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Language and Identity:  
Margery Kempe's Narrative of Becoming

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Abstract

# Language and Identity: Margery Kempe's Narrative of Becoming

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In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery Kempe's religious identity is inseparably interwoven with her social identity, and such interweaving is made possible only through verbal discourse. One distinctive feature of Margery's identity-fashioning process is that she negotiates a unique spiritual economy of her own. Her spirituality is governed by a quasi-economic system that incorporates not only God's personal promises and her private thoughts but also material goods and social valuations of her acts of piety. In this system, heterogeneous elements are interlocked with one another through the virtue of language, and the private, once articulated, is granted a public value, turning into the object of worldly recognition and exchange. Another feature is that Margery blurs the boundary between confession and self-narrative, thus between spiritual need and personal propaganda. She authorizes her autobiographical narrative by appropriating the language of confession, which presupposes the transparent relationship between what is spoken and what is true. In this way, her own mystical experience and life story acquire a socially

sanctioned form of speech. *The Book of Margery Kempe* attests to, and results from, a medieval woman's heroic efforts to balance the processes of becoming her own self and coming to terms with religion and society.

Keywords: Margery Kempe, female mysticism, identity, language, spiritual economy, performative utterance, self-narrative, confession

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# 1. Introduction

*The Book of Margery Kempe* is often cited as the first autobiography written in the English language. It is also considered a mystic text, a failed hagiography, and even fiction.<sup>1</sup> The variety of labels itself gives an idea of the controversial nature of the work, which is “located at the intersection of hagiography, autobiography studies, and social history” (Ashley 371). This thesis reads *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a sample of life writing that should be approached in its sociocultural context as an identity-building project tailored to the subject’s situation, the end result of which is the acceptance of Margery Kempe as a mystic into her immediate and wider community. My primary concern will be to show how the text’s representation of Margery Kempe includes and overlaps with her own self-representations.

A consensual starting point for reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter *Book*) is that it is the sole source, aside from one or two mentions of the name in fifteenth-century Lynn records, for “knowing” and “bearing witness to” its protagonist.<sup>2</sup> The *Book* puts forth Margery Kempe as its

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Staley puts forth a reading of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as “a fiction that attempts to create a social reality and to examine that reality in relation to a single individual” (171).

<sup>2</sup> Margery Kempe’s book, except for a drastically shortened pamphlet printed by Wynkyn de Worde (c. 1501) and reprinted in Henry Pepwell’s anthology of mystical pieces (1521), exists in a single manuscript. For details regarding the manuscript and its history, see Meech and Allen, Introduction xxxii–xlvi. Surviving records (c. 1438) from the Trinity Guild of Lynn mention one “Margeria Kempe,” who may be

author, but the text itself also *creates* her as we know her. The various characterizations of Margery Kempe (mystic, proto-feminist writer, madwoman, etc.) are built upon the image of Margery as fashioned by the text. The book, while carrying valuable seeds for analysis in the areas of religion, history, and literary theory, is first and foremost a work of painstaking self-representation. Although it may be presumed that an account of a mystic's life should follow exclusively the trajectory of her spiritual growth, this study underscores the interwoven nature of her identity with her social surroundings. Practicing mysticism is not only a divinely sanctioned religious vocation, but also a social identity available to the fifteenth-century woman, one that can be established through self-representation and narrative.

The *Book* shows the unfolding of, and also is the very result of, Margery Kempe's efforts to gain public recognition for the narrative of her life—whether mystical, saintly, or simply *lived*—and to construct and safeguard personal identity in doing so. Margery<sup>3</sup> does have a *given* social identity, dictated by her parentage, socioeconomic standing, and erstwhile lifestyle. However, as she undergoes spiritual conversion and adopts the manner of life that separates her from both her youthful self and her

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identical to the Margery Kempe of the treatise (Meech and Allen 358-59); aside from this detail, there are no other public records available for comparison with her text.

<sup>3</sup> Margery Kempe will be referred to as Margery hereafter. Not only is “Margery” the name preferred by Christ and her acquaintances in the text, but it is also a more appropriate designation for the independent woman who is clearly “something other than John Kempe’s wife” (Salih 173) than her married name of “Kempe.”

neighbors, she gains a new identity which she has to promote and validate publicly time and again. Margery's newfound identity as a mystic and beloved of Christ is indisputable on a personal level, since God himself repeatedly vouches for it in her visions. In the social space, however, which she has no intention of abandoning and in which she wants to be recognized as the "synguler lover" of God (*Book* 138),<sup>4</sup> she must undergo a separate process of self-articulation and authorization. Despite the divine warrant, her identity is never stable in social terms. Like any secular identity, it must be constructed and negotiated in dialogues with existing institutions and ideologies, including the Church, the mystical tradition, commercial economy, and patriarchal ideas of gender and domesticity. Sometimes adhering to one, sometimes playing one off against another, Margery manages to keep up a precarious yet determined existence in unusual and hostile situations.

The *Book* records the process through which Margery puts her identity into language, testing and reasserting it continuously in social space. The purpose of my thesis is to highlight this process, paying attention to how she brings her divine discourse into, or balances it with, the language of this world. Since identity-making is always intertwined with language, I focus especially on Margery's employment of verbal language in connection with her community, and also on the ways in which she grounds the "truth" of her narrative in forms of speaking. The decades-long debate over

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the *Book* are from Barry Windeatt's 2004 edition, accompanied by page numbers.

Margery's "authenticity" has made it seem necessary to take up a solid position on the issue before conducting any analysis of the text. If the text is read as a process of self-representation, however, the authenticity issue becomes less relevant, making way for the analysis of actual effects that are made possible by, and are wrought by, the workings of the text itself.

Since the manuscript version was discovered unexpectedly in 1934 in Colonel William Butler-Bowdon's collection, *The Book of Margery Kempe* has received a great deal of critical attention. The initial reception was unfavorable.<sup>5</sup> Based on the quietly pious image established by Wynkyn de Worde's short pamphlet and Pepwell's designation of Margery as "deuoute ances" (Meech and Allen 357n), scholars anticipated a work that would fit in well with the existing tradition of female mystics. Therefore, they responded with disappointment and shock to the emergence of a less-than-polished text, which turned out to be definitely unconventional and potentially controversial. David Knowles aptly summarizes early attitudes towards Margery Kempe: "[she] is clearly not the equal of earlier English mystics in depth of perception or wisdom of spiritual doctrine, nor as a personality can she challenge comparison with Julian of Norwich" (*Religious Orders* 139). Her better established contemporary does make Margery look

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<sup>5</sup> The *Book's* entrance into academia and the growing attention it receives is well documented in Ashley's summary (372). For a detailed review of hostile criticism, see Bremner.

not only inferior in spirituality but also less stable in wits.<sup>6</sup> Even to this day, critics often refer to her “psychologically dysfunctional” state, “morbid self-engrossment,” and “hysterical temperament” (Wright 497; Colledge and Walsh 38; Thurston 570).

Closer comparison with other mystics helped place her within the context of affective mysticism, mitigating some of the initial shock caused by her eccentric practices. The *Book* itself connects Margery explicitly with female mystical figures such as the thirteenth-century Beguine Marie d’Oignies, who provides the closest model for her mysticism. Marie’s life is mentioned in the *Book*: the example of her tears and loud cries persuades Margery’s second scribe to have faith in her again after a period of doubt.<sup>7</sup> Margery shares with Marie not only the uncontrollable “abundance of tears” and cries “in the manner of a woman in labor” (Jacques de Vitry 715-16), but also means of chastising the body, such as extreme fasting and the wearing of a hidden hair-shirt next to the skin. Margery was still different, however, from other affective mystics in several significant points, which along with the “unpolished” nature of the *Book* contributed to her reputation as a “wannabe.” Marie d’Oignies is demure in speech despite all her display and tears, with no “idle words . . . or excessive laughter” (717).

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of *via negativa*, that more “serious” vein of mysticism supported by religious historians, and of the tradition of affective mysticism, see Knowles and Jantzen. For discussions of *via negativa* and *positiva* with regard to female mystics in particular, see Beckwith 198-201; Lochrie 27-37.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of Marie’s life, see Jacques de Vitry 709-27. She is recognized by Margery’s second scribe in ch. 62 of the *Book*.

She “never presumed of herself nor would do anything without counsel” (722), renouncing her own will—an attitude advocated by many other religious texts, not only in oppressive manuals of conduct widely circulated in the era by conservative clerics such as Jean Gerson but in texts as akin to Margery’s as the *Book of St. Bride*. Unlike her predecessors, Margery has no qualms about “presuming of herself” or providing her own counsel, speaking up loudly and often as the most ardent defender of her own identity.

The self-absorption and verbosity of the Margery portrayed in the *Book* was difficult to assimilate into the acceptable image of the serious holy woman. Characteristics that did not fit in with the general conception of piety, including her dedication to self-narrative, led her contemporaries to accuse her “of fakery, of self-dramatization, sometimes of being an epileptic” (Mahoney 37). These peculiarities were considered “glitches” in Margery’s identity-making project by early critics as well, who thought it a bad imitation and an embarrassing failure. A considerable number of accusations have been focused on Margery’s penchant for talking about her own singularity and the uniqueness of God’s love for her. For example, Michael J. Wright colorfully accuses Margery of “wishing to be the bride at every spiritual wedding, the corpse at every deposition” (506). This first-person “obsession” has been grounds for reading her account as an artifice or fraud. Being caught in the act of self-articulation seems to be doubly problematic: while representing one’s own self is itself a breach of “natural” authenticity, the transparency of such an intention calls forth even more

contempt. That self-representation is attempted *and* that it is apparent both go against the integrity of the account—hence the tragedy of autohagiography.

It is for this reason that some critics emphasize the unintentional meaning of the text. This allows them to pick out what seems “real” in her text without having to respect Margery’s own conscious formulations of herself.<sup>8</sup> Knowles’ comment that many of Margery’s contemporaries “were only too ready to accept her at her own valuation” suggests that he does not buy her self-articulations himself (*English Mystical Tradition* 148). To these critics, the “true” mystic should not be interested in how she is considered and presented in the world; she should remain conspicuously unaware of the very processes through which she is made as a mystic in the social space.

A wave of more favorable approaches began to surge in the early 1980s. Even as it sought to build a higher regard for Margery’s respectability and worth as a mystic, the criticism had difficulty escaping from the abovementioned requirement of naïve authenticity. Some critics argue that Margery is *as good* a mystic as any of her canonized predecessors, that what seem to be failings are actually common traits or strengths. Others turn attention away from Margery’s verbal self-representation to base her authenticity on a different element: the “language of the body.” In the last

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<sup>8</sup> For an example of this approach, see Knowles, *English Mystical Tradition*; Goodman; Wright. Goodman takes Margery’s supposed “mental banality” as a signal of the reliability of her recollections (170); Wright argues that “the credibility of the narrative as a whole” is strengthened by in the existence of “inadvertent information” included with “no evident purpose” (505).



two decades of scholarship, Margery's physical eccentricities have earned a newfound value in affirmative reinterpretations of "the distracting inclusion of the female body" at the forefront of her text (McAvoy 24). Karma Lochrie argues that the female mystic claims "a privileged language, the Word made flesh and uttered through the flesh . . . through the trembling of limbs, cries, falling on the ground" (45).<sup>9</sup> Along similar lines, Gayle Margherita observes that Margery "react[s] against a paternal discourse that makes the flesh the price of the word" (30). Recent criticism reaffirms this "flesh" and highlights its employment in the very process of proclaiming that "word." To many critics, Margery's body is representative of the "insistent presence" that lends female mystics' texts "authority" or "*alternative* mystical access to what they perceive as divine truth" (McAvoy 24; emphasis added). In that they are indeed compelled to look not at Margery's words but at something else, however, these critics are not much different from those who are "distracted" by Margery's body. Despite their seemingly opposite positions, the initial hostile responses and the later feminist approaches work on the same assumptions—that the value of Margery's text depends on an unassuming authenticity, and that active self-representation is superficial, irrelevant, and mostly misleading.

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<sup>9</sup> The earlier chapters of Lochrie's book intentionally address the female "mystic" in general terms, building up theories of the mystic's flesh that converge on the figure of Margery Kempe later in the work; the quote given here refers to Angela of Foligno in the immediate context, but it is equally applicable to Margery.

Even the most personally supportive critics often doubt the authenticity of her self-spoken representation. That the body can “speak,” and that it has its own ways of speaking, have been healthy correctives to the tradition that dismissed the body, especially the female one, as an obstacle to legitimate speech, and to unfavorable criticism based on misogynist takes of what a woman can do, especially with the power of affect. This “body talk,” however, does not resolve the question of whether we can believe what someone says about one’s own self. It unwittingly obscures the Margery that speaks through verbal language in her text, presenting herself in social terms even while appearing to be a divine mystery. As Mary C. Bodden points out, “contemporary critics, though they try to free themselves from the prejudices of the Middle Ages that promoted the association of female verbosity with sexuality, still do not like noisy women” (26). For my purpose, how Margery makes herself through language (*sans* metaphor) and how she presents that self verbally is more important than how her *body* “speaks mystical, linguistic . . . categories of investigation” (Lochrie 5).

Somehow, the true Margery eludes the parameter of exclusively religious interpretation. She keeps a hard-won but ultimately profitable peace with the Church, follows sanctioned tenets of affective mysticism, and thus manages to maintain a relationship with God that is recognizable to her contemporary society. However, she is also *in friction* with these institutions, through which come both the need for active negotiation and a chance for creating a singular space of existence. In the process of molding

Margery Kempe into a “successful” mystic, we lose the unique and personal Margery who undergoes such complex processes specifically to *earn* the recognition that some critics now give her for granted. This leaves unexamined many features of her life and text—her insistent personal focus, her revelations of even the most shameful and unholy parts of her life—which are not glitches to be glossed over (or frowned upon), but centerpieces of Margery’s text. They are what make her text truly powerful and irreplaceable—Margery is “synguler” in her presentation of herself as singular.

Unlike that of other female mystics,<sup>10</sup> Margery’s discourse with Christ does not end with a distilled version of Christ’s words or holy visions. It is inextricably bound up with Margery herself. In Margery’s brand of mysticism, the representation of the self built up by, or found in, the subject’s verbal interaction with Christ is more important than Christ’s speech itself. Her narrative, perhaps less than perfect as a model “mystical” text, becomes special through its relationship to the personal/individual—the personal as made public in contemporary society. Where Margery’s text deviates from the norms of mystical and/or hagiographical texts, one finds

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<sup>10</sup> For examples of other medieval mystics’ use of language, with comparisons by gender, see Jantzen 278-321. Both geographically and chronologically, Margery’s closest counterpart is Julian of Norwich, whose *Showings* contain very few personal details and deals heavily with the content (and later interpretation) of her visions. In that we are given plenty of biographical information through the mystic’s text itself, Margery is more similar to male writers such as St. Augustine or Richard Rolle than to any female religious.

the autobiographical record of a woman who fought not only for her salvation in the world to come but also for her position and survival in the here and now. The *Book* shows us how the personal intersects with the social by means of self-representation, or how the personal enters the social in the process of shaping an individual's identity.

Major attempts at a social reading of Margery Kempe's *Book* include the work of David Aers, Sheila Delaney, and Clarissa Atkinson. Atkinson's *Mystic and Pilgrim* (1983), the first book-length study on the text, steps out of a strictly religious approach to discuss Margery's creation with regard to her social and historical context. As one of the first to find parallels in affective mysticism for Margery's piety, Atkinson insightfully suggests religious role models that would have been available for Margery. At the same time, she provides a useful overview of the socioeconomic atmosphere of Margery's day, including descriptions of the prestigious and affluent Brunham family, into which Margery was initially born, and the lively merchant town of King's Lynn, which formed her social background. Though Atkinson covers a lot of ground, tackling a different context in each of her seven chapters, she stops short of examining the actual ways in which Margery makes use of the sociocultural resources at hand. She concludes her study by defending Margery as a not entirely "aberrant" practitioner of female mysticism in late medieval society—thus justifying Margery's piety and salvaging her religious reputation.

Delaney, while acknowledging that Margery was influenced by the forms and vocabulary of the continental tradition of "feminine mysticism,"

does not forget to add that “it offers no understanding of the genesis of that experience” (109). Drawing parallels with Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, Delaney places Margery Kempe “in her social milieu” (106), not in the company of religious women. She sees Margery as a victim of her patriarchal surroundings, who tries to resist masculine oppression in the only ways she knows how but eventually caves in. By highlighting that “money creates socially” (112), she draws attention to the interaction between Margery’s socioeconomic environment and her religious motivations, which, as I shall argue, forms the basis of Margery’s spiritual economy. Delaney does not allow much room for innovation or negotiation on Margery’s part, however: according to her, Margery never escapes being a piece of property to be exchanged between masculine figures, including God himself. Approaching religion in Marxist terms, Delaney argues:

Religion is Margery’s way of asserting her ownership of herself—that is, of overcoming alienation while simultaneously providing the most poignant testimony to that alienation. . . . One could also say that Margery discovered a way to use the system against the system—a way to leave home, travel, establish a name for herself, and meanwhile remain both chaste and respectable. (114)

Despite all credits she gives to Margery’s personal efforts, Delaney concludes that Margery could not “really opt out of an abhorrent social system,” that she was unable to turn “the abuse of her sexuality . . . to personal *profit*” as the Wife of Bath did (114). Her study provides the

valuable insight that Margery's text can be read as something besides "a book of devotion" (108). Some unanswered questions still remain: did Margery really get nothing out of her religious and social efforts? Is her "social system" as monolithic as Delaney suggests? Do options exist besides "opting out," and how must one's social existence be formed in order to pursue them?

Aers provides so far the most comprehensive social reading of the *Book*. He illuminates not only how Margery's identity is made in contemporary social discourses, but also how Margery participates in that making. Margery, while being produced by the community and the web of discourse within which she is embedded, manipulates that web herself through her characteristic spiritual economy and through the appropriation of existing methods of speech for self-expression. Aers locates Margery's identity in a gendered society, examining "the complex processes through which female identity might be made in a particular community and class" (74). In his view, the individual is not simply determined by society, or tries to escape it in vain; she *participates* in the process of making her own identity.

In my reading of the *Book*, what is crucial in the process of identity formation is the employment of language as a social practice. Aers points out that "historical communities, their economies and their social relations, their discourses and practices" come together to "provide the collective practices, including language, out of which texts are made" (3). Social life is reflected in language, and in turn—and partly because of this—language contains and activates the social life. Quoting Bakhtin, Aers notes that

“utterances . . . are ‘socially oriented,’ determined by the ‘immediate social situation and the broader social milieu’” (3). I build on Aers’ comments on the general nature of language to discuss the linguistic situations that the text specifically creates. A large portion of the text is made up of Margery’s conversations, starting from the most personal and private (with Christ) and extending into the public (with great and small members of her immediate and extended community). The whole account is then rendered again into the language of autobiographical dictation.<sup>11</sup> These multiple linguistic layers provide the backdrop and ingredients Margery’s self-representation. The *Book* shows how Margery uses language to situate herself in the world, which is not a simple process, as she must clear out a space of her own instead of claiming an existing one. In her attempts to stay a member of her community even as she distances herself from the norm, she impacts the society by virtue of her language. Tears, cries, and other “outward signs” may be Margery’s tools for marking herself out as special and set apart, but her verbal—and eventually written—language is the medium in which she articulates the specifics of her relationship with Christ and professes such a relationship in social space.

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<sup>11</sup> There exist many valuable studies on the process of creating Margery’s *written* text; Lawton, Uhlman, Ashley, and Staley among others have discussed its legitimacy, and Lochrie links it to her discussion of body via the concept of *corpus*. Such studies often elide the speaking Margery within the text and jump directly from Margery’s first-hand “experience” to the written. I seek to prioritize the talking Margery Kempe over the one that writes (or is written about), addressing the acts of narration that prefigure writing and inscribe Margery immediately into social discourse.

Spirituality, a realm often set apart from one's communal environment, can also be approached as a linguistic construct in the sense that it must be recognized and activated in society. If spirituality stays entirely "within," then it can be allotted a separate realm of its own. If it is to affect an individual's status and reception, however, it too is subject to the same kinds of constraints that bind other social identities and institutions. It must be built and circulated on acceptable terms—a consensus which must extend beyond the individual—and should be able to be *declared* in them. Whether or not Margery Kempe is represented and accepted as a "true" mystic is an issue entirely different from whether or not she really *is* one. For the purposes of this study, the former is of more importance.

This thesis aims to bring the discussion of Margery Kempe into the language of the world, without relying on notions of a *mystical* language. Many critics privilege Margery's "ineffability topoi" (Ashley 375).<sup>12</sup> They suppose that "language remains inadequate for the task of explicating her insights," and that, where it fails, it is replaced by the "primeval language of the body" (McAvoy 200). Dhira B. Mahoney asserts that Margery's tears and cries "are her public language, an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in defiance of the prohibitions of custom" (40). The

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<sup>12</sup> It may be useful to note that Christ himself mentions ineffability, but obviously in a rhetoric of amplification: "Ther may non hert thynke ne tunge telle the gret love that I have to the" (*Book* 367). See Jantzen 278-321 for an in-depth discussion of ineffability and the mystic's speech. For a more detailed discussion of Margery's use of "telling," see ch. 3 of this thesis.



supposed inadequacy of verbal language for the publicization of Margery's experience is accentuated by the difficulty of grasping the spiritual. Yet the statement that Margery "coud nevyr telle the grace that sche felt" (*Book* 44) is itself *effable*, and takes effect as such in language. Grace Jantzen criticizes the common view of mysticism as "an ineffable, private state of consciousness" (321). Especially in the affective tradition,<sup>13</sup> "a proper grasp of divine ineffability is an invitation to *experiment with language*, to stretch it to its limits so that its very articulacy may lead beyond itself to the silence of God" (284; emphasis added). David Lawton points out that "it is Kempe's gift of speech that amazes clerics" (103) and that for Margery, "locution is never merely a capricious exercise of speech; rather, it calculatedly claims a privilege" (105).

In the following chapters, I will the effects of the linguistic presentations of Margery's experience—the personal experience that eventually *becomes* the self—despite all its "ineffable" nature. The *saying* makes the *said* recognizable, gives it a reality and shape in language. It follows that the said inevitably becomes at once contestable and deniable; at the same time, it escapes being nothing, and thus *becomes*. It gains a palpable existence which can be talked about, written down, remembered, and

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<sup>13</sup> "[T]he affective tradition rooted their confidence in language . . . in divine revelation in general, and particularly in the incarnation. If the Word became flesh, if the divine became human, then God became one who used and is expressed in human language. The incarnation thus becomes a validation of language, and allows for confidence and experimentation in human expression" (Jantzen 289).

questioned. The more Margery speaks about herself, the more she exists and the more she becomes herself.

I argue that Margery takes advantage of the spoken word and its characteristics to stage her self-definition and self-articulation, whether speaking inside her mind with her own private Christ or making herself public to others out in her community. Through Margery's maneuvers one can see how identities are inscribed into social discourse through linguistic means and how they are circulated as truth. Something *happens* when a life is spoken, something that exceeds the mere truth-value of the content. That excess effect provides the motivation for Margery to keep on speaking, especially about herself, although opening her mouth could severely compromise everything from her own physical safety to her image as a religious and public figure. Margery's new identity does not call for a retreat from society, but rather a charge straight into it. It must serve her not only personally in her spiritual and domestic space, but publicly in her wider community as well.

The main body of my thesis is divided into two chapters. The second chapter begins with a discussion of the linguistically constructed values Margery creates through her relationship with Christ. I argue that these values cannot stay in her private discourse with the divine but must be verbalized in the public arena, as the very formulation of Margery's mysticism stands on the interplay of spiritual, social and material economies. Spirituality, social existence and the power of language all come together to create the public Margery Kempe, as God's promising speech and

Margery's will become effects that enter into transactions with the material. In the third chapter I focus on the processes through which Margery builds authority, a major source of which is the careful presentation of her autobiographical narrative in conjunction with her mystic experience. Through the sacrament of confession, Margery's repetitions of her experience merge with her representation of self, giving it the linguistic form it will wear for the next half-millennium. The *Book* follows Margery as she invests her self-narrative with the power of confession to make it manifest as truth and solidifies it into a written text.

## 2. Language and Spiritual Economy

The nature of Margery's discourse with God is closely related to the economic consciousness of Margery's contemporary culture. As Delaney observes, in Margery's text "one is kept constantly aware of the 'cash nexus'; it pervades her consciousness as it pervaded her world, part of every human endeavor and confrontation" (110). Delaney deduces a system of spiritual economy from how Margery entrusts half her pious acts to her confessor and the rest to other poor souls, for which Christ gives her "dubbyl reward in hevyn" (*Book* 81): "good deeds and prayer [are] the commodity, transferrable and administered by Jesus . . . producing an enviable profit in heaven of 100 percent" (Delaney 111). Noting Margery's wish to buy herself "more pardon," Aers points out that the religious atmosphere of Margery's age, being in step with the "culture's profane economic practice . . . fostered the congenially congruent idea that 'mor' was better, could be purchased and would afford efficacious credit on distant shores where the final accounts would be settled" (78).

In Margery's spiritual economy, the religious is inseparable from the secular and the commercial. Items available for exchange in the spiritual market include not only good deeds and prayers but also the spiritual values created "in wepyng, in pylgrimage goyng, in fastyng, er in any good word spekyng" (*Book* 81). The line between material and spiritual goods is fuzzy, not because the categories are mixed up subjectively but because they actually interact on the same dimension in Margery's world. The very form

of her spiritual negotiations is inextricably woven into the texture of the social space. As Sarah Beckwith argues, the sacred and the secular are “incomprehensible other than through their mutual relation” (*Christ’s Body* 110). Margery’s private discourse with Christ cannot stay safely and silently private; what had been just between herself and Christ slips out into the material and social world as the spiritual capital she accumulates in Christ’s accounting becomes exchangeable with the world’s tokens and privileges.

Margery’s negotiation with her husband regarding chastity provides a telling example. It marks the point where Margery and God’s private spiritual economy must undertake a venture into the secular, as spiritual, social, and material goods and obligations go into the melting pot. When Margery’s husband asks her to grant him several wishes in exchange for hers, she answers thus:

Sere, yf it lyke yow, ye schal grawnt me my desyr, and ye schal have yowr desyr. Grawntyth me that ye schal not komyn in my bed, and I grawnt yow to qwyte yowr dettys er I go to Jerusalem. And makyth my body fre to God, so that ye nevyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr this day whyl ye levyn, and I schal etyn and drynkyn on the Fryday at yowr byddyng. (*Book* 89)

Margery’s habit of fasting on Fridays has been spiritually profitable for her, but a minus to her husband’s social needs; she forfeits this profit of fasting (which is now transposed into her husband’s social profit) in exchange for chastity, another source of spiritual profit. Margery comes out on top in the

end, with no spiritual losses incurred; she is a good bargainer, Christ an excellent advisor. The exchange of spiritual capital occurs *together with* the financial and practical capital she has in the world, to cancel out both her husband's material debt and her conjugal debt—which means freeing herself from sexual subjugation to her husband. This is how she frees her body to use as she wishes, whether it be communing with Christ or mobilizing herself to go on pilgrimages overseas. The contract with her husband is necessary for liberating her body with the appropriate social agreement, in addition to the spiritual sanction which God has already given.<sup>14</sup>

The overlapping and mutual interference of spiritual imperative and economic consciousness can also be found in Margery's tale of the laughing man who pays silver to have people chide him for his sins (*Book* 94-95). Most likely a fiction of Margery's own creation, it has many parallels with her personal experience. The man in the tale, used to paying for the penitential effects of hearing harsh words, starts "lawhyng er smylyng and havynge good game" at the slander of "many gret men" (94). When they ask him why he laughs, he explains, "I have many days put sylver owt of my purse and hyred men to chyde me for remyssyon of my synne, and this day I may kepe my sylver in my purs, I thank yow alle" (95). In the swirl of spiritual capital, material capital, and "words," it is not clear whether the

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<sup>14</sup> Women at the time required their husbands' permission to move about the country, as attested by Margery's own experience of being required to present a "lettyr of recorde" from her husband when on pilgrimage in York (*Book* 246).

material buys the spiritual, or vice versa, even less clear whether the profit the man has gained—the occasion for his laughter—is spiritual or material. More importantly, the man does not silently accept his “profit,” but laughs and talks, providing his own interpretation of that laughter. When he explains his laughter to the “gret men,” he tells them what has happened—what they have just unwittingly given him. Two different dimensions of value are conflated into one economy *at the moment* the man articulates his profits and his particular appropriation and re-valuation of the others’ words. By voicing the spiritual profit that he has gained through their slander, the man endows their words with a new value, something that was socially unrecognizable before he named it. Without ever having to consult his purse in reality, he has “made” profit through the process of verbal explanation, by translating spiritual action into language.

This system of spiritual economy is substantiated only through linguistic means. The transactions, although ultimately valid in the spiritual realm, must be expressed in language in order to take immediate effect in the here and now and to be recognized by others as valid. Like that of any other economy, the currency of Margery’s spiritual economy requires the consensus of the community if it is to function properly in public space. In Margery’s case, the role of language and self-representation is especially important since the spiritual does not materialize (or “incarnates”)—for example, in the form of blood-stained relics, spectacular miracles, or crosses mysteriously tattooed on body parts—but only appears through her own words or displays.

Margery's verbal representation of spiritual experience is considered controversial from the beginning. As she speaks not only as a pious woman but as a mystic, privy to special knowledge about God, she has to prove that she speaks from a privileged position, that she really "knows what she is talking about." Hence the tension between her newly earned identity and public opinion is inevitable. After her experience of heavenly music in Chapter 3, she "coud not wyl restreyn hyrself fro the spekyng therof" and goes into the habit of exclaiming "It is ful mery in hevyn!" whenever she has any company (62). This causes trouble with the "people of the world," who are stunned by this change in a member of their community who was not so different from them only a few years ago. "Why speke ye so of the myrth that is in hevyn? Ye know it not and ye have not be ther no mor than we," they say (62), dubious as to the validity of her knowledge. Even before Margery ever wishes for chastity or exhibits her trademark cries and tears, the authority of her pious speech and the distinct status it gives her are challenged by her community.

In fact, Margery depends on such verbal challenge for her salvation. Her interaction with the slanderous "language of the world"<sup>15</sup> forms an important part of her spiritual economy due to her apparent "need" for slander from the folk of this world. It is first of all an act of *imitatio Christi* and an emulation of the saints. She is "mery whan sche [is] reprevyd,

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<sup>15</sup> The OED entry for "language," def. 5a., reads as follows: "That which is said; talk, report, rumour; esp. words expressive of censure or disapproval. *to say language against*: to talk against, speak of disapprovingly or critically. Obs."



skornyd, or japyd for ower Lordys lofe . . . sythen Cryst hymself ches that way. Alle hys apostlys, martyres, confessorys, and virgynes, and alle that evyr comyn to hevyn, passed be the wey of tribulacyon” (65). She has also been specially promised a free pass through Purgatory in exchange for the slander of this world, which will be her scourge and her martyrdom: “I have behyghth the that thu schuldyst noon other purgatory han than slawndyr and speche of the world” (136). To profit from this system, to achieve direct salvation, Margery must not leave this “world” or stay inconspicuous in it, but instead draw as much attention as possible to her piety, even if the responses are negative. Thus slander is in itself indispensable to her spiritual economy, and contestation and conflict become requisites of her spirituality.

The “language of the world,” in fact, defines Margery’s identity negatively: it repeatedly tells her what she is not, what she must defend herself against. Likewise, it is only when the people of the world, including powerful personages and their households, swear and say sinful “words” that she is prompted to use her voice to chastise them, herself speaking out in God’s name. It is against these assaults of “evyl langage” (216) that she sets herself off as one who speaks *for* God. Julian of Norwich once tells Margery, “feryth not the langage of the world” (122). Indeed, Margery cannot cut herself off entirely from this “langage,” even if it be harsh words of judgment and slander, because it is her social element; neither can she conform to it entirely. Like the laughing man, she straddles the line between being believed and being jeered at by revealing how she processes the slander she receives. Even while being slandered, she must also let the

public know that she is in fact profiting from the setup, that she takes this slander meekly only because she is stable in the knowledge that she is *not* what it says of her. It is then that she can digest it as a kind of martyrdom.

It follows that Margery must build a socially recognizable version of her self, one that identifies her as a holy figure who is suffering in Christ's name on this earth, in order to counter the other hostile versions into which she is cast. A private spiritual identity is insufficient for her survival, or for the legitimization of the economy through which she gains spiritual profit. Having already spent her youth in society, she already knows what it takes to present oneself socially; she is aware of how she will be judged by others in social terms, how reputations are formed. Margery's "quest for singularity" is first motivated by the secular goals of "material comfort and economic advancement," and only after her conversion by the wish to be recognized as the daughter of Christ (Fienberg 136). Her period of post-partum sickness and the madness instigated by trouble with her confessor marks a definite split with her past self; for a long time thereafter she seeks to build a new identity in purely socioeconomic terms, keeping up her "pompows aray" (*Book* 57) and trying her hands at the brewing and milling business. Margery not only eagerly enters the market as an active contributor, but also asserts her particular class position and the "worschyp of hir kyndred" (58). It can easily be presumed that even after Margery changes her orientation from the material to the spiritual, she still has the social consciousness to shape her own self-representation.

Staying within the social space while pursuing a spiritual identity is itself an anomalous condition, and thus a difficult one to achieve for the medieval woman. Kathleen Ashley notes that “Margery refuses to model her conduct either on anchorite behavior (enclosed in a sacred space) or on that of the urban goodwife (enclosed in the domestic space)” (374). This unconventional stance troubles her onlookers, as is the case with one monk who encounters her in Canterbury: “I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston, that ther schuld no man speke wyth the” (*Book* 93). The monk’s comment reveals both the uniqueness of Margery’s free-roaming status and the major concern provoked by such liberation—the fear of female speech.<sup>16</sup> However, Margery holds fast to her assertion that she “wyl bothe

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<sup>16</sup> Anxieties caused by the apparent lack of “integrity” in the female anatomy inform medieval discourses on female speech. The open mouth and the female sexual organs were manifestations of the same imperfection, the drafty and porous state of the woman (Lochrie 3-4; 23-27). As a result, the woman is at once less holy and less credible, and had neither the wherewithal nor the right to speak of God. Only the virgin was allowed a certain form of integrity—“virginity is the path, *par excellence*, of purgation, and the virgin body, in solidarity with the virgin mother of God, becomes a link between heaven and earth” (Jantzen 91). The tradition of anchoresses also made up for the inadequacies of the female body in the form of the anchor-hold. By removing themselves physically from the public sphere and sealing themselves silently into a stone cell, they gained a claim to holiness. Beckwith notes that the enclosure of these women was considered a symbolic burial, becoming “dead” to the world (“Material Mysticism” 197n); the anchorite was “literally walled up, with only a window to the outside world” (Mahoney 37). By erecting physical enclosure, or by having herself “cut off from human intercourse” (Mahoney 38), the female recluse gained a little room for such culturally sanctioned speech as prophecy and holy revelation.

speke of hym [i.e., God] and heryn of hym” (93) in the open space of the secular world. Margery’s holiness is provided for by the presence of God inside Margery’s soul as a constant companion that guides and bolsters her holiness wherever she goes. “God is in thi sowle,” says Christ numerous times, emphasizing that wherever Margery goes, there he is: “whan thou gost to chyrch, I go wyth the; whan thou syttest at thi mete, I sytte wyth the; whan thou gost to thi bed, I go wyth the; and whan thou gost owt of towne, I go wyth the” (100). The notably specific reference to going “owt of towne” serves as assurance that God endorses Margery being out and about in the wider world. God is with her always, whether she is in her domestic environment, out in her community, or traveling to far lands on pilgrimage and holy visits. It is never an option for Margery to leave the social space altogether, nor to stay entirely silent. Margery becomes a holy woman *at large*, and the room for speech that was limited to the anchorite’s cell expands with every journey.

Margery’s acute awareness of social environment is also found in her encounter with another male authority figure who is troubled by her mobility and outspokenness—the Archbishop of York. When finding her to be a married woman who freely moves about alone wearing the virgin’s white, the Archbishop accuses her of being “a fals heretyke” (249). In response, Margery exclaims: “I am non heretyke, ne *ye schal non preve me*” (*Book* 249; emphasis added). In this two-part sentence, she first states what she knows herself to be in her soul—she is not a heretic—and then shows her social insight in recognizing that, separately from what she may consider

herself to be, the world has its own processes of testing, proving, and accepting identity. Just as the Archbishop's naming of her as a heretic does not make her one, neither is her own claim enough to give her an all-clear in this world. Knowing that she herself is a mystic and special lover of God is not enough; she must prove that identity in terms acceptable to her community.

To have the divine authority behind her movements recognized, she must make herself "prevyd and knowyn" publicly, as the Bishop of Lincoln advises her. When Margery visits the bishop to request of him "the mantyl and the ryng, and . . . whygth clothys" (106)—a sartorial endorsement that will mark her out as a holy woman—he tells her that he will not be able to grant her "so synguler a clothyng" until she is "bettyr prevyd and knowyn" (107). As Christ later tells Margery, the bishop's reluctance and lack of confidence originate from a dread of "the schamys of the world" (108); he relies on the "cownsel of hys clerkys" for his initial judgment and seeks permission from the Archbishop of Canterbury before he makes another move. In other words, he acts according to the rules of the established order, without jumping to believe the revelatory claims of a woman he has seen for the first time in his life. Although Margery tells him that she speaks in Christ's stead, and that "yf ye clothyng me in erth, owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst schal clothyng yow in hevyn" (106), that is not effective enough to persuade him to action. The slow and tedious process of social persuasion is unavoidable, regardless of the stability of her divinely sanctioned identity.

Between Margery and Christ's divine speech, of course, all is well. The spiritual, the linguistic, and the real merge in Christ's speech, the mystery of the Word taking on the power of *fiat*, as in the Creation. For the divine, the linguistic not only functions as a vessel for *conveying* the spiritual—letting the world know about values that are accumulated in transcendental realms—but is actually an investing of reality *through* language, the words comprising the thing. Saying is equal to creating the value. In Margery's verbalized discourse with Christ,<sup>17</sup> the “wonderful spechys and dalyawns which our Lord spak and dallied to hyr” (44) form the equivalent of actual worlds.

Along with Margery's re-enactive “visions” of participation in various scenes of Christ's life and passion, the greatest part of her “speche and dalyawncce” with God (378) is made up of promises for the future, oaths, declarations of love, and commands. The rhetoric of God's speech is a collection of *performative utterances*, where words take on the power of making a thing happen. For example, the performative utterance *par excellence*, the marriage vow, is rehearsed in full by the Godhead, and the marriage “actually” takes place, with all manner of saintly guests:

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<sup>17</sup> Lawton notes that Margery “avoids the unforced doctrinal error of ‘herynge actuali,’ but retains the link with bodily senses,” going on to give the example of St. Teresa, who has written that “divine locutions ‘fall upon the inner ear with the authenticity of actual speech’” (103). Although Margery and Christ talk in “thowt,” their medium of communication is close to “actual” language. Christ assures Margery that “every good thowt” she has in her soul is the “speche of God” (*Book* 366); he sometimes repeats Margery's own “thoughts” back to her through the formulation “thu seyst” (364). Such are my grounds for characterizing Margery's discourse with Christ as verbal speech.

And than the Fadyr toke hir be the hand in hir sowle befor the Sone and the Holy Gost, and the Modyr of Jhesu, and alle the xii apostelys, and Seynt Kateryn and Seynt Margarete and many other seyntyngs and holy virgynes, wyth gret multitude of awngelys, seying to hir sowle: “I take the, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so that thu be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do. . . . And therto I make the suyrte.” (191-92)

Through this process Margery *becomes* the bride of God, not only of the “Secunde Persone, Crist Jhesu” but also of the holy “Fadyr” (191), and is justified in communing closely with all aspects of divinity in settings as intimate as her own bed.

What is uttered by God “reveals” not so much general theological truth as Margery’s spiritual destiny, which gains shape, utterance by utterance, as Christ speaks them. That is to say, God’s speech is the very process of Margery’s becoming. The moment Christ voices his commands, promises, or other such speech acts, they are transferred to and *realized* in Margery’s spiritual life. From the redefinitions of Margery’s status to the small details behind her expressions of piety, Christ’s speech is incorporated into Margery’s “maner of levyng” (*Book* 110) by the power of the performative utterance. The tentative link between the verbal and the real, the godly speech and what it denotes, is traversed only by Margery’s existence, the new Margery being created in discourse with Christ.

God's words are full truths when expressed by God, of course, but are still technically "all words." Margery interacts with Christ under the influence of many "as-yyfs," things that are taken to exist because they are thought, imagined, and expressed. The ontology of Margery's discourse with Christ is made up of items that operate in the subjunctive mood. This impacts her spiritual economy, since now Margery's spiritual capital extends way beyond the material. In Margery's characteristic spiritual economy, thoughts, desires, and intentions create the same effect as the deed—effects which will be added up for later in the heavenly ledger to be cashed in the afterlife. When in her desire for holy martyrdom Margery "ymagyned in hirself what deth sche mygth deyn for Crystys sake" (98), Christ appears in her mind to thank her that she "woldyst suffer deth for my lofe" and promises that "as oftyen as thou *thynkest* so, thou schalt have the same mede in hevyn as thou thu suffredyst the same deth" (98; emphasis added). Not only is she spared a materially painful death, but she is also given an endless fount of blessing which she can activate with just her imagination.

The same holds for Margery's endearingly specific daydreams of having "many chirchys ful of nobelys" to give in God's name, of having "good anow" to make "many abbeys for [God's] lofe," filling them with religious and paying each a hundred pounds a year, and of granting "xx pownde be yer" to repentant sinners (364-65). In this passage, God assures Margery twice: "I behote [i.e., promise] the thu schalt have the same mede and reward in hevyn for this good willys and thes good desyrys, as yyf thu



haddist don hem in dede” (365);<sup>18</sup> “for alle thes good willys and desyrys thu schalt han ful hy mede and rewarde in hevyn” (366). Not only does she participate in the spiritual “market,” but she is herself a producer of endless amounts of spiritual capital. Wills and intentions—exchangeable with deeds, or at least with the spiritual rewards accorded to the actual deed—are worked into this discourse through language, or by being translated into language.

Language thus comes to create things out of thin air, to simulate the flow of tens and hundreds of pounds, to enact a martyr’s death. The word has the power to become something; these things, in turn, exist only by and in being said. Although Margery starts off with tokens that could be easily checked for their existence—for example, her hidden penitential haircloth *could* be materially displayed if she needed to do so—many are assumed into the spiritual discourse and disappear from material reality. After ordering Margery to “boldly *clepe* [i.e., call] me Jhesus, thi love, for I am . . . and schal be thi love,” Christ tells her to “do away” with the haircloth, replacing it with the announcement of “an hayr *in thin bert* that schal lyke me mych bettyr than alle the hayres in the world” (71; emphases added). In the same breath, Margery is told to leave off her “byddyng of many bedys” and to replace the exercise with thinking in her mind. The source of Margery’s

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<sup>18</sup> This assurance is a clever twist on the biblical trope: “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (*King James Bible*, Matthew 25:40). The scenario of heavenly reward for a good deed towards man, not Christ, looks similar at first glance, but for Margery there is no need even to actually *do* it.

spiritual capital becomes that of speaking to Christ “be thowt” (73), and her major spiritual exercise is with language in her head, calling Christ by name and having conversations with him—the contents of which are witnessed by this book—instead of acting, doing, or having materially (73).

Margery gains not only capital but new roles and identities within her spiritual discourse through Christ’s realizing speech, the power of which she eventually shares. In her interior “dalliance” with Christ, Margery is furnished with a host of new spiritual roles with which to identify herself: mother, daughter, reinstated virgin, martyr, et cetera. According to what Christ tells her, she is a virgin in her soul; although she is still in the bond of marriage, her present state does not hinder her from having a virgin’s heavenly meed. This spiritual status is a verbal construct, formed out of Christ’s promising announcement that “for-as-mech as thou art a mayden *in thi soule* . . . so shalt thou dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes” (138; emphasis added). It depends entirely on the words of Christ, and on a spiritual realization that immediately affects Margery’s status, although it cannot be manifest outside of language before she reaches heaven.

As God’s assurance itself is the creation of truth, the repetition of God’s words has the effect of bolstering that truth. Repetition is valuable in the context of Margery’s discourse with Christ because it makes for the accumulation and continuation of the effects achieved simply by *saying*. Again, “mor” is better. Whenever Margery becomes weak in her faith, Christ repeats the message of forgiveness and salvation, as one can gather

from their meditational discourse. God even exclaims in some exasperation: “A, dowtyr, how *oflyntymes* have I teld the that thy synnes arn foryove the and that we ben onyd togedyr wythowtyn ende?” (135; emphasis added). Christ also says, “I come to the and make the sekyr of my lofe, and telle the wyth myn owyn mowth that thou art as sekyr of my lofe as God is God, and that nothyng is so sekyr to the in erthe that thou maist se wyth thi bodily eye” (382). Saying is making “sekyr.” Into his discourse with Margery, Christ sometimes brings other witnesses—“I take wytnesse of my blissyd modyr, and of alle the awngelys in hevyn, and of alle the seyntyngs in hevyn”—who then personally speak to her to confirm the “sekyr tydyngys” of Christ’s love (134). In fact, doubt is what propels Christ to work so hard to reaffirm his relationship with her. Although the advice of holy advisors such as Julian of Norwich is to “stedfastlych belevyn” since “he that is evyrmor dowtyng is lyke to the flood of the see . . . and that man is not lyche to receyven the yfytys of God” (121), in Margery’s case even her doubting becomes occasions for continued assurance of God’s gifts.

When Christ himself speaks, his utterances regarding Margery are inherently felicitous<sup>19</sup> and have the spiritual authority to produce the appropriate effect. Still, the mechanism of God’s speech does not refer to a separately existing truth *about* Margery, but refers only to its own saying, the reality constituted simply by being said. If this private discourse is to be opened up and *revealed* to a greater audience, we encounter a conceptual

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<sup>19</sup> See Austin’s Lectures II-IV for a full discussion of felicity and infelicity in the performative utterance.

puzzle. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in a philosophical investigation of what it means for God to speak, contends that not all kinds of speaking can be called “revealing.” A spoken statement in the performative, such as Christ would make to Margery, “does not itself consist of revealing something—does not itself consist of making the unknown known” (Wolterstorff 19). According to J. L. Austin, the performative utterance does not refer to something that is “true” nor “false” outside of itself, as it is not a simple report but a creation of effect. Thus what Margery can reveal about her discourse with the divine is not a separately existing content to which it refers, but only that she has been promised such-and-such by the most faithful of promise-makers, or that she has been commanded to do such-and-such by the least refusable of command-givers. This is the very “revelacyon” she must eventually present to her audience.

In the space of this world, in the absence of others to speak for her—no other can hold witness to her personal experience—the baton passes to her. She must risk speaking out for herself, risk the employment of obviously verbal forms of social self-construction. In her formulation of virginity, Sarah Salih suggests that “virginity *as it is known on earth* can only aspire to fixity . . . if it has a true essence, then process, repetition and contestation are it” (241; emphasis added). Whatever virginity may be in the heavenly sense, it is always *verbally* in the making in terms of being presented to this world’s society, as are the other values and identities to which Margery must hold witness. The contact between God and Margery, as Diana R. Uhlman observes, “is not *interpreted* as language, but *is* language”

(59). Margery's own speech, unlike God's *fiat*, is much less powerful because she is not initially accepted to have that power of divine realization in her social environment, though Christ tells her that "I am in the, and thow in me . . . thei that heryn the, thei heryn the voys of God" (85). In order to have her speech accepted by her community, therefore, Margery must find ways to build trustworthiness for her words through sometimes complicated maneuvers. The recognition, exchange or transposition of values is made possible solely by speech, and Margery's words are the only medium through which this can be carried out. Margery does enjoy a novel "awareness of the near-infinite possibilities of self-making" (Salih 180), but along with this freedom comes new demands for self-expression.

A method by which the power of Christ's speech can find its way into Margery's world is through a demonstration of her "superior knowledge of events" (Staley 73), or in other words, testing her prophecies for truth. Her spiritual experiences are called "revelacyons" or "felyngys," which sometimes refers to specifically prophetic insights, though generally used for her discourse with Christ as a whole—the entire treatise is in fact "a booke of hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons" (46). The two words are sometimes combined into longer expressions, such as "felt be revelacyon" and "revelacyons this creatur had in felyng" (*Book* 139, 140). Margery is occasionally "mevyd in hir spiryt" to foretell things without being prompted by others (143-44); several times in the text, however, this power of prophecy is called upon by her supporter-priests as a truth-test, to show that she really communes with God. Margery is asked to gain an insight

from God, and then everyone—including the uneasy Margery herself—waits to see if things will indeed come to pass as her “felyngys” have told. By speaking, and then waiting to be proved “in experience,” she creates the basis to be considered one whose words have the spiritual value of holy truth.

Margery’s prophecies usually involve predictions of plausible, small-scale phenomena to come in the near or far future. In Chapter 24 of the *Book*, we see how the priest who later becomes Margery’s scribe endeavors to test her:

For to prevyn this creaturys felyngys, many tymes and dyvers tymes he askyd hir qwestyons and demawndys of thyngys that wer for to komyn—unsekyr and uncerteyn as that tyme to any creatur what schuld be the ende—preyng hir, thei sche wer loth and not wylly to do swech thyngys, for to prey to God therfor and wetyn, whan owyr Lord wold visiten hir wyth devocyon, what schuld be the ende, and trewly wythowtyn any feynyng tellyn hym how sche felt. (141)

Conveniently, the preceding chapter happens to be a catalogue of Margery’s successful prophecies, so that one can easily guess the nature of the priest’s requests. Margery has “felyngys . . . bothe of levyng and of deying, of summe to be savyd, of summe to be dammyd” (141); she is privy to the future deaths or recoveries of sick people.

Some of them, however, are of a different type. In Chapter 23, for instance, a troubled vicar seeks her out to ask whether or not he should

keep “hys cure and hys benefyce,” because he is not sure if he is any good among his parishioners (138). Margery prays on the matter and delivers God’s “message,” which is that he should keep it, work hard, and sometimes recruit others to teach in his stead, to make up for anything that might be lacking in himself. God adds that, if he thus does his best, the vicar’s heavenly “mede” is assured regardless of the results on his parishioners’ spiritual health. Unlike other prophecies that follow in the chapter, each wrapped up with affirmative concluding statements such as “And so it befel as sche felt be revelacyon” and “And so it was in trewth” (139, 140), this particular promise of God’s depends on the realization of a value that cannot “proven” or demonstrated in any earthly sense. Some of her prophecies are thus unverifiable, as they will only be realized in the spiritual realm. The element of wait-and-see exists in every prophecy, though in varied doses, and the *Book* itself advises a careful credence: “it is not expedient to yevyn redily credens to every steryng, but sadly abydyn and prevyn yf thei be sent of God” (383-84).

The abundance of already-proven successful prophecies that follows creates a sense of virtual truth even for the unverifiable ones. A closer look at another specific prophecy gives some clues as to how proof by prophecy works. The case of a dead woman whose soul is said to be in purgatory involves a vision ultimately unverifiable to humans, and thus may be regarded as an example of a humanly unverifiable prophetic statement. However, the revelation escapes endless deferral by being coupled with a prediction of her husband’s death: “the sowle of this cors is in purgatory,

and he that was hir husbond is now in good hele, and yet he schal ben ded in schort tyme. And so *it* befel as sche felt be revelacyon” (139; emphasis added). The realization of the latter part of this prophecy, easily verified, neatly incorporates the former statement into “truth” as well. In this manner, the accumulation and juxtaposition of “successful” short-term prophecies count toward bolstering the community’s belief in Margery’s prophetic speech in general, including the long-term, humanly unverifiable parts.

Some parts of prophecy must thus inevitably be taken *on faith*, not by a strict alignment with fact but through an acknowledgment of the power and trustworthiness of what has been said and who has said it. The community’s assessment of that power is the criterion for allowing (or not allowing) the prophetic statement into the realm of accepted truth. (Of course, this system is rather circular in that Margery’s prophecies were meant to play the role of bolstering that very power. Still, this is how it works.) Here we can return to the idea of spiritual economy; the accumulated number of valid prophecies *creates* the reputation through which other allegations are accepted and raises the expected probability of the others being right. As the community’s belief rises, Margery’s utterances gain more and more power to *affect the real*, making things exist through saying. In cases where a collective verification is not feasible, the pending truth is kept afloat in the interval between the initial utterance and the realization—an interval that takes up all of human time—through being repeatedly spoken. Verbal repetition is the closest equivalent to



actualization. As in the example of Christ's promise of a virgin's heavenly reward or of constant companionship, the prophecy or promise can never be materialized but always stays a verbal construction; repeating it and making it appear again and again in language gives it the approximated value of truth. Not yet treatable as *fact*, spiritual truths come into circulation by, and are given life by, being asserted, contested, and yet still reasserted in language.

Due to the character of her interactions with God, Margery herself becomes the message and the miracle, and the articulation of her own self is in itself the witnessing of God's holy work, the proof of God in action. Each time she repeats her spiritual experience or spiritual knowledge, she thus reasserts that self. Other mystics can assert themselves as *channels* of God's speech, but for Margery the individual comes in one package with the holy experience. The new Margery exists only as the very effect of her discourse with God, and the publicizing of this discourse plays the double role of speaking of God and building herself on earth. How she fulfills both of these roles in communicating her experience to her society, amid all the difficulties that her environment poses, will be the subject of the following chapter.

### 3. Confession and Self-Narrative

Margery's mystical experience is not only a linguistic construct, but something that happens simultaneously as it is being articulated and revealed, that constantly redefines her own self and lifestyle. This collapsing of the categories of identity, experience, language, and revelation is well exemplified in Lynn Staley's comment on Margery's encounters with priests: "Margery *shows herself*, which is to say, her *life*, to a priest, who must choose to believe or disbelieve the *text* she presents for his verification" (109; emphases added). The juxtaposition of "showing," "self," "life," and "text" occurs unproblematically in Staley's analysis, which immediately moves its focus to Margery's efforts for self-interpretation. To me, this swift statement is symptomatic of Margery's identity-building process, which has taken effect on Staley as well as on Margery's contemporaries. If Margery herself may be considered "a text upon which God has inscribed words" (Staley 195), her discourse with God in turn becomes the text into which she inserts and melds her life experience.

Margery brings together in one integrated narrative her special discourse with God and the story of her own life from beginning to end, so that in telling one she always tells the other as well. What Margery presents as a revelation of God's grace thus becomes her autobiography. A narration of Christ's wonders and marvels soon turns into a narrative of the life of Margery Kempe. The *Book's* descriptions of Margery's conversations with clerics gradually progress in this direction, from Margery's showing of

God's grace, her holy "secretys" and her "maner of levyng" to her faithful recounting of *her own* life piece by piece, "hire lyfe fro the begynnyng unto that owyr as ny as sche mygth in confessyon" (154). As she encounters different members of the clergy, she repeatedly shows "al hir lyfe, as ner as sche cowde, fro hir yong age, bothe hir synnes, hyr labowrys, hir vexacyons, hir contemplacyons, and also hir revelacyons and swech grace as God wrowt in hir thorw hys mercy" (316). As a direct result, priests come to trust "ryth wel that God wrowt ryth gret grace in hir" (316). Talking incessantly about herself is thus fully justified, as it is always inseparable from the spreading of a holy cause. So Christ says to her, "I am in the, and thow in me. And thei that heryn the, thei heryn the voys of God" (85).

It is through this process of self-narration that Margery's public identity is made, tested, and authorized. When she prays, "A, my derworthy Lord, this *lyfe* schuldist thu *schenyn* to religiows men and to preistys," Margery suggests that her holy way of living is so high as to befit only the clergy, not a laywoman like her (302; emphasis added). She sounds humble, but is in fact raising her own spiritual status to equal (or even surpass) that of the established religious men. She is also making her entire "lyfe" into a holy revelation, the showing of which is not an option but an obligation, as God makes clear: "I wil not han my grace hyd that I geve the. . . I [schal] spredyn it abrood and makyn it knowyn to alle the worlde" (273). Margery fulfills God's will by spreading the account of his grace within her community and elsewhere.

It is with God's full support that Margery publicizes her life, but her self-narration becomes possible only as long as it is recognized as the telling of *spiritual* experience. As I have discussed earlier, when she reports her glimpses of heaven—"It is ful mery in hevyn!" (*Book* 62)—her speech is often derided and disregarded, quickly deprived of the time and space in which to continue. Although her mystical authorization comes directly from above, independently of her community and its religious institutions, she must find ways to promote her identity as a mystic in her immediate surroundings so that she can be recognized as one. As Michel de Certeau points out, mystics need to prove that they are both different and the same:

The qualification that is pertinent from a mystic point of view is not one derived from an institutional position. . . . Although they [i.e., mystic texts] put themselves in a *different* position from that of the Church instruction *ex cathedra*, they claim nonetheless to bear witness to the *same* God. They have to prove, at one and the same time, that they speak from a *different* place (as "mystics") and that they draw on the *same* inspiration (as "Christians"). Though not emanating from the authorities, they must manifest the same Spirit as the authorities do. (180-81)

As Margery's mysticism is "a discourse that is in principle sustained solely by the 'experience' of its speaker" and she herself only a laywoman without legitimizing power (de Certeau 180), she must present herself as acceptable—or at least tolerable—to institutional authority in order to take up a *social* position that agrees with her divinely promised *spiritual* position.

Margery's practical social concerns are well illustrated by the situations in which she leans on church authorities for permission and protection. For example, she asks Archbishop Arundel for written permission to make weekly confession to a priest of her choice (*Book* 110), and his successor for a letter that allows her even more liberty of confession and sacraments. She asks the Archbishop of York for a letter discharging her of all accusations of heresy (267). By asking members of the clergy to authorize her mystical "experience," she wants to have her inner discourse sanctioned as "the werke of the Holy Gost." She is doubly charged, from inside and out, "to obey hem [spiritual revelations] and receyve hem whan God wold yeve hem and no dowl han" (154). Thus Margery at once recognizes and exploits the authority of the clergy.

Margery's relationship with the religious institution takes many turns. During her earlier, divinely unvisited years, she undertakes all common responsibilities of the lay Christian with one exception: she refuses to confess one secret sin. Having fallen sick after giving birth to her first child, Margery fears for her life and calls for a confessor in order to relieve herself of the sin "whечh sche had nevyr schewyd beforн that tyme in alle hyr lyfe" (*Book* 52). Here we meet an especially guarded and obstinate Margery. Although she meant to confess, she abruptly closes her mouth when the priest cuts her off:

And whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing whечh  
sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye  
and gan scharply to undyrnemyn hir, er than sche had fully seyde

hir entent, and so sche *wold no mor seyn* for nowt he mygth do.  
(53-54; emphasis added)

Her silence is followed by a period of self-abusive madness. Called to alleviate her troubles, her “gostly fadyr” fails to see into her or to help her in her time of need (52). Instead of absolving her sin, he throws her into despair through his ill-timed intervention. Margery’s symptoms are commonly misread as some kind of postpartum psychosis (e.g. Fries 219), but it is in fact a mental sickness triggered by the failings of the institutional church and clergy. As she herself describes, she is stuck between the “dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde, and hys [i.e., the confessor’s] scharp reprevyng on that other syde” (54)—that is, between a need to confess and an unwillingness to succumb to the tyrannizing of the institution.

The experience of an aborted confession disillusiones Margery as to the role of the clergy as spiritual guides in her life. Margery’s mystical experience is triggered in part by this disappointment. This period of madness is the first occasion on which Margery comes in touch with the supernatural; first the devil takes hold of her soul, and then Christ appears to her, starting off the holy encounters that she will enjoy for the rest of her life. Margery no longer needs a mediating authority to communicate with God. A fundamental part of Margery’s mysticism, in fact, involves liberating herself from the church’s institutional powers. The companionship offered by God allows her to sidestep the existing hierarchy in her relationship with the divine.

Margery's religion is thus uninstitutional, if not anti-institutional. She no longer needs the clergy and the Church for her *spiritual* health, as other lay people do. Functions such as the hearing of sermons and making confession for sins are all available within Margery's mind, since Christ has already assured her of salvation and engages her directly in holy speech. He also serves as the executor of grace in her stead, so even interactions with fellow Christians, in delivering acts of mercy, can technically be maintained through proxy. A parallel to Margery's spiritual self-sufficiency can be found in the *English Wycliffite Sermons*: "men be sauyd for þowtis *in þer herte*, al 3if þei do not owtward meritorie werkys" (qtd. in Little 46; emphasis added). Similarly, Margery's God assures his beloved that "thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe" and promises her "mor meryte in hevyn for o yer of thynkyng in thi mende than for an hundryd yer of preyng wyth thi mowth" (*Book* 195).

Margery's final pilgrimage is an example of the empowerment brought by such liberation. Although she has leave from her confessor to go only as far as Ipswich, she eventually crosses the sea to Germany at God's bidding. When she protests by saying, "I have no leve of my gostly fadyr. . . . I may not do thus wythowtyn hys wil and hys consentyng," God replies, "I am abovyn thy gostly fadyr, and I schal excusyn the" (*Book* 393). Staley argues that "what Margery moves toward is a reliance on Christ that finally obviates the need for obedience to any representative of the earthly priesthood" (113). For her, Margery thus becomes "a fully empowered visionary and writer, a person whose power comes solely from her

relationship to Christ” (113).

A power recognized by Christ, however, is not automatically accepted as such by the world: the power to maneuver in it must be earned separately. Despite the autonomy suggested by her bold on-the-spot decision, Margery must ingratiate herself again with her confessor when she returns to her community, in which she has been warned she would “fyndyn but lityl frenschep” (420). This episode of the final pilgrimage does highlight Margery’s independence, but more acutely the support she has to earn in her worldly community. The “good love of hym [i.e., her confessor] and of other frendys” is something that she cannot afford to lose (421), not necessarily for her spiritual health but for her social existence. She must negotiate with less-than-divine authorities, mostly religious but sometimes secular as well, to avoid being burned at the stake, to put it most bluntly, and to fulfill the mission of serving as a living witness of God’s grace to other Christians in the world. Her “mowth,” though unnecessary for her “meryte in hevyn,” must be free to spread the word for the good of others who might hear.

Throughout her life, Margery fights to defend her orthodoxy under the shadows of heresy. She takes pains to demonstrate that her views on the Church and its sacraments are entirely orthodox. As divulged through the numerous tests and trials she goes through, Margery’s faith is hard to find fault with.<sup>20</sup> Her numerous pilgrimages, respect for images, acceptance of

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<sup>20</sup> An extensive discussion of Margery’s trials and the charges of heresy, given in relation with notable events in the history of Lollardy, can be found in Arnold’s essay.



transubstantiation, belief in purgatory, and even the receiving of money in exchange for her prayers show that she is in fact far from being a Lollard.<sup>21</sup> As Anne Hudson nicely summarizes, “questioning on the articles of the faith never produced any condemnation; Repingdon, Peverell of Worcester, Arundel, and, with perhaps some reservations, Bowet of York were all convinced of her doctrinal rectitude” (*Reformation* 435).

The relationship she maintains with members of the clergy gets her out of dangerous situations and helps her solicit a favorable reputation. She says that God steadily “mad sum men to lovyng hir and supportyn hir,” giving a list of those in the city of York that she considers “hir good frendys of the spirituale” (*Book* 244). One of these friends, a “doctowr of divynyte” (244), agrees to accompany her “on hir party” to a trial, where she benefits from the “gret favowr” he has among the people (245). The Archbishop of York, once a doubter, speaks for her when she is brought to him a second time:

[T]he Erchebischof seyde, alle that wer present heryng: “Serys, I had this woman befor me at Cowode, and ther I wyth my clerkys examynd hir in hir feyth and fond no defawte in hir.

Forthermor, serys, I have sithyn that tyme spokyn wyth good

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For a general overview of possible links between Margery and Lollardy, including geographical and personal influences, see McAvoy 179-85.

<sup>21</sup> A concise summary of contemporary Lollard views, including opposition to pilgrimage, auricular confession, and the doctrine of transubstantiation, can be found in “The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards” (Cronin 295-304).

men which holdyn hir a parfyte woman and a good woman.”

(261-62)

He still does not quite know what to do with her, but when Margery leaves him for the last time, it is with his blessing and a letter with his seal on it that grants her “al hir desyr” (267). Such aid from religious authorities suggests that some of Margery’s battles for social survival can be fought out by proxy between the clergy, rather than for herself all alone. As her reputation grows and she gathers more enemies, she also finds new supporters who in turn provide more positive recognition, evening out slander and support into a balance. Margery does not challenge the institution itself, although she has no mind to have it stand between Christ and herself. Rather, she uses the existing channels of interaction with the clergy as tools for her own authorization.

The sacrament of choice for this process is the rite of confession. Confession brings about Margery’s initial disengagement with the clergy, but (or perhaps because of it) she appropriates it for a discursive manifestation of the self. Margery’s attitude towards confession undergoes a great change after her initial mystic experiences. The greatest difference is found in her attitude to her former secret: “sche was schrevyn sumtyme twyes or thryes on the day, and in specyal of that synne which sche so long had conselyd and curyd, as it is wretyn in the gynnyng of the boke” (63-64). The secret that has weighed so heavily on Margery’s soul is now obviously speakable, and her multiple confessions of the same sin underscore not its seriousness but her newfound willingness to tell it repeatedly. Confession is

no longer a frightening but inescapable ritual for the desperate dying soul, but a relief that one can seek daily, like meals. She is becoming braver and more comfortable in revealing herself. Margery's confession is not tied down by church ritual; instead of confessing once a year as required, she devises a schedule of her own, pumping up the cycle at will and visiting not only her assigned parish priests but also other confessors of her choice (110). The church no longer makes Margery confess in obligation and guilt; rather, she is now the one seeking out a confessorial audience.

A few years hence, as she kneels praying in church, Christ "ravysche[s] hir spyryt" and gives the first of his long, reassuring monologues:

I am comyn to the, Jhesu Cryst, that deyde on the crosse  
suffering byttyr peynes and passyons for the. I, the same God,  
foryefe the thi synnes to the utterest poynt. And thow schalt  
nevyr com in helle ne in purgatorye, but whan thow schalt  
passyn owt of this world, wythin the twynkelyng of an eye, thow  
schalt have the blysse of hevyn, for I am the same God that  
have browt thi synnes to thi mend and mad the to be schreve  
thereof. And I grawnt the contrysyon into thi lyves ende. (71)

Here Christ effectively rids Margery of the need for shrift by a human confessor, promising her unconditional forgiveness, endless contrition, and a free ticket to heaven. Despite this newfound freedom, Margery is ordered by Christ to visit the Dominican anchorite who will be her future confessor and "principal gostly fadyr" (123). The anchorite tells Margery that he "schal, wyth the leve of ower Lord Jhesu Cryst, telle yow whethyr thei [i.e.,

Margery's thoughts] ben of the Holy Gost or ellys of yowr enemy the devyl" (74), thus performing the role of verifying her religious experience. He never denies her, taking it "on charge of hys sowle that hir felyngys wer good and sekyr, and that ther was no disseyt in hem" (123). For Margery, the "revelacyon" of God's "prevyneys and . . . counsels" (73) replaces the confession of sins. Through Christ's promise and command, the sacrament of confession is emptied of its former significance and changed into an occasion for Margery to reveal her privilege as a divine messenger, without guilt or fear.

This authorization is effected by, and also effects, her insistent self-narration. Her reputation among the clergy fluctuates over time, even if they have repeatedly "proven" God's special grace in her. Her anchorite-confessor, the most consistently supportive of her religious associates, tells her after her trip to London that he has heard "mych evyl langage" about her and been advised to abandon her. He says he answered thus for her: "Yyf ye [i.e., Margery] wer in the same plyte that ye wer whan we partyd asundyr, I durst wel say ye wer a good woman, a love of God, and hyly inspyred wyth the Holy Gost" (112). When Margery complains that another confessor refuses to believe in her conversion, the anchorite explains, "it is no wondyr, dowtyr, yf he kan nowt belevyn in yowr felyngys so sone. He knowyth wel ye han ben a synful woman, and therfor he wenyth that God wold not ben homly wyth yow in so schort tyme" (125). Confessors play the role of keeping track of their confessants' spiritual trajectories and adjusting their attitudes towards them accordingly. Instead of relying solely

on their observation and judgment, Margery feeds them a narrative of her own making and keeps doing so to maintain herself and her lifestyle.

Margery does not tell everyone of her special relationship with Christ. When God is speaking to Margery, he says “I *telle* the trewly” (367; emphasis added), but his acts of telling are later referred to as “showings.”<sup>22</sup> When she repeats to others what God has *told* her (which involves the *telling* of her life), she also refers to it as showing. In principle, Margery “can not *tellyn* the gret grace and goodnes” that she feels from God (367; emphasis added), but she can *show* the revelations “swech as wer schewyd to hir” (74). When she explains herself to curious laypeople, she only tells that she is touched by the great grace of God—a general statement that any Christian could make. It is only to members of the clergy that Margery reveals her intimate relationship and direct discourse with God. She *tells* laypeople of her life, she *tells* them tales, but she *shows* revelations to confessors and clergy in serious, private one-on-one settings “be the maner of confessyon” (236). When the verb *show* is used for Margery’s speech, it is almost exclusively in private communication with a member of the clergy, typically coupled with an actual confession of sins. In an exceptional scene, she shows her life “in parcel” to one curious young man later in life (419), although a full version of such showing is always saved for holy men. She once shows her life to her converted son, who says he is unworthy to hear

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<sup>22</sup> According to Windeatt’s gloss, to *schew* means to “reveal to” in this text (74n); the OED provides the same usage from the late Middle Ages in the context of confession (22a).

it (389); this exceptional case can be explained by the possibility that he may be her initial scribe.

Margery exploits the occasion of confession to widen the audience for her showings as she extends its contents beyond sin and repentance to include the personal conversion narrative and the holy grace embedded in her life.<sup>23</sup> Any conversation in a confessional setting with religious authorities, whether priests, bishops, masters of divinity, or those simply called “confessowrs,” soon turns into an occasion for showing. Although Margery depends on confession for a “space to speak,” she transforms its material and meaning. The text never relates the content of confessions in their usual sense, namely her sins; if they are mentioned, it is as part of her life narrative. The recounting of God’s special grace, and thus Margery’s divinely inspired self-narration, quickly takes their place. When Margery finds herself a German-speaking confessor in Rome after being abandoned by her countrymen, she makes a characteristic juxtaposition:

Than was sche *confessyd* to this preste of alle hir synnes, as ner as  
hir mende wold servyn hir, fro hir childhode unto that owre,  
and receyved hir penawns ful joyfully. And sithyn sche *schenyd*  
hym the secret thyngys of revelacyonys and of hey

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<sup>23</sup> A letter obtained from the Archbishop of Canterbury commands priests to “heryn hir confessyon and ministryn to hir the sacrament as oftyn as [they] ben requiryd” (*Book* 274), and even before she receives such permission Margery actively employs her mobility to seek out as many members of the clergy as possible, have them sit down, and “show” them her story.

contemplacyons, and how sche had swech mend in hys Passyon,  
and so gret compassyon whan God wolde yeve it, that sche fel  
down therwyth and myth not beryn it. (185-86; emphasis added)

There is a relay of showing—first from God to Margery, then from Margery to her elected audience. Margery recounts the countless “holy thowtys, holy spechys, and the hy revelacyons which owr Lord schewyd unto hir” (281). Thus Margery shows the Bishop of Lincoln “hyr medytacyons, and hy contemplacyons, and other secret thyngys bothe of qwyk and of ded *as owyr Lord schenyd to hir soule*” (105; emphasis added).

The most detailed description of this process is found in Chapter 17. Ordered by God to “schew hym [i.e., the vicar of St. Stephens] thy prevytes and myn cownselys swech as I schewe the,” Margery travels to Norwich and announces beforehand that she wishes to “speke wyth hym . . . in the lofe of God” (113-14). The vicar laughs her off, asking “what coud a woman ocupyn an owyr er tweyn owyrs in the lofe of owyr Lord?” (114). Margery begins with showing “all the wordys which God had revelyd to hyr in hyr soule” and immediately moves on to the following account of her life, here quoted lengthily for the effect of excruciating detail:

Sythen sche schewyd hym al hyr maner of levynng fro hyr chylhdhod as ny as it wolde come to hir mende—how unkynd sche had ben ageyn owyr Lord Jhesu Crist, how prowde and veyne sche had ben in hir aport, how obstynat ageyns the lawes of God, and how envyows ageyn hir evyn-Cristen; sythen, whan it plesyd owyr Lord Crist Jhesu, how sche was chastysed wyth

many tribulacyons and horrybyl temptacyons, and aftyrward  
how sche was fed and comforyd wyth holy medytacyons and  
specyal in the mende of owyr Lordys Passyon. (114)

The recapitulation goes on like this for the next few paragraphs. The vicar, who is incidentally already “schewyd and prevyd for holy”—a worthy audience—comes to believe through being shown Margery’s “maner of governawns and levynge” that she is “wel lernyd in the lawe of God and indued wyth grace of the Holy Gost” (116-17). Margery’s showing of the love of God is equal to a narration of the turns and twists of her entire life story, which in turn convinces the listener of her holy identity.

The critical point in this process is that Margery claims the power of transparent communication. She maintains that what she shows to these religious is an exact copy of God’s discourse as shown to her. According to Lochrie, Margery finds authority for “her own voice” through “a series of showings of the speech-acts in her soul,” which take “the form of further locutions, even dalliances, with clerics” (106). These showings, when presented as direct, transparent transmissions of God’s discourse, confer on Margery’s speech the authority of holy dalliance, a glimpse of God. In contrast, those “whych had no knowlache of hir maner of governawns, save only be sygth owtforth er ellys be jangelyng of other personys”—in other words, without a direct revelation from her—are recorded as saying “ful evyl of hir” and cause her to have “mech enemyte and mech dysese” (*Book* 123). The chance to be shown Margery’s revelations straight from her own self is a privilege, without which it becomes hard to believe in her.



This transparency comes only by virtue of the confessional situation, which is different from everyday speech in that neither the truth of the spoken nor the sincerity of the speaker is open to doubts. During her heresy trial before the Abbot of Leicester, Margery thus refuses to tell the mayor why she wears white clothes, as he is “not worthy to wetyn it” (236). Instead, she offers to “telyn it to thes worthy clerkys, wyth good wil, be *the maner of confessyon*” (236; emphasis added). By having the clerks speak to the mayor in her stead, substituting her confessors’ will for her own, she invests herself with the very spiritual authority that she forges in her private meditation, now in outwardly recognizable form.

More importantly, by choosing “the maner of confessyon,” Margery attempts to tie her “mowthe” to her “hert” without question. The mayor of Leicester’s main complaint is that “sche menyth not wyth hir hert as sche seyth with hir mowthe” (235). She is familiar with this possible gap, which the mayor suspects, between the true self and its outward, verbal representation. When her priest-scribe is misled by a decent-looking young man who claims to be a priest in hiding, Margery points out that a man may be different from what he looks like or what he says he is: “God knowyth what thei arn in her sowlys!” (143). The young man soon proves false and disappears with the priest’s money. Margery’s recognition that one may lie about one’s “true” identity has implications for her use of language. As Margery is another opaque individual who makes spoken claims about her hidden interior, she herself must find ways to deal with this liability of self-proclamation. She cannot speak like the others, in everyday speech, in

language that may lie or let slip. What she says must be incontestable.

The confession, as it had fallen into regular practice in the early fifteenth century, was a form of speech suitable to her needs.<sup>24</sup> The confessional system of her age depended on the supposition that the penitent's interior could be clearly communicated to, and/or discerned by, the confessor. Though a "faithful manner" was required of the penitents, the ability to bring forth a true and full confession lay mostly with the priest:

[T]he injunction that he enquire diligently into the contingencies of person, intent and action, the precise circumstances of both sinner and sin, represent the rhetorical empowerment of the priest, his establishment of authority by mastering and controlling all facets of the confessional encounter . . . as examiner of the penitent's doctrinal knowledge and self-knowledge. (Woods and Copeland 392-93)

The lay penitent's role (and the possible liberties he/she may take) was continually downplayed, while the priesthood's rights to ask, know, and interpret were increasingly strengthened. A Wycliffite sermon derides such

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<sup>24</sup> The famous Twenty-First Decree of the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 ordered annual "shrift of mouth" in the following terms: "Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit, omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno proprio sacerdoti" [All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priests at least once a year] (qtd. in Little 50-51). Tentler notes that this decree "was not the first legal act to require confession to the priest . . . nevertheless it was momentous" (22).

institutional prerogative given to priests in confession, saying that “þi confessour can nouȝt wyte wheþer þou be bound or soyled, but bi supposynge þat he haþ of þi *trewe speche*” (qtd. in Little 49; emphasis added). If the priest could not tell, what would verify the speaking individual’s reliability? Based upon such doubt is the Lollard proclamation that “schrift of mouþe is not nedeful to helpe of soule, but only sorowe of hert dop away euery synne” (Hudson, *Selections* 19).

Unlike the Lollards, who completely deny the institutional nature of confession, Margery appropriates confession as an empowering mode of speech. Margery sees an opportunity in what the Lollards consider a shortcoming. While Margery also works to suspend the interpretive powers of the clergy, unlike them she foregrounds her own will to speak. Hence the rhetoric she uses in dealing with confession: “sche *wold* not schewyn it in confesson”; “sche . . . sent for hir gostly fadyr . . . in ful *wyl* to be schrevyn”; “sche *wold* no mor seyn” (53-54; emphases added). Meanwhile, she retains the claim of transparency, or the association with solid truth, that holds together the existing system of confession. Her interior is still one that “can easily become exterior—revealed, scooped out, or purged—actions that underline the ease with which these interior conditions are translated into a language whose representational power is never questioned” (Little 73). Instead of depending on the clergy’s insight into her speech to smooth her spiritual relationship with God, she uses the form of the confession to render her God-prompted speech into a truth that the clergy must recognize once spoken. The doubts of her contemporaries regarding

confession, when flipped around, support Margery's effort to create her own truth and hold witness to it herself. None can distill the truth out of her save that she speak it through her own mouth.

The truth-rendering power of confession is not limited to the kind unwittingly granted by a convenient institutional oversight. Confession, Michel Foucault argues, is "one of the main rituals we [i.e., Western societies] rely on for the production of truth" (*Sexuality* 58), an occasion on which saying something comes to constitute its existence. As Foucault points out in "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," it is the "verbal act of confession, which . . . makes appear, in a certain sense, by its own mechanics, the truth, the reality of what has happened. The verbal act of confession is the proof, is the manifestation, of truth" (219). In his example of a monk who has stolen bread, the sin becomes manifest not when others realize it, or when the guilty party displays the evidence, but only at the moment of verbalization, when the devilish spirit leaves the monk with "a disgusting smell of sulphur" (219).

Margery's confession manifests neither sin nor shame, but God's blessing and grace in her person. According to Foucault, when confession involves sin, "verbalization as a movement toward God is a renunciation to Satan, and a renunciation to oneself." Hence it follows that "verbalization is a self-sacrifice" ("Hermeneutics" 220). For Margery, in contrast, confession is not about what she must leave behind but about what she must embrace and affirm. Margery reverses the direction of the realizing power of confession, turning it into an opportunity not for negating the self but for

endorsing and reinforcing it in the love of God and in her life narrative. Such an approach to confession is crucial to her mystical self-propagation, in which religious devotion works to confirm her “synguler” identity, instead of erasing it in the name of God.

Margery’s confessors are not only the audience but also the “internal witnesses” of Margery’s self-narration (Ashley 377). Instead of mediating between God and Margery, they mediate between Margery and society. They speak for her cause and in her stead, defend her from enemies, and write letters of approbation that grant her safe passage over rivers and through towns, among other things. They are part of Margery’s efforts to build a social identity and to negotiate a place in the world for herself. The ultimate form of this mediation is achieved when the priest-scribe, her second amanuensis, takes up the role of writing down Margery’s autobiographical text in decent English.

In the *Book’s* Proem and in certain apologetic parts of the text, we see the scribe’s strong belief that the narration of the details of Margery’s life is necessary for the showing of God’s grace. Margery’s synthesis of God’s revelations with her own life narrative is convincing enough to persuade the earliest and most sympathetic reader of her mystical text. The Proem begins as follows:

This lytyl tretys schal tretyn somdeel in parcel of hys [i.e.,  
Christ’s] wonderful werkys, how mercyfully, how benyngly, and  
how charytefully he meved and stered a synful caytyf unto hys

love, wech synful caytyf many yerys was in wyl and in purpose,  
thorw steryng of the Holy Gost, to folwyn oure Savyowr. (41-42)

The text is announced to be about Christ's works, but they turn out to be works which cannot be separated from or narrated without the thoughts and actions of that "synful caytyf." The Proem continues to say that "thys tretys thorw the mercy of Jhesu schal schewen in party the levyng" of the said creature (42). In the middle of the text, the narrator—here presumably the scribe—finds it necessary to stop and comment that "thes be wretyn for to schewyn the homlynes and the goodlynes of owyr merciful Lord Crist Jhesu, and for no commendacyon of the creatur" (141). The very existence of such an excuse suggests that some material in the text does constitute a "commendacyon" of Margery as an individual, not sufficiently hiding away her highly personal narrative behind accounts of the divine. The mixup is inevitable when one considers that the text is indeed meant to play the role of preserving her personal identity, as built up by the effects of divine discourse.

The *Book*, which Margery asked to keep hidden during her lifetime (48), takes the place of the roving and speaking Margery after her death, continuing to *show* her fellow Christians the wonderful works of Christ in Margery's life. At the same time, however, the *Book* serves as a *showing* of the life of Margery Kempe in the wonderful works of her Christ, whose gifts are concentrated upon the very making of her life and person. The nature of Margery's discourse with Christ itself, along with her social needs and personal ambition, dictates that a text about her mystical experience would

also have to be an autobiography. The most direct way to reach God's blessing through this text is to "belevyn that God lovyth" Margery (138). God makes a promise with a far-off expiry date, that whoever "in erth unto the day of dom aske the any bone and belevyth that God lovyth the, he schal have hys bone er ellys a bettyr thyng" (138); again, that "the same pardon . . . is not only grawntyd to the, but also to alle tho that belevyn, and to alle tho that schul belevyn in to the worldys ende, that God lovyth the and schal thankyn God for the" (324). Margery becomes the figure who must be believed in for "ower profyth," if "lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce" in receiving God through her. Like the priest-scribe whose eyes are opened as he begins "trustyng in hire prayers," the text extends to readers the promise that Margery will "purchasyn" us the "grace to reden it" (49), if only we will believe in her narrative, if we will "buy" it. Through her text, Margery lives on; she leaves her private door open to us—a door to the life full of blessings and, yes, tribulations, and most singular by the standards of her age, as well as ours.

## 4. Conclusion

At the end of Margery's final pilgrimage to Germany, she returns to London, where "mech pepil knew hir wel anow" (*Book* 415). Her fame in her home country has become such that she must draw "a kerche befor hir face" in order not to be recognized while wearing the unseemly sackcloth that was the only garment left to her from her tedious continental trip. Despite her caution, some "dissolute personys" correctly guess her identity; "Mar. Kempe of Lynne," her full name, is mentioned here in the text for the first and only time (415). The people, excited by this chance encounter, rehearse in Margery's plain hearing a derogatory tale about her (involving hypocrisy and a taste for fine fish) that has apparently been circulating even more widely than she herself has physically traveled: "the wordys . . . wer rehersed in many a place wher sche was nevyr kyd ne knowyn" (416). Margery walks by as if she has not heard, but soon runs into the tale again in the house of a "worschepful woman," where many guests, "sche unknowyn onto hem and thei unto hir," are having a great feast (416). Margery does not stay silent this time, and asks the gossipers if they had "any knowlach of the persone which schulde a seyde thes wordys" (417). They do not have direct knowledge, but have heard it told that such-and-such a person lives in Lynne.

By this time in her life, Margery is already something of a celebrity. Margery's fame, although negatively tinted in this episode, has reached far beyond her immediate community, and she is well-known enough to have



“sprong into a maner of proverbe” (416). The gossipy tale, not very flattering but indeed the kind of narrative that would travel fast and wide, shows the beginnings of the circulation of Margery’s identity in society. Her reputation is mixed, as still is today; though greeted by some with jeers, in “many placys of London sche hily was cheryd in ovr Lordys name” (416). Through the implicit support of such favorable parties, along with her personal conviction, she gains the courage to reveal who she is to the people who have just been mocking her. “I am *that same persone* to whom thes wordys ben arectyd,” she announces to the gossipers (417; emphasis added), identifying herself as the very person that has been the subject of their discourse. By first verifying their lack of “knowlach,” and then chastising them for saying “wers than ye knowyn,” Margery establishes a privileged position for herself as the key-holder to her own identity, the true knowledge of which she reveals only through carefully controlled processes to those she considers worthy. By then asking for God’s forgiveness in the gossipers’ stead, she puts herself forth as an authority in religious terms, showcasing her charity and her intimacy with the divine. The incorporation of the tale and its openly announced denial into her written narrative permanently establishes her ascendancy, presenting the accusations of hypocrisy as a tribulation overcome rather than a suspicion still haunting . Even while allowing different narratives about her self to co-exist, she is already acting with the confidence of one who knows she has her authoritative self-narrative in her own hands. And for all those who “feithyn and trustyn, er schul feithyn and trustyn” in her till the end of time,

she claims the power to grant, through her special relationship with God,  
“sweche grace as thei desiryng, gostly er bodily, to the profite of her sowlys”  
(428).

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## 국문초록

# 언어와 정체성:

## 마저리 캠프의 자아 만들기 서사

『마저리 캠프 이야기』에서 마저리 캠프의 종교적 정체성과 사회적 정체성은 상호불가분의 관계에 있으며, 그 관계는 오로지 언어를 통해서만 맺어진다. 마저리의 자아 만들기는 그가 자신만의 독특한 영적 경계를 구축한다는 점에서 특징적이다. 마저리의 신앙은 신과의 개인적인 약속, 그의 내밀한 사고뿐 아니라 물질적인 재화와 그의 신앙행위에 대한 사회적 평가까지도 포괄하는 일종의 유사경제 시스템의 지배를 받는다. 이 시스템 안에서 이질적인 요소들은 언어의 힘을 통해 결합되며 사적인 것은 발화됨으로써 비로소 공적인 가치를 지니고 세속적인 인식과 교환의 대상이 된다. 마저리의 자아 만들기는 고해성사와 자기서사, 영적인 의무와 자기선전 사이의 경계를 불식시킨다는 점에서도 특징적이다. 마저리는 말과 진실의 일치를 전제하는 고해의 언어를 전유함으로써 자신의 자전적 서사에 대한 권위를 확보한다. 그 과정에서 그의 신비체험과 삶의 이야기는 사회적으로 공인된 발화형식을 갖추게 된다. 『마저리 캠프 이야기』는 오로지 자기 자신이 ‘되기를’ 열망하면서도 종교적·사회적 요구로부터 완전히 자유로울 수 없었던 어느 중세 여성의 영웅적인 노력에 대한 증언이자 그 결과물이라 할 수 있다.

주요어: 마저리 캠프, 여성 신비주의, 언어, 정체성, 영적 경제, 수행적 발화, 자기서사,  
고해성사

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