

MARGERY'S READING COMMUNITIES: LITERACY AND DEVOTION IN *THE
BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

BY

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Abstract

This paper examines Margery's interaction with literate culture in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. It argues that Margery shows an awareness of the way that Christian knowledge is contained within texts and disseminated to wider audiences. Margery presents herself as a saintly figure, a holy woman with clerical authorization and direct spiritual access to God and Jesus. Through an explanation of key scenes involving Margery's literacy, this paper shows how literacy in late medieval England was a process of negotiation, meaning it was not merely the skill of reading from a written page but a collaborative process. Literacy brings Margery into closer relationship with clerics and has multiple dimensions. Thus Margery shows herself in varying authorial roles, being that of a book owner, an author of her own text, a contemplative listener to a reading priest, and the subject of scorn during a friar's sermon. These shifting roles demonstrate how Margery set herself as the center of textual production.

Introduction

In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery Kempe (c. 1373-c. 1440) narrates her spiritual life through episodes that demonstrate her interactions with aspects of Christian culture, revealing how she practices and expresses her faith. Margery was born in King's Lynn in Norfolk to John Brunham, who was the mayor of Lynn five different times and selected as a parliamentary representative in addition to serving in the Guild of the Trinity and as a Justice of the Peace. Margery married John Kempe in about 1393; shortly thereafter she had her first child and is struck with a type of mental illness until she reports that Christ intervenes and saved her. She starts several short-lived businesses ventures including a brewery and grain mill, but both businesses collapse. In about 1414, Margery travels to Venice and the Holy Land on pilgrimages. She walks upon Mount Calvary and has her first weeping experience, a recognized sign of spiritual grace in her community. Later, she travels to Rome and Santiago de Compostela. Returning to England in 1417, she is imprisoned under suspicion of Lollardy on several occasions until receiving a letter of authorization. In 1420, a famous friar preaches at Lynn and is annoyed with her loud crying at his sermons and thus forbids her from attending. *The Book of Margery Kempe* was written during the period 1436 to 1438. The last record we have of her name is her admission to the Guild of the Trinity at Lynn on May 22nd, 1439.¹

A central theme throughout Margery's *Book* is her engagement with literacy as she desires to learn from devotional texts while authoring her own spiritual autobiography through the hand of two amanuenses, a clear indication that medieval

¹ These central summarizing details are taken from Windeatt's succinct timeline and summary of her work, in addition to my own interpretation: Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Barry Windeatt. New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000.

authorship is a dialogical, collective process.² Margery also yearns to hear the written word of God as represented in devotional texts since this language, whether Latin or English, is divinely inspired and moves her contemplative spirit. The prime issue for Margery is that, although her soul is hungry for the word of God, she cannot herself read well enough to consume the devotional texts circulating throughout England, such as St. Bridget's *Revelations*, Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, the *Stimulus Amoris*, Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* and Nicholas Love's *Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*.³

This paper examines literacy as a feature of Margery's Christian education and sets it within the larger framework of late medieval England, the period from roughly 1360-1450, encompassing the years immediately prior to and after Margery's life. Literacy includes all aspects of Margery's relationship with textual culture and is broadly defined as the dissemination, (re)production, and use of books and manuscripts in Margery's spiritual practices and biographical expressions. My research examines how Margery interacts with texts—both specific, named books and genres such as Books of Hours—and how these interactions shape her religious practices as described in her book. In the Christianity of late medieval England, heterodox and orthodox beliefs and practices are often indistinguishable, meaning that lay people engaged in a dynamic range

² Staley, Lynn. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994. Staley notes that "Kempe's references to scribes and to the process of writing ultimately relate to her emphasis upon the process involved in making a book, a process that, in turn, focuses attention upon the subject of that book, the holy woman," p. 35.

³Chapter 58, p.280. Margery mentions how these specific books are read to her in chapter 58: "He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys thereupon, Seynt Brydys boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other" [He read to her many a good book of high contemplation, and other books, such as the Bible with doctors' commentaries on it, St. Bride's book, Hilton's book, Bonaventura's *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and others similar]. All Middle English references come from Windeatt's edition already cited, while the translations are from: Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. Barry Windeatt. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

of spiritual expression.⁴ Margery's narrative emerges as one important site of evidence for lay people's literacy, which is itself one aspect of lay religious education through which people absorbed essential Christian knowledge. In her narrative, Margery shows the dynamics of practice and belief in the English parish, such as interaction with friars and church images, pilgrimages, and the liturgy. To treat all of these cultural aspects equally is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, the focus here is the literacy of Margery and those episodes where she references books, reading, writing, and preaching.

Margery describes her desire for God's written word as a type of hunger, claiming that God "ne woldyst sendyn me on of hem that myth fulfillyn my sowle wyth thi word and wyth redyng of holy scripture, for alle the clerkys that prechyn may not fulfillyn, for me thynkyth that my sowle is evyr alych hungry...for thi word is mor worthy to me than alle the god in this werld."⁵ For her, God's word is itself powerful, supporting and satisfying her devotional spirit through documents that serve as spiritual guides, offering to Margery devotional understanding as opposed to theological knowledge. Indeed, as a semi-literate lay woman, Margery's access to books and manuscripts was primarily mediated through her clerical relationships. Being an upper-class woman, the daughter of Lynn's highly influential mayor, means that she is not a truly marginal woman. She employs her status to more easily access textual culture, even acquiring her own Book of Hours and paying scribes to copy her dictations. Lay people's interactions with texts were not isolated incidents but rather constant processes which included hearing the recitation

⁴ See Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580*. New Haven ; London :Yale University Press, 2005.

⁵ Windeatt, p. 278: "will not send me one of them who might fill my soul with your word and with reading of Holy Scripture, for all the clerics that preach may not satisfy me, for I think that my soul is always just as hungry...for your word is worth more to me than all the money in this world."

of a book or memorizing hagiographical stories and psalms.⁶ In other words, literacy permeates Margery's world in such a way that lay people interact with literary and textual conventions throughout their lives to varying degrees. Such interactions might include hearing a sermon that reiterates moral values or owning a personal primer even if its contents could not be read by the owner.⁷ In writing her book, Margery contributes the perspective of a wealthy lay woman to the reading audiences of late medieval England; indeed, her book was discovered in the Carthusian priory Mount Grace having been annotated by four different hands, including one using red ink (the Red Ink Annotator) who essentially responds to and corrects her text.⁸

Kempe Studies—From Medieval Manuscript to Modern Scholarship

Margery's manuscript was first discovered in 1934. It was preserved by chance while so many other medieval manuscripts were lost. Scholars have argued about Margery's role in English religious literary culture since Hope Emily Allen first identified and published the *Book* in 1940.⁹ Essential questions scholars explore are how unique were Margery's experiences? what ways did her gender shape or alter her

⁶ See Scott-Stokes, Charity. *Women's Books of Hours in Medieval England: Selected Texts*. Cambridge: The University Press, 2006. Scott-Stokes notes "that the psalms formed the basis of all Offices is not always apparent at first glance when one looks at medieval manuscripts. They were so well known that they were often indicated simply by their incipits, or opening phrases," p. 8.

⁷ Spencer H. Leith. *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1993. Spencer adds that sermons and reading "would permit the layman to memorize a fixed set of words which he could then repeat to others without distorting the information... It is in essence the same pedagogical technique that was practiced by the grammar schools to make sure that pupil's had learned their lesson by making them repeat the master's words after him," p. 41.

⁸ Kerby-Fulton, Kathryn. Maidie Hilmo. Linda Olson. *Opening up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 235.

⁹ Hirsh, John C. "Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960)." *Women Medievalists and the Academy*. Ed. Jane Chance. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. 227-238. Windeatt, p. 1, observes that scholars were aware of the existence of her name prior to this discovery through a seven-page excerpt taken from Wynkyn de Worde's (c. 1501) pamphlet, *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the booke of Margerie kempe of Lynn*. Later, in 1521, Henry Pepwell reprinted several of these excerpts.

religious life? how much of her book was written by her scribe, and how much was her own voice? was she suffering from some type of mental illness that triggered her mystical experiences? does Margery critique her own society in writing her narrative?

Interpretations of Margery's *Book* are themselves contextualized within particular periods of scholarly research. For example, psychoanalysis turned many researchers towards a psychological hermeneutics that read onto Margery modern psychological terms in order to explain her tears and her eccentric personality, often concluding that she was a hysteric. Prior to 1980, many scholars were dismissive of Margery since she was thought to embody the more outlandish aspects of late medieval religion, which was itself seen as a period of the Middle Ages representing a decline before the rebirth of the Renaissance.¹⁰

In a landmark study, published in 1983, Clarissa Atkinson responds to scholarly trends that view Margery as a hysteric and her age as a period of decline and reevaluated Margery without a negative bias. In approaching Margery, Atkinson reconstructs specific aspects of the late medieval world that directly inform contemporary readings of the *Book* to show that it is worthy of critical interpretation. This method shows how Margery's world was not only incredibly complex but also interdependent: gender issues inform and relate to clerical culture which influences meditative practices of the laity and so on in ever intertwining domains of discursive practices. These connections suggest that Margery must be read as a figure of her time instead of as a 20th century medical patient. Atkinson argues that Margery "incorporated the major elements of affective piety into her own devotional life, transforming the tradition to the uses of her singular vocation and

¹⁰ Atkinson, Clarissa. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 201.

personality.”¹¹ Instead of focusing only on Margery’s mental state, Atkinson contextualizes her within the religious framework of late medieval England.

Not all medical-oriented theories are groundless. Richard Lawes cogently argues for a psychological reading of her narrative that differs from previous interpretations in that it is sensitive to the medieval view of psychological illness. He uses contemporary medical models as a means to explore the potential correlation between modern standards of diagnosis and Margery’s descriptions.¹² What Lawes and Atkinson have in common is their commitment to Margery’s narrative itself as both a source of information about religious life and also as a personal account of a devout lay woman. This twofold vision allows both scholars to approach Margery’s text through contextual, literary analysis, treating her book as a finely crafted narrative.

Drawing upon the previous work of Atkinson, Lynn Staley’s important 1994 study, *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*, pushes Margery’s authorial agency further, arguing that Margery is a dissenting critic of her society, one who artfully commands her own *auctoritas* to show the fragmentations of her community. Staley views Margery as two figures: Margery is the subject of the book while Kempe is its author. According to Staley, this split reflects Margery’s own issues with authorial identity, since to be a woman writer immediately brought her under the gaze of male authorities. The result is that while “male authors theoretically had available to them a wide range of literary conventions—to some extent reflecting the wide range of activities in which they might engage—women’s literature reflected their general social, ideological, and economic

¹¹ Atkinson, p. 155.

¹² Whitehead, Christiania. Denis Renevey. *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practice in Late Medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, p. 226.

restriction.”¹³ Margery critiques her society by casting her life as a “reenactment of the Passion of Christ or of the persecution of the early martyrs, her neighbors play the part of the hostile, crucifying, tormenting crowd that sought to destroy Christ and his Church.”¹⁴ Staley’s argument shows a shift in 1993 towards appreciating Margery as a woman writer in her own right, highlighting the ways that she negotiates her gender in the larger context of late medieval England. It also underscores how authorship closely relates to authority and ultimately with the reading audience, since the very act of writing a book implies that someone should read the narrative. Implicit in Staley’s argument is the notion that Margery writes ‘dissenting fictions’, using her gendered societal relations to rebel against the status quo.

Rebecca Krug criticizes the dissenting position in *Reading Families: Women’s Literate Practice in Late Medieval England*, arguing instead for far more nuanced negotiation practices. Noting that modern criticism of Margery is often based on the concepts of dissent, Krug argues that “because dissent-based models of medieval women’s reading and writing categorizes literate actions as either violations of the law or acts of gendered disobedience, they in effect discard the old law of oppression—only to replace it with the new law of dissent—in which women’s literate action is an expression of gendered rebellion.”¹⁵ Krug prefers to read Margery—and other medieval women writers—through their familial context. Women writers are always working within more complex systems as types of ‘actors’ in a ‘game’ having its own rules and regulations. Her point is that women’s literate practices are multilayered, as each individual has

¹³ Staley, p. 5.

¹⁴ Staley, p. 66.

¹⁵ Krug, Rebecca. *Reading Families: Women’s Literate Practice in Late Medieval England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 5.

different textual practices, meaning that general analytical rules only go so far in explaining textual interactions; indeed, every individual's connection with texts deserves to be read in its own context.

This paper draws heavily upon these arguments without attempting to craft an entirely new sphere of analysis. Rather, it focuses on literacy as it functions on-the-ground by examining how Margery interacts with texts to show how Christian knowledge circulates in late medieval England. Framing my argument is the dynamic range of religious practices and beliefs in England. In his seminal study, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, Eamon Duffy calls attention to the variety of religious expression in Margery's time, noting that lay people experienced Christianity through images, liturgy, Books of Hours, and communal rituals. Duffy shows how lay people explore different avenues of Christian worship that were not always authorized by the Church, especially considering that the Church sought to control lay interpretation of Scripture as a means to limit heresy and centralize authority. Yet Duffy's point is that Christianity is far from homogeneous or unified at this time despite efforts from clerical writers to show otherwise.¹⁶ Books of Hours (primers) exemplify these issues of homogeneity since no two primers were the same prior to the advent of printing. Primers were not only structurally different but were also handmade, often serving as a

¹⁶ Duffy's positive treatment of parish life in late medieval England is framed as a study of pre-Reformation Christian culture. Katherine French points out that Duffy "has filled his mostly East Anglian parishes with knowledgeable and committed Christians, united in their devotion to what he calls 'traditional religion,' a fully Christian religion neither lacking legitimacy nor in need of reform. Duffy portrays the parish as a place where the universal Church was physically embodied in shared venerations, symbols, and liturgies." French, Katherine L. *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p. 16.

site for the personal writings of the owner and were themselves learning tools, expressing both religious devotion and spiritual desire.¹⁷

The Religious Landscape of Margery's England—The Plague and the Parish

Margery lived in a time of social and economic change. Shortly before her birth, the Black Death (1347-1350) reached England in 1348, only to reoccur nearly every decade in smaller outbreaks. Her age was also characterized by shifting socio-economic dynamics and increased opportunity for women's spiritual expression. The significance of the plague should not be overlooked, for "the city [London] had a population perhaps between 40,000 and 50,000, and an estimate of one-third mortality is as close to the true figure as we may get. East Anglia, with its close commercial ties with the Low Countries, was devastated."¹⁸ Being highly contagious, the plague was either spread through fleas carried on rats or through inhalation once airborne, thus infecting thousands and typically killing people within three to five days.¹⁹ It is estimated that the population of England was reduced by nearly one-half from 1300 to 1377, a decline so great that there were not enough clergy to administer last rites or workers to toil in fields.²⁰ Priests and workers died as equals. Entire monastic establishments perished. The religious landscape of England was transformed as clergy died and the Church sought to reestablish social order and control.

In her important study of women's piety after the plague, Katherine L. French argues that Christianity became a way for women to cope with massive societal changes.

¹⁷ Duffy, *Stripping*, p. 223

¹⁸ Logan, F. Donald. *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 278.

²⁰ French, Katherine L. *The Good Women of the Parish: Gender and Religion After the Black Death*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

She writes that “women used Christianity and their religious participation to cope with the chaotic changes that followed the plague and to justify their own changing behavior. Through active participation in their parish church, women could promote their own interests and responsibilities, giving them social and religious significance.”²¹ In the post-plague years, women experienced increased opportunity and social mobility, which was understood by social commentators as sexual promiscuity: “They [the social commentators] understood it as a challenge to the patriarchal basis of family and society. As a result, society exerted a great deal of energy trying to make sure women’s increased mobility did not lead to an elevation of status.”²² It is within this context of mobility and opportunity that Margery wrote about her piety and the realities of parish life in Lynn.

As the center of religious life, the parish shapes and mediates most aspects of medieval English culture such as burial, communal gathering, and marriage.²³ Writing about religious practices within and beyond the English parish, John van Engen argues that “the medieval parish functioned, first, as an authorized public authority. For medieval people a parish meant social life and ecclesiastical obligation as much as personal devotion. Its bell tower called people to prayer and to Mass; it also kept time for work and served as a military bulwark.”²⁴ The parish encompasses a broad range of human social life, serving as the communal structure of religious duty. Investigating the parishes of Bath and Wells in a late medieval English diocese, Katherine L. French notes that the parish is a vibrant and dynamic center of communal identity. She defines the

²¹ French, *Good Women*, p. 2.

²² French, *Good Women*, p. 4.

²³ Engen, John van. “Practice Beyond the Confines of the Medieval Parish.” *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, p. 154.

²⁴ Engen, p. 154

community as “the repeated interactions over time of a group of people with shared goals, interests, concerns, and ideals. This continual interaction creates a group history that can enhance the group’s identity.”²⁵ Her notion of community emphasizes the continual interaction that I believe is paramount to Margery’s own sense of community. Margery writes not only about her involvement with her parish community but also about her relations with the community of the holy including saints, the clergy, and Christ. These communities are not necessarily distinct entities as the parish governs all aspects of life: “[the parish] provided much of the focus for spiritual and moral instruction and ecclesiastical authority. As a benefice, it provided a living for the incumbent through tithes; as the primary forum for public worship, it offered its members religious instruction and the sacraments.”²⁶ Material goods move in and out of the parish along with spiritual instruction and people, making it an economic, social, and religious center for communal involvement. Margery’s experiences show how parish life is vibrant and flexible as the clergy required only minimal participation, meaning she was free to pursue her own spiritual interests.²⁷

Such flexibility in religious practice suggests that Margery shapes her personal spirituality, fulfilling her ecclesiastical duty while searching for spiritual experiences that are most important to her. French defines ‘religious practice’ as

a broad range of activities that promote and enhance worship. Religious practice goes well beyond attendance at the mass and veneration of the saints. The flexibility and scope of parish involvement meant that, in order to help their souls, men and women could participate in a variety of ways commensurate with their social status, economic resources, and gender. They came together in groups and also worked as individuals. This

²⁵ French, *People*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 23.

approach also recognizes that for most of the laity, religion was not so much a set of ideological concepts as it was certain sets of activities and prescribed behavior.²⁸

The importance is that Margery moves in and out of her parish, traveling domestically and abroad, while also placing herself in both a local community and a wider community of the holy. This community of the holy includes clergy, monks, nuns, the saints, Christ, and other Christian writers such as Jerome or St. Augustine. Her book weaves together local practices with personal choice. Engen notes that “if the parish represented duty, what everyone was minimally expected to do, practices beyond the confines of the parish represented choices, ways people could seek involvement, gain religious deepening or instruction or participation or amusement according to their needs and desires.”²⁹ As we shall see, Engen’s notion of choice is central to Margery’s literacy as she reads those books that foster a contemplative life and guide her along her personal spiritual path.

In negotiating her own personal faith, Margery demonstrates the range of socio-textual practices circulating throughout late medieval English Christian culture.³⁰ Her narrative shows how books, reading, and writing were central aspects of Christian practice. Margery creates a vernacular portrait of spiritual practices that reveals a lay woman interacting with textually-based theological knowledge.³¹ She makes explicit how human relationships shape textual practices—those among preachers and parishioners, readers and listeners, the amanuensis and the dictator, or Christ and his faithful servant praying for his intercession with a primer. Texts connect Margery to wider theological

²⁸ Ibid, p. 17.

²⁹ Engen, p. 176

³⁰ By ‘socio-textual’ I refer to the intersection of textual culture and social interactions that govern the parish.

³¹ Zieman, Katherine. *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p. 114.

and devotional communities while allowing for personal choice in hearing a friar's sermon or interpreting biblical passages.

This paper explores how Margery exemplifies the dynamics of lay literacy and Christian education in the late medieval parish. It first illustrates book and textual culture in Margery's world, drawing key examples from her narrative to show how she writes about texts and how texts influence her own writing. Important themes are the production and use of sacred books alongside scriptural interpretation and *lectio divina* as a monastic model for Margery's own reading practices. My analysis focuses on four central scenes to show how textual culture intensifies Margery's spiritual experiences. The first scene explores her reading experience (chapter 58), followed next by her book-owning experience (chapter 9), then her authorial experience (proem, chapter 88), and concludes with her experience as an audience to a friar's sermon (chapter 61). I argue that her proximity to clerical textual culture is a way for her to participate in and reproduce her own Christian reality. She shifts roles during each of these textual experiences, from that of an author to a reader and listener, revealing a multidimensional Christian life. She is at once active and contemplative, submissive and authoritative. In occupying multiple textual roles, Margery participates in and shapes the processes through which Christianity is reproduced, authorized, and invented. She shows an awareness of the way that the lives of Christian saints and holy people were written into books and manuscripts.

Chapter one examines medieval reading in the context of Margery's book, looking specifically at her collaborative reading. It is important to evaluate her reading practices in their medieval context which includes collaborative reading and the role of language. Moreover, Margery references specific books throughout her narrative,

showing these to be both significant for her devotion and suggestive of her spiritual exemplars. Reading is thus tied closely to spirituality through the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, which influences Margery's own attempt to elevate her status beyond that of a simple lay woman.

In chapter two I investigate Margery's primer as an instance of book-owning. Medieval English primers were a popular genre for lay women to imitate monastic practice without taking vows or living in a monastery, making primers an accessible form of devotion. Nonetheless, many lay people could not read the contents of primers, written in either Latin or English, and perceived that the book itself held value and reflected the status of its owner. Margery's primer is a type of spiritual tool for her to intensify her devotion and connect her own body to textual culture.

Turning to the writing of Margery's book, chapter three explores medieval authorship and notions of authority. Writing as a woman in the wake of the Lollards and Thomas Arundel's *Constitutions* of 1408, vernacular books face issues of censorship and legitimacy. She therefore emphasizes her close associations with the clergy through her scribe and shows that clerics also opt to defend her against her persecutors. In doing so, Margery draws herself closer to clerical culture and substantiates her position as a spiritual visionary.

Finally, chapter four explicates preaching and Christian education to show how parish life is infused with literacy. After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the Church turned its attention to pastoral care and the education of both its clergy and, through them, the laity. There was an increase of vernacular training manuals for priests during the 14th and 15th centuries since priests were the primary agents of religious instruction. These

manuals taught priests to care for the souls of their parishioners and to spread God's word through responsible preaching. When a famous friar comes to preach at Lynn, he expresses his dissatisfaction with Margery's weeping. Her local priests attempt to defend her and persuade the friar to tolerate her tears, but he stubbornly refuses. I argue that the main conflict is among the male clerics. Margery seems hurt by the friar's rejection but is ultimately unmoved, showing to her parish that she has the word of God in her soul and does not truly need preaching.

After investigating Margery's literate practices, I conclude my paper by situating her literacy practices within the framework of late medieval devotion on the eve of the Reformation. I show that her *Book* is the ultimate expression of her desire for sainthood. As Clarissa Atkinson notes, Margery's narrative is a response to clerical educational agendas:

The distinct and specific influence of such works in the prayers of an illiterate woman shows us how religious instruction was transmitted (and transformed) in the Middle Ages. Margery's book is especially valuable because it is a *response*. Generally, our sources are limited to the writings of the experts—teachers and professionals; here we find some of the results of their work.³²

Not only is her book a response to the experts, it is also a record of a spiritual life shaped by personal choice. Margery is an agent in her Christian development by recording those episodes most significant in her portrayal of a life fashioned from God's grace. In the end, her book helps us to redefine literacy and reassess power structures in the late Middle Ages

³² Atkinson, p. 218

Chapter 1: Reading the Medieval Book

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.³³

This chapter explores Margery's collaborative reading practices. Margery occupies different textual roles as she reads together with a priest and later dictates her story through the hand of scribes. She hears the reading of texts and produces one of her own, being both a reader and author. All the while Margery is the ultimate *auctoritas* in the construction of her narrative. As Lynn Staley argues, "*The Book of Margery Kempe* does not report a world. Margery Kempe, its author, makes a world. Margery Kempe, like Chaucer, with some of whose works I would guess she was familiar, used the literary tradition to which she was heir as well as the world around her to compose fiction."³⁴ The crucial point is that Margery selects what events to include in her book when she is nearly sixty years old, suggesting that the episodes of her narrative are either emotionally and spiritually memorable or else meaningful in some other way as to merit their inclusion.³⁵ Margery's narrative exemplifies the differences between medieval and modern reading practices, demonstrating how she is a part of educational hierarchies that often situate the *litterati*—sophisticated, Latin speaking men and clerics—above the *illitterati*—the vernacular-speaking, uneducated lay people.³⁶ These distinctions are overturned or sidestepped in Margery's book as she legitimizes her authority, establishes clerical

³³ John 1:1-3 in *The New Revised Standard Version*. Ed. Harold Lindsell. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publication House, 1991.

³⁴ Staley, p. xii.

³⁵ Fanous, *Writing Religious Women*, p. 164

³⁶ Glenn, Cheryl. "Popular Literacy in the Middle Ages: *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Popular Literacy: Studies in Cultural Practices and Poetics*. Ed. John Trimbur. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. 56-73, pp. 56-57.

relationships, and develops personal spiritual experiences through her proximity to books and manuscripts.

In late medieval England, the written word of God is spiritually powerful in that it connects humankind to creation and the apostolic teachings of the Church. Writing about popular literacy in the Middle Ages, Cheryl Glenn observes how Christianity and manuscript culture are inexorably intertwined, noting that “Christianity simply cannot be separated from the written word, be it the written laws of God or the written teachings of Christ...God’s word, as speech and action, is irrevocable and brings to reality whatever it expresses: creation, redemption, salvation.”³⁷ Christians had an imperative to teach lay people and clerics proper use and interpretation of the written word of God found in Scripture and translated into the universal ecclesiastical language—Latin. This knowledge was essential for effectively performing the sacraments, carrying out the liturgy, and reciting daily prayers to God. At stake in such education was the very soul of every Christian, for misinterpretation of Scripture could feasibly lead to heretical practices and beliefs, drawing people away from the Church, which was the ultimate authority for Christ’s message of salvation.

The Lollards illustrate that reading in Margery’s culture had dynamic social and spiritual implications. Considered heretics by the Church, the Lollards were widely persecuted from 1381 until 1431, while some of the core tenants of the movement, although not a detailed program, continued through the Reformation.³⁸ The Lollards were followers of John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384), an Oxford-trained doctor of divinity, who expounded controversial ideas concerning righteous clergy, purgatory, and the Eucharist.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 65.

³⁸ See Aston, Margaret. *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval England*. London: The Hambleton Press, 1984.

He held that “the elements of the Mass were both substance and accident; substance could not be changed without also altering the accident (that is, taste and appearance).”³⁹ Additionally, his theory of dominion argued “that spiritual authority should be vested only in the virtuous, that the sinful priest had nullified his spiritual powers.”⁴⁰ Although he was deemed a heretic at the Council of Constance in 1415, his ideas had important ramifications for how lay people viewed language and their own spiritual authority.

For the Lollards, the Bible should be accessible to all readers, not only those capable of reading Latin. Lollards also turned ecclesiastical authority on its head in asserting that lay people could administer sacraments and that women could potentially be priests. In her vital study of the Lollards and their literacy, Margaret Aston states that the Lollards expanded Wycliffe’s arguments and put them into practice. She writes: “where Wycliffe hinted others asserted and acted. His reformulation of the Church as the body of the elect brought him virtually to deny the existing order of priesthood and seemingly to elevate the virtuous layman over the constituted ministers of the Church.”⁴¹ Regarding language, the Lollards thought that the Latin and English divide should be crossed as to allow biblical translations into the vernacular: “As the translator of the second version of the Lollard Bible made clear, lack of Latinity must be no bar to direct scriptural understanding.”⁴²

³⁹ Staley, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴¹ Aston, p. 69. Regarding the subject of women priests, Aston asserts that “the conclusion is indefinite. The Lollards, who produced some famous women preachers in their time and promoted the religious and educational equality of the sexes, had at least raised the theoretical possibility of having women priests.”

⁴² Ibid, p. 197.

In chapter 12 of the *General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible*, the anonymous author explores the tension between mindful study of the Bible and the notion that the Bible should be accessible for anyone:

Therefore if it is not lesir to seeke alle Holy Scriptures—to expounne alle the wlappingis of wordis, to perse alle the prevytes of Scripturis—holde thou charite, where alle thingis hangen, so thou schalt holde that that [thou] lernydist there. Also thou schalt holde that that thou lernedist not: for if though knowist charite, thou knowist sum thing wheronne also that hangith that in hap thou knowist not. And in that that thou undirstondist in Scripturis, charite is opyn, and in that that thou undirstondist not, charite is hid. Therefore he that hooldith charite, in vertues either in goode condiscounds, hooldith bothe that that is opyn and that [that] is hid in Goddis wordis.⁴³

Here, charity is imagined as a central requirement for understanding God’s word. Dedicated study is at once necessary for biblical knowledge but also a hindrance for lay access to Scripture. Different types of reading practices therefore reflected the multiple uses of Scripture. Aston imagines a spectrum polarized by solitary readings and ritual readings to larger groups, between which “a variety of domestic groupings joined together in study as opportunity offered, within the ramifying circles of household and kin.”⁴⁴ Reading Scripture or devotional texts brought people into closer contact with domestic relations in a collaborative learning process.

These Lollard reading practices suggest that Margery lived in a time where literacy reflected social status, opportunity, and even heretical beliefs. Her reading

⁴³ Text is from Wogan-Brown, Jocelyn, and Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, Ruth Evans, eds. *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. Translation is my own: “Therefore if it is not opportune to seek all Holy Scriptures—to expound all the convolutions of words, to look through all the secrets of Scriptures—if you keep charity on which all things depend then you will keep all those things which you learn there. Also you shall hold that which you do not learn: for if you know charity, then you know something on which a thing you perhaps do not know depends as well. And in that which you understand in Scripture, charity is open, and in that which you do not understand, charity is hidden. Therefore he that holds charity through virtuous behavior or through good qualities, holds both that which is open and that which is hid in God’s words.”

⁴⁴ Aston, p. 205. Interestingly, she notes that “silent reading was scarcely to be expected, and we may surmise that the expertise of this kind of reading was rarer among heretically inclined craftsmen than it was among upper class or professional readers.”

experience is framed as a contemplative act that illustrates her particular method of using books. Margery employs narrative and rhetorical strategies of her time to present herself as a humble woman,⁴⁵ a servant of Christ living within the boundaries of the Church while dynamically shaping her own beliefs and practices. Writing her Proem, her scribe tells how: “Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth, y flak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce.”⁴⁶ Margery is the “werk” of the Savior and is therefore another means of instructing the laity. She frames her book as an example of a spiritual life that is the product of devotional texts and *imitatio christi*.

Margery and her Priest

Whan sche was gon, the preste seyde to hys modyr: ‘Me mervelyth mech of this woman, why sche wepith and cryith so. Nevyrtheles me thynkyth sche is a good woman, and I desire gretly to spekyn mor wyth hir’ Hys modyr was wel plesyd and counselyd that he schulde don so. And aftyrwardys the same preyste lovyd hir and trustyd hir ful meche and blissed the tyme that evyr he knew hir, for he fond gret gostly confort in hir and cawsyd hym to lokyn meche good scriptur and many a good doctowr which he wolde not a lokyd at that tyme had sche ne be. He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys therupon, Seynt Brydys boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other. And than wist sche that it was a spirit sent of God which seyde to hir, as is wretyn a lityl befor, whan sche compleynyde for defawte of redyng, thes wordys, “Ther schal come on fro fer that schal fulfillyn thi desyr.” And thus sche knewe be experiens that it was a ryth trewe spyrty. The forseyd preste red hir bokys the most part of seven yer er eight yer to gret ences of hys cunnyng and of hys meryte, and he suffryd many an evyl worde for hyr lofe inasmeche as he red hir so many bokys and supportyd hir in hir wepyng and hir crying. Aftyrwardys he wex benefysyd and had gret cur of sowle, and than lykyd hym ful wel that he had redde so meche befor.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Wogan-Browne, p. 9. The editors write that Middle English authors often present themselves as the “compiler, translator, narrator, humble servant to a patron, or obeyer of a friend’s or superior’s wishes.”

⁴⁶Proem, p. 33: “All the works of our Saviour are for our example and instruction, and what grace that he works in any creature is our profit, if lack of charity be not our hindrance.”

⁴⁷Chapter 58, p. 279: “When she was gone, the priest said to his mother, ‘I am amazed at why this woman weeps and cries so. Nevertheless, I think she is a good woman, and I greatly desire to speak more with her.’ His mother was well pleased, and advised that he should do so. And afterwards this same priest loved and trusted her greatly, and blessed the time that he ever knew her, for he found great spiritual comfort in

This passage from chapter 58 describes Margery's reading practices, showing how she partners with a priest to read several books over the course of many years. Such collaborative reading was commonplace in late medieval England as the 14th and 15th centuries saw a proliferation of texts.⁴⁸ Reading directly from the page as the priest does was a skill to be mastered and trained, for "the teaching of letters was a difficult art, even for a reader with a suitable text, and learning to read—let alone write—ininitely more demanding in the days of manuscript and fitful elementary education."⁴⁹ Learning to read became synonymous with learning about faith, although the Church saw "no necessary connection between conversion and letters, between the Bible as a source of faith and people's access to the faith."⁵⁰ Margery's reading experience shows the tension between a lay woman desiring devotional texts and her apparent inability to read from the page without the aid of a skilled priest.

her, and was caused to look up much good scripture, and many a good doctor, at which he would not have looked at that time, had it not been for her. He read to her many a book of high contemplation, and other books, such as the Bible with doctors' commentaries on it, St Bride's book, Hilton's book, Bonaventura's *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and others similar. And then she knew it was a spirit send from God which said to her these words, as is written a little before, when she complained of a lack of reading: 'There shall come someone from far away who shall fulfill your desire.' And thus she knew by experience that it was a very true spirit. The said priest read books to her for the most part of seven or eight years, to the great increase of his knowledge and of his merit, and he suffered many an evil word for her love, inasmuch as he read her so many books, and supported her in her weeping and crying. Afterwards he became beneficed and had a large cure of souls, and then he was very pleased that he had read so much before."

⁴⁸ Aston, p. 103. Aston notes that "the single most important agency...in widening literate communication was the royal administration. The extension of literacy was preceded by growing awareness of the written word, and the precondition of that was the proliferation of documents."

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 102.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 105. Aston adds that "ecclesiastical attitudes towards the role of books and the written word in the church's main task of making and teaching believers, had been fixed long before and were slow to change. They were geared to a world in which literacy was a preserve of the minority, and the minority were churchmen. The church had developed in a society whose culture was predominantly oral, and in which it had to be assumed that the mass of believers were, and would remain, remote from the world of letters and learning."

Margery mentions several specific books such as the *Revelations* of St. Bridget, *Incendium Amoris*, *Stimulus Amoris*, and the Bible with commentaries.⁵¹ Both *Incendium Amoris* and *Stimulus Amoris* are Latin devotional classics that emphasize the contemplative life over and against the active life. Richard Rolle, the author of *Incendium Amoris*, stressed the importance of experiential knowledge over book learning in his writing.⁵² This same set of books are earlier mentioned in Chapter 17 while references to mystical concepts found within these books occur throughout Margery's writing, suggesting that these specific texts are both popular books of her time or location and that she appreciates their content.⁵³ Irrespective of her precise interest in these books, mentioning them implies familiarity with their content and shows how certain books stand out before others in her reading list. It is noteworthy that Margery requires a priest to satisfy her hunger for God's written word since she is incapable of reading the text from the page sufficiently on her own,⁵⁴ which demonstrates the differences between medieval and contemporary notions of reading.

⁵¹ Since the Bible was usually circulated as separate books or collections of texts from the Old and New Testaments, it is uncertain what biblical passages were most appealing to Margery. Nonetheless, throughout her book there are references to The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of John, Genesis, and Song of Songs.

⁵² Roman, Christopher. *Domestic Mysticism in Margery Kempe and Dame Julian of Norwich: the Transformation of Christian Spirituality in the Late Middle Ages*. Lewiston: E. Mellon Press, 2005. Roman shows that Rolle prioritizes the contemplative life over the active life. The active life consists of "feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, comforting those in prison, and burying the dead. A person striving for the perfect active life cannot do 'ane ot twa' but must perform 'þam all.'" pp. 30-33.

⁵³ Chapter 17, p. 115: "that sche herd nevyr boke, neythyr Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amorys*, ne *Incendium Amoris*, ne non other that evyr sche herd redyn that spak so hyly of lofe of God but that sche felt as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle yf sche cowd or ellys mygth a schewyd as sche felt" [that she never heard any book, neither Hilton's book, nor Bride's book, nor *Stimulus Amoris*, nor *Incendium Amoris*, nor any book that she ever heard read, that spoke to exaltedly of the love of God as she felt highly working in her soul, if she could have communicated what she felt].

⁵⁴ It is impossible to determine whether or not Margery could read or recognize certain printed words from the evidence contained in her book.

For Margery, reading is a means to access devotional texts as well as Scripture. Reading is not necessarily a measure of her ability to read straight from book pages. Collaborative reading is a method whereby one individual serves as an interpreter for other people unable or unwilling to read written texts on their own. Cheryl Glenn points out that Margery's "society at large conducted its affairs orally within what Brian Stock calls a "textual community" of texts, publicized by a few readers and more interpreters to an even wider audience of listeners."⁵⁵ What Glenn emphasizes is that contemporary notions of reading as an individual, silent, viewing activity overlooks the way that "medieval literacy becomes a mode of communication rather than a set of personalized technical skills."⁵⁶ Margery's reading experience is based on her sustained communication with the priest over nearly eight years; indeed, she notes that he also benefits from the experience, suggesting that reading practices are a medium for meritorious deeds. Glenn further argues that the

common medieval practices of reading aloud (and the concomitant listening) and reciting from memory mean that a knowledge of letters and book-learning were compatible with little direct contact with print itself. These popular literacy practices were text based without being text dependent; people used information in texts without using the actual texts themselves...whereas our contemporary literary practices are often concentrated on seeing and inscribing, medieval practices emphasized hearing and remembering.⁵⁷

This final point is crucial for understanding Margery's reading: she internalizes texts through memory in such a way that the entire reading experience cannot be minimalized into smaller parts. More precisely, the priest is as important to her reading as are the specific books and Christ's reported intervention on her behalf. Reading is thus

⁵⁵ Glenn, p. 57

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 61

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 61

presented as communal and spiritual relationships, a medium for collaboration among people occupying different social positions—the cleric, the mother, Christ, and Margery herself. Reading is not merely the skill of deciphering printed books.

The aural way that Margery reads is also significant for her overall experience. It shows how language—the words of God—have a meditative role in her spirituality. She writes that she is hungry for God’s word and desires the reading of Holy Scripture, pleading with the Lord to send her a textual interpreter as mere preachers are insufficient.⁵⁸ Images of reading as eating are also found in other Middle English texts such as *The Book of Ghostly Grace* and *Piers Plowman*, deriving from a “monastic reading practice called *ruminatio* (literally, chewing the cud).”⁵⁹ Reading the Gospel of Luke, the priest satisfies her hunger and even elicits an emotional reaction from Margery as she cries in imitation of the Lord: “Whan the sayd creatur herd redyn how owr Lord wept, than wept sche sor and cryed lowed, the preyste ne hys modyr knowing no cawse of hyr wepyng.”⁶⁰ She becomes an actor in the life of Christ, bringing the message of the Gospel of Luke to her present moment.⁶¹ Her tears suggest that she is connected with the word of Christ to such a degree that not even the priest and his mother recognize the

⁵⁸ Chapter 58, p. 278: ‘Alas, Lord, as many clerkys as thu hast in this world, that thu ne woldyst sendyn me on of hem that myth fulfillyn my sowle wyth thi word and wyth redyng of holy scripture, for alle the clerys that prechyn may not fulfillyn, for me thynkyth that my sowle is evyr alych hungry’ [‘Alas, Lord! as many clerics as you have in this world, and you will not send me one of them who might fill my soul with your word and with reading of Holy Scripture, for all the clerics that preach may not satisfy me, for I think that my soul is always just as hungry’].

⁵⁹ Jocelyn-Brown, p. 220.

⁶⁰ Chapter 58, p. 279: “When the said creature heard it read how the Lord wept, then she wept bitterly and cried loudly, neither the priest nor his mother knowing any reason for her weeping.”

⁶¹ *The New Revised Standard Version*. Ed. Harold Lindsell. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publication House, 1991.

Luke 19: 41-44: As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

cause of her weeping, despite the similarities between her tears and those of Christ in the passage from Luke. Reading causes Margery to imitate the text in a way that captivates the priest's attention—her tears are a response to God sending a priest and to hearing his word, suggesting that the ancient art of *lectio divina* shapes her reading experiences.

Lectio divina refers to monastic reading practices that bring the soul into contemplative prayer with God through reading Scripture or sacred genres such as hagiography. In his seminal work on *lectio divina*, *Praying the Bible*, Mariano Magrassi offers a thorough exposition of how patristic writers and medieval monastics practiced this type of reading. Although Margery never clearly mentions the term *lectio divina*, I argue that it had disseminated from the monastery through the mouths of clerics into the devotional practices of the laity. Thus Margery uses certain aspects of *lectio divina* to strengthen her relationship with God. Chapter 59 begins by further explaining how “thorw heryng of holy bokys and thorw heryng of holy sermownys, sche evyr encresyd in contemplacyon and holy meditacyon. It wer in maner unpossibyl to writyn al the holy thowtys, holy spechys, and the hy revelacyons which our Lord schewyd unto hir.”⁶² Here, she describes how her meditative and contemplative experiences are always increasing as a result of hearing God's word. Reading so effectively increases her contemplation and holy mediation that she cannot easily describe her revelatory knowledge, meaning that God's word is in her heart.

⁶² Chapter 59, pp. 280-281: “through listening to holy books and through listening to holy sermons, she was always increasing in contemplation and holy meditation. It would be impossible to write all the holy thoughts, holy speeches, and high revelations which our Lord showed to her.”

Magrassi calls *lectio divina* “prayed reading” as it is a process with multiple layers of ascending meaning: *lectio, cogitatio, studium, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*.⁶³ These acts are imagined as “rungs on an ascending ladder whose lower end rests upon the earth and whose top pierces the heavens... Here is the first important point: all religious experience, until it erupts in mystical experience, is solidly linked to the Bible.”⁶⁴ God’s word is always living through the mouth of clerics reading Scripture; although the material book itself is only a means of transmission, its interpreter, being a member of the Church, embodies the presence of Christ while reading.⁶⁵ *Lectio divina* is thus a method of engaging in dialogue with God in order to develop closer relationships with the Lord. It is not merely an act of reading or studying, it is rather an intellectual activity similar to meditation that prioritizes experience without implying a systematic methodology.⁶⁶

Magrassi imagines the classic image of medieval monastics whispering passages from pages of Scripture in a near-silent monastery. His key point is that *lectio* always involves listening and dialogue: the whispering monk imprints words on mind and body, while hearing the words of God responding to prayers.⁶⁷ The idea is that “if we speak to God in prayer, it is because God already speaks to us first in reading.”⁶⁸ Such dialogue reinforces the idea that God’s word is always living; furthermore, it implies that God, although the creator of the word, is also a listener in a cycle of unending conversations. To engage the words of God in prayer is a universal Christian practice meant to elicit a personal response, which guides the recipient along their proper spiritual path. Writing

⁶³ Magrassi, Mariano. *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998, p. 104.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 104.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 66.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 16.

about this tension between the community and the individual, Gregory the Great (540-604) writes: “For I know that in the presence of my brothers and sisters I have very often understood many things in the sacred text that I could not understand alone... Thus it happens, by the grace of God, that as perception grows pride diminishes, since on your behalf I learn what I am teaching in your midst.”⁶⁹ Magrassi concludes that the “community assumes the role of making the Word come alive. Understanding is a community act because dialogue itself is a community act. God does not speak to the hearts of individuals; he addresses himself to all.”⁷⁰ *Lectio divina* is therefore a conversation encircling the word of God as found in Scripture and other holy writings; it is an ongoing, dynamic process involving multiple participants in differing circumstances.

For Margery, dialogue is the central core of her reading experience that develops through listening, speaking, and reflection. Reflecting on her own reading, she says her “contemplacyon and holy meditacyon” were always increasing. It is noteworthy that she mentions two of the ascending terms said to be closer to heaven; likewise, the books she reads are described as texts of “hy contemplacyon,” reinforcing the contemplative aspect of her reading experience. Margery is reading not simply to gain knowledge from books but to engage in conversation with God. The priest also participates in this conversation to the “encres of hys cunnyng and of hys meryte,” offering Margery a companion with spiritual authority from both the Church and from God, who sent the priest to her in the first place. Christ is also present during Margery’s reading, responding to her hunger as the word itself is spoken by the priest, transforming this scenario into a living conversation. This transmission does not mean that the content of these books is

⁶⁹ Quoted in Magrassi, *Praying*, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Magrassi, p 10.

irrelevant; rather, this scene shows how books are a means for Margery to establish personal relationships with a literate priest and his mother.

In conclusion, collaborative reading connects Margery with documents providing spiritual guidance. She shows how the roles of the reader and listener are essential for spreading God's word. This process mediates dialogue and personal relationships. Yet her increasing knowledge of faith is not always comforting. In chapter 59, she notes that reading has taught her about the doctrine of eternal damnation, which "was to hir a gret ponyshyng and a scharp chastising. . .Sche wolde not heryn it ne belevyn that it was God that schewyd hir swech thyngys."⁷¹ Her response directly engages God on account of what she learns from books, even refusing to believe the orthodox doctrine of damnation as a testament to the way that reading is an ever-changing dialogue. She reaches this conclusion after reflecting on the many texts shown to her by God until she "is no longer able to believe in the God she wants, one who always answers her prayers to elevate mercy over justice. Here, book-learning proves debilitating as well as enabling."⁷² This lesson in Christian doctrine pains her temporarily until she again communicates with God after having visions of the devil. Although both enabling and debilitating, books open up Margery's network of personal relationships and establish connections with clerical authorities as well as with Christ, which is important in legitimizing her own text and practices. Finally, she portrays herself as a mediator for the priest's own spiritual development, thereby asserting her role in the educational hierarchy while decentering clerical power.

⁷¹ Chapter 59, p. 183: "was a great punishment and a sharp chastisement to her. . .She would not hear it, nor believe that it was God who showed her such things."

⁷² Jocelyn-Brown, p. 221.

Chapter II—Margery’s Book of Hours

Another tyme, as this creatur prayd to God that sche myt levyn chast be leve of hir husband, Cryst seyde to hir mende: ‘Thow must fastyn the Fryday bothen fro mete and drynke, and thow schalt have thi desyr er Whitsonday, for I shal sodeynly sle thin husbonde.’ Than on the Wednysday in Estern Woke, aftyr hyr husband wold have had knowlache of hir as he was wone befor, and whan he gan neygh hir, sche seyde, ‘Jhesus, help me!’ and he had no power to towche hir at that tyme in that wyse, ne nevyr aftyr wyth no fleschly knowing. It befell of a Fryday befor Whytson Evyn, as this creatur was in a church of Seynt Margarete at N. heryng hir messe, sche herd a gret noyse and a dredful. Sche was sore astoynded, sor dredyng, the voys of the pepyl, which seyde God schuld take veniawns upon hir. Sche knelyd upon hir kneys, heldyng down hir hed, and hir boke in hir hand, prayng owyr Lord Christ Jhesu for grace and for mercy. Sodeynly fel down fro the heyest party of the cherchvowte, fro undyr the fote of the sparre, on hir hed and on hir bakke a ston which weyd iii pownd, and a schort ende of a tre weyng vi pownd, that hir thowt hir bakke brake asundyr, and sche ferd as sche had be deed a lytyl whyle. Soone aftyr sche cryed ‘Jhesu, mercy!’ and anoon hir peyn was gon.⁷³

Chapter 9 describes Margery holding what is likely a book of hours, called a ‘Primmer’ in Middle English. Her primer appears only in this chapter and is mentioned during her brief prayer before she is struck by the rafter-beam. Most scholars offer little analysis of such an important event, observing that she holds a primer and that such texts were popular among the laity. Exploring Margery’s primer as an important element in the early part of her narrative, I show that she uses the primer as a symbol of faith while her physical body is threatened. This chapter examines what we can understand about primers more generally before analyzing why Margery has a primer during such a pivotal

⁷³ Chapter 9, p. 56: “Another time, as this creature prayed to God that she might live in chastity by her husband’s permission, Christ said to her mind, ‘You must fast of Friday both from meat and drink, and you shall have your wish before Whit Sunday, for I shall suddenly slay [all sexual desire in] your husband. Then on the Wednesday of Easter week, when her husband wanted to have intercourse with her, as he was used to before, and when he was coming near to her, she said, ‘Jesus, help me,’ and he had no power to touch her at that time in that way, nor ever after that with carnal knowledge. It so happened one Friday before Whitsun Eve, as this creature was in the church of St Margaret at N. hearing mass, she heard a great and dreadful noise. She was greatly dismayed, very much fearing public opinion, which said God should take vengeance upon her. She knelt there, holding her head down, and with her book in her hand, praying to our Lord Christ Jesus for grace and for mercy. Suddenly—from the highest part of the church vault, from under the base of the rafter—there fell down on her head and on her back a stone which weighed three pounds, and a short end of a beam weighing six pounds, so that she thought her back was broken in pieces, and she was afraid that she would be dead in a little while. Soon after she cried, ‘Jesus, mercy,’ and immediately her pain was gone.”

scene. I use her primer (assuming it is a primer) to show how Margery attempts to bring monastic practices into her lifestyle. Her primer is also a gateway into exploring the value, use, and production of material books in late medieval England.

In his edition of Margery's Middle English text, Barry Windeatt notes that this book is "probably a 'primer,' or book of hours; often accompanied by pictures, the contents of the Latin text would be familiar even to lay people, and for the less literate might serve as cues to launch them on prayers known by heart from hearing or recitation."⁷⁴ Primers were commonplace among the laity in late medieval England. Although most copies differ marginally, they typically include prayers, gospel excerpts, and illustrations depicting various emblematic saints or Christ. Primers are evidence of lay people's increasing desire for access to devotional material and Christian guidebooks, which includes religious texts and semi-monastic practices contained in primers. Eamon Duffy, surveying primers in late medieval England, argues that the widespread appeal of these books is due to their 'extratextual' nature. He claims that they were not only texts but sacred objects:

The use of rubric print, and the frequent punctuation of the text with the sign of the cross, particularly in prayers of exorcism and invocation, also served to establish the sacred character of the primers as objects in their own right, by approximating them in appearance to the books used on the altars of the parish church and in many ceremonies of the liturgy. The fact that many of the texts contained in the primers were held to be powerful and holy in their own right also helped sacralize the books in which they occurred.⁷⁵

Margery's inclusion of a primer indicates her ability to own such a devotional tool. More precisely, Margery's primer is one of many texts that she uses to intensify her faith by showing her proximity to devotional literature circulating in late medieval England.

⁷⁴ Windeatt, *Margery Kempe*, p. 83.

⁷⁵ Duffy, *Stripping*, p. 214.

Describing this devotional literature, Mary Erler notes that “investigation of the audience for such books, their readers and owners, furnishes some notion of the climate in which the reading took place, and hence gives a sense of what we may call the culture of religious reading.”⁷⁶ For Margery, the primer is a sacred tool; it is part of a web of sacred texts that she employs to show her dynamic reading practices. She is thus connected to the sacred contents of her primer.

Primers are one type of devotional book that were accessible to the laity. During Margery’s time, manuscripts were hand copied by professional and commercial scribes. A professional scribe “might make his living primarily by writing legal documents and/or keeping accounts. He might be a scrivener...He might be a royal or civic clerk, or serve as secretary or man of affairs to some wealthy person.”⁷⁷ A commercial scribe

made his living largely by copying books for a bespoke trade and perhaps, later in the fifteenth century, speculatively for sale in a shop...[they] emerged later [than professional scribes], in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as it became clear that one could make a living not just by taking on writing tasks, but by producing and selling books.⁷⁸

London was the center for book and manuscript production as it had a large amount of potential readers wealthy enough to invest in the production and purchasing of documents. Books and manuscripts were typically unavailable to rural laity due to the skills needed in preparing ink and parchment, while having the ability to write in acceptable scripts. Cheryl Glenn observes that “the written text itself accrued value according to the extent and complexity of its colored illuminations and the richness and

⁷⁶ Erler, Mary C. “Devotional Literature.” *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume III 1400-1557*. Ed. Lotte Hellinga and J.B Trapp. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 495-425.

⁷⁷ Mooney, Linne R. “Vernacular Literary Manuscripts and their Scribes.” *The Production of Books in England: 1350-1500*. Eds. Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 193.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 193.

ornateness of its binding and cover. Written texts (books and manuscripts) reflected the material wealth and status of their owners.”⁷⁹ Her point is that owning books “outwardly symbolized skills acquired and public functions performed, an intellectual status perhaps even more impressive than that of mere wealth.”⁸⁰ Although Margery mentions her primer only once, nevertheless it carries with it these book-owning associations of wealth, status, and social prestige.⁸¹

Primers are not all identical since they were hand-produced in different localities by individual scribes. Nonetheless, there are certain conventional features found in most surviving primers. They originally arose as the full Marian Office was replaced by the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary and intended for both monastic and lay use.⁸²

Gradually, lay people

tried to emulate the religious life by integrating as much as possible of the Little Office into their daily lives. Once the Office became detached from the breviary, other Offices, psalms and prayers accumulated around it, resulting in the course of time in what we now know as the book of hours.⁸³

⁷⁹ Glenn, p. 63.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

⁸¹ In her essay, “Devotional Literature,” Erler shows that primers became increasingly popular with the advent of printing later in the 15th century: “A very partial tabulation of existing manuscript *horae* from all countries and uses would include the British Library’s collection of about 400 examples; the Bibliotheque Nationale de France’s holdings of about 350; the Walters Art Gallery’s approximately 300; and the more than 300 copies scattered throughout 7 additional American collections. This total of nearly 1,400 manuscript primers represents only a fraction of those which remain, and a still smaller fraction of those which once existed,” p. 496.

⁸² Scott-Stokes, p. 3: “[the Marian Office was] a monastic religious service worshipping God, the diety, but expressing also special veneration of Mary. The Office prayers praise her and appeal to her for intercession, asking her to pray to Christ for the salvation of mankind in general, and for the supplicant in particular... a full Office of the Virgin was used on Marian feast-days, which celebrated the major events of her life.” The Little Office and the Hours of the Blessed Virgin were shorter versions of the foundational full Office.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 4.

Primers usually began with four Gospel excerpts, including St. John's "In Principio," Luke's story of Annunciation, Matthew's Magi, and Mark's conclusion.⁸⁴ Gospel narratives were powerful texts themselves, serving as key elements in the devotion of lay people who frequently heard the stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John during sermons or at required Mass readings. Duffy observes that "[v]irtue inhered in these passages quite apart from actual comprehension of their message, and their presence in the primers suggests that these books were themselves seen as sacred objects, focuses of power, as much as books to be read and understood."⁸⁵ He compares primers to Gospel books that might be venerated objectively during the liturgy, arguing that not only the texts within but also the physical book itself was inherently powerful.

Other common features in primers are the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, prayers, and psalms. Primers required some wealth for production, meaning that their form and embellishment could vary widely so that "[in the fourteenth century] most Books of Hours were humbler objects, mass produced with no illustrations, few illustrations, or just bad illustrations."⁸⁶ Such variation means that each primer is slightly unique and therefore a highly personal object for its owner, having significant spiritual worth. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne calls such variation the phenomenon of "textual instability" as "medieval texts were highly unstable, being recreated over and over again as they were adapted to different audiences at different periods."⁸⁷ Duffy points out that the "*raison d'être* of the Book of Hours was to offer lay people a suitably slimmed down

⁸⁴ Duffy, *Stripping*, pp. 214-215. Duffy adds that the Gospel of St. John "was one of the most numinous texts used in the late medieval Church. It was prescribed as part of the ritual for the blessing of holy bread at the main Mass of Sunday, and was recited as an additional or last Gospel by the priest after Mass each day."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁸⁶ Duffy, Eamon. *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240-1570*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 30.

⁸⁷ Jocelyn-Brown, p. 110.

and simplified share in the Church's official cycle of daily prayer, it was not so much a rival religion of the official church as an aspect of it."⁸⁸ Lay people are likely familiar with certain central texts of Primers such as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin and the Prayers for the Dead since these are staples of liturgy, suggesting that, despite the commonality of Latin and Anglo-Norman texts, laity could still recite from and interact with primers during mass.⁸⁹ However, Latin connects the laity with the universal sacred language of the Church, for there was a "special sacral aura therefore attached to Latin as the language of revelation and of worship, and that aura made lay people willing and even eager to pray privately in Latin, thereby associating themselves with the universal public worship of the Church."⁹⁰ Language is not necessarily a barrier to lay understanding and use of primers, especially considering that such books often serve as templates for additional handwritten material in English—prayers, remembrances, even prayer-spells. The important point, according to Duffy, is that people are reciting similar prayers throughout all English parishes. Primers function as templates for spiritual practice, offering multiple models for accessible devotion.

Devotion and the Body

Margery is struck by a rafter while she prays, hearing Mass in St. Margaret's, one of the larger churches in Lynn, a center for communal worship. It is noteworthy that the church rafter falls on her, for the church is the sacred space in which the liturgy is celebrated in order to spread Christ's message of salvation. Here, the church rafter is an instrument for God to enact his grace upon Margery, as he tells her soul to "helde this for

⁸⁸ Duffy, *Marking*, p. 59.

⁸⁹ Duffy, *Stripping*, pp. 220-221.

⁹⁰ Duffy, *Marking*, p. 59.

a gret miracle, and yyf the pepyl wyl not levyn this, I shal werkyn meche mor.”⁹¹ By her account, she is wounded and saved by a miracle. Christ’s intervention suggests that she is closely protected by divine favor and singled out from the community. The first responder to her accident, John of Wereham, acts with kindness towards her, while Master Aleyn, a doctor of divinity, is amazed at the event and attempts to validate the miracle. Master Aleyn retrieves the stone and the beam in order to weigh it and determine what kind of damage it should have done:

this worshipful doctor seyde it was a gret miracle, and ower Lord was helyl to be magnified for the preserving of this creatur ayn the malice of hir enemy, and teld it mech pepyl, and mych pepyl magnified mech God in this creatur. And also mech pepyl wold not levyn it, but rather levyd it was a token or mercy er quemfulnes.⁹²

Master Aleyn offers clerical legitimacy for her experience and informs the people, who respond by viewing her as either a vessel of God’s grace or as a target of vengeance. Her community takes sides in a micro-drama of good and evil that plays out in her book. It is in this divine drama that she mentions her primer. Although the primer seems to fall out of her hand and out of her text, it appears in a pivotal episode when Margery’s body and chastity is most important.

This scene is filled with physical imagery that centers on Margery’s body. The chapter opens with Christ averting the sexual advances of her husband. Margery’s language itself emphasizes the physical senses, the “fleschly knowing,” “heryng hir messe,” and the man who “cam and pullyd hir be the sleve.”⁹³ Likewise, she thinks her

⁹¹ Chapter 9, p. 84: “Take this for a great miracle, and if people will not believe this I shall work a great many more.”

⁹² Chapter 9, pp. 84-85: “this worshipful doctor said it was a great miracle, and our Lord was highly to be glorified for preserving this creature against the malice of her enemy, and he told it to many people and many people greatly glorified God in this creature. And also many people would not believe it, but preferred to believe it was more a token of wrath and vengeance than or mercy or favour.”

⁹³ The “carnal knowledge,” “hearing her mass,” and “came and pulled her by the sleeve.”

back breaks asunder under the weight of the stone and she is “gretly awonderyd that sche felt no peyn and had felt so mech a lytyl befor.”⁹⁴ This physical language is set within the larger context of Margery’s move towards chastity. At the beginning of the chapter, Margery shuns the advances of her husband who wants to have intercourse with her. In chapter 11 she more fully explores the tension of chastity in marriage with her husband, but here in chapter 9 she emphasizes the physical dimension of chastity. Indeed, Margery calls on Jesus in two seemingly different back-to-back events that each threatens her bodily welfare. It is only through Jesus’ intercession that her chastity and pain are remedied. As John Kempe approaches to have intercourse with her, she says “Jhesus, help me!” and John Kempe has no power to touch her. After being struck by the rafter in church and fearing her back was broken she cries “Jhesu, mercy!” and her pain vanishes immediately. Christ protects the sanctity of her body while simultaneously expressing divine mercy through her body. Margery thus portrays her body as a medium of both divine favor and earthly experience. Her primer becomes a metaphor for the spiritual and temporal tensions in her bid for chastity. It is symbolic of a literacy that is performative as she acts out the liturgy outlined in the primer.

The bodies of medieval men and women were thought to be composed of flesh and spirit. Summarizing medieval notions of the spirit and body in her significant work, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, Karma Lochrie shows how Augustine argues for a “distinction between the flesh and the body.”⁹⁵ Augustine, in interpreting Paul, thought that the flesh was the central agent in human sin while the body was a type of vessel carrying the soul. It was up to the mind to master the flesh and bring it under

⁹⁴ Chapter 9, p. 84: “greatly amazed that she now felt no pain and had felt so much a little before.”

⁹⁵ Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. p. 21.

control.⁹⁶ For Lochrie, the “identification of women with flesh, and hence with excess, permeability, and disruption, produces a different model for chastity than that invoked for men.”⁹⁷ The female body is frail and naturally symbolizes weakened senses, while “the sealed body, then, becomes the sign not only of virginity but of the *integritas* of all the senses...It is no coincidence that female sanctity during the late Middle Ages was often manifested through miraculous closure of the body.”⁹⁸ To avoid a lengthy discussion of the medieval body, the key point is that chastity represents the closing of Margery’s body to her worldly husband in favor of a closer connection with God. Not long after being struck by the rafter, Margery makes a deal with her husband to pay for his debts if he remains chaste with her. In response, John Kempe says to her: “As fre mot yowr body ben to God as it hath ben to me.”⁹⁹ Her body is now closed to male human contact and desire while being placed in the service of the Lord, making her seem more like a nun than a lay woman.

Margaret Aston further points out how the tools of writing became religious metaphors. The materials of writing—the pen, the ink, the parchment—were closely associated with Christ’s body and passion. She summarizes this relationship:

The way in which the instruments and forms of writing themselves appear in metaphorical dress in vernacular texts, shows how the extension of literary modes impinged on religious teaching. Christ’s body, nailed to the tree of the rood, is compared to the child’s horn book, the ABC, nailed on its wooden panel. The body of the crucified Christ is seen as a lettered parchment. (‘Come hither, Joseph, behold and look, How many bloody letters ben written in this book’.) The Savior’s wounds become the red letters limned on the vellum.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

⁹⁹ Chapter 11, p. 90: “May your body be as freely available to God as it has been to me.”

¹⁰⁰ Aston, p. 104.

Christ's body is like a parchment on which his wounds are inscribed, suggesting that the letters written on manuscript pages are shaped by human hands just like his wounds. Although primers were not necessarily regarded in such metaphorical terms, they were nonetheless viewed as material books with spiritual value. What is most significant in Margery's primer is her close proximity to the book that she holds in her hand as if an extension of her body. The primer also contained semi-monastic material for use in prayer during church services. It is thus indicative not only of Margery's hybrid status between a lay woman and a nun but also of the surrender of her body to God through chastity.

Ultimately, I have tried to read deeply into the appearance of Margery's own primer. But what does her primer actually tell us about Margery's spiritual practices? Is it really a significant aspect of her devotion? The fact that her primer appears only in this one scene should not discredit its significance. On a practical level it suggests that she has the wealth to acquire a primer and opportunity to use it in church. Her primer shows the importance of prayer in her devotion. Furthermore, the primer illustrates the dynamics of her textual practices as it intensifies her devotion and shows her proximity to semi-monastic reading material. Margery occupies a hybrid role in that she is neither an ordained nun nor a true lay woman, despite her desire to associate with clerics and adopt monastic practices such as chastity and wearing white clothing. The physical and spiritual tensions surrounding her primer show that monastic practices do not always translate effectively into the life of a lay person. Her proximity to the primer reinforces her status as a holy woman against the "voys of the pepyl, which seyde God schuld take veniawns

upon hir.”¹⁰¹ For Margery, a primer is another instrument to distinguish her from her community of lay people and is another piece of a web of spiritual texts that she weaves throughout her book. Although the primer leaves a small imprint on her book, further research may uncover structural and contextual similarities between this genre and Margery’s narrative.

¹⁰¹ Chapter 9, p. 82: “public opinion, which said God should take vengeance upon her.”

Chapter III—Writing and Authorship

This chapter examines the writing process in Margery's narrative, drawing from two general episodes—the proem and chapter 88-89—to illuminate how she became an author. I first explore authority and authorship in her book to show how there are multiple levels of narration simultaneously present: her own narrative voice, the hand of her scribe, and the voices of Christ and God. Next, I investigate two episodes that show Margery's personal writing experience. These scenes show different aspects of Margery's relationships with clerical authorities since her scribe is central to the writing process while God and Jesus urge her to complete her book. Such relationships suggest that she is not a private individual but an active participant in her community and clerical culture more broadly. She uses her social status as the daughter of Lynn's mayor to navigate her way through difficult circumstances and to write a narrative that demonstrates her knowledge and awareness of contemporary literary conventions.¹⁰²

Margery emerges as a close companion of clerical authorities, thereby legitimizing her spiritual practices and locating her beliefs squarely within the confines of orthodoxy. She frames her narrative around her own spirituality, bringing this holiness to the foreground by emphasizing that her life is the result of Christ's intercession. Her scribe authorizes the book, beginning “with a proem that locates Margery in a community in which books serve as tokens of permanency and authority.”¹⁰³ As a woman writing a book, Margery's need to legitimize her own voice and spiritual practice is even more important since the written word is seen as an intellectual activity most suitable for men. Both biblical interpretation and women preaching are looked on with suspicion due to the

¹⁰² Staley, p. 98.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 31.

notion that women were responsible for original sin and the fall of man. This idea was first put forth by patristic writers who suggest that women are subservient to men.

In his *Discourse 2 on Genesis*, John Chrysostom (347-407) writes about how men and women were not equally created in the image of God. He argues that “the ‘image’ has rather to do with authority, and this only the man has; the woman has it no longer. For he is subjected to no one, while she is subjected to him; as God said, ‘Your inclination shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you’ (Gen. 3:16).”¹⁰⁴

Although writing nearly a thousand years before Margery’s time, perceptions of women as subjects to men permeated medieval England and added another barrier for women authors to overcome, even if such restrictions are never so simple in practice. Christopher Roman complicates issues of female authority, noting how “to interpret the Bible, and therefore God, through the written Word becomes a domain of men, to interpret and understand God through the senses and the body becomes the domain of women, especially in the later Middle Ages.”¹⁰⁵ Women authors faced additional issues of authority that “were compounded by repeated injunctions to silence.”¹⁰⁶ Nuns were the main exception to this rule, as they frequently handled books and had proficient literary skills. Margery actively shows her proximity to clerical authorities, including a well-educated doctor of divinity and a brief encounter with Thomas Arundel (1353-1414), the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1399 until 1414, who authorizes her to continue her practices. Yet Margery faces not only issues of female authorial legitimacy, she also deals with the tensions between Latin and the vernacular as languages of spiritual authority. Margery emphasizes her own illiteracy while demonstrating clear knowledge

¹⁰⁴ Clark, Elizabeth. *Women in the Early Church*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1983, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Roman, p.18.

¹⁰⁶ Wogan-Browne, p. 18.

of certain Latin phrases and orthodox doctrine as a means to substantiate her awareness of Latin literate culture. Latin was thought by the Church to be the language of the orthodox, the language of the elite. Thus Margery frames her own life as a text inscribed by the word of God and fashioned according to literary conventions of her day.

The relationship between Latin and English is central to Margery's book because she writes in the vernacular, scattering bits of Latin throughout her narrative. In fact, the following Latin phrases appear in her book: *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*,¹⁰⁷ *Crescite et multiplicamini*,¹⁰⁸ *Bonus es, domine, sperantibus in te*,¹⁰⁹ *Et capitulo Stimulo Amoris et capitulo ut supra*,¹¹⁰ *Jhesus est amor meus*,¹¹¹ and *Ego sum*.¹¹² It is possible that she includes these phrases with the help of her scribe for accuracy, although it is just as probable that she has learned a certain amount of Latin from hearing Mass and conversing with priests, meaning she has a foothold in Latin literate culture. The inclusion of Latin is also part of Margery's greater effort to make her book seem literary and worthy of respect. By evoking literary authority as a means to legitimize her book, Margery exemplifies a trend of Middle English authors "asserting that their texts are worthy partners of the international high-culture literature most commonly associated with French courtly writing, while also distancing themselves from less exalted Middle

¹⁰⁷ "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9), p. 193.

¹⁰⁸ "Be fruitful, and multiply" (Genesis 1:22), p. 243.

¹⁰⁹ From the first line of Marie d'Oignies' *Vita* circulated by Dominicans, p. 293.

¹¹⁰ These are the original Latin chapters from *The Prick of Love*, which Margery quotes in its English translation, p. 295: "A, Lord, what schal I mor noysen er cryen? Thu lettyst and thu comyst not, and I, wery and ovrcome thorw desyr, begynne for to maddyn, for lofe governyth me and not reson. I renne wyth hasty cownr wher-that-eyvr thu wylte I bowe, Lord. Thei that se me irkyn and rewyn, not knowing me drunkyn wyth thi lofo. Lord, thei seyn: 'Lo, yen wood man cryeth in the stretys', but how meche is the desyr of myn hert, thei parceyve not'." ["Ah, Lord, what shall iu more cry out and call? You delay and do not come, and I, weary and overcome with desire, begin to go mad, for love governs me, and not reason. I run with a hasty course wherever you wish. I submit, Lord. Those who see me are irked and have pity, not knowing me to be drunk with your love. 'Lord,' they say, 'see that mad man cries out in the streets,' but they do not perceive how great is the desire of my heart'].

¹¹¹ "Jesus is my Love," p. 305.

¹¹² "I am he" (John 18:4-8), p. 343.

English texts.”¹¹³ Nonetheless, Margery shows that the Latin-English divide is subtle and complex in actual practice.¹¹⁴ Her narrative demonstrates that Latin is not part of an enclosed linguistic, cultural sphere distinct from English but that these two languages are closely tied together through medieval notions of authorship, authority, and actual practice.

In late medieval England, the languages of cultural prestige were Latin and French.¹¹⁵ English was increasingly becoming a language of cultural transmission, as evidenced by the large number of vernacular texts and translations resulting from the desire of lay people to access devotional texts. Yet vernacular reading can still be considered an elite skill, for many people were unable to receive the necessary education to read directly from the page. Nonetheless, as Margery demonstrates, this limitation does not mean that lay people were cut off from reading practices. As an author writing in Middle English, Margery has authority—*auctoritas*—over the written word and thus engages with Latin notions of authority while writing for a vernacular-reading community. In Margery’s terms, ‘author’ differs from contemporary ideas that

often revolve around either the notion of individual genius (derived from the romantic conception of the “artist”) or that of property rights over a text (as expressed in laws governing copyright or plagiarism). Authorship in the Middle Ages was more likely to be understood as participation in an intellectually and morally authoritative tradition, within which...a writer might fill one of several roles, copying, modifying, or translating, as well as composing.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Jocelyn-Brown, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Wogen-Browne, pp. 3-4. Writing a commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, Bonaventure (1221-1274) describes authorship thusly: “People compose books in four different ways. One person writes material composed by other people, adding or changing nothing; and this person is said to be merely the scribe. Another one writes material composed by others, joining them together but adding nothing of his own; and this person is said to be the compiler. Another one writes both materials composed by others and his own, but the materials composed by others are the most important materials, while his own are added for the purpose of clarifying them; and this person is said to be the commentator, not the author. Another

Margery participates in these intellectual and moral traditions by including Latin phrases, referencing other spiritual books, and emphasizing the role of her scribe: “With its [Margery’s book] allusions to other books of spiritual counsel, its attention to its own veracity as a written text, and its careful delineation of the chronological relationship between experience and transcription, it seems to insist upon its own literary authority.”¹¹⁷ Thus Margery stresses her participation in the production and writing of her book to present herself as an authority in the book-making process.

Margery and *Auctoritas*

Summe of these worthy and worshipful clerkys tokyn it, in perel oh her sowle and as thei wold answer to God, that this creatur was inspired wyth the Holy Gost, and bodyn hyr that sche schuld don hem wryten and makyn a booke of hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons. Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys, and sche wold not consentyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in hir sowle hat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone. And so it was xx yer and mor fro that tym this creatur had first felyngys and revelacyons, er than sche dede any wryten. Aftyward, whan it plesyd ower Lord, he comawnded hyr and chargyd hir that sche schuld don wryten hyr felyngys and revelacyons and the forme of her levying, that hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle the world.¹¹⁸

Whan this booke was first in wrytyng, the sayd creatur was mor at hom in hir chamber wyth hir writer, and seyde fewer bedys for sped of wrytyng than sche had don yerys befor. And whan sche cam to chirche and schulde heryn messe, purposing to seyn hir mateyns and swech other devovyons as sche had usyd afortyme, hir hert was drawyn away fro the deying and set mech on meditacyon. Sche being aferd of displesawns of oowr Lord, he seyde to hir sowle: “Drede the not, dowtyr, for as many bedys as thu

one writes both his own materials and those composed by others, but his own are the mos important materials and the materials of others are included in order to confirm his own; and this person must be called the author”, quoted in Wogan-Browne.

¹¹⁷ Staley, p. 36.

¹¹⁸ Proem, pp. 46-47: “Some of these worthy clerics took it, on peril of their souls and as they would answer to God, that this creature was inspired with the Holy Ghost, and bade her that she should have a book written of her feelings and her revelations. Some offered to write her feelings with their own hands, and she would in no way consent for she was commanded in her soul that she should not write so soon. And so it was twenty years and more from the time that this creature first had feelings and revelations before she had any written. Afterwards, when it pleased our Lord, he commanded and charged her that she should have written down her feelings and revelations, and her form of living, so that his goodness might be known to all the world”, pp. 35.

woldist seyin, I accepte hem as thow thu seydist hem, and thi stody that thu stodiist, for to do writyn the grace that I have schewyd to the, plesith me right meche, and he that writith bothe. For, thow ye wer in the chirche and wept bothyn togedyr as sore as evyr thu dedist, yet schulde ye not plesyn me mor than ye don wyth your writing, for, dowtyr, be this boke many a man schal by turnyd to me and belevyn therin.¹¹⁹

In this section I first explore the proem before moving into the end of Book I and her injunction to write. My analysis focuses on her relationship with her two scribes and her engagement with processes of writing. These two excerpts show Margery participating in the writing process through conversations with clerics and the Lord. A proem is a preface to a longer book and thus resides in the extremity of the manuscript where it frames the narrative but is not necessarily part of the narrative trajectory. In the case of Margery's book, her proem is written by her scribe and summarizes her gradual desire to write. She is referred to as a 'creatur,' which is possibly her own usage or an addition of her scribe, implying that she is lowly before God, being a servant who follows him and responds to his actions as her nature allows. Margery straightaway places Christ as the centerpiece of her narrative that is aimed at 'synful wrecchys' as a tool for education: "Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth, yf lak of charyte be not ower hynderawnce."¹²⁰ Margery's lifelong spiritual journey is the 'werk' of Christ so that she is an example for the betterment of other people seeking the grace of God. As the subject

¹¹⁹ Chapter 88, pp. 379: "When this book was first being written the said creature was more at home in her chamber with the man doing the writing, and said fewer beads than she had done for years before, in order to speed the writing. And when she came to church to hear mass, intending to say her matins and such other devotions as she had performed before, her heart was drawn away from recitation and much set upon meditation. She being afraid of the displeasure of our Lord, he said to her soul, 'Do not be afraid, daughter, for as many beads as you would like to say, I accept them as though you said them: and you concentration on getting written down the grace that I have shown you pleases me greatly, and he who is doing the writing as well. For though you were in church and both wept together as bitterly as you ever did, you still would not please me more than you do with your writing, for, daughter, by this book many a man shall to turned to me and believe."

¹²⁰ Proem, pp. 41: "All the works of our Savior are for our example and instruction, and what grace that he works in any creature is our profit, if lack of charity be not our hindrance."

of the book, she is the receiver of ‘hys wonderful werkys’ that turn her to the love of Christ. She seemingly records Christ’s intercession to serve as an exemplary figure for other people in dire circumstances. The opening of the proem therefore presents Margery as a saintly figure: she is a humble servant, a vessel of God’s grace, and she is a means for spiritual instruction.

Her scribe next tells how she is struck with bodily sickness that reverses her fortunes by causing her to loose material possessions, turning her companions into her enemies. She turns to the Holy Church for confession and welcomes Christ into her life, thereby converting her to the holy life. The result of her conversion is a life devoted to God:

For evyr the mor slawnder and repref that sche sufferyd, the mor sche incresyd in grace and in devocyon of holy madytacyon, of hy contemplacyon, and of wonderful spechys and dalyawns which owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle, techyng hyr how sche schuld be despised for hys lofe, how sche schuld han pacyens, setting all hyr trost, alle hyr lofe, and alle hyr affeccyon in hym only.¹²¹

This passage conveys themes that recur throughout her narrative such as conversation, contemplation, and teaching. Now the image of Margery expands, from that of a humble servant to an active participant in an ongoing conversation with the Lord: she is a student while he is the master. Margery positions herself closer to God by creating distance from her community of critics and conversing with Christ through meditation of the inner life. As Staley remarks, Margery is “successful neither as an alewife not as a mill-owner, her neighbors scorn her and chastise her for her worldliness. Shortly thereafter, Margery begins to focus on her inner self and to begin to discount the

¹²¹ Proem, p. 44: “For ever the more slander and reproof that she suffered, the more she increased in grace and in devotion of holy meditation, of high contemplation, and of wonderful speeches and conversation which our Lord spoke and conveyed to her soul, teaching her how she would be despised for his love, and how she should have patience, setting all her trust, all her love and all her affection on him alone.”

‘worshepys of the world’.¹²² By conversing with Christ, Margery aligns her spiritual status with that of saints and other exemplary figures. The proem frames Margery as an authentic spiritual authority called to write her book by the worldly leaders of the church, these ‘worthy and worshipful clerkys.’ This authenticity does not mean that her authority is ever clearly established. Throughout her book, Margery continually associates with the clergy and the process of writing to show her awareness of the way that exemplary figures are written into texts.

In describing her own calling to write, clerics offer to write her book but are rebuked since she was not ready. Twenty years later she decides to record her memories but cannot find a suitable writer. This scene juxtaposes two periods of her life, one prior to the calling to write and the other after. What is important is that her decision to write comes not from the clergy but from God. Here, clerics are a necessary component to a writing process that is ultimately grounded in Margery herself and governed by God. She thus sets herself apart from the clerics without dismissing their importance in order to prioritize her spiritual relationship with God, moving between human and divine interactions. Her first scribe is friendly but writes a book “so evel wretyn that he [the second scribe] coud lytyl skyl theron, for it was neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne the lettyr was not shapyn ne formyd as other letters ben.”¹²³ Wogan-Browne suggests that Margery’s “apparent victimization at the hands of incompetent or unwilling scribes, including the one who eventually wrote her *Book*, became matter for her book’s account of the vicissitudes appropriate to Christ’s spouse.”¹²⁴ The second scribe even refuses to

¹²² Staley, p. 48.

¹²³ Proem, p. 47: “so ill-written that he could make little sense of it, for it was neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters are.”

¹²⁴ Wogan-Browne, p. 18.

write for a brief time because there “was ther so evel spekyng of this creatur and of hir wepyng, that the prest durst not for cowardyse speke wyth her but seldom, ne not wold wryten as he had behestyd unto the forseyd creatur.”¹²⁵ Although the priest eventually relents and agrees to finish her book, the initial writing process is depicted as a struggle, a contest among Margery, her scribes, and the material book itself that must be rewritten into readable script.

For Margery, writing is a spiritual activity. Her struggle to find a proper scribe and make her book readable suggests that her life, as a ‘werk’ of Christ, is connected to the letters on the pages. The vernacular contains her whole being. Legible vernacular script is therefore necessary for the preservation and readability of her life. After retrieving her manuscript from a paid scribe, Margery hands it back to the scribe who decided to stop working with her. This priest resumes, despite his struggle to read the poorly written text, for Margery “schuld prey to God for hym and purchasyn hym grace to redder it and wrytyn it also. The preste, trusting in hire prayers, began to redyn this booke, and it was mych more esy, as hym thowt, than it was beforntym.”¹²⁶ Prayer here helps the priest to read the book and demonstrates Margery’s changing roles in the writing process: she is at once the dictator of the text, “sumtym helping where ony difficulte was,”¹²⁷ and also the spiritual authority in its production. It is her scribes who write badly or have difficulty reading the manuscript. She remedies the situation by asking God for help, effectively bringing the written script into accordance with her

¹²⁵ Proem, p. 48: “there was such evil talk about this creature and her weeping, that the priest out of cowardice dared not speak with her but seldom, nor would write as he had promised the said creature.”

¹²⁶ Proem, p. 49: “[she] would pray to God for him, and gain him grace to read it and to write it as well. The priest, trusting in her prayers, began to read this book, and it was much easier, as he thought, than it was before.”

¹²⁷ Proem, p. 49: “she sometimes helping where there was any difficulty.”

actual memories. Producing her text reflects her life and the struggles she underwent while learning about Christ. The book ultimately reinforces her spiritual authority as a woman writer. Her choice to include a line of scribal succession is no accident, for: “In terms of the *Book’s* function, the scribe is an integral component of the fiction, for by his very existence *in the text* he testifies to the local eminence of the holy, the exemplary.”¹²⁸ Describing the writing process shows Margery’s awareness of different levels of authority in that she gives written form to a life shaped by Christ. The Lord is the ultimate authority, who confers his authority in human spiritual matters to the Church and from there to the clerics who teach the laity.

In giving aspects of her life written form, Margery implicitly equates her body with a text that her scribe can read. Her personal conversations with Christ shape her spiritual practices, which are then witnessed by fellow Christians including the scribe. Embedding textual references in her narrative to hagiography, Middle English devotional texts, and the Bible shows her engagement with a living Christian reality. Indeed, she exemplifies this reality through a writing process that allows her to rework and employ existing texts while giving primacy to her own material. Her tears, visions, and conversations with Christ all demonstrate her proximity to the divine. The scribe, in hearing her dictate these practices, recognizes her holiness as he reads over the poorly written version of her book. Her holiness is further confirmed as she helps the scribe’s writing, taking away any hindrances in order to fulfill God’s injunction:

He compleyned to the creatur of hys dysese. Sche seyde hys enemy had envye at hys good dede and wold let hym yf hy mygth, and bad hym do as wel as God wold yeve hym grace and not levyn. Whan he cam ageyn to hys booke, he myght se as wel, hym thowt, as evyr he dede befor, be day-lyth and be and be candellygth bothe. And for this

¹²⁸ Staley, p. 38.

cause, whan he had wretyn a qwayr, he addyd a leef therto, and than wrot he this proym, to expressyn mor openly than doth the next folwyng, which was wretyn er than this.¹²⁹

She assures him that God will correct his vision because of his meritorious deed in writing her story, for her life is an example of Christ's 'werk.' Christ is the true *auctoritas* in her book as her "body belongs to the cosmos and obeys the same divine laws as those governing the forces of nature... She is part of the *liber naturae*. Whoever reads her astutely will be able to uncover a divine message."¹³⁰ Being a professional cleric, the priest-scribe perceptively reads her holiness and writes an extra proem in her already existing prologue, emphasizing Christ's presence in this holy woman. The priest transcribes Margery's experiences from an illegible book, crafting a new book of acceptable literary merit in the process.

Stressing the need for legibility highlights Margery's anxiety about the writing process. She experiences "ineffable sounds and melodies while she was writing; she was frequently ill, and on each occasion was suddenly made well and told to return to her work."¹³¹ Margery initially views writing as an order from God; it is only after he converses with her that she perceives the spiritual value of writing. Speaking to her about writing in chapter 88, God says that he is pleased by her intense desire to write down his grace, which extends to Margery and the scribe. God tells her that her book will save many men by converting them to his grace. Writing is a type of divine labor. His assurance reinforces the meritorious aspects of book-writing mentioned in the proem, yet

¹²⁹ Proem, p. 50: "He complained to the creature about his troubles. She said his enemy was envious of his good deed and would hinder him if he might, and she bade him to do as well as God would give him grace and not give up. When he came back to his book again, he could see as well, he though, as he ever did before both by daylight and by candlelight. And for this reason, when he had written a quire he added a leaf to it, and then he wrote this proem to give a fuller account than does the following one, which was written before this."

¹³⁰ Renevey, p. 199.

¹³¹ Atkinson, p. 126.

it also equates writing with attending church: “And whan sche cam to chirche and schulde heryn messe, purposing to seyn hir mateyns and swech other devovyons as sche had usyd afortyme, hir hert was drawyn away fro the deying and set mech on meditacyon.”¹³² Margery worries that she is distancing herself from the Lord in order to finish her book, but he informs her that writing is as meritorious as attending church and saying prayers. Nonetheless, writing is still a stressful process:

Also, whil the forseyd creatur was occupiid abowte the writing of his tretys, sche had many holy teerys and wepingys, and oftyntymys ther cam a flawme of fyer abowte hir brest ful hoot and delectably, and also he that was hir writer cowed not sumtyme kepyn himself fro wepyng. And oftyn in the menetyme, whan the creatur was in cherche, owr Lord Jhesu Crist, wyth hys gloryows modyr and many seyntys also, comyn into hir sowle and thankyd hir, seying that thei wer wel plesyd wyth the writing of this boke.¹³³

Writing evokes images of devotion such as tears, fire, and the weeping of her scribe. Moreover, Christ and saints come to her soul and approve of her work, suggesting that Margery’s audience is not only her scribe but also the holy community of saints. Thus, writing brings Margery closer to the sacred reality of Christian history, past and present. It at once links her to Christ and the saints—the divine realm—while also bringing merit to her scribe—the worldly realm.

In conclusion, Margery’s writing places her at the center of book production. She negotiates linguistic and gendered tensions to make her life appear revered by the clergy due to her status in the eyes of Christ. For Margery, writing is a devotional practice.

¹³² Chapter 88, pp. 379: “And when she came to church to hear mass, intending to say her matins and such other devotions as she had performed before, her heart was drawn away from recitation and much set upon meditation.”

¹³³ Chapter 89, pp. 382: “Also, while the said creature was occupied with the writing of this treatise, she had many holy tears and much weeping, and often there came a flame of fire about her breast, very hot and delectable; and also, he that was writing for her could sometimes not keep himself from weeping. And often in the meantime, when this creature was in church, our Lord Jesus Christ with his glorious mother, and many saints as well, came into her soul and thanked her, saying that they were well pleased with the writing of this book.”

Through writing, she imitates the way that the lives of saints and holy women like Julian of Norwich are authorized. Yet she also shows that writing has real-world experience for a would-be woman author. Writing is an experience with pitfalls and breakthroughs, illnesses and changes of fortune. Overcoming these obstacles means that Margery, although presenting herself as a humble writer, has shared in experiences unfamiliar to most Christians. Just as Christ inscribes his grace on her, she too inscribes her life on the page. As the primary instrument for reproducing and disseminating the lives of holy people, writing is an extremely important aspect of Margery's literacy and devotion.

Chapter IV—The Holy Woman and the Friar

Turning now to the other side of the literacy spectrum—the orality of Margery’s spiritual development—this chapter investigates education within the context of late medieval English preaching. The focus here is specifically on English sermons as opposed to Latin sermons and how they fit into the larger context of Christian education.¹³⁴ Preaching is one domain of the Church’s educational agenda that sought to teach the laity and clergy an essential level of knowledge in order to prepare them to follow the sacraments and behave according to Christian values. Writing about the dichotomy between the ‘teachers’ and the ‘taught’ in Margery’s time, Gwenfair Adams states that the

teachers included theologians, mystics, monks, preachers, writers, and hagiographers. The learners included the nobleman and the serf, the tailor’s son and the merchant’s wife, the ‘lewde men and women.’ In differentiating between the two groups, however, I do not wish to imply that there was a higher class of spirituality that could be distinguished from a lower grade of piety belonging to the laity. The pious practices and beliefs of the poor and the rich, the secular and religious, and the pilgrim and the monk were all woven from the same wool. Not all teachings originated with those in official positions of religious authority.¹³⁵

There is no fundamental distinction regarding the importance of education between the teachers and the taught, between the clergy and the laity, since even many clergy were inadequately educated. The growth in the production of vernacular training manuals for priests during the 15th century attests to these educational trends, suggesting

¹³⁴ See Spencer, p. 15: “To discount the Latin entirely would be unhistorical: the English sermons depend upon and derive from the huge corpus of Latin material. Because they are derivative, the vernacular sermons constitute only a tributary—a backwater perhaps—leading directly or indirectly from the mainstream of religious writing in Latin. . . . Consequently, some important figures have been relegated to the background of the study because there is little or no sign that English writers have directly modeled themselves upon them, or that the Latin writers themselves designed their sermons as model collections for vernacular preachers to use.”

¹³⁵ Adams, Gwenfair Walters. *Visions in Late Medieval England: Lay Spirituality and Sacred Glimpses of the Hidden Worlds of Faith*. Boston: Koninklijke, 2007.

that the Church in England was sensitive to the need for better trained clerics to serve in parishes. French argues that these manuals show that as Latin knowledge was declining “the desire for knowledgeable and literate clergy was not. At the same time, parishioners also wanted qualified, honest, and committed clergy who would perform their jobs with sincerity.”¹³⁶ The clergy and laity were closely connected in a web of relationships as the ecclesiastical authorities of the parish were part of the local traditions and communities.¹³⁷ Margery’s book exemplifies such connections between the clergy and laity, demonstrating how she moves between the local and the universal aspects of Christian education.

In late medieval England, Christian education began in the parish and included preaching, church images, collaborative reading, and spiritual manuals or guides. The education of both the laity and the clergy happened in a variety of ways, although the general trend was to reinforce orthodoxy so as to assure that neither party was subject to heresy and improper practices. If priests were not properly trained they could not effectively minister to their parishes, meaning the salvation of parishioners was at stake. Likewise, uninformed laity would be unable to take the sacraments and may be more likely to pursue heterodox interpretations of Scripture or church teachings. Thus Christian education had real-world impacts in the mind of Margery and her contemporaries. The groundwork for more dedicated Christian education began in the 13th century with the

¹³⁶ French, *People*, p. 180. In summarizing the work of Peter Heath on the English parish before the Reformation, she adds that the parish “could employ clergy who would offer specific liturgical and spiritual practices and fulfill the laity’s spiritual needs. The problem, Heath argues, was that the clergy were unable to keep up with the growth in literacy or the laity’s increasing interest in religious matters. Bishops may not have established consistent programs of study to facilitate the clergy’s role in pastoral care, but they cared about the quality of their clergy.”

¹³⁷See French, *People*, p. 21: “Once members of a given parish developed certain patterns of liturgical practice, fundraising, social interaction, and decision making, they would go to great lengths to protect them. The desire for salvation that could be advanced through involvement in the church was infused with the desire to honor the traditions of the particular parish.”

Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which called for increased education among the laity through attentive pastoral care. Specifically, this council

decreed that each cathedral should have a master of grammar who will instruct the clergy and poor scholars gratis, and in metropolitan churches there should also be a master of theology, who will teach priests and others ‘in the sacred page’ and who will especially instruct them in those things which pertain to the care of souls...More than Mass priests, they were expected to be pastors of souls.¹³⁸

The Fourth Lateran Council also required laity to confess their sins once a year or risk expulsion from the Church, which is the first time that confession became necessary for Church membership.¹³⁹ Such significant decrees at the council show an increasing interest in well-trained priests able to competently spread and maintain orthodox Christian faith in every parish. Moreover, the council’s canons imply a renewed concern for the salvation of lay people in an effort to augment spiritual practices by educating those most responsible for teaching.

The Fourth Lateran Council also required lay people to annually confess their sins to their local parish priest. This event served as an educational moment for the priest to test confessors on their knowledge of Christian practice, including the articles of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁴⁰ The primary issue in the spread of annual confession was that “the penitent needed to know how, what, and when to confess, the priest needed to be able to distinguish between what was serious and what was trivial, to impose the

¹³⁸ Logan, *History*, pp. 195-196. Logan quotes from canon 16 which formulates proper priestly behavior: “Clerics shall not hold secular office nor indulge in commerce, especially unseemly commerce. They shall not attend performances of mimes, jesters or plays and shall avoid taverns except only out of necessity while traveling. Nor shall they play with dice; they should not even be present at such games. They should wear the clerical tonsure and be zealous in the performance of their divine offices and in other responsibilities. Moreover, they shall wear their garments clasped and neither too short nor too long, and they shall eschew bright colours such as red and green as well as ornamentation on their gloves and shoes.”

¹³⁹ Logan, *History*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁰ Duffy, *Stripping*, pp. 54.

appropriate penances.”¹⁴¹ Priests were required to serve as both spiritual guides and moral compasses for their parish. It was their responsibility to maintain orthodox faith and practices, which meant that training priests to sensibly fulfill their duties became a central subject of vernacular training manuals. William of Pagula’s (d. 1332) *Oculus Sacerdotis* taught priests how to hear confessions, information about particular sins, and “essential religious knowledge, such as how to baptize babies in case of emergency, the age at which children should be confirmed, and questions of sexual and social morality, as well as doctrinal knowledge.”¹⁴² Likewise, John Mirk’s (c. 1382-c. 1414) *Instructions for Parish Priests* was meant to help less-educated priests perform basic duties in church and at confession. Mirk instructs priests to take confession, receive communion, and outlines the duties of midwives. He also explains the Eucharist and the seven sacraments in accessible poetic verse.¹⁴³

Another important document comes from John Pecham’s (archbishop of Canterbury 1279-1292) *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*, a manual for priests. In this manual he “called for parish priests to explain four times a year the fourteen articles of faith, the ten commandments, the two precepts of the Gospel, the seven works of mercy, the seven deadly sins, the seven principle virtues, and the seven sacraments.”¹⁴⁴ Regular instruction in key aspects of Christian faith was thought to give lay people the essential requirements for proper worship and guide them towards salvation. Bishops also increased lay education by recruiting more preachers. Thomas Arundel’s *Constitutions* of 1408

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴³ Mirk, John. *Instructions for Parish Priests*. Ed. Gillis Kristensson. Lund: Gleerup, 1974.

¹⁴⁴ Fench, *People*, pp. 177-178. Fench also notes that Pecham’s *Ignorantia Sacerdotum* was translated into English in 1435 by John Stafford, the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Stafford “concluded [his translation] by ordering all parishes to acquire a copy of this work and by requiring the clergy to read it to their parishioners four times a year. In this manner, the bishop hoped to address both clerical and lay ignorance.”

“limited the content of what preachers could tell the laity and required all bishops to license all preachers working in their dioceses. Only the beneficed clergy could preach on scripture; the unbeneficed had to confine themselves to the topics outlined in Pecham’s *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*.”¹⁴⁵ Arundel also prohibited biblical translations from Latin into English in response to the spread of Lollardism in earlier decades and as a means to standardize the biblical texts offered to laity. Through such decrees, Arundel “sought to prevent heretical preachers from working in the dioceses and to keep the clergy and parish life orthodox.”¹⁴⁶ There was a clear tension between educational practices that sought to teach essential Christian knowledge and the need for censorship. Increasing the knowledge of the laity through education could disrupt the Church’s authority in the wake of the Lollards. Margery deliberately situates her book in this time to examine secular and spiritual authority as she decenters clerical power.¹⁴⁷

The general trend of educational agendas in the 14th and 15th centuries can be summarized as an attempt to spread essential aspects of Christianity necessary for salvation and to assure that the clergy were prepared to teach within their parishes, testing parishioners during yearly confession on their knowledge of the necessary doctrine. In examining the increase of vernacular instructional manuals for both clergy and laity, Eamon Duffy notes that it was considered acceptable for both groups to practice “meditation on the Passion or the life of Christ, affective devotion to his sufferings, to the Sacrament, or to the saints, the recognition of a desire for a more structured and elaborate

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ French, *People*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁷ Staley, p. 173: “She also peppers the narrative with name of real people, figures of the English church such as Philip Repingdon, Thomas Arundel, or Henry Bowet or of key individuals like the Duke of Bedford, who were active in supporting orthodoxy as a manifestation of nationalism.”

prayer-life.”¹⁴⁸ Devotional texts were more accessible for the laity with the spread of literacy, indicating lay interest in certain monastic practices as already observed through primers and contemplative reading. However, the increase in educational opportunities for laity and clergy was not necessarily representative of all English people, for Margery

was a formidably determined woman with some means, living in what was possibly the most religiously privileged part of early fifteenth-century England, for the towns of East Anglia had far more in the way of religious resources than the scattered communities of Derbyshire, Cumberland, or Wales. The religious horizons of villagers in remote areas probably remained fairly constricted even late into the century, but in Yorkshire, the East Midlands, East Anglia, the South-east, and many parts of the West Country, a common and extremely rich religious culture for the laity and secular clergy had emerged by the fifteenth century, which far exceeded the modest expectations of Pecham and the thirteenth-century bishops who devised the catechetical strategies of the medieval English Church.¹⁴⁹

Margery was representative of her East Anglian religious community. Her confrontation with a friar shows the dynamics of preaching at the communal level in Lynn as she is scorned by the friar and attempts to legitimize her spiritual experiences through local clerics.

A Friar Comes to Lynn

Than cam ther a frer to Lenne which was holyn an holy man and a good prechour. Hys name and hys perfeccyon of prechyng spred and sprong wondyr wyde. Ther cam good men to the sayd creatur, of good charite, and seyde: ‘Margery, now schal ye han prechyng anow, for ther is comyn on of the most famows frerys in Inglong to this towne, for to be her in con[v]ent.’ Than was sche mery and glad and thankyd God wyth al hir hert that so good a man was comyn to dwellyn amongys hem. In schort tyme aftyr he seyde a sermown in a chapel of Seynt Jamys in Lenne, wher was meche pepyl hadyrd to heryn the sermown. And er the frer went to the pulpit, the parisch preste of the same place wher he schulde prechyn went to hym and seyde: ‘Ser, I prey yow, beth not displeyd. Her schal comyn a woman to yowr sermown the which oftyntymes, whan sche herith of the Passyon of owr Lord, er of any hy devovyon, sche wepith, sobbith, and cryeth, but it lestith not longe. And therfor, good ser, yyf sche make any noyse at yowr sermown, suffyr it paciently and beth not abaschyd therof.’ The good frer went forth to

¹⁴⁸ Duffy, *Stripping*, p. 62.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

sey the sermown, and seyde ful holily and ful devoutly, and spak meche of owr Lordys Passyon, that the seyde creatur myght no lengar beryn it. Sche kept hir fro crying as long as sche myght, and than at the last sche brast owte wyth a gret cry and cryid wondyr sor. The good frèr suffyrd it paciently and seyde no word therto at that tyme.¹⁵⁰

Patient at first, this good friar later wishes that Margery were removed from the church and prevents her from attending his sermons for several years, asking her to go to another church while he was present.¹⁵¹ She is much dismayed and several men—the young reading priest, a doctor of divinity, and a burghess—attempt and fail to convince the friar to permit her attendance at his preaching. Even some members of her own community speak against her while others defend her weeping:

Summe that weryn hir frendys answeyrd ayen: ‘Sir, have hir excusyd. Sche may not withstand it.’ Than meche pepil turnyd ayen hir and wer ful glad that the good frer held ayen hir. Than seyde summe men that sche had a devil wythinne hir. And so had thei seyde many tymys befor, but now thei wer mor bolde, for hem thowt that her opinion was wel strengthyd er ellys fotifyed be this good frer.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Chapter 61, pp. 286-87: “Then a friar came to Lynn who was held to be a holy man and a good preacher. His name and his skill in preaching were very widely known. Good men came to the said creature in their charity and said, ‘Margery, now you will have enough preaching, for one of the most famous friars in England has come to this town to be in their establishment here. Then she was happy and glad, and thanked God with all her heart that so good a man had come to dwell amongst them. A short time afterwards, he preached a sermon in a chapel of St. James in Lynn, where many people gathered to hear the sermon. And before he went to the pulpit, the parish priest of the place where he was going to preach went to him and said, ‘Sir, I pray you be not displeased. A woman will come here to your sermon who often, when she hears of the Passion of our Lord or of any high devotion, weeps, sobs and cries, but it does not last long. And therefore, good sir, if she should make any noise at your sermon, bear with it patiently and do not be dismayed by it.’ The good friar went forward to preach the sermon, and spoke most holily and most devoutly, and said much about our Lord’s Passion, so that the said creature could no longer bear it. She kept herself from crying as long as she could, and then at last she burst out with a great cry, and cried amazingly bitterly. The good friar bore it patiently, and said not a word about it at that time.”

¹⁵¹ Staley, p. 10, suggests that ‘good’ is part of Margery’s ‘private vocabulary’: “she consistently applies the adjective ‘good’ to nouns like *man*, *lady*, or *priest* as a way not only of indicating their manner toward Margery and her needs, but of designating their spiritual status.”

¹⁵² Chapter 61, p. 288: “Some people that were her friends replied, ‘Sir, do excuse her. She can’t control it.’ Then many people turned against her and were very glad that the good friar held against her. Then some men said that she had a devil within her, and they had said so many times before, but now they were bolder, for they thought that their opinion was much strengthened by this good friar,” p.188. In his gloss for the Middle English ‘withstand,’ Windeatt notes that the Red Annotator writes: ‘Non est in hominis potestate prohibere spiritum s[anctum]’ [It is not in the power of men to prohibit the holy spirit].

Margery is thus the subject of communal discussion, thrown out of the friar's sermon due to her weeping, which was recognized as a sign of spiritual grace. The friar appears more concerned about his own preaching than identifying the signs of divine presence during his sermon. Moreover, Margery's involuntary action singles her out from her community as she writes about her 'frendys' who defend her and 'meche pepil' who think she is possessed by the devil. This communal fragmentation and clerical defense of her spirituality is initiated by the friar's preaching and personal disapproval. What does this experience signify about Margery's own spirituality and the role of preaching in her life?

In the late Middle Ages, English preaching was a central aspect of lay education. Sermons were often part of the liturgy and heard either in church or in a public space. Also, Sermons were typically delivered orally from a pulpit and focused on integrating biblical texts into the lives and experiences of the lay audience. In her study of preaching and gender in the later Middle Ages, Claire Waters notes that sermon exempla "owe a dual allegiance: to the authority that validates them but also to the experience that makes them acceptably "realistic" examples."¹⁵³ Her point is that the preacher stands between earth and heaven, between the clergy and the laity, and must use all his oratory skill to instruct the audience without deceiving them. People were capable of judging good preachers from the bad. Nonetheless, there was a real danger that rhetoric (defined by Waters as 'verbal artistry') could lead the audience astray from the real message of the sermon, which meant that the preacher was responsible for reaching an audience in a way

¹⁵³ Waters, Claire M. *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

that was meaningful and not manipulative.¹⁵⁴ Waters argues that the preacher was thus connected intimately with the audience as to gain their trust and respect while maintaining the authority of his position. She writes that

the preacher's ability to address his congregation in the "common language" meant not only his ability to speak French, Italian, or English but also his ability to use exempla, proverbs, and other "common speech" to get his message across. To form a connection the preacher had, to a certain extent, to make himself like his audience—or rather, to acknowledge and exploit his existing likeness to them.¹⁵⁵

Exempla—and the content of the sermon more generally—were a means for preachers to become closer to their audience and participate in what Waters calls the "common speech" or the vernacular.¹⁵⁶ Applying these insights to Margery's book suggests that she is not trying to undermine the friar but rather show the dynamics of the clergy; some support her while another berates her publically.

The good friar who comes to preach in Lynn is widely known and is presented by Margery as an effective preacher and holy man. His presence brings many people from the community together to hear his sermon and they even recognize how Margery yearns for good preaching and personally tell her about his arrival. Her own parish priest warns the friar about Margery's weeping. Here, the friar appears as an outsider entering a community already familiar with Margery's spiritual weeping and interests as if she is singled out from the group on account of her practices. Although she tries to resist the tears, the preacher is so effective when speaking about Christ's Passion that she "myth no

¹⁵⁴ Waters, p. 80: Waters summarizes Augustine's argument from book 2 of *De doctrina christiana* concerning rhetoric: "The materials and means of rhetoric come from God and were merely discovered by mankind; thus it is impossible that they should work only to evil purposes." Human preachers can use rhetoric for good or for evil.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 72: "Indeed, considering vernacularity not as a purely linguistic issue but as a matter of the preacher's access to his audience allows us to see that preachers did not so much traverse the imagined space between laity and clergy as embody it; the preacher's very identity as a cleric relied on his ability to participate in the "vernacular"."

lengar beryn it” and she weeps. Margery prays that the Lord might “make thi holy word to sattlyn in her sowlys as I wolde that it shulde don in myn, and as many mict be turnyd be hys voys, as shulde ben be thy voys yyf thu prechedist thyselve.”¹⁵⁷ She compares the effect the voice of the friar might have on the people to that of Christ himself, noting especially that Christ’s word is coming into their souls through the mouth of the friar. Spencer observes that preachers were ultimately servants of God, being the “mere vessel, or repository, of God’s word...he was the *os Dei*, the mouth through which God in heaven continued to teach his people exiled on earth.”¹⁵⁸ The friar, like any other authorized preacher, is represented as an embodied link between God and humanity. Denying Margery access to his sermons is particularly painful since his preaching makes God’s word come alive during the sermon and stirs her spiritually.

Responding to the friar’s condemnation of Margery, several priests, a doctor of divinity (possible Master Alan), and a bachelor of law—her confessor—vainly plead with him to reverse his decision. They tell the friar that her weeping “was a yyft of God, and that sche cowed not have it but whan God wolde yeve it, ne sche myth not wythstande it whan God wolde send it.”¹⁵⁹ Attributing her weeping to God’s grace shows that the clerics recognize Margery’s holiness and know how to effectively read signs of spirituality. More importantly, these clerics are all personally connected with Margery and the parish, having a dual allegiance to the local community and to the Church. One is her own confessor, another a learned doctor of divinity, while the priest is the same one who read devotional classics to her and gained much merit for his actions. Margery

¹⁵⁷ Chapter 61, pp. 288: “make your holy word to settle in their souls as I would that it would do in mine, and may as many be turned by his voice, as would be by your voice if you preached yourself.”

¹⁵⁸ Spencer, p. 100.

¹⁵⁹ Chapter 61, pp. 289: “was a gift of God, and that she could not have it but when God would give it, nor could she withstand it when God would send it.”

juxtaposes this personal, local community and their appreciation of her spirituality with the wandering friar temporarily lodging at Lynn, who blames her tears on a “cardiakyl, er sum other sekenesse.”¹⁶⁰ The priests view her condition as spiritual, while the friar interprets it as a natural event, thereby diminishing the authenticity of her revelatory experience.

Margery further legitimizes her experiences by connecting them with the very devotional writers and saints with whom she was familiar. When the friar openly preaches against Margery, a priest from the audience “that afterward wrot this boke”—her scribe—is temporarily lead astray by his words,¹⁶¹ suggesting that the friar is now irresponsibly using his skill and office for personal attacks, not spreading the word of God. The soon-to-be-scribe eventually trusts in her weeping, describing how he comes to appreciate the spiritual significance of her tears after reading other source material about Marie d’Oignies, *The Prykke of Lofe*, the *Revelations* written about Elizabeth of Hungary, and Richard Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris*. In all of these works there is mention of weeping instigated by the grace of God, showing how humans cannot resist his grace. The priest-scribe even weeps while delivering mass, thereby reinforcing the spiritual authenticity of Margery’s tears.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 290: “a heart condition, or some other sickness.”

¹⁶¹ Chapter 62, p. 292: “as this day he prechyd meche ageyn the seyd creatur, not expressing hir name, but so he expletyd hys conseytys that men undirstod wel that he ment hir. Than was ther mech remowr among the pepil, for many men and many women trustyd hir and lovyd hir ryth wel, and wer ryth hevy and sorweful for he spak so meche ageyn hir as he dede, desiring that thei had not an herd hym that day” [on this day he preached a great deal against the said creature, not mentioning her name, but so conveying his thoughts that people well understood that he meant her. Then there was much protest amongst the people, for many men and many women trusted and loved her very much, and were very sad and sorry that he spoke so much against her as he did, wishing that they had not heard him that day].

¹⁶² Chapter 62, p. 293-294: “And owr Lord also visityd the preyste, being at messe, wyth swech grace and wyth sweche devocyon whan he schulde redyn the holy Gospel, that he wept wondirly so that we wett hys vestiment and ornamentys of the awter and myth not mesuryn hys wepyng ne hys sobbyng, it was so habundawnt; ne he myth not restreyn it, ne wel stande therwyth at the awter” [And our Lord also visited the priest when at mass with such grace and such devotion when he should read the Holy Gospel, that he wept

In mentioning these source materials, Margery links herself with a wider spiritual community both in England and abroad. The result is that her weeping is grounded in a chain of citation encompassing the universal Church, while the friar seems obsessive in his scolding. Indeed, he would always “in hys sermown have a parte ageyn hir, whethyr sche wert her er not, and cawsyd mech pepil to demyn wol evyl of hir many day and long.”¹⁶³ What started as an image of a renowned, skilled preacher now turns into a disruption within the community, turning people against Margery. Eventually many of these same people accept Margery back into their favor; the friar’s having incited people with his rhetoric. The friar has the authority of the preacher’s position on the pulpit but seems to misuse it for personal reasons. In his *artes praedicandi* (*The Art of Preaching*), Alan of Lille (12th century) writes that if preaching is “too heavily-embroidered [the sermon] would seem to have been contrived with excessive care, and elaborated to win the admiration of man, rather than for the benefit of our neighbors, and so it would move less the hearts of those who heard it.”¹⁶⁴ Alan’s point is that preachers risk saying things that “are better fitted to delight the ear than to edify the soul.”¹⁶⁵ The friar’s continual preaching about Margery were excessive, and his talent as a preacher seems to degenerate as this scene unfolds while Margery remains tied to her local clerical supporters and devotional source materials.

During the good friar’s stay in Lynn Margery remains in the background. She is the subject of communal gossip and clerical dispute, but she never voices her own

amazingly, so that he wetted his vestments and the ornaments of the altar, and could not control his weeping or his sobbing, it was so abundant; nor could he restrain it, or very well stand at the altar because of it.]

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 296: “would always in his sermons have a part against her, whether she were there or not, and caused many people to think very badly of her for many long days.”

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Waters, p. 87.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

opinion or attempts to mount a defense to persuade the friar. In this respect she is largely passive, expressing only momentary pain and sorrow while still attending other preaching events. The *movement* and *activity* in the scene is in the opinions members of her community express about her, while it is the local clerics who confront the friar on her behalf. The laity bicker in the audience while the clerics try to persuade the friar to allow Margery's attendance. All the while she appears hurt and persecuted by certain people of her community, but nonetheless she is resolute and resourceful. Margery attends other preachers

at whoys sermownys sche cryid ful lowed and sobbyd ful boystowsly many tymes and ofte. And yet thei suffyrd it ful paciently, and summe which had spokyn wyth hir befor, and haddyn knowlach of hir maner of levyng, excusyd hir to the pepil whan thei herdyn any rumowr er grutchyng ayens hir.¹⁶⁶

These other preachers further marginalize the friar and emphasize that those clerics who know Margery are tolerant of her behavior, even if the entire audience is not. Furthermore, this scene shows that most clerics and preachers are supportive of Margery while this one particular friar is interested in winning the favor of the people.

Margery shows that her own weeping is the most divine aspect of the scene. She does not undermine or criticize the friar because he is the vessel of God's word, although he uses his authoritative position to rouse the community against her. The central conflict of the episode occurs between the male clerics and is not resolved, although Margery's spiritual practices continue unabated, as if the friar is not necessary for her devotion.

¹⁶⁶ Chapter 61, p. 291: "at whose sermons she cried very loudly and sobbed very violently many times and often. And yet they put up with it very patiently, and some who had spoken with her before, and had knowledge of her manner of life, excused her to the people when they heard any clamour or grumbling against her."

Indeed, God speaks directly to Margery, inverting her status and that of the friar and showing how the temporal, worldly is overthrown by the divine, saintly:

Therefor I warne the that thou telle hym not of the prevy counsel which I have schewyd to the, for I wille not that he here it of thy mowth. And, dowtyr, I telle the forsothe he shal be chastised scharply. As hys name is now, it shal ben throwyn down, and thin schal ben reysed up. And I shal makyn as many men to lofe the for my lofe as han despisyd the for my lofe. Dowtyr, thou shalt be in church whan he schal be wythowtyn. In this chirche thou hast suffyrd meche schame and reprefe for the yyftys that I have yovyn the, and for the grace and goodness that I have wrowt in the, and therefore in this cherche and in this place I shal ben worschepyd in the.¹⁶⁷

Margery calls for her own canonization through direct discourse with God. The friar will eventually be forgotten, while she will be remembered in the central place of Christian worship. If preaching is a central aspect of Christian education, Margery shows herself to be intimately connected with God's word more than with the knowledge contained in sermons. Her proximity to Christ and God reveal that she views herself on the same level as the saints, persecuted by her community who misinterpret her spiritual status. Thus, in her view, she emerges as a type of local saint with divine and clerical authorization, suggesting an awareness of the components necessary for canonization.

¹⁶⁷ Chapter 63, p. 299: "Therefore, I warn you not to tell him of the secret counsels which I have revealed to you, for I do not wish him to hear it from your mouth. And daughter, I tell you truly, he shall be chastised sharply. As his name is now, it shall be thrown down, and yours shall be raised up. And I shall make as many men love you for my love as have despised you for my love. Daughter, you shall be in church when he shall be outside. In this church you have suffered much shame and rebuke for the gifts that I have given you and for the grace and goodness that I have worked in you, and therefore in this church and in this place I will be worshipped in you."

Conclusion

A central tension between the *litterati* and the *illitterati* still lingers in any analysis of the religious literature of late medieval England. Perhaps literacy was spread geographically, increasing more rapidly in urban centers and gradually spreading to rural parishes. The information that John Pecham's *Ignorantia Sacerdotum* and John Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* thought was essential for knowledgeable practice suggests that literacy was not a widespread skill. But who truly has the right to define literacy? Given that literacy had real-world implications for Margery and her contemporaries, analyzing literate practices must take into account issues of authority and social status.

Literacy was a means for social mobility. It might permit lay people with appropriate skills to serve as copyists or administrative officials. It could also be a stepping-stone into the clergy or higher education, especially for men learning literate skills at an early age. Literacy also had a religious dimension, for stronger literate skills would facilitate access to devotional and spiritual texts, including the Bible and lives of the saints. The Church often defined itself as the literate, elite arm of society, while lay people were 'lewd' and subject to heretical manipulation if the clergy did not perform their duties responsibly. Even literate lay people, arousing the suspicion of the Church, might be accused as heretics. This misunderstanding happened to Margery, although she was exonerated. Aston writes that "it was as a vernacular literate movement that Lollardy had gathered momentum and it was as a vernacular literate movement that it was suspected and persecuted."¹⁶⁸ The Lollards reflected wider and deeper literate trends spreading throughout England, illustrating that literacy was not the domain of the clergy.

¹⁶⁸ Aston, p. 207.

Margery's book shows how literacy was dynamic in actual practice. She writes against the notion of a polarized society split between the clergy and the laity. If her textual practices tell us anything about late medieval England, it is that lay people were learning how to appropriate literacy to further their own interests. I argue that Margery wants to be considered a lay saint, a holy figure helping other people in their spiritual pursuits. Her love of sermons and devotional literature indicates her desire to hear God's word and create a Christian reality that is at once imaginative and corporeal. The Lord even invites her into the holy community on account of her thoughts and deeds: "For thes, and for alle other good thowtys and good dedys that thu hast thowt in my name and wrowt for my lofe, thu shalt have wyth me and wyth my modyr, wyth myn holy awngelys, wyth myn apostelys, wyth myn martirys, confessowris and virginys, and wyth alle myn holy seyntyng, al maner joye and blysse, lestyng wythowtyn ende."¹⁶⁹ She elevates herself into heaven as a new member of the virgins, saints, and other exemplary figures. Yet her bid for sainthood failed, for she never gained a cult or a wide readership beyond monastic circles.

Her failure to achieve sainthood does not mean that all was lost. In the process, Margery entered her voice into a gathering conversation among English people about the dynamics of literacy and orthodox spirituality. She writes against the notion of a central ecclesiastical power from which literate practices disseminate to peripheral English people. Instead, Margery shows how late medieval England was populated by a complex web of readers, writers, and book owners who were constantly negotiating their practices

¹⁶⁹ Chapter 86, p. 377: "For these, and all other good thoughts and good deeds that you have thought in my name, and performed for my love, you shall have with me and with my mother, with my holy angels, with my apostles, with my martyrs, confessors, and virgins, and with all my holy saints, all manner of joy and bliss, lasting without end."

within local communities. These negotiated practices illuminate how literacy was an ever-changing process bound to the political, economic, and social status of an individual. Literacy was not a monolithic concept but was rather tied to the social and economic interests of each individual person.

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