes Christ’s patience during his long trials. Moreover, the writing sister insists on the boundaries of body and soul. By concluding with a reference to a divinely bestowed favor, the syntax in the second sentence safely bookends with devotion the “cierheit” covering the body in the first and second clause. As a result, the sister-book syntactically contains the sumptuousness of her array. This containment dramatizes how, like Christ’s silence in the face of taunts, the sensory impression of the splendor that Trude wears does not affect her.⁴³

The *vita*’s choice of “teijken,” however, reveals the tense interplay between inner and outer in Trude’s passage through the church and signal that the garments serve as a dissimilar similitude rather than a similitude. Middle Dutch “teken” or “teijken” encompasses a range of denotations from “physical gesture” serving as a “visible sign” through “miraculous sign or

⁴² Eelco Verwijs and Jacob Verdam, eds., “Heerlijcheit, def. 2,” in *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek (MNW)*, De Geïntegreerde Taalbank (Leiden: Instituut voor Nederlandse Lexicologie, 2007), <https://ivdnt.org/woordenboeken/middelnederlandsch-woordenboek/>.

⁴³ It might be possible to object that the sister-book concerns itself here with ruining splendour rather than harnessing it. However, the prohibition in Modern Devout constitutions of habits’ trailing “indecently” across the floor suggests such fashion predominantly signified opulent luxury rather than a careless attitude towards the textiles. The intimation of the textile’s fraying, moreover, recalls Christ’s skin being flayed. In this manner, textiles make Christ’s Passion present once more. For the constitutions on clothing being trailed across the floor, see R. Th. M. van Dijk, “De Constituties der Windesheimse Vrouwenkloosters vóór 1559: Bijdrage tot de Institutionele Geschiedenis van het Kapittel van Windesheim,” (PhD diss., Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1986), 304, 766.

marvel...a particular way in which God reveals himself to humanity, deviating from nature,” to “a signature or mark of a written text,” validating a contract or agreement.⁴⁴ Trude’s clothes paradoxically signify that her clothes have not taken hold of her heart. The “teijken,” however, refers ambiguously. The antecedent of the relative pronoun “dat” with which the second sentence opens does not merely refer to her clothes. It also encompasses the entirety of the preceding sentence with its juxtaposition of private contemplation of Christ’s suffering and public display of sumptuous clothes. A similar ambiguity marks the relative pronoun “dat” in the final clause (“dat zeer groot was”), which refers back to either the sign, or the impermeability of her soul, or both. The “teijken” of her sartorial display, therefore, signifies her private, invisible meditation on Christ’s passion and even her subjectivity. As a symbol and an event, then, the “teijken” of Trude’s spectacle straddles the visible and the invisible, the exterior and the interior. Rudy postulates that religious dress (or its prefiguration) “takes on the identity of its wearer, or vice versa, in a spiraling series of reciprocal relationships.”⁴⁵ In a word, this bond blurs the distinction between them. Consequently, ostensibly powerless clothes reveal themselves to act upon their wearers. Despite the writing sister’s anxiously stressing the dividing lines between material and metaphorical signification and underscoring the impermeability of her subject’s inner world, these boundaries turn out to be porous. In this manner, Trude in her opulent array transforms into a dissimilar similitude of Christ during his stoic, near-naked procession to Calvary (clad only in a loincloth and a mantle). After all, her clothes not only differ from Christ’s in their splendor, but also in that they affect their wearer at all. Christ bears his Passion; Trude showcases both his Passion and this-worldly rewards of meditation on that Passion.

⁴⁴ “Teken, n.,” in *MNW*.

⁴⁵ Rudy, “Introduction,” 12.

This dissimilar similitude harnesses and reorients the potential of clothing to instill a distinctly Modern Devout Christology in both the individual and the community. The Modern Devout saw Christ as not only the heavenly bridegroom noted by M. L. Caron.⁴⁶ Aligning with Michel de Certeau's observation about the proliferation of "'Imitations' of Jesus" in the high and late Middle Ages, the Devout also envision Christ as the silent, defenseless lamb "ad occisionem ducetur" ("led ... to the slaughter") of Isaiah's prophecy and the submissive accused who "non aperiet os suum" ("shall not open not his mouth") (Isaiah 53.7).⁴⁷ According to Modern Devout theologian and author Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen (1367–1398), Christ humbled himself by becoming human so that the Devout could imitate his humility.⁴⁸ Christ's clothing materializes this exemplary humility. According to Zerbolt's treatise "De Vestibus Pretiosis" ("On Expensive Dress"), which was translated into the vernacular by Dirc van Herxen, the infant Christ's swaddling clothes were "far from

⁴⁶ M. L. Caron, "Het Beeld van Christus in de Vrouwenkloosters en bij de Zusters van Het Gemene Leven," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 59 (1985): 457–69.

⁴⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 86. Bonifatius Fischer, Roger Gryson, and Robert Weber, eds., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994); Swift Edgar, ed., *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴⁸ Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen, "De Spiritualibus Ascensionibus," in *Maxima Bibliotheca Veterum Patrum et Antiquorum Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum* vol. 26, ed. Marguerin de La Bigne (Lyon: Anisson, 1677), 258–289 at 269H (ch. 29), 270A (ch. 30).

precious” and emblemize Christ’s peerless humility.⁴⁹ *Devotio Moderna* dress signals and inculcates this Christic humility. Daily devotions and treatises metaphorize the expected silent, submissive humility as dressing oneself in this trait of Christ’s. Zerbolt literalizes such exhortations and declares that unadorned clothes instill meekness: “Most importantly, humble and abject dress lead people to inner humility and meekness of heart.”⁵⁰ A plain habit produces humble habits, which produces a humble believer. Zerbolt also encourages the Devout to clothe Christ, as the earlier description of the simplicity of Christ’s dress signals. Thus, *Devotio Moderna* spirituality invites the Devout to envisage themselves as dressing Christ in themselves and in their own Christic humility. Fashion also acts upon the community and its interaction with the divine. Zerbolt insists that “abject and despised” dress invites God to bestow favor upon the wearer only if other people and God recognize this performance.⁵¹ As G. H. Gerrits expounds, for Zerbolt, “the exercise of virtue ... must be exercised overtly.”⁵² This public display, in turn, prompts others to array themselves likewise to invite similar grace and participate in this Christic identity. Trude’s rich array suggests that this effect of clothes on interiority extends to modish dress worn humbly as well. The sister-books thus intervene in *Devotio Moderna* discourse, harnessing the potential of humble

⁴⁹ Thomas Kock, ed., “Zerbolt Inkognito: Auf den Spuren des Traktats “De Vestibus Pretiosis,” in *Kirchenreform von unten: Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben*, ed. Nicholas Staubach, Tradition – Reform – Innovation: Studien zur Modernität des Mittelalters 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 165–235 at 195, 198, 218, 219.

⁵⁰ Kock, “Zerbolt Inkognito,” 213, 217, with Latin interpolations from 194.

⁵¹ Kock, 217.

⁵² Gerrits, 119.

clothes to figure Christ's humility and expanding this potential to include sumptuous dress. Accordingly, rooted in a conceptualization of Christ as clothing and clothing as capable of crafting Christic humility and communal identity, the sisters' outfits simultaneously veil, unveil, and fabricate their devotion.

Returning to Trude, the dissimilar similitude of her array weaves a collective memory. It dresses the idealized textual community in Christ as if they constitute one body and presents this community as a dissimilar similitude of Christ. The partial invisibility of the "teijken" of Trude's garments exemplifies this mnemonic community formation. Instead of imprinting a memory of the single "subject-who-remembers" as a similitude of the submissive, silent Lamb of God, the "teijken" impresses a memory of the idealized textual community upon the reading sisters' minds. When scrutinizing the sister-book through a *memoria* prism, figurative and actual clothes serve as *imagines agentes*, active, dynamic memory images, "both in 'in action' and act[ing] on other things," according to Carruthers.⁵³ Agent images spark a series of associations, keeping the mind attentive and promoting recollection and invention.⁵⁴ To be effective, agent images and other mnemonic elements require even placement in a neat arrangement (*solemnis*), clearly separated (*rarus*) from one another.⁵⁵ Returning to Trude, the "teijken" discussed earlier contributes to her stately individual procession, which renders it *solemnis*, making Trude memorable. Nonetheless, since the sign is partially invisible, it slides into ceasing to be a sign and prevents Trude from being wholly *rarus*. While facilitating the memory of Trude, the image consequently renders

⁵³ Carruthers, *Craft*, 16.

⁵⁴ Carruthers, 16, 51, 55, 198–199.

⁵⁵ Carruthers, 13, 55; van Gijsen, *Vertroosting*, 129; Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Selected Works of Frances Yates 3 (London: Routledge, 1999), 17, 23.

her indistinguishable from her fellow sisters in the sister-book. As a result, what impresses itself into the readers' memory through the *imago agens* of the 'teijken' is not the single sister's *imitatio Christi*, but rather the community's self-conception as clothed in Christ. By extension, by collectively re-presenting the God-Man through their unlikeness, these holy women and their clothes supply dissimilar similitudes of Christ.

The materiality of their array, however, also defies these sartorial significances, allowing sisters to diverge from their communal Christic identity. The *vita* of Sister Katharina van Naaldwijk (d. 1443), sub-prioress at Diepenveen, intimates such textile resistance. On the day of her investiture as a nun—literally, her “taking the cloth”—she appears in splendid array.⁵⁶ She has donned “enen costelen blauen bonten tabbert mit apenen mouwen, al uut ghevoert totter eerden ende die mouwen weren vol dubbelder hacken ende al vol groter verguldenre loveren behanghen” (“a costly, brightly colored blue mantle with open sleeves, lined with fur and reaching the floor, and decorated with double hooks and golden leaves”).⁵⁷ The writing sister quickly moralizes this splendor: “Meer dat alre meest is toe prisen ende gade van toe dancken diet hoer gaf” (“Yet God is most to be praised and thanked, who gave her all of this”).⁵⁸ The writing sister conflates the entirety of Katharina's garments into a single emblem of God's generosity. Clothes again act as a dissimilar similitude of Christ's humility. In its stuff-ness, however, Katharina's clothing resists these significances. Readers would have assumed Katharina to wear the aforementioned mantle over a white garment, but to take it off when handed the habit of an Augustinian canoness regular positioned next to her. The prior would have sprinkled this habit with holy water, consecrating it, before

⁵⁶ Cf. Rudy, “Introduction,” 12.

⁵⁷ MS DV, 234r–234v.

⁵⁸ MS DV, 234v.

Katharina dons it.⁵⁹ Towards the conclusion of the ceremony, after Katharina has, among other things, recited her profession letter and prostrated herself on the altar stairs, she is about to enter the enclosed areas, inaccessible to others, through a door from the chapel to the cloisters.⁶⁰ That is, she is on the brink of entering the state of being enclosed. Her splendid mantle remains on the altar steps. At once, a novel element brimming with significance interpolates itself in the rite, to which the prior immediately responds: “Ende als sie op solde ghaen int slot, soe was hoer tabbert ghespreidet voer die trappe daer sie opghenck. Doe vermide sie hoer daer op toe treden ende began hem over siet toe trecken, meer heer Johan Brinckerinck, onse vader, sede hoer: ‘Tredet daer op!’” (“And when she was about to enter enclosure, her mantle was spread on the stairs on which she was to ascend. And she avoided walking onto it, and began to pull it aside, but Lord Johan Brinckerinck, our father, said, ‘Step onto it!’”).⁶¹ By way of its weight and the space it covers, the mantle stops Katharina in her tracks in her entrance into enclosure. The materiality of the mantle thus arrests her in a liminal space between an unenclosed and an enclosed existence, between world and cloister. In its position and handling, moreover, the mantle harks back to the habit, when the habit was still on the church floor. I would argue that, because of these material connections between the two garments, Katharina is simultaneously still clad and no longer clad in the mantle, instead of “trampl[ing] the clothing of a secular life,” as Rudy comments on this scene.⁶² My

⁵⁹ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 40. R. Th. M. van Dijk, “Constituties,” 387–88.

See 353 for an image of the canonesses’ habits.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Wybren Scheepsma for his comments on the ceremony and on the architectural design of the convent.

⁶¹ MS DV, 236r.

⁶² Rudy, “Introduction,” 12.

reading also partially departs from Saskia Raue's, who understands the treading underfoot as emblemizing a conversion to a more Christ-like life; she argues that the trampling of the mantle serves as a "feudal gesture of subjection and humility," with overtones of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem.⁶³ Instead, I would posit that the significations the writing sister has sewn into Katharina's mantle—God's financial generosity and her literal discarding of the old life—remain and transfer to the habit. Thus, the newly professed nun becomes like *and* unlike Christ in his self-abnegating humanity. An in-between space in the dissimilar similitude emerges, in which meanings shift and billow like clothes, becoming ungraspable. Katharina's sartorial performance tessellates the community's reflection of God. The sisters thus simultaneously represent Christ in his celestial glory and in his glorious humanity.

The liminal space that the physical garment creates mnemonically marks off Katharina from the textual community but ultimately encloses her in it as well. The sister-book dresses her in both a habit ultimately the property of the convent and in an opulent, individually owned mantle. The sister-book places the mantle clearly apart from the other garments, as it straddles world and cloister, rendering it more *rarus* than the mnemonic images discussed previously. Demarcating its wearer thus from the other sisters in the textual community, the sister-book imprints Katharina as a recognizable, distinct memory image herself.

Nevertheless, *memoria* still encloses this figure in the community of readers because the text imprints her on readers' minds alongside her fellow sisters. Such inclusion may seem to run counter to Garber's and Bürkle's claims about the sister-books presenting a golden age and a

⁶³ Saskia Raue, "Kleren Maken de Vrouw: Een Onderzoek naar de Mislukking van een Middelnederlandse Kledingallegorie," *Spektator: Tijdschrift voor Neerlandistiek* 22, no. 1 (1993): 48–61 at 57n47.

flawless textual convent.⁶⁴ Yet *memoria* bridges past and present, as Bollmann insists of Middle Dutch sister-books and Carruthers of *memoria* more broadly.⁶⁵ In this manner, the idealized community permeates the present of the medieval reader, merging the communities and promoting *paraenesis*, the exhortation of the sisters to aim for virtues.⁶⁶ By stocking the sisters' memory inventory with mnemonic images, the text equips the reading sisters to imitate their predecessors in virtues. Memory knits together the perfect past community and the less-than-perfect actual community. No matter how distinct a sister may be, the sister-book channels her into its community-building project once more.

Rags supply another dissimilar similitude. The parading of rags as matter and metaphor re-presents the Incarnation. References to a spectacle of threadbare clothes punctuate the Deventer and the Diepenveen sister-book.⁶⁷ These ragged garments defy Zerbolt's warning against the sin of "overganc der maten" (excess) in clothes and exceed the others' expectations.⁶⁸ One day, a Diepenveen nun, Sister Armgert of Lisse (d. 1467 or 1472), the convent's banner-bearer, carries into the choir a make-shift banner consisting of "enen bloten vergleden rock ende daer en was nauwe een nopken op ende mit enen langhen toebrakenen hengel" ("a worn, yellowed skirt, with hardly any visible wooliness left, and a long, broken fishing rod").⁶⁹ In Deventer, two sisters living in the early, austere days of the Master Geert's House each possess a single "rock ... van witten wullen gescheert," a skirt in which the white

⁶⁴ Garber, *Feminine Figurae*, 62; Bürkle, *Literatur*, 317.

⁶⁵ Bollmann, "Memoria"; Carruthers, *Craft*; Carruthers, *Book*.

⁶⁶ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, 146.

⁶⁷ See van Dijk, "Pearl," 50–51.

⁶⁸ Zerbolt, "De Spiritualibus Ascensionibus," 213.

⁶⁹ MS DV, 288r.

thread used in its warp shows, “ende daer was graw schroedel ingedragen” (“into which grey scraps of clothing had been woven as the warp”).⁷⁰ In a word, their skirts resemble rag rugs. Similarly, the Deventer sister-book recounts how Sister Fenne van den Gronde (d. 1421) is so “oetmoedich” (humble) in her clothes that she cares little about their state. Her only concern is “dattet cleet der mynnen van hoer niet gebroken noch geschoert en worde” (“that the garment of her love would be neither broken nor torn”).⁷¹ The figurative garment echoes the torn temple veil and Christ’s tunic, and by metonymy, his body.⁷² The underlying metaphor of God who dresses Himself in humanity, or humanity that dresses itself in Christ dates back to several Scriptural epistles analogizing the God-man to textiles and *imitatio Christi* to donning Christ. As Lucas also observes, this tissue of images metaphorizes the Incarnation as textile craft, requiring effort but resulting in Christ’s immaculate body (before his Passion).⁷³ In visual art, this analogy expressed itself in an iconographical tradition of pregnant Mary spinning, weaving, and knitting Christ’s seamless tunic.⁷⁴ In literature, it prompted imagery such as the Virgin Mary’s declaration to Joseph in the East Anglian N-Town mystery plays that Christ “wyll be clad in flesch and blood.”⁷⁵ Accordingly, in the sister-books, these

⁷⁰ De Man, *Sommige Stichtige Punten*, 19.

⁷¹ De Man, 34.

⁷² Rudy, “Introduction,” 19.

⁷³ Lucas, “Clad,” 31–36.

⁷⁴ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155–66.

⁷⁵ Lucas, “Clad,” 31–36. Douglas Sugano and Victor I. Scherb, eds., *The N-Town Plays*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), lines 65–66. For visionary texts, see, e.g., Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the*

sisters' conspicuous display of threadbare rags invoke the Incarnational effort of Mary arraying Christ in his humanity. Such excessive display, moreover, functions as a dissimilar similitude of Christ's humility, which his Incarnation epitomizes. The rags figure through unlikeness the perfection of Christ's body. In this manner, the sisters celebrate the deliberate effort of Christ taking on human nature, which was as gratuitous as their wearing of literal cast-offs.

Metaphorically and materially, the rags imprint a memory of the idealized textual community as collectively fashioning the Incarnation. The writing sister's choice of "schroedel" to describe the rags worn by the two nameless Deventer sisters evinces this memorial community building. A variant of "schrodelinc," as editor Dirk de Man glosses, it denotes a "[parchment] cutting, scrap."⁷⁶ The matter of the rags, therefore, recalls the parchment snippets which the sisters, for instance, Diepenveen sister Jutte of Ahaus (d. 1408), would collect and cover with devout adages and admirable behaviors.⁷⁷ These fragments of parchment invite poring over until the reading sisters' minds have incorporated the fragments. The sister-books thus cast the sisters as metaphorical textile compilations to be read and remembered as one. The materiality of the rags also facilitates a collective rather than an individual memory of the rags' wearers. The vivid detail and movement in the descriptions cited earlier signal that the clothes serve as agent images again, yet these images lack a *rarus* and a *solemnis* quality. The two sisters' skirts are identical rather than clearly set apart. Armgert's skirt, moreover, has acquired a felt-like texture, suggesting the potential to

Later Middle Ages, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 187–245.

⁷⁶ De Man, *Sommige Stichtige Punten*, 19n10; "Schrodelinc, n.," in *MNW*.

⁷⁷ MS DV, 143v.

spread infinitely, since felt lacks order and distinctness in its fibers.⁷⁸ These agent images, therefore, cue the memory of the community, rather than the individual participating in Christ's humanity. By proudly parading their "oetmoediche" (humble) habits after having abandoned excessively fine dress, the sisters dress Christ in themselves as one and function as a collective dissimilar similitude of his body.

As matter, however, the rags risk excluding sisters from the communal memory. The two sister-books rarely elide sisters mnemonically, but the few elisions that occur have serious ramifications. A brief account of two nameless sisters in the opening *vita* of the Diepenveen sister-book, Rector Johannes Brinckerinck's *vita*,⁷⁹ exemplifies this mnemonic maneuver:

Hier quemen eens twi personen om hoer leven toe beteren, ende als sie hier een tijt gheweest hadden, soe hiete heer Johan doen datmen sie mit ghiestelicken clederen cleden solde ende dan toe hem brengen solde. Die cleder worden bereit ende ghelecht dat sie sie antrecken solden. Doe quam die ene mit vuierrigher wackerheit ende toch die oetmodichste cleder an ende die ander sportelde weder ende en conde daer niet wal an comen na hore sinlicheit, om dat hoer daer voer gruwelde. Ende als die ene gheclet was, soe ghenck sie tot onsen eerwerdighen vader heer Johan, als hie ghesecht hadde. Soe vraghede hie waer die ander bleef ende heem waert gheantwaert dat sie daer noch niet wal

⁷⁸ Pennina Barnett, "Folds, Fragments, Surfaces: Towards a Poetics of Cloth," in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London: Berg, 2012), 182–190 at 185.

⁷⁹ The *vita* here refers to Johannes Brinckerinck as "Johan," the short form of his Christian name.

an en conde comen die cleder an toe trecken. Doe sprack hie prophetirende ende sede dat hore beider leven zeer onghelick solde wesen, alst ock ghesciede.⁸⁰

(Once, two persons came here to live a more spiritual life, and when they had been here a while, Lord Johan commanded they be clad in religious clothes and brought to him. The clothes were prepared and laid out so that they could put them on. Then the one arrived with arduous eagerness and put on the plainest [lit. humblest] clothes, and the other resisted and could not get herself to put them on because of her sensuality, because the clothes disgusted her. And when the one was dressed, she went to our honorable Father Lord Johan, as he had asked. He asked where the other was, and he was told that she could not get herself to put on the clothes. Then he spoke, prophesying, and said that their lives would be very dissimilar, which also happened.)

Ostensibly, this vignette supplies a didactic *exemplum* to Brinckerinck's later urging the sisters to be fond of their habits.⁸¹ The reference to disgust and humility associates the habits with the community's rags. In addition, the narrative metonymically identifies the community with the "oetmodichste" (humblest) habit. Yet the writing sister has raised the stakes. The text imperils nothing less than the fate of the "other" woman's soul. The women's namelessness, the obliqueness and brevity of the rector's prophecy, and the choice of "prophetirende" all invoke the brief, opaque prophecies uttered by the ghosts of departed sisters when appearing in the

⁸⁰ MS DV, 39v, 40r.

⁸¹ MS DV, 46r.

convent.⁸² These departed sisters make these prophecies for two reasons. They either intend to inform the community of their being in transit to heaven, or to indicate why their time in Purgatory lasted longer than the community expected, warning the others not to commit the same grave sin. For instance, one Deventer sister, the House chambress, permits a niece to keep her bedclothes,⁸³ for which this sister suffers in Purgatory. Returning to these two women, the sister-book aims to avoid storing in the communal memory inventory the image of a woman refusing to wear a habit and likely to suffer great pains in the afterlife for this. After all, she does not provide an edifying model for emulation. The sister-book, therefore, bars the two women from corporate memory.

A *memoria* prism reveals how. Medieval *memoria* refers to a mnemonic image's emotional filter or "emotional coloration" as its *intentio*.⁸⁴ This is, in other words, the emotional tone with which the remembering individual imbues the memory image. The *intentio* tags a particular mnemonic image and thus facilitates recalling this image.⁸⁵ The narrative initially attributes an identical *intentio* to the women. Designated only by the placeholder identifiers of "the one" and "the other," the two women lack the *rarus* quality of effective memory images. Entering the convent and the room in an ambiguous order, they fail to be *solemnis* as well. The writing sister renders both women forgettable and excludes both from the

⁸² For Modern Devout attitudes towards the souls of the departed appearing to the living, see Jaap van Moolenbroek, "Openbaringen en Hersenschimmen: Omgang met Terugkerende Doden in Gemeenschappen van de Moderne Devotie in de Vijftiende Eeuw," *Trajecta* 17, no. 3 (2008): 257–90.

⁸³ De Man, *Sommige Stichtige Punten*, 53.

⁸⁴ Carruthers, *Craft*, 97.

⁸⁵ Carruthers, 14–16.

memorial convent, despite only one of the two lacking the willpower and devotion to enter the convent. This strategy forms a marked contrast with the one that the sister-book deploys regarding Katharina, whom the communal memory ultimately includes.

In sum, considering these textiles as agential, each of the sartorial extremes in the sister-books can image Christ as a dissimilar similitude, and in so doing, works to fashions the community. Communal dress determines how others' clothes affect the corporate memory and shape the corporate body. The habit crafts corporate habits. Furthermore, through textiles, the sister-book bars sisters not to be emulated (the anonymous women) from corporate memory, while ultimately embracing the sisters whom it sets apart in a positive manner, such as Katharina. The remainder of this paper will focus on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In the *Book*, while Margery's sumptuous clothes can be dissimilar similitudes, due to limited textile networks her rags can only signal her dissimilitude from Christ and from her ideal community of fellow holy women.

THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE: FROM GLAMOROUS IMITATION TO RAGGED ISOLATION

Margery's fashionable array figuratively and materially represents Christ's Passion, constituting another dissimilar similitude. Memorable fashion similar to that of the sisters stitches through the *Book of Margery Kempe*. Fashionable *imitatio Christi* makes an early appearance. Divinely delivered from demons, Margery attempts to serve God, yet struggles to renounce contemporary fashion. The account of her attire rewards reproducing in full for its commingling of delight and disdain in a manner similar to the sister-books:

[S]che wold not leevyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray that sche had usyd befortym,
neithyrfor hyr husbond ne for noon other mannys cownsel. And yet sche wust ful wel

that men seyden hir ful mech velany, for sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd and hir hodys wyth the typettys were daggyd. Hir klokys also wer daggyd and leyd wyth dyvers colowrs betwen the daggys that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sygth and hirsself the mor ben worshepd.⁸⁶

([S]he would not put aside either her pride or her pretentious costumes that she had been used to ... And yet she knew full well that they said a great many insulting things about her, for she wore gold piping on her headdress, and her hoods were dagged with tippets. Her cloaks were also dagged and lined with many colors between the dags, so that it would be more striking to people's eyes and she herself should be more admired.)⁸⁷

At first glance, this description chastises Margery for slipping into her pre-conversion vanity. Its anxiety about others' glances wholly accords with warnings in treatises such as Zerbolt's, cited earlier. The "daggyd klokys" also offer a glimpse of pan-European fashion trends in the fifteenth century, since Katharina's cloak displays similar slashes. Lucas notes how Margery's "sartorial performance" aligns her with a saintly lineage comprised of holy women (Birgitta, for example), Christ's female ancestors (the Virgin Mary, for instance) and female disciples, such as Mary Magdalene.⁸⁸ I wish to add that while evoking these women's bodies and Christ's, Margery's clothes also disentangle Margery from this community by supplying

⁸⁶ Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.2.255–261

⁸⁷ Bale, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 13.

⁸⁸ Lucas, "Clad in Flesh," 43, 48–49.

a dissimilar similitude of the near-naked Christ during his Passion, particularly the moments which expose Christ to his torturers' mocking eyes and the meditator's piercing gaze.

As matter, Margery's clothes instill Christ-like patient endurance of others' piercing glances, drawing on motifs from works of affective meditation supplied to the English faithful. In *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, an early fifteenth-century vernacular adaptation by Nicholas Love of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, itself a fourteenth-century work of affective meditation, the text first positions Christ naked before his tormentors, who make him pick up his clothes, naked and cold, scattered in various places by the soldiers.⁸⁹ Subsequently, after Christ has been clad in and divested of a purple robe, Love encourages the meditator to visualize Christ "all bloody nakede with a maner of schamfastnes gederyng hese clopes ... doying hem on in honest maner before hem þat euere laghen him to scorn" ("covered in blood and naked, gathering his clothes in a modest manner ... putting them on in a seemly fashion before those who laugh him to scorn").⁹⁰ The text exposes this pitiable figure equally to the meditator's mental eye and to the torturers' gaze. The opening instruction to that description also scripts such probing vision: "Now with inwarde compassion beholde him here ... after þe manhede" ("Now with inward fellow-feeling behold him there ... in accordance with his humanity").⁹¹ Accordingly, to borrow Lucas's adaptation of Judith Butler, Christ's "sartorial performance" facilitates and emblemizes his patient submission to suffering and to others' gazes.

⁸⁹ Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Full Critical Edition*, ed. Michael G. Sargent, Routledge Revivals (London: Routledge, 2018), 168, 169.

⁹⁰ Love, *Mirror*, 171 (my translation).

⁹¹ Love, 171 (my translation).

As matter, Margery's clothes instill such *imitatio Christi* of patient endurance of others' piercing glances. Since holes furnish a perspective, the wound-like slashes in Margery's "aray" direct the eye to the lining and provide multiple perspectives on her body. Corresponding with textile theorists' assertions about the polyvalent "emotional potency" of textiles, these perspectives can be appropriative and scornful (analogous to that of Christ's tormentors) as well as admiring and compassionate (analogous to Love's meditator's gaze).⁹² In this manner, Kempe has Margery's clothes craft in Margery a willing subjugation to others' eyes and invite in her neighbors the disdain that Christ also bore. The spectacle of Margery's "pretentious costumes" therefore paradoxically represents the spectacle of Christ without clothes, transforming these textiles into a dissimilar similitude.

The figurative significance of this textile performance enfolds Margery in an idealized textual community of holy women, another dissimilar similitude of Christ. I would suggest that Kempe casts as Margery's idealized textual community a holy triad consisting of Saint Birgitta, Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213), and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, also referred to as Elizabeth of Thuringia (1207–2131). Kempe expects her *vita* to be read and compiled alongside these women. This relation is analogous to the relation between the different sisters in the German and Dutch sister-books. Such an interpretation builds upon previous readings of the rhetorical significance of holy women alluded to in the *Book*. For instance, Herzog maintains that by enfolding readers in her memory network Margery aligns herself with a

⁹² Alice Dolan and Sally Holloway, "Emotional Textiles: An Introduction," *TEXTILE* 14, no. 2 (2016): 152–59 at 154. For compassionate contemplative beholding, see Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, Middle Ages Series. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 134–42.

female, “reform-minded community” critical of contemporary religious authority.⁹³ By re-presenting (making present again) Christ in his Passion, Margery’s clothes encompass her in this community. Her meek submission to these glances echoes how Birgitta “keped so wele hir een that sho sawe right nawe in the face” (“was so in control of her eyes that she looked no one in the face”), as a Middle English *vita* reports.⁹⁴ Margery imitates Birgitta imitating the incarnate Christ. Moreover, as a “living saint,” Margery instantiates him directly as well.⁹⁵ Like and unlike Christ, the community which encompasses Margery supplies another dissimilar similitude.

By imprinting an *intentio* of devotion to Margery and her idealized community, Margery’s clothes weave a communal memory of them all. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa traces Margery’s “cultural roots” to medieval monastic *memoria*; Cheryl Glenn maintains Margery deploys “her memory as a conceptual filter for image formation and recollection.”⁹⁶ I wish to

⁹³ Herzog, “Portrait,” 218.

⁹⁴ Roger Ellis, ed., “A Life of St. Bridget: Translated from Archbishop’s Gregersson’s *Officium Sanctae Birgittae*” in *The Liber Celestis of St Bridget of Sweden*, EETS o.s. 291, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–5 at 4.

⁹⁵ For the notion of “living saints,” see Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ed., *Living Saints of the Thirteenth Century: The Lives of Yvette, anchoress of Huy; Juliana of Cornillon, Author of the Corpus Christi Feast; and Margaret the Lamé, anchoress of Magdeburg*, Medieval Women—Texts and Contexts 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

⁹⁶ Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, *Margery Kempe’s Meditations: The Context of Medieval Devotional Literature, Liturgy and Iconography*, Religion & Culture in the Middle Ages (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 5; Cheryl Glenn, “Popular Literacy in the Middle Ages: *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” in *Popular Literacy: Studies in Cultural Practices and*

develop this memorial prism further. We recall that the *intentio* constitutes the remembering subject's emotional stance towards the matter remembered. Carruthers postulates that, while the content (the *res*, the gist) of a mnemonic image cannot be altered, its *intentio* can be.⁹⁷ Since *intentiones* also inflect commonplaces, the individual's *intentio* towards these collective *topoi* reveals whether he or she is attuned to a particular community's stock of images and sayings. Therefore, the *intentio* signals whether he or she belongs that community.⁹⁸ Referenced in the *Book*, the different lives of Marie d'Oignies define its community by an *intentio* of *admiranda* (an impulse of admiration) rather than *imitanda* (an impulse of emulation) towards the holy woman by scripting this non-appropriative disposition of devotion.⁹⁹ In her *vita* by Jacques de Vitry (c. 1160/1170–1240), Marie's hagiographer cautions: "admire rather than imitate what we have read about the things certain saints have done."¹⁰⁰ The *intentio* of admiration towards the holy woman defines the

Poetics, ed. John Trimbur, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 56–73 at 69.

⁹⁷ Carruthers, *Craft*, 56, 57, 96, 97.

⁹⁸ Carruthers, 44, 45.

⁹⁹ For the complex interplay between *admiranda* and *imitanda* towards holy women, see Rachel J. D. Smith, *Excessive Saints: Gender, Narrative, and Theological Invention in Thomas of Cantimpré's Mystical Hagiographies*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Juliette Vuille, *Holy Harlots in Medieval English Religious Literature: Authority, Exemplarity and Femininity* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 181–222.

¹⁰⁰ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ed., *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation*, Medieval Women—Texts and Contexts 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), bk. 1.2.12 (p. 54).

community; the community's *intentio* of admiration defines the holy woman. Garments construct such an *intentio*. To catch her many tears, the product of the "grace of compunction," Marie needs to bring several spare veils.¹⁰¹ Her veils, therefore, emblemize and evoke the *intentio* of *admiranda*. The *Book* seeks to imprint a similar *intentio* upon its readers. We glimpse this endeavor from the effect on Margery's priest-scribe of reading about Marie. Upon learning that Marie's confessor's recognized the "abundance of grace ... beyond any comparison" bestowed upon Marie,¹⁰² Margery's priest adopts a similar *intentio* of *admiranda* towards his earlier memories of Margery. He "inclined mor sadly" ("inclined more earnestly") to Margery (1.5159; 139). The choice of "inclined" carries memorial overtones. We also hear these overtones in the reference to the priest's "mende" (memory) (5157). The changed *intentio* of Margery's priest towards Margery, therefore, encompasses her in this textual community of female living saints. Margery's attire bolsters this *intentio*, since her clothes instantiate her inimitable participation in Christ's Passion, in which the other holy women also partake. Therefore, by imprinting upon readers' minds the mnemonic image of Margery's dress, the text impresses upon readers' minds an *intentio* of *admiranda* towards Margery and her fellow holy women. In so doing, Margery's clothes unite Margery and her idealized community and encourage remembering these women as one. I now turn to Margery's ascetic clothes, which are her white clothing and her hair shirt.

Like the sisters, Margery's ascetic clothes emblemize her conversion; these clothes include a coarse, white sackcloth that her fellow travelers force her to wear and a woolen gown, one of her white garments. Unlike the sisters' rags and Margery's earlier, fashionable

¹⁰¹ Mulder-Bakker, *Mary of Oignies*, bk. 1.5.16–18 (pp. 56–58).

¹⁰² Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.5151; Bale, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 138.

outfits, however, Margery's ascetic clothes fail to transfigure into a dissimilar similitude, due to the friction between their significance and their materiality.

This friction manifests itself in Margery's canvas clothing. On one of her pilgrimages, when in Konstanz, her fellow travelers insist she wear a "whyte canvas in manner of gelle" ("white canvas made of shaggy sackcloth"), possibly made of badger or ferret hair.¹⁰³ Fitting loosely by nature of its textile qualities, it materially harks back to the vision of Margery swaddling the Christ child. In this early vision, Margery contemplates the Christ child's future "scharp deth" and sheds Marian tears of "compassion," while she declares "I schal not byndyn yow soor" ("I shall not bind you tightly").¹⁰⁴ This vision ostensibly aligns with visionary traditions. For instance, the Virgin in Birgitta's *Liber* (and by association, Birgitta herself) winds the infant with great care in several layers of swaddling clothes.¹⁰⁵ As Mary Dzon illustrates, in medieval devotional culture, the swaddling bands prefigure Christ's seamless tunic (crafted by the Virgin), loincloth, and shroud.¹⁰⁶ Mary's neat wrapping in Birgitta's vision, then, foreshadows Christ's confinement to the cross and within the shroud, reinforced by how, within the inescapable cycle of the liturgical year, the Annunciation is always followed by Good Friday, and Christ's birth by his death. As Gail McMurray Gibson observes of this knot of the Incarnation and Passion: "The mother who clothes the Christ in flesh, therefore, knits, as inexorably as the Fates who held the threads of earthly destiny, the

¹⁰³ Windeatt, 1.26.2007; Bale, 59, 242n59.

¹⁰⁴ Windeatt, 1.5.584–588; Bale, 22.

¹⁰⁵ *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, Volume 3, *Liber Caelestis*, Books VI–VII, ed. Bridget Morris, trans. Dennis Searby, introductions and notes by Bridget Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), bk. VII, 21.18–19.

¹⁰⁶ Dzon, *Quest*, 187–245.

agony and death of Calvary.”¹⁰⁷ Margery’s mental leap to the Passion indicates that the metonymic layering of clothes and salvation history outlined by Dzon and Gibson is at play here. However, Margery’s approach diverges from that of the Blessed Virgin and that of her idol Birgitta. In contrast to them, Margery takes great care not to harm Christ, and therefore swaddles him loosely; consequently, the swaddling bands do not prefigure Christ’s pain. The typological connection is only found in Margery’s mind, not in the clothes’ materiality. Returning to Margery’s sackcloth garment, Margery’s canvas clothing materially recalls these swaddling bands. It is therefore charged with overtones of compassion and helplessness. However, whereas Christ does not suffer at Margery’s hands, nor from being dressed in the swaddling bands, Margery does suffer at the hands of her fellow pilgrims and from wearing the coarse sackcloth. Intended to provoke derision and imposed upon Margery, Margery’s sackcloth seems a lambent emblem of Christ’s passion, but Kempe instead presents Margery’s suffering body as in greater need of compassion than Christ’s. Since Margery’s suffering surpasses Christ’s, and, by extension, her humanity exceeds Christ’s in importance, her clothes fail to point towards Christ, instead directing attention to Margery. They, therefore, foreground Margery over Christ, the Virgin (who supplied his humanity), and her fellow holy women. Consequently, in its materiality redirecting our gaze from the heavenly signified to Margery, matter and meaning diverge. The textiles fail to signify by dissimilitude. As a result, this textile displays even more polyvalence than Hope Emily Allen contends, who reads it as signifying virginity, martyrdom, forgiveness of sins, and heavenly garb.¹⁰⁸ Instead, it symbolizes the compassion (co-suffering) that Margery, in her vision of

¹⁰⁷ Gibson, *Theater*, 156.

¹⁰⁸ Hope Emily Allen, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS o.s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 273.

the Christ child, experiences with her later self. The literal and metaphorical slippage in the textiles thus opens up a liminal space between signification and materiality that encloses the mind instead of propelling the mind beyond the similitude.

Margery's ascetic clothes also demarcate her from her textual community, which allows her to compete mnemonically with them.¹⁰⁹ Whereas their garments prompt easy decoding as re-incarnating Christ in his humility, Margery's woolen gown (possibly one of the white garments she has elected to wear out of devotion) resists such hermeneutics, inadvertently resulting in the misconstrual of her clothes. In York, a priest grabs hold of the collar of her gown, calling her a wolf, demanding she tell him what manner of clothing she wears.¹¹⁰ Margery remains silent but young choristers passing by exclaim: "Ser, it is wulle [wool]!"¹¹¹ In addition to *Agnus Dei* echoes and "wolf in sheep's clothing" resonances, the priest's words and the children's response also point to the fabric of Margery's outfit as posing a challenge to the observer.¹¹² Like the Modern Devout sisters' array, Margery's white woolen cloak has acquired a felt- and fur-like coarseness, harking back to the white canvas.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ This reading of Margery's white clothes as ascetic may require a brief clarification.

Throughout the text, Kempe casts the white clothes as an instrument for provoking ridicule, and consequently, as a means for allowing Margery to engage in social self-mortification. On their second occurrence, Margery's white clothes form part of a sartorial signs that indicate a formal vow of chastity, which points to these clothes carrying the heavy symbolic weight of penance and self-denial, and therefore, of *ascesis*.

¹¹⁰ Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.50.3991–3993.

¹¹¹ Windeatt, 1.50.3994–3996.

¹¹² Lucas, "Clad," 42; Windeatt, 1.50. 3993n, p. 242.

¹¹³ Windeatt, 1.26.2007; Bale, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 59.

Hermeneutic danger freights such textile ambiguity, since sumptuary laws also determined the appropriate material of clothes.¹¹⁴ Margery's cloak, therefore, does not refer "fittingly," as signs were believed to do in medieval religious culture.¹¹⁵ This ambiguity in Margery's sartorial self-formation contrasts sharply with the Continental semi-religious and devout laywomen whom Margery resembles.¹¹⁶ For instance, Marie d'Oignies would don "a white woolen tunic and a cloak of the same simple color without the addition of any fur" over her hair shirt, with "fur," according to editors, referring to either lining or stuffing.¹¹⁷ The material unity and undyed appearance of her clothes materialize Marie's apostolic-inflected Beguine identity, which others recognize. The patchiness of Margery's clothes, in contrast, materializes how the individuals she encounters misread Margery. It gives material expression to how her contemporaries construe Margery as sexually promiscuous rather than the chaste wife modelled upon Birgitta, Elizabeth, and Marie. Margery's rags thus exclude her from the community she envisions.

This exclusion nevertheless enables Margery to compete mnemonically with her fellow holy women. The violence of the encounter with the priest in York and his derogatory

¹¹⁴ Maria Hayward, "'Outlandish Superfluities': Luxury and Clothing in Scottish and English Sumptuary Law from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century," in *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, 1200–1800*, ed. Giorgio Riollo and Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 96–120.

¹¹⁵ Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 27.

¹¹⁶ Bynum has illustrated how for professed religious, clothing not merely indicated status but made up that identity as well. This claim easily extends to semi-religious women. Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 110–19.

¹¹⁷ Mulder-Bakker, *Mary of Oignies*, bk. 1.XI.37n64, p. 72.

language facilitate storing and repurposing her outfit as an agent image in one's memory inventory, encouraging imitation of Margery. Despite Marie's white clothes setting a precedent for Margery's, the *Book* never expressly describes Marie's garments, only her copious weeping. The visible devotion of these holy women that does appear in the *Book* does not invite mnemonic appropriation either. For instance, Birgitta's servant reveals to Margery that Birgitta possessed "lawhyng cher," a smiling expression.¹¹⁸ Bookended by reminiscences of how Birgitta "evyr" behaved, the comment spans a whole lifetime. Neither a *rarus* nor a *solemnis* quality marks the occasions of Birgitta's smile, and they, therefore, do not function as agent images. Kempe, then, imprints on readers' minds devotion to Margery rather than devotion to these other holy women, rendering them less memorable than Margery. As a result, Margery memorially obliterates the other holy women by out-dressing them. By extension, despite having exchanged her sumptuous apparel for ostensibly unadorned clothes, Margery still competes with her neighbors to the same degree as at the onset of what Lucas dubs her "sartorial pilgrimage," except that her neighbors in this case consist of her textual community of holy women.¹¹⁹ She succeeds in becoming the most memorably fashionable and fashionably memorable of them all.

This out-dressing is edged with memorial precariousness, however, which Kempe barely contains. The ambiguity of Margery's woolen garments indicates that her sumptuous clothes remain visible under her ascetic array. Carruthers has detailed how, when new memories or series of images overlay old ones, the earlier *res* (content) remains visible.¹²⁰ Accordingly, while Kempe may seek to imprint an agent image of Margery in her white

¹¹⁸ Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.38.3123.

¹¹⁹ Lucas, "Clad in Flesch," 142.

¹²⁰ Carruthers, *Craft*, 57.

clothes, Christ's locutions from the cross and others' responses to her clothes indicate that Margery's sumptuous outfit remains perceptible to readers who do not share the *intentio* of *admiranda*. The stuff-ness of textiles is of material significance here: the priest's grabbing Margery by the collar enacts the *ductus* (the manner in which a textile or text guides the reader through itself) of her sumptuous array,¹²¹ with its slashes directing the viewer's eyes towards her body, since medieval optics understood beholding as taking hold of the object that the viewer perceives. The textile, then, opens up a liminal space in Margery's clothes' polyvalent significance, between belonging to her textual/textile community (its presence) and the pre-conversion absence of that community. Once more, matter resists the mind.

This fissure between absence and presence resonates with Liz Herbert McAvoy's French-feminist-informed argument that Margery deploys "the female body as a female-identified literary tool" grounded in "the fissure between what masculine discourse said about their bodies and their own individuated experience of them."¹²² To Karma Lochrie, Margery also utilizes the "fissured flesh," the site where body and soul grate against each other, which women signify, to interpose herself between binary oppositions.¹²³ However, whereas for

¹²¹ Mary J. Carruthers, "The Concept of Ductus, or Journeying through a Work of Art," in *Rhetoric beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190–213.

¹²² Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Studies in Medieval Mysticism 5 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 11–12.

¹²³ Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, New Cultural Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 19–21, 56.

McAvoy and Lochrie, the body or psychosomatic friction serves as an authorizing vehicle, Margery's clothes resist and endanger Kempe's hagiographic enterprise.

This resistance and the failure to signify by dissimilitude and exclusion from her fellow holy women may spring from Margery's lack of a network of material antecedents in medieval Britain. Since it boasts no other holy women who can supply antecedents to Margery's ascetic array, her sumptuous clothes can only reference similar textiles. Margery's ragged and rich clothes, consequently, cannot achieve such polyvalent significance as the sisters' clothes can. Margery's lack of a network of textile antecedents for her ascetic clothes thus compounds Kempe's hagiographic endeavor. Read in this manner, it becomes possible to distinguish the stakes in Margery's fraught interactions with fellow pious women abroad. When Margery and another female pilgrim jointly engage with a Christ doll or when she prays for the souls of other women's husbands' souls,¹²⁴ Kempe strives to gather around her a community of female readers analogous to that of the sisters reading the sister-book for the sake of Margery's re-presentation of Christ. This re-presentation, after all, hinges on these women providing a textile network upon which she can draw. In short, for the sake of the *Book's* hagiographic project, Kempe strives to transform Margery into a sister and other pious women into her community of sisters, but struggles to succeed in this endeavor. Sarah Beckwith's 1986 treatment already recognizes Margery as "an isolated English example of a widespread continental phenomenon, with which she had important connections," positing that Margery ultimately does not succeed in "break[ing] the mould of [her] subjection,"

¹²⁴ Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1.30.2524–2535; 1.19.

which marginalizes her.¹²⁵ Placing the *Book* and the sister-books in conversation, then, reveals the benefits of having conversation partners at all. I now turn to points of intersection and departure in these texts' textile *memoria*.

CONCLUSION: UNTANGLING THREADS OF DEVOTION

In all three texts, clothes impress a memory of the community as a dissimilar similitude of Christ, yet the materiality of the clothes resists this impression. As matter, the clothes partake in the constructedness of Christ's body. In this, they re-present (make present again) the celestial referent which they figure. Yet, in correspondence with Bynum's account of the dissimilar dimension of the dissimilar similitude, that same matter opens up a space in which the community embodies Christ's absence as much as his presence.¹²⁶ Each community both instantiates Christ as the meek lamb and does not instantiate Him. Katharina remains memorably distinct and fashionably attired, deviating from the community's sartorial instantiation of Christ. Margery's garb, too, crafts her devotion, yet that same garb also continues to re-weave her into King's Lynn's bourgeois web that twins threads of devotion and commodification, in contrast to Christ and the holy women who partake in his transforming power and reflect him.

In all three texts, textiles weave a communal memory by facilitating and impeding mnemonic engagement. Textiles and texts fashion a devout memory of the community, as well as of distinct holy women. Texts and textiles thus become similitudes of one another.

¹²⁵ Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 34–57 at 36, 54.

¹²⁶ Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 52–57.

Both, however, also elide some women, allowing them to slip through the fracture points between interiority and exteriority. In offering such figures without likeness and thereby prompting imageless thinking, the textiles and texts also impede mnemonic engagement with them, since, according to the art of memory, memorial activity requires images. This negation of individuality performs a social function, since a common memory of common virtues forges a communal identity. The sister-book distinguishes sisters for the sake of *paraenesis* by hagiography through building a communal memory inventory. Similarly, in eliding Margery's fellow holy women, Kempe provides Margery with a community of one, namely, Christ.

The texts' sartorial *memoria* differs in other regards. Whereas the textiles in the sister-books ultimately encompass nearly all in one community, they demarcate Margery from her textual community and her readers. The memorial effect of the dissimilitude sets Katharina apart from the ideal community described. Nevertheless, *memoria* still enfolds this figure in the community of readers, since it impresses her on the readers' minds. (After all, through their memorability, these *vitae* aim to inspire readers to make a new composition in the form of a life shared with others.) The larger community therefore ultimately embraces the distinct sisters. Kempe, conversely, draws a boundary between Margery and her idealized textual community of holy women and the community her text hails. Instead of offering traditional hagiographic edification by presenting exemplary figures for emulation, the *Book* likewise impresses devotion to Margery, imprinting an *intentio* of *admiranda*, of admiring awe and wonder, rather than *imitanda*, invoking the *mulieres sanctae* of the southern Low Countries once again. The *Book's* *memoria* thus affords devotional meditation rather than embodied imitation. In this manner, Kempe divorces Margery from the community of worshippers it envisions itself as addressing. The *Book*, then, does not re-animate or re-present Margery in the community of readers.

This point of divergence relates to the differences in what the clothes are able to re-present. The sisters' rich and ragged clothes are equally capable of re-presenting Christ through unlikeness, while only Margery's sumptuous clothes can do so. For the Modern Devout sisters, while the risk of exclusion suffuses the sister-books, the stakes are lower than they are for Margery. After all, the writing sister ultimately weaves nearly all of the sisters into the hagiographic textile. Margery, instead, faces the catch-22 of a simultaneous need for mnemonic competition and a textile/textual community. Such a reading accords with that of Denis Reveney, who postulates that since the individuals observing Margery fail to decode her performance, the latter cannot transcend the boundaries of her book.¹²⁷ This confinement does not lack benefits, however, since it also isolates her with Christ. To Margery, sainthood consists of Christ uniquely favoring her, as Clarissa Atkinson notes.¹²⁸ In a word, the dissimilar similitude constitutes a site of production and destruction of community.

Textiles and texts alike unravel the dichotomy between mind-body, self-other, Christ's humanity and divinity, and externalized and interiorized devotion. For these texts, heaven inhabits (or in-habits) earth. Earthly and heavenly signification twin; earthly and heavenly matter entwine. Since clothes instill humility and participate in ritual gestures and in the body's devotional performances, the texts collapse the body and its dress, a collusion predicated upon the analogy between Christ's skin and textile. Yet these clothes plunge

¹²⁷ Denis Reveney, "Margery's Performing Body: The Translation of Late Medieval Discursive Religious Practices," in *Writing Religious Women. Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Reveney and Christiania Whitehead (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 197–216.

¹²⁸ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 214.

Margery and the sisters into a communal body, not a reified one. Characterized by shared clothing, synchronized gestures, and, in the case of the sister-books, continuous physical proximity, this body constitutes a conglomerate, in which boundaries between distinct physicalities dissolve while enclosure delineates this resulting communal body. This extended body also comprises a textual body, a corpus of women as texts, encompassing the materiality of women living and departed in the memory. I would even hazard to propose that the *Book* and the sister-books jointly make up such a single textual community and communal body.

As one collective body, all three texts harness and complicate the association of female spirituality with embodied devotion. They negotiate what David Aers, examining the intersection of gender and spirituality in medieval England, terms “basic premises and fantasies in traditional patriarchal constitutions of ‘women.’”¹²⁹ Allowing communities to fray and come together, the sister-books and the *Book* capitalize upon the gendered associations of somatic spirituality to draw attention to sartorial performance but ultimately implode these denotations by encompassing textual bodies and departed bodies in the dissimilar similitudes.

The clothes and the women themselves, then, constitute knots tying together self and other; past, present, and future; and God and self. Given that knots, however, like dissimilar similitudes, open up an in-between space, spots remain untouched. (After all, in a knot, strands diverge and converge, run parallel and twist around one another.) The fraught tension between interiority and exteriority persists; the texts attempt to contain this tense interplay by

¹²⁹ David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 35.

apophasis. Just as these women's clothes weave a European tissue of devotion, matter and mind are all woven into a textile of God's creation. This heavenly cloth, however, ultimately needs unravelling to reach the apophatic silent space behind these splendid rags.