2001

Margery Kempe and Perfectionism

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"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." – Matthew 5:48 NRSV

A Senior Thesis for the University Honors Program
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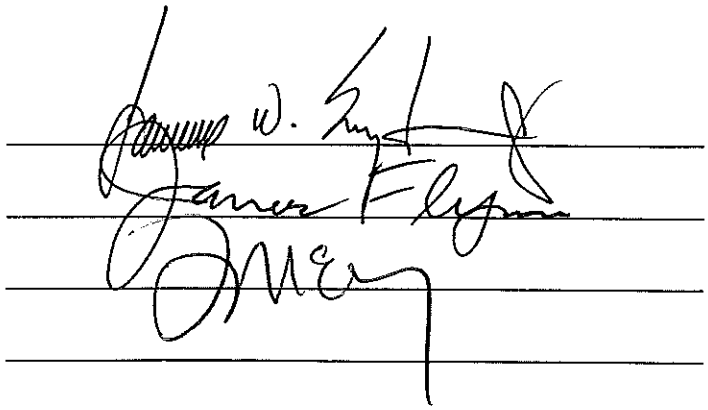
Fall 2001

Approved By



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Foreword

Late fourteenth, early fifteenth-century mystic Margery Kempe (1373 ca. 1439) was an extraordinary lay Christian who sought spiritual perfection--and did so outside the confines of traditional religious orders. However, understanding Kempe's quest is complex, as evidenced by scholars having classified her as everything from a hysteric, anorexic, heretic, or self-centered egocentric to a revered saint. Kempe's life cannot be exclusively categorized into any one of these classifications. Instead, she was on a general quest to understand the suffering of Christ. Her life pursuits may well be illustrated by using the broader psychoanalytical term *spiritual perfection.*

To be sure, *perfectionist* has become a popular psychological and social buzz term within the last decade that describes an effort to reach the unattainable, to push the limits of self and psyche, and to define or control one's identity in an imperfect world. Perfectionism manifests itself in emotional, physical, and social ways, encompassing all aspects of a sufferer's life--work, home, relationships--and ultimately the whole self when one determines that she is not good enough.[1] Examples include the employee who can never "get things right" for his perfectionist boss, the grade-schooler who devotes excessive hours to a project in order to obtain the 'A,' the young female who feels her body will never compare to those of the glamorous girls in magazines, or the wife and

[1] Monica Ramirez Basco, *Never Good Enough: Freeing yourself from the Chains of Perfectionism* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), xii.

mother who idolizes June Cleaver. Ultimately, perfectionist qualities hinder relationships, lead to mental unrest, and control the victim's life. When seeking comfort from the control factor, a perfectionist might turn to religion or spirituality; however, more often than not, embracing spirituality for a perfectionist only leads to additional suffering because she seeks to find perfection in religion. Ironically, the spiritual aspect of a person's life that promises to bring peace and healing only frustrates the perfectionist and leads her to more desperation.

No better example of this type of spirituality can be found than with Margery Kempe, who practiced extreme self-denial. But before examining the effect such behavior had upon her, one needs to review her life and times.

Margery Kempe's Life and Book

Most of what we learn from Margery Kempe's self-confessed behavior is revealed within her autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. During the late Middle Ages, the manuscript was in the possession of a Yorkshire priory, where it was often referred to for examples of mystical religious encounters. The writing disappeared for several centuries, later found in England to be in the possession of an old English, Catholic family, the Butler-Bowdons.[2] Discovered in 1934, it is the earliest surviving autobiography in English, despite the fact that Kempe did not write the book with her own hand. She was illiterate and thus could not read or write. She first unsuccessfully dictated *The Book* to her son and then to a priest.[3] Naturally, scholars question *The Book's* authenticity. But Robert Stone, a scholar of Middle English prose, asserts that "no one who reads *The Book* can help feeling the impact of the author's individuality on the way in which thoughts are expressed."[4] Additionally, in translator B.A. Windeatt's

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[2] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B.A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1994).

[3]Kempe, 9-10.

[4] Wendy Harding, "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature,* ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 168.

introduction to *The Book,* he states that it was written "in much of the accent of an authentic voice."[5]

But Wendy Harding reminds readers in her essay "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*" that in the Middle Ages a female's spirituality was going to be shaped in some respect by masculine definitions of *femininity*; and feminist theorists are quick to point out that *The Book* was written by the pen of a male scribe. Perhaps Kempe could not produce her own writings free from male influence, and it is difficult to deny that the scribe did modify her writings to some extent. Harding also argues that perhaps because she was illiterate, Kempe had even more freedom to express her thoughts, opinions, and ideas in conformations other than through written words. However, a concern is that the literate priest might not have understood her alternative expressions. Obviously there is a stark contrast between a celibate, literate priest and the married, illiterate Kempe.[6]

Referring to herself in third person throughout *The Book,* Margery Kempe began her story about the year 1373, when she was born to a prominent family at England's port of Bishops Lynn, now King's Lynn, in the county of Norfolk. This seaport is situated on the coast of the North Sea, and during Kempe's lifetime it served as a major trade and commerce center. Like most cities of the era, walls and gates surrounded the town, but by no means was the city cloistered. Trade brought international travelers, such as businessmen and clergy, who, in turn, brought merchandise and culture. And because cotton was beginning to be introduced into the economy, textile products became dominant trade items. The House of Lancaster ruled during the majority of Kempe's lifetime, but the local wealthy merchant class controlled the political landscape of King's

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[5] Kempe, 10.

Lynn. A firm middle-class structure was in place, but poverty also flourished, and a peasant's revolt erupted in 1381. The debris-clogged streets were dirty and odorous. Sanitation dilemmas, overcrowded dwellings, and disease contributed to the general filth.[7] Overall, with the hustle and bustle of trade, King's Lynn served as a center for human interaction. Margery Kempe was in fact in a central location replete with a variety of resources-- people, literature, and ideas.[8]

Margery Kempe's father was John Brunam, an honorable, wealthy member of the Parliament, and Kempe was proud of her family's prominence. *The Book* fails to document either her family interactions or her younger years. Within her pages, Kempe only referenced childhood from a negative perspective when, as an adult, she admitted her childhood sins to a confessor. There was no mention of her mother within the book, but official civil records tell of her brother John being the family heir.[9] At the age of twenty, she married John Kempe. Until the birth of her first child, Kempe was not particularly religious. At this point she entered into a crisis in which she reported being haunted by devils that tortured her to wickedness.[10] In a state of emotional turmoil, she attempted to rid herself of guilt and sin by turning to confessors. But they failed to meet her ideal expectations. This lack of comfort and direction led to more fear.[11]

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[6] Harding, 169-172.

[7] Leann Magners, "Kempe's Life Encapsulated Within Historical Context," *University of Southern Colorado History Department's Seminar Papers: Traveling to Jerusalem (11-18 Century),* http://uscolo.edu/history/seminar/kempe/magner.htm (20 Jan 2001), 1-3.

[8] Knowles, 192.

[9] Maureen Fries. "Margery Kempe, *"An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe,* ed. P.E. Szarmach (Albany: 1984) 217.

[10] Kempe, 42.

[11] Atkinson, 117.

> And when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her, before she had fully said her intent, and so she would no more say for aught he might do. Anon, for the dread she had of damnation on one side, and his sharp reproving of her on the other side.[12]

But no matter what the cause of this perplexing interval, conversion occurred when she had a vision of Christ, who strengthened and calmed her by asking, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?"[13] Scholars have classified this crisis as one of the first recorded cases of postpartum depression.

Margery Kempe recovered quickly. She had a total of fourteen children, and yet they are hardly mentioned in her book. Indeed, the reader is left uncertain how many actually survived.[14] Kempe soon forgot this early conversion experience and ventured into the business world as a brewer. But because she never achieved commercial success, she concluded that God was punishing her. Later, a horse-mill venture brought futile results when the horses refused to pull the mill. This devastation left her further wondering if she were cursed by God. At the point of fallen pride and failure, Kempe genuinely began to explore spiritual aspects of her life by asking God for mercy.[15]

Kempe never fully dismissed her role as a wife and mother by joining a monastic order or institution, and she was even considered an "everyday, plain witness" or layperson who attended to the domestic details of life. According to Bernard McGinn, before the fourteenth century, religious orders that were responsible for shaping

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[12] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 1.
[13] Ibid., 42.
[14] Ibid., 10-11.
[15] Ibid., 44-45.

spirituality were usually located in rural, solitary settings removed from city life. In contrast, the fourteenth century was the "first time in [the] history of medieval spirituality when the possibility that lay people living in the world could reach the heights of perfection" and develop their religiosity.[16] Kempe's spiritual quest led her to defy traditional assumptions about what was appropriate for a lay, married woman of the Late Middle Ages.[17] In fact, after discovering she was pregnant, Kempe assumed that her quest for spiritual perfection and holy living only belonged to young maidens, but a conversation with God convinced her otherwise. God asserted to Kempe, "Yea, daughter, trow thou right well that I love wives also, and specially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will, and do their business to please Me as thou dost...I love thee as well as any maiden in the world."[18] In contrast, men told her, "Woman give up this life you lead, and go and spin, and card wool, as other women do, and do not suffer so much shame and so much unhappiness."[19] Ignoring the later, she even ventured from her stable home in order to traverse the continent on spiritual pilgrimages.

After the death of her father in approximately 1413, at the age of forty, Kempe entered on the life of a pilgrim for twenty years. These travels were not recorded

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[16] Bernard McGinn, "The English Mystics," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 194.

[17] Elizabeth Armstrong, "Understanding by Feeling in Margery Kempe's Book," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 19-20.
Also see Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power Over Language," *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 39 and McGinn, 194.

[18] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon) 39-40.
[19] Mahoney, 39.

chronologically in *The Book,* and the dates are at best suggested.[20] It was during these visits that she met and conversed with spiritually like-minded people, as well as those who opposed her. She began her journeys locally, but later expanded them to include all of Europe and parts of the Middle East. In 1413, on a trip to the Holy Land, Kempe entered the city of Jerusalem riding on an ass and visited Mount Calvary. Next, she traveled to Assisi and Rome. Remaining in Rome for several months, Kempe visited the Chapel of St. Bridget and prayed at the Church of the Apostles. In the spring of 1415, Kempe returned to England to travel locally. The next foreign adventure was to Santiago de Compostela, in 1417, but she soon returned to domestic travel (Leicester, York, and London). And in 1431, she revisited Lynn to care for her ailing husband and learned of her son's death. But after their passing, she embarked once again. This time Kempe accompanied her German daughter-in-law home to Danzig in Prussia. Before returning to England, Kempe visited Baltic via Stralsund, Wilsnack, and Aachen.[21] But no conclusion to Kempe's pilgrimages was given in *The Book.* Instead, she simply reported to her confessor at Lynn and was reconciled to her hometown acquaintances.

At this juncture, the reader is abruptly halted when Kempe, near age sixty, ceased to speak. Uncertainty surrounds her death date, but the last reference to Kempe was in documents that mention her admission into the Trinity Guild of Lynn in 1438 and 1439.[22] Such an odd conclusion to her life and book emphasizes the eccentric and complex nature of Margery Kempe. It is no surprise that she sought spiritual perfection in her own unique manner.

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[20] Kempe, 29.
[21] Ibid, 14.
[22] Neuburger, 54.

Perfectionism and Spirit

Psalm 101: 2 reminds readers to "live a blameless life," a primary goal of the religious perfectionist. Researchers such as Freud and William James, realizing that religion directly impacts people's lives, attempted to define religion within psychological terminology. [23] William James asserted in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that throughout the centuries the Roman Catholic tradition, with which Kempe was intimately involved, has attempted to define Christian perfection. But the main theme has always been an avoidance of sin in order to attain a more perfect, Christ-like life. This is a negative ideal because sin is considered to stem from pride, worldliness, sexuality, and guilt--all of which Kempe feared. Thus, her discipline to avoid sin was codified into a type of asceticism.[24]

Religion and perfectionism often operate contradictorily. For example, in the medieval world, asceticism, a type of religious pursuit involving active suffering, implies negative pain and torment. This negative suffering is also associated with a positively enhanced religiosity that leads to perfection. When a person infuses religiosity within her desire for perfection, the term "spiritual perfection" may well describe her pursuits--as Margery Kempe qualitatively evidenced within *The Book.*

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[23] Jeffery Ashby and Judy Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism: Relationships and Implications, " *Counseling and Values* 43 (1999): 1-12.
[24] Williams James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Modern Library: New York, 1994), 333.

Perfectionism has traditionally been studied in relation to personal high goals and standards that, as Sorotzkin noted in 1985, carry negative connotations such as lowered self-esteem and self-criticism. Could this be a result of the negative ideal of sin? If so, perfection within a negative ideal could be detrimental. Recent studies have begun to incorporate more adaptive perfection characteristics in which high standards can lead to high self-esteem.[25] Ashby and Huffman found in a 1999 study that "religiosity may be associated with adaptive aspects of perfectionism. That is, religious persons may be more likely to be perfectionist in ways that contribute to greater self-esteem and self-efficacy."[26]

Some religious pursuits of perfection are more likely to produce these positive characteristics than are others. According to psychologist Gordon Allport's study in *The Individual and His Religion*, one such type of religiosity can be termed *intristic* and is exemplified by "those who regard faith as a supreme value in its own right; religious sentiment floods the whole life with motivation and meaning." [27] It is this type of religious perfectionism that can be positively adaptive; on the other hand, there is what is termed an *extrinsic* religiosity that provides a means to an end or is used to accomplish personal gains. This type serves "to provide safety, social standing, solace, and endorsement for one's chosen way of life."[28] When such pragmatic expectations to achieve the ends, especially in relationships, are not met, the extrinsic individual may

[25] Ashby and Huffman, 2-3.
[26] Ibid, 6.
[27] Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 454.
[28] Allport, 454.

struggle or have maladaptive characteristics, such as difficulty in "developing and maintaining intimate relationships."[29]

Joseph W. Vollmerhausen, M.D. furthers this argument with a psychoanalytical approach. He defines *perfectionism* and *religiosity* in relation to the regulation of a supernatural order, or one that is above natural events. Mystic experiences could be categorized according to this definition of perfectionism, because they seek to bring an order to frustrating, unusual, or irrational experiences. The individual who performs this spiritual perfection manifested through mysticism expects, according to Vollmerhausen, a "fair deal." This fair deal means that religious performance, ritual, and worship should lead a mystic to results intended in the present, future, or afterlife.[30] Stated differently, perfectionism associated with religiosity (mysticism and asceticism) may produce adaptive or maladaptive characteristics depending upon whether this spiritual perfectionism invades a person's whole being or is merely a instrument to a desired outcome. Kempe's quest for spiritual perfection included both types.

Although contemporary psychologist Monica Ramirez Basco does not directly study religiosity in relation to perfectionism, she does help generalize traits of a perfectionist that are demonstrated in all areas of life--including religiosity. Her expertise helps one to understand how Kempe's perfectionist characteristics relate to contemporary views of perfection traits. According to Basco, most perfectionists are not even aware that they set such extremely high goals and expectations for themselves and others. Only through relationships and interactions with people does the stress of perfectionism manifest itself into a type of tangibility. Perfectionist characteristics slice through society

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[29] Ashby and Huffman, 7.

as a double-edged sword, because for the perfectionist who gives her best effort, such determination is often regarded as good or even rewarded. In Margery Kempe's case, she concentrated her whole self and all the effort she could muster in order to understand the suffering of Christ. As a result of this effort, she was regarded by some as a saint, and what better attainment for perfection is there besides sainthood? But, within her lifetime, Kempe never recognized a glorious or even beneficial religious satisfaction. In these terms, her pursuit could be regarded as harmful since these efforts left her depressed. [31] Often times, Kempe was never satisfied with her own and others' expectations, but felt tormented in her mind and body. *The Book* recorded her hopelessness when it stated,

> She went away all shamed and confused in herself at seeing his [her husband's] stability and her own instability…Now she saw how she had consented in her will to do sin, and then fell she half into despair. She thought she must have been in Hell for the sorrow she felt. She thought she was worthy of no mercy, for her consent was so willfully done, nor ever worthy to do Him service, because she was so false to Him. Nevertheless she was shriven many times and often, and did whatever penance her confessor would enjoin her to do.[32]

Perhaps philosophy, psychology, and religion professor Antoine Vergote best expresses the perfection concept as a contradictory one when he notes in *Guilt and Desire*, "It [perfectionism] condemns the individual to self-torture. And yet it becomes

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[30] Joseph W. Vollmerhausen, "Religion, Perfectionism, and the Fair Deal", American *Journal of Psychoanalysis* 25: (1965), 203-204.
[31] Basco, 4-5.
[32] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 9.

apparent that the suffering caused by one's imperfections is accompanied by the satisfaction received from a superior sense of one's perfection." [33]

There are two additional general categories of perfectionism: inward and outward. The inward perfectionist determines that her own actions are inadequate. Such a perfectionist is concerned with what others think about her or how she is perceived. Often she feels that there is something wrong with her and is fearful of making mistakes. Yet, "working hard" often hides this type of inward perfection. [34] Vergotte explains this inward perfection when referring to Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." The context of the command is that the "divine ideals that are proposed are those of a benevolent forgiveness and a form of generosity that goes beyond reciprocal exchange."[35] When viewed in absolute terms, the phrase encourages a sense of guilt. The command "serves its own obsessive aims: to attaint perfection by means of internal struggle against all desires, joys, or pleasures."[36] This internal perfection reinforces the negative ideal of avoiding sin.

The outward perfectionist suffers anxiety when others frustrate her. These 'imperfect' people make the perfectionist rigid or intolerant when they fall short of expectations or have no pride in their actions and behavior. A spiritual perfectionist might perceive these people as ignoring their guilt or ignorantly refusing to correct their sin. In general most perfectionists display both inward and outward characteristics.

What the above categories and types of perfectionism have to do with Margery Kempe is absolutely everything. Harvard scholar Clarissa Attkinson explains,

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[33] Antoine Vergotte, *Guilt and Desire* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).
[34] Basco, xi-xii.
[35] Vergote, 78.
[36] Ibid.

"...Margery Kempe is extraordinarily attractive to the psychohistorian. The candor of her narrative and the quality of her experience lend themselves without undue distortion to psychoanalytic categories."[37] But the psychoanalytic approach is limited, too. Understanding Kempe's pursuit of perfection, one must gather information from such disciplines as women's studies, religious studies, literature, and history.

Margery Kempe demonstrated these perfectionist tendencies throughout *The Book,* and these tendencies are directly related to her spiritual pursuit to understand the suffering of Christ. She illustrated both intrinsic and extrinsic spirituality that, just like spiritual perfectionism, had positive and negative results for herself and her relationships with others. Kempe's quest for spiritual perfection continued throughout her life because amidst the negativity she found reinforcement from within. She had a personal satisfaction rooted in understanding the suffering of Christ. Yet, she also received reinforcement from others who praised and confirmed her perfectionist traits.[38]

Margery Kempe's spirituality is often defined as mystical because of her excessive weeping, fasting, and venturing upon various pilgrimages that are described in her autobiography as instructional metaphors, stories, images, and conversations. English prose writers of the era shared "common values and approaches as well as the late medieval desire to express traditional Latin spirituality in the vernacular."[39] Kempe fit into the medieval mold as a mystic because she instructed people on proper Christian living through devotional literature and prose. She hoped to instruct her readers about

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[37] Attkinson, 208.
[38] Basco, 15.
[39] McGinn, 194.

spiritual perfection.[40] The message of God's love was fundamentally rooted in her attempts to understand and convey to others the suffering of Christ.

The Book, like other mystical devotional literatures--such as writings by St. Bridget of Sweden or St. Catherine of Siena--reflected the historical notion that religiosity turned inward by becoming more of an individualized, private devotion during the fifteenth century. Kempe was influenced by these mystical texts, and in chapters seventeen, twenty-eight, and fifty-eight, Kempe had the writings of St. Bridget of Sweden, Richard Rolle, and Walter Hilton read to her.[41] The writings spoke of God's love, and Kempe insisted that she ultimately experienced this love inwardly within her soul.[42] People of the fifteenth century who turned inward towards the fulfillment of the contemplative life began to express religion within the "sphere of poetry and devotion."[43] In fact, most fifteenth mystics, many of whom recorded their experiences, were anchorites or anchoresses. In 1521 Henry Tepwell mistakenly assumed Kempe fit the standard when he wrote, "she was a devout anchoress." [44] Kempe's record of her life contained within a devotional instructional did reflect personal, private spirituality, but she by no means lived her life in seclusion like other mystics, such as Julian of Norwich.

According to Allport, mysticism is an individual religiosity of experience that brings comfort and peace during times of chaos.[45] Not up to analytical interpretation, it reflects a total rest or peace in God. But he also defines mysticism as "a benign dissociation of the stream of thought and feeling from the ordinary critical self-conscious

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[40] McGinn, 195.
[41] Neuburger, 56.
[42] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 31.
[43] E.F. Jacob, *The 15th Century: 1399-1485*, (Oxford, 1961,)685.
[44] Magners, 1.
[45] Allport, 139.

activities of the mind."[46] For Margery Kempe, this definition needs to be altered because her mystical experiences, manifested through conversations with Christ, were often guided, shaped, and dominated by her own self-conscious thoughts. Additionally, these mystical conversations, visions, and bodily manifestations caused her to be extremely self-conscious of how others perceived her. Yet, with a stubborn, obstinate attitude, Margery Kempe was often able quickly to brush aside critical commentaries. Following Allport's definition, she shared characteristics with English mystics by recognizing the humanity of Jesus, the desperation of a life without God, the value of God's love, and the importance of living an active or contemplative life.[47] Within the sphere of the contemplative and active life, she rested on the fringes of normative mystical behavior in the pursuit of spiritual perfection.

According to Ellen Ross, by "envisioning a holistic lifelong path on which a growing relationship with the divine is coupled with a deepening love of self and neighbor," one can best understand Kempe's intention in *The Book.*[48] Perhaps this is so, but because she was illiterate, Kempe's communication and relationship to the divine had to be through oral and bodily means. Her oral conversations with Christ demonstrate how personal God was to her, and much of her expression (tears, passion, etc.) cannot be reproduced in literate language. The priest scribe perhaps thought she was even incognizant regarding communication, but one may argue that she might be considered a mystic whose intensity, through bodily means, was her communication. And in order to

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[46] Allport, 62.
[47] McGinn, 195.
[48] Ellen Ross, "She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain," *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics,* ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993), 49.

instruct others about such spiritual perfection, Margery Kempe had to establish her authority to do so through exemplary suffering.[49]

Written communication was controlled by the educated patriarchy during medieval times. It was deemed more important than any other means of communication. For example, the patriarchy controlled the Biblical text. Oral communication took second place, but Margery Kempe defied such primary standards because her principal communication was through mystical experiences, then conversations with God, and finally (her least favorite) writings. Reluctant to write because she viewed writing as an end to her oral conversations with Christ, she postponed dictating her experiences, even when scribes offered to record her words. However, Christ convinced her that writing pleased him as much as her expressive tears--it was just another form of communication that Kempe should not ignore. The fear of truncating her conversations with Christ might explain why Kempe did not initially record such dialogue and pilgrimage experiences until near the end of her life.[50]

Instead of writing, Margery Kempe exemplified mysticism when she used her body as a primary instrument of communication to develop her theology and interpret scripture. Her suffering and physical reaction gauged and measured her spirituality. However, for a modern religious person, it might seem contradictory to understand suffering to be an estimate of God's love. How does suffering demonstrate love? In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul spoke directly about suffering and "the thorn in his flesh." Margery Kempe adapted Paul's concept of delighting in weaknesses in order to become

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[49] Harding, 173-174.

[50] Ibid., 178.

more spiritually strong. There was a certain notion of contradiction that existed as mystics sought to experience life more fully through suffering and ultimately dying for a cause. Catherine Garrett comments on such dualism when she speaks of negative rituals common to mystics. A negative ritual, such as fasting, can sometimes explode to become the person's existence and thus lead to a 'self-transformation' through suffering. This conversion results in a positive outcome of religious prestige or sainthood. [51]

However, ecclesiastics did not always interpret mysticism as evidence of sainthood, but as madness. In 1415, Jean Gerson of the University of Paris wrote about the subject by saying, "Mysticism is brought into the streets. Many people take to it without suitable direction, and indulge in too rigid fasts, too protracted vigils, and too abundant tears, all of which disturb their brains. There is nothing more dangerous than ignorant devotion."[52] Modern author Louise Collis agrees, stating, "Lacking the intellect to grasp these esoteric ideas in their entirety, she [Margery Kempe] mistook the wanderings of a commonplace imagination for a divine vision. She thought hysterical tears and fits were certainly a gift from Christ himself."[53] But mysticism might have been the only way for a woman such as Kempe to experience spirituality in a patriarchal context. The patriarchal suspicion of mysticism is exactly what Karma Lochrie discredits when she responds to Gerson's argument: "Repression of the female body, as we shall see, takes a different form in the Middle Ages than it does in contemporary culture, and

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[51] Catherine J. Garrett, "Recovery from Anorexia Nervosa: A Durkeheimain Interpretation," *Social Science Medicine* 43 (1996), 1500.

[52] Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 2.

[53] Louise Collis, *The Apprentice Saint* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964), 25.

therefore the woman writer's task of adopting a language must be viewed specifically within her historical and cultural context".[54]

Women, with little or no value, were associated with worldly flesh, which ultimately meant an inherently sinful nature.[55] This medieval understanding was taken directly from Biblical text. Since written expression was of central importance and controlled by the male patriarchy, men blatantly preached that power was determined for them through the text. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 or 1 Timothy 2:12-15 directly relate to women and submission. Women were understood to be of lower class, evil, and even sinful in the patristic tradition. "From the desk and the pulpit, an avowedly celibate clergy denounced the female body as the emblem of sinful humanity, thereby distancing themselves from the fallen soul to whom they ministered."[56] Kempe diminished and challenged the ravine between women and men when she was forced to seek communication through her 'inferior female body.'[57]

Because she was illiterate, Margery Kempe's gospel knowledge came from hearing such patriarchal sermons and teachings rather than reading. Often entering into discourse with religious leaders, she sought to learn and understand scripture. Because she was able to circumvent the need to read scripture and go directly to the source, her conversations with Christ also gave Kempe a type of authority and allowed her to bypass male mediators. However, this evading of males was not always beneficial, because Kempe needed male support for advice, guidance, as well as protection from heresy

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[54] Lochrie, 2.

[55] Ibid., 6.

[56] Harding, 176-177.

[57] Ibid., 179.

charges. In order to travel, speak, and preach, Kempe acquired some male associates. After listening and talking with priests, she committed scripture to memory. It was actually a delight for her to hear a good sermon preached; in fact, she was often moved to tears when listening, and preachers would have to pause until the interrupting sobbing ceased. Sometimes she was barred from hearing a sermon because of her outbursts. She regarded such alienation from God's word to be devastating.[58]

If the mystical urge was expressed through language and bodily communication, it was also formulated iconically through the crucifix. The suffering Christ on the cross symbolized God's love for humanity. Comprehension of love at an intellectual level was not enough; the mystics sought to experience or imitate suffering that led to an understanding of Christ's divinity.[59] Kempe's passion for the crucifix developed when she pilgrimaged to Jerusalem. While on pilgrimages, Kempe was able to suffer as Christ did on long, perilous journeys, and she experienced or identified with his pain at many religious shrines and holy sites. She spoke of bursting with compassion and tears to the point of being near death when she placed her body at locations where Christ supposedly physically suffered.[60]

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[58] Joseph H. Lynch, "Religion with a Human Face," *Christian History* 15 (1996): 5. Online. EBSCOhost. 25 Sept. 2000.

[59] Ellen Ross, "She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain," *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics,* ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993), 46.

[60] Lynch, 5.

Perfectionism and Body

Margery Kempe relished in mental pain in order to develop her spirituality, and her physical reaction reflected internal piety, which she thought would gain her a better place in heaven. However, her sufferings did not often provide comfort for what she deemed to be an uncertain spiritual future. It was a future fraught with a constant feeling of unworthiness for being a wretched sinner. It is important to remember that physical expressions were Kempe's way of earnestly understanding suffering and the humanity of the perfect Christ. Therefore, she was quick to defend any of her actions or bodily manifestations of spirituality, even though she did not always understand the reactions herself.

A characteristic manifestation of Margery Kempe's spirituality was her uncontrollable weeping. She would often burst into fits of tears and shrills that caused distraction or begot attention wherever she went. For example, when a friar came to preach at Lynn, she rolled on the ground and wept excessively. As a result of her dramatic episode, he denied her the privilege of hearing his sermons unless she admitted that she was physically or mentally ill. He refused to acknowledge that such eccentric characteristics were divine. However, Kempe stubbornly refused to accept his judgment

and insisted that she heard and experienced God through her crying episodes, just as some people heard God through his sermons.[61]

Dhira Mahoney traces Kempe's tears throughout *The Book* and explains that she began with simple weeping in response to heavenly music, but her emotional state steadily became more violent until she lamented with wailing outbursts. Kempe, as well as those that witnessed and heard her behavior, could not explain her excessive moisture. But the tears could be considered a language within themselves when Kempe was overwhelmed with God's grace and love.[62] In chapter sixty-five of *The Book* Kempe tormented the devil with her tears and saved souls through her weeping. But her crying was most often linked with prayer. She would continue "weeping for two hours and often longer without ceasing when in mind of our Lord's Passion, sometimes for her own sin, sometimes for the sin of the people, sometimes for the souls in purgatory, sometimes for those that were in poverty or in any distress, for she wanted to comfort them all."[63] Her passion and intercession for others consumed her being.

This passion was not just evident in her tears. Margery Kempe often fasted to identify with the suffering of Christ by giving up bodily desires. This denial of food is speculated to be in agreement with modern scholars' understandings of *anorexia nervosa*. After all, perfectionism is common in eating disorders.[64] To actually medically define Margery Kempe as a suffering anorexic would be impossible, since one cannot completely analyze her thoughts. However, she did fast and abstain from bodily desires.

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[61] Harding, 180-181.
[62] Dhira B. Mahoney, "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power Over Language," *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 39-41.

[63] Lynch, 7.

[64] Basco, 34.

What can be said is that within her religious and cultural context, Margery Kempe's behavior may be characterized as anorexia. Catherine Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Famine* analyzes such behaviors by medieval women when she states that "fasting is not a flight from--but into physicality" for these women.[65] Once again, the notion of suffering emerges, and perhaps at a dangerous level for Margery Kempe.

Medieval spirituality contained an aspect of giving up control, which ironically is, in essence, clinging to and controlling spirituality. Men might give up money, property, sexual desire, etc. Women often gave up food as an ascetic way of fusing with the Christ who suffered to save humanity. Even if a woman wanted to denounce money, economics, or family, males would not allow them to do so, because the idea of a woman having to travel and beg for economic support in the Late Middle Ages went too far - absurd even.[66] What else was a women left to give up besides food? It was easy for a woman to do so in the context of a convent, home, or at a father's or spouse's table. At one point, Kempe refused to eat from her husband's table. Indeed, she avoided eating or drinking anything that was paid for by family wealth. Such obstinacy represented her renouncement of any type of abundance for the sake of suffering.[67]

The food-filled table was a communal setting in the fourteenth century, and the diet depended on economics. Meat and any type of dietary variation were only available to the wealthy, although fish was affordable for the middle class since King's Lynn was a port town. The staple diet consisted of bread or grain with minute deviations or

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[65] Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkley: University of California Press), 250.

[66] Bynum, 193.
[67] Ibid.

additions.[68] These simple meals were communal: there were no place settings, rather large platters, and food was delivered directly to the mouth using one's fingers. Kempe's refusal to join such a participatory event led to her being ostracized and ridiculed. She was often urged to resume but stubbornly resolved to follow her conscience.[69]

Although Kempe endured the common ascetic practice of fasting, she had the means to eat, and fasting does not necessarily make someone anorexic.[70] This ascetic practice was used to extinguish the human appetite sensation, because appetite was something that had to be controlled in order for a person to be an ultimate servant of Christ. A religious person would have to obliterate such bodily distractions as a way of fusing with the Christ who suffered to save humanity.[71] Neuburger affirms the control issue when she states, "She [Margery Kempe] may have suffered from yet another syndrome common to 20th century women, that of being "out of order" due to pressure to conform."[72]

Because female piety was often defined in relation to food, Kempe sought this piety through casual conversations and visions with Christ in which she developed food regulations that included fasting and abstaining from meat. For example, Christ instructed her, "But also, my beloved daughter, you must give up that which you love best in this

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[68] Magners, 3-4.
[69] Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994), 51-52.

[70] Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 14.

[71] Ibid., 20.

[72] Neuburger, 103.

world, and that is the eating of meat. An instead of meat you shall eat my flesh and blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the alter."[73]

In the example above, religious behavior and language revolved around food. According to Caroline Bynum, "Not only did medieval women deny themselves food, they also *became* food--in their own eyes and eyes of male admirers."[74] This perspective leads to the assumption that when women "ate God" (the Eucharist) they were focusing on their hunger and ultimately suffering. This obsession with food and suffering is explored by Robert Bell, a scholar of medieval women and food, when he characterizes Margery Kempe as "holy anorexic" because Kempe sought to be an ultimate servant of Christ by obliterating human desires and controlling sensations such as pain, sexual drive, exhaustion, and appetite that might be considered distractions to the spiritual.[75] Bell further proposes that "the suppression of physical urges and basic feelings--fatigue, sexual drive, hunger, pain--frees the body to achieve heroic feats and the soul to commune with God."[76]

Lynn Staley would argue that *The Book* does not mention the subject of female piety in relation to food very often.[77] She comments that "Kempe does not reject food or become ill when she smells it; nor does she become wraith-like from fasting."[78] However, Staley's analysis seems to be in line with a simplistic, modern understanding of *anorexia nervosa*, which disregards historical and religious contexts. Not all anorexics reject food entirely or are severely thin. There are many varieties to this complex disease. It is difficult to deny that Margery Kempe's communication with God

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[73] Kempe, 50.
[74] Bynum, 206.
[75] Bell, 19-20.
[76] Ibid, 13.

concerning food issues and rituals demonstrated how her spirituality was eventually expressed in physical manifestations such as fasting.

Fasting and the Eucharist were not the only aspects of Margery Kempe's life that she manipulated. Kempe cajoled her husband into abstaining from sexual relations. In one particular conversation with Christ she discussed a compromise. At first Kempe hoped to abstain from sexual relations and food, but then Christ granted her only one desire. She chose to eat in exchange for refraining from intercourse, and her husband had to accept the decision because it was from God and directly influenced her spirituality.[79] In order to focus on Christ's sufferings alone, Kempe refused to have intimate relations and in fact lost all desire when she stated, "I have rather eaten and drunk the ooze and muck in the gutter than to consent to intercourse, except out of obedience."[80] In chapter nine she prayed to live chaste, and God granted her wish by ridding fleshly lust in her husband. The matter was tested when John approached her, but she cried out to God for help and suddenly he was void of any sexual desire.[81]

Her husband later argued with her after devising a hypothetical question: "Kempe, if there came a man with a sword, who would strike off my head, unless I should commune naturally with you as I have done before, tell me on your conscience- for ye say ye will not lie- whether ye would suffer my head to be smitten off, or whether ye would suffer me to meddle with you again, as I did at one time?"[82] Obstinate and dedicated to the spiritual perfection associated with chastity, Kempe responded to her husband's question with a shocking answer, "I would rather see you being slain, than that

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[77] Staley, 49-51.
[78] Ibid., 50.
[79] Bynum, 219.
[80] Kempe, 46.

we should turn again to our uncleanness." In a failed compromise, her husband was left with one reply, "Ye are no good wife!" [83]

Although the chastity issue was a constant struggle throughout *The Book*, and her husband did not usually approve, throughout her journeys he was usually at her side when others abandoned or reproved her. The pair visited the Bishop of Lincoln to take the vow of chastity, and as a result of God's direction, Kempe desired to wear white clothing and be given the mantle and ring (the symbols of a widow pledged to live chaste).[84]

Another medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, also reinforced chasteness as an example of spiritual perfection. When Kempe visited the anchoress, Julian commended Kempe on her pledge and dedication to the Holy Ghost by stating, "He moveth a soul to all chasteness, for chaste livers are called the Temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost maketh a soul stable and steadfast in the right faith, and the right belief."[85] This demonstration of Kempe's stifling sexual desire served as another alternative to control her spirituality through suffering. While denying pleasure, Kempe might have felt guilty for enjoying sexual relations within her marriage. She punished her body for lustful desires, because erotic desire to Kempe was deemed as being out of control, and perfectionists must be able to control.[86]

Her internal perfectionist tendency to "suffer" by practicing chastity was also paralleled by her outward perfection to please others' high expectations. In chapter forty-six Kempe was arrested and prepared to go to jail, but she did not want to be put among

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[81] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 14.
[82] Ibid, 16.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid, 25-27.

men inmates because the environment lent itself to rumors that could damage or soil her pure reputation.[87] Kempe stated, "I pray you, sir, put me not among men, that I may keep my chastity, and my bond of wedlock to my husband, as I am bound to do."[88] However, Kempe did relax rigid limitations and high expectations when she experienced and explored the sensual in regard to her relationship with Christ.

According to Elizabeth Robertson and her essay that investigates medieval women's spirituality, "Kempe [was] no longer capable of separating the sensual and spiritual and the former [was] more important to her than the latter."[89] Instead of expressing sexual desire, she sensually sought to understand the maleness of Christ and his pain. Kempe's body was sensuality transformed through sexual repression in order to experience the physical connection to the divine.[90] In chapter thirty-six of *The Book*, Kempe conversed with Christ about forgiveness of her sin. Christ used a corporal metaphor that compared forgiveness to a medieval marriage and a worldly, loving relationship--both which are a result of love.

> Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can

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[85] Ibid, 34.
[86] Ibid., 215.
[87] Atkinson, 110-111.
[88] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 99.
[89] Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 157.

[90] Bynum, 250.

> boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.[91]

These sensual overtones and suggestions are related to Christ's physicality or bodylines--for which Kempe received praise from God: "Daughter, I am well pleased with you, inasmuch as you believe in all the sacraments of Holy Church and in all faith involved in that, and especially because you believe in the manhood of my son, and because of the great compassion that you have for his better Passion."[92] Kempe was so attracted to Christ's manhood that in chapter thirty-five she denied a spiritual marriage to the Father (Godhead) in order to focus on Christ:

> The father also said to this creature, 'Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end.' Then the creature kept silence in her soul and did not answer to this, because she was very much afraid of the Godhead; and she had no knowledge of the conversation of the Godhead, for her love and affection were fixed on the manhood of Christ, and of that she did have knowledge and would not be parted from that for anything.[93]

With regard to Margery Kempe's outbursts, one may note that she was so intensely attracted to Christ's maleness that she wept each time she saw a male child, because male infants reminded her of Christ as a child or infant. Kempe actually admitted to wanting to snatch such children into her arms. Her maternal compassion, love, and gentleness for

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[91] Kempe, 126-127.
[92] Ibid., 122.
[93] Ibid., 122-123.

the baby Jesus cannot be understated.[94] Kempe also wept when she saw a handsome man that reminded her of the maleness of Christ and his sufferings.[95]

Because Kempe was a lay woman with daily household duties, cares, and responsibilities of motherhood, her perfectionist characteristics in secular matters were linked with her spiritual pursuit of perfection. One might argue that Kempe's maternal instincts were null or lacking since she only mentioned one of her fourteen children, traveled the world, and was so dedicated to spiritual perfection that she neglected maternal responsibilities. Although others perceived Kempe as neglecting worldly responsibilities for spiritual pursuits, she often justifiably demonstrated both secular and spiritual positions. In chapter forty-eight Kempe responded to the mayor's rebuking of spiritual and temporal delinquency by saying, "I am bounden by the law of matrimony [to her husband], and by whom I have borne fourteen children. For I would have you to know, Sir, that there is no man in this world that I love so much as God, for I love Him above all things, and Sir, I tell you truly, I love all men in God and for God."[96] However, in chapter seventeen she recalled her motherhood long before the time she endured pilgrimages: "On a day, one before this time, while this creature was bearing children and she was newly delivered of a child, Our Lord Jesus Christ said to her that she should bear no more children."[97] From her perspective she did not neglect motherhood in pursuit of spiritual perfection until Christ instructed her to so.

Verena Neuburger supports the link between maternal instinct and spiritual perfection when she proposes that nearly all of Kempe's fourteen children died. Hence,

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[94] Bynum, 28.
[95] Kempe, 123.
[96] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 102.
[97] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 30.

devoid of maternal responsibility, Kempe was able to pilgrimage and otherwise avoid mentioning children in *The Book.*[98] After all, mortality rates for infants in the late Middle Ages would have been extremely high. After losing so many children, Kempe may have felt imperfect as a suitable mother and childbearing woman in the late 14th century. In order to compensate for the immense grief and "failed" procreation duties, Kempe demonstrated maternal compassion and perfection through mystical experiences. She recognized the Jesus child in the faces of children, described herself caring for Mary as a child, and envisioned herself participating in the birth of Jesus.[99]

Her perfectionism as a mother may also be likened with her perfectionism as a medieval housewife. In chapter nine, Kempe was sitting in church attending Mass when a great loud noise was heard. Suddenly, stones and timber from the highest point of the church roof fell and strook her so severely on the head and back that she "thought her back was broken." She cried out, "Jesus mercy!" and was miraculously healed without any lingering pain.[100] In this situation Kempe was once again confronted with dualistic attitudes toward her spirituality. Some felt the incident was a token of wrath or vengeance on a woman who did not adhere to their traditional spiritual tradition. Kempe could have easily agreed that she was sinful and that the incident served as a warning from God. But, in this case, she ignored the outward approval and prioritized inward spiritual perfection when insisting that the incident was a miracle of kindness and mercy. As a result, she felt that people might be led to believe in God. Dualism existed when Margery Kempe wanted to turn inward towards spiritual perfection but did not want to neglect worldly responsibilities or promises she had made.

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[98] Neuburger, 87.
[99] Ibid.

Verena Neuburger goes so far as to say that the incident demonstrated Kempe's eye for detail as a housewife.[101] Because perfectionists are detail oriented, this notion supports the assumption that Kempe was a perfectionist within the home.[102] After all, Kempe did describe the projectiles as "a stone which weighed three pounds, and a short end of a beam weighing six pounds."[103] Her perfectionist characteristics can be applied not only to spirituality but also to worldly standards, or a combination of both expectations.

Two years after Kempe's conversion experience, she had a quiet spirit, because she felt she was pleasing the Lord. But she then entered a state of depression for three years. This torment resulted from her previous two years that fostered the "deadly wound of vainglory." Driven to uphold superior piety, Kempe "desired that the crucifix should loosen His hands from the Cross, and embrace her in token of love."[104] As a result of her presumption, God sent three years of great temptations. She realized her weaknesses and feared the Lord had left her, but Jesus comforted and instructed her to meditate daily after 6:00 pm.[105]

Kempe, being a diligent, perfect woman and housewife did not disregard her responsibilities, duties, and obligations towards the household so long as these duties occurred before 6:00 p.m. She once again demonstrated outward perfection by pleasing her husband, children, and more generally the patriarchal society. In this instance she prioritized her inward spiritual perfection as secondary to outward perfection. Yet, there is a sense of tension felt throughout *The Book* as Kempe was constantly on the spiritual

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[100] Kempe (Bulter-Bowdon), 14.
[101] Neuburger, 73.
[102] Basco, 19, 39.
[103] Ibid.

pursuit but trapped between the dual role of the heavenly way and earthly duties--choosing between independence and dependence.[106]

Patriarchal, dualistic attitudes affected medieval woman's spirituality, and a woman's sexuality was not excluded from such hierarchical opposition. The fourth-century theological assumption of Jerome asserted such an opinion: "As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be woman, and will be called man."[107] The patriarchal precept was that women had to renounce their sexuality; however, Kempe may have felt more obligated to demonstrate a "spiritual celibacy" by taking a vow of chastity and wearing white clothing, because she was married and had fourteen children.[108] The patriarchal control of sexuality is demonstrated on a number of occasions in her book. "We find men attempting to discipline Kempe's body, using threats, insults, or sexual harassment in order to assert masculine power and remind her of her secondary status."[109] In chapter forty-three a monk sexually harassed and accused her of conceiving and bearing a child while traveling abroad. In defense, Kempe exclaimed that nothing of the sort happened; yet, he would not believe her. When she spoke of her Lord's will for her to wear white clothing, the monk could only reply with a "God Forbid!" Kempe's direct response was, "Sir, I don't care, so long as God is pleased with it."[110]

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[104] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 7.
[105] Ibid, 9.
[106] Neuburger, 71-72.
[107] Harding, 179.
[108] Ibid., 179-180.
[109] Ibid., 181.

[110]Kempe, 140.

Perfectionism and Relationships

Because Margery Kempe was an eccentric woman who defied medieval religious behavior and patriarchalism with her outbursts, fasting, sexual repression, and clothing, she was often treated as a heretic by male religious authorities. Heresy charges resulted as Kempe used her body as a means of communication or speech. *The Book* records in chapter fifty, "She had many enemies who slandered her, scorned her, and despised her."[111] With an affinity for discourse and the sharing of ideas, Kempe naturally enjoyed preaching; however, most religious leaders did not accept her frank discussions and speech. "A great cleric quickly produced a book and quoted St. Paul for his part against her, that no woman should preach. She answered to this, saying, 'I do not preach sir; do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live.'"[112]

Another example of ecclesiastical patriarchy attempting to mute Kempe's speech occurred when she was in the chapel with the Archbishop of York. He vehemently told her that he did not approve of how her speech was expressed through tears, outbursts, conversations. The Archbishop did not want her seen or heard in public in fear that her speech might pervert his own audiences.[113] Once again, Kempe refused to stop her eccentric behavior, arguing that she had done nothing wrong according to scripture.

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[111] Ibid., 158.
[112] Ibid., 164

Undermining priestly authority, she claimed her speech was something spiritually higher. According to Wendy Harding, "Linguistic co-incidences suggest that Kempe's oral, feminine ministry represents a return of much that is repressed in orthodox and authoritarian clerical practices."[114]

Although Kempe's speech was repressed by clerical authority simply because she was a woman, preaching also was grounds for Lollard charges of heresy. In fact, throughout *The Book*, she is alleged as a being a Lollard. The historical, religious context in which Kempe found herself was one of turmoil and corruption, yet amidst social and economic change, the church still dominated and exerted influence. In a sense, the church maintained a stable, steady presence in the average person's life, while the internal structure within the institution itself was unsettling. The effects of the plague loomed, and stirrings of the Hundred Years War and reformation had begun. The Great Schism in 1378 led to multiple popes, and the clergy of the era were not regarded as educated or academic. Corruption was associated with traffic in indulgences and ecclesiastical preferment. John Wycliffe (1320-1384) attacked this notion of lost piety by exposing and attempting to correct such depraved behaviors. The Pope quickly denounced him as a heretic. In 1401 the *De Haeretico Comburendo* was passed by Parliament, and the first follower of John Wycliffe, termed a Lollard, was burned at the stake.[115] Kempe narrowly escaped the same fate when crowds who disapproved of her presence often shouted, "Take and burn her!" [116] When Kempe was repeatedly rebuked by the Archbishop for speaking of God, she justified her actions by the authority of scripture: "And therefore,

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[113] Harding, 174-176.
[114] Ibid., 175.
[115] Attkinson, 103.
[116] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 21.

sir, methinketh that the Gospel giveth me leave to speak of God."[117] Such an appeal likened her with a heretical Lollard's appeal to scripture or left the clerks thinking she was possessed by the devil.[118]

The opposite of spiritual perfection would be any demonic possession. Although Kempe was often charged as a Lollard heretic, accusations of witchcraft also accompanied her wherever she journeyed. "For some said that she had a devil within her, and some said to her own mouth that the friar should have driven those devils out of her. Thus was she slandered, eaten and gnawed by the people..."[119] Kempe had to prove to laity and the general public she was not a witch, but sometimes she had doubts about her own spiritual state. According to Clarissa Attkinson, Margery Kempe was more scared of evil or demonic presence in her own life than the outward heresy charges. "Her vocation as well as her psychic health depended on the conviction that her 'feelings' came from God, but she could not be perfectly sure--for long--that the devil might not interfere."[120] Such anxiety is an example of inner perfectionism, but outwardly she also sought the church's approval and discernment of spirits.

Embarking on spiritual quests, she sought to tarry with a variety of people from Archbishops to recluses. But, once again, when encountering these people throughout her pilgrimages, the accusation of heresy and chastisement followed her. External relations were strained and hindered as an outcome of her outward perfectionist tendencies. For example, she was tormented and labeled a heretic for her white clothing. In response to the Archbishop's charges, she stated, "I am no heretic, nor shall you prove

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[117] Ibid, 113.
[118] Attkinson, 108.
[119] Kempe (Bulter-Bowdon), 141.
[120] Attkinson, 120.

me one."[121] When on a pilgrimage to St. Williams shrine, she was stopped by religious authorities and asked for a letter of permission. Her response to the unnecessary request was as follows: "I will neither maintain error nor heresy, for it is my will entirely to hold as the Holy Church holds, and fully to please God."[122] Her internal perfection resulted in an obstinate attitude that caused tension in outward relationships.

As the above quotation implies, Kempe's devotion to the church was never questioned by God, and, from her perspective, not a basis for heresy charges. Although her spiritual pursuit was a personal, individualistic experience, it brought her into the context of outward relationships in an established community – the church. She remained orthodox and obedient in hopes of first pleasing God and then the institution of the church through the adherence to doctrine. So she maintained, "If there be any clerk amongst you all who can prove that I have said any word other than I ought to do, I am ready to amend it with good will. I will neither maintain error nor heresy, for it is my full will to hold as Holy Church holdeth, and fully to please God.[123]

God did talk with Kempe about her spirituality being above the church: "And I am well pleased with thee, daughter, for thou standest under obedience to Holy Church....for I am above the Holy Church, and I shall go with thee and keep thee right well."[124] God was also pleased with her obedience to the church, evidenced when Kempe remained faithful to the sacraments. "Daughter, I am well pleased with thee, inasmuch as thou believest in all the Sacraments of Holy Church and in all faith that belongeth

[121] Ibid., 162.
[122] Kempe, 160.
[123] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 109.
[124] Kempe (Bulter-Bowdon), 61.

thereto."[125] In the case of her devotion and undue zeal to please God in the above selections, Kempe once again demonstrated an internal perfection driven by self-motivated goals and desires. Yet, because she desired to please the institution of the church and rid her reputation of any imperfections, Kempe also demonstrated external perfection. This dualistic dilemma resulted when the outward world seemed critical, unsettling, unfair, and even harsh. Then, Kempe was forced to rely on her inward conversations, visions, and bodily control while still seeking outward approval.[126]

At times gathering approval was difficult for Kempe amidst prolific rebuking. But God's approval was what she utmost desired. In chapter fourteen she favored suffering for God's love, and even enjoyed being reproved for the love of Jesus. However, Kempe took her perfectionism--demonstrated through suffering--to the extreme when she willing desired a martyr's death as the highest attainment of spiritual perfection.

> She imagined to herself what death she might die for Christ's sake. She thought she would like to be slain for God's love, but feared the point of death and therefore imagined for herself the most soft death, as she thought for fear of impatience, which was to be bound head and foot to a post, and her head to be smitten off with a sharp axe, for God's love.[127]

Kempe understood her self-endured suffering as an experience of God's grace and love. But she often had to prove to skeptical persecutors, travel companions, and clergy that the grace of God was within her. This seeking of approval for her own self-doubt was best demonstrated in her desire for confessors. According to Basco, perfectionists

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[125] Ibid, 74.
[126] Ibid., 112.

have trouble making decisions and "hope that someone else will make the choices for them, thereby assuming responsibility for the outcome."[128] Through discussing her feelings with confessors, Kempe was able to relieve anxiety when they held accountability for her actions.[129] Having to have her life constantly approved, Atkinson notes, "Despite the assurance of God's love and favor, which she did not seriously doubt, Margery Kempe was never completely confident about her own feelings."[130] God represented everything she consciously or subconsciously felt lacking in her life. With such high expectations, Margery Kempe's own feelings fell short. So she gravitated towards confessors.

In the late Middle Ages the church was linked with the social state of England. Furthermore, the clergy was connected with emotional factors in society, and Kempe relied on the non-stoic contributions of her confessors. According to Attkinson, "The styles and attitudes of her confessors were crucial to her psychic as well as spiritual welfare."[131] Her feelings were hinged in a confessor's approval.

Her insecurity about spirituality drove Kempe to experience the suffering of Christ through rigorous self-denial. This severity brought a sense of internal satisfaction in knowing she was "doing her absolute best." Because Kempe also felt an outward desire to please her confessors, in chapter eighteen Kempe visited anchoress, spiritual guide, and confessor Julian of Norwich to prove that "the grace of God was put into her soul". This realization of God's love resulted in bodily manifestations, visions, and

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[127] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 22.
[128] Basco, 27.
[129] Atkinson, 125.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Attkinson, 116.

devoutness.[132] Julian instructed her that severity for ascetic practices was important if she wanted to understand the suffering of Christ to the fullest extent. "The more sharp he is to you the more clearly shineth your soul in the sight of God."[133] Kempe desired her soul to shine at utmost brightness; thus, she persisted in her pursuits. The two spent many days together, and afterwards *The Book* notes outsiders' expectations, such as Julian's, for Kempe.

> This creature shewed her manner of living to many a worthy clerk, to worshipful doctors of divinity, both religious men and others of secular habit, and they said that God wrought great grace with her, and bade her she should not be afraid—there was no deceit in her manner of living. They counseled her to be persevering, for their greatest dread was that she should turn and not keep her perfection.[134]

Friends and supporters further justified her behavior by their belief that the Holy Ghost was working within her. The Vicar of Saint Stephen's was convinced that her genuine spiritual pursuits were God's will, and he thus became her confessor.[135] Similarly, the White Friar William Sowthfeld said, "Sister [Kempe], dread not for your manner of living, for it is the Holy Ghost working plenteously His grace in your soul."[136]

Besides the perfectionist tendency to seek approval for her actions, Kempe had the desire to take approval one step further. She wanted to be noticed and praised for her behavior. Kempe acquired public attention as a result of her excessive weeping wherever she visited. In addition, her verbal expression or preaching often gathered a crowd. In

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[132] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 32."
[133] Ibid, 35-36.
[134] Ibid, 34.
[135] Ibid, 32.

chapter fifty-three Kempe received public regard when she was arrested and imprisoned in Beverly. At first the people maliciously rebuked her, "...Men called her 'Lollard,' and women came running out of their houses with their distaffs, crying to the people: 'Burn this false heretic!'"[137] Yet, Kempe held fast to courage and tenacity to later preach from a cell window--winning the hearts and compassion of listeners. She was loved and hated, and it was this dualism of acceptance that complicated her pursuits for spiritual perfection. Whom should she listen to and seek acceptance from? Herself, the public, or God?

Divine notice of her actions and behaviors is documented in conversations with Christ throughout *The Book*, and He continuously thanked her for specifics, such as her compassion for others, love of His Passion, and her fight against moral wrongs or sin.[138] This praise or approval would have boosted Kempe's intrinsic perceptions, such as self-esteem, while confirming her pursuits were valid. With such positive reinforcement, her behavior to please others continued.[139] With the attitude that she had to be perfect before others and God in order to find acceptance, Kempe assumed others would notice her perfection. She continually demonstrated how she recognized every imperfection in herself, but she also knew when she acted perfectly. However, the people in her surroundings might not have noticed or have been that observant. To Kempe, failure to notice her "just right" behavior might have felt like a stab in the back, resulting in a

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 117.
[138] Neuburger, 84-85.
[139] Basco, 15.

fabricated criticism of herself. These feelings could have driven her to more ascetic extremes.[140]

Because her body and feelings were trapped in "worldliness," Kempe perhaps had eschatological hopes of attaining perfection. Only in heaven would such ideals be met. As mentioned earlier, Kempe sometimes longed for God to take her life, but her request was never granted upon asking. However, she did discuss death and the afterlife with Jesus when he allowed her to choose a person to eventually join her in heaven. Surprisingly, she did not choose her husband, father, or fellow family member, but her confessor. According to Neuburger, Kempe's choice was justified because she felt that she could never repay her confessor's kindness or spiritual guidance.[141] Paradoxically, Margery Kempe was even distressed about her spiritual perfection in a place of perfection.

Kempe had high moral and ethical standards, and it would have been difficult for her to bend the rules—a common characteristic of perfectionism.[142] She did her share of rebuking clergy that did not live up to her spiritual expectations throughout *The Book.* These scoldings give historians a glimpse into the church structure and the humanity behind some of the figures. Bishops have traditionally been regarded from legalistic, impersonal documents and records as administrative officers or defenders of orthodoxy. Kempe's account allows readers to go behind such "stately" offices and to explore the men's idiosyncrasies, compassions, as well as expectations.[143]

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[140] Ibid, 77.
[141] Neuburger, 74.
[142] Basco, 21.
[143] Jacob, 272-274.

In chapter sixteen Kempe visited Archbishop Arundel at Lambeth to ask for directions in order to journey to the bishop of Lincoln. The historical Arundel was often depicted as a "hard prelate as a hammer of the Lollards." Thus, he would have been familiar with Kempe's Lollard charges.[144] An ardent defender of orthodoxy, he was the author of the *Preaching Constitution* (1409) and even pressured Henry V into fighting an old friend.[145] Kempe did not hesitate to rebuke this commanding man and his clerks within his own house and garden. "There were many of the Archbishop's clerks and other reckless men, both squires and yeomen, who swore many great oaths and spoke many reckless words, and this creature boldly reprehended them, and said they would be damned unless they left off their swearing and other sins that they used."[146]

Another incident incorporating Kempe's perception of others' failed moral and spiritual expectations occurred in chapter fifty-eight when she was disheartened that no one could fulfill her high religious aspirations. She cried out to the Lord, "Alas! Lord, that however many clerks Thou has in this world, Thou wouldst not send me one of them who might fill my soul with Thy word and with reading of Holy Scripture. For all the clerks that preach could not fill it full."[147]

On one occurrence, in disgust and disapproval of another's faults, Kempe explained to the Archbishop her rebuke of the Lady of Westmoreland's daughter and how she persuaded the young woman to leave her husband.[148] Yet in the same conversation, she also had to prove her authority to the Archbishop of York in response to ill reports of her spirituality: "My lord, if ye like to examine me, I shall then know the truth, and if I

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[144] Ibid, 273.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Kempe (Bulter-Bowdon), 28.
[147] Ibid, 130.

be found guilty, I will abide by your correction."[149] She had to satisfy her internal expectations, manifested in her outward disgust, while still seeking approval from outside influences. Margery Kempe teetered on the fine line between accusing and defending.

However stubborn or blunt Kempe's defenses might have seemed at the time, it is important to note that she held a sense of compassion for her enemies and always prayed for them.[150] She often angered others, but there is no evidence that she hurt them. Kempe did what she earnestly felt would improve others' spiritual states or lead them to become more perfect. They were not paying for her personal gratification.[151]

When Kempe rebuked others who failed to live up to her moral expectations, scholar Nanda Hopenwasser associates Kempe's dramatic disapproval with prophethood. Yet, her ethical messages for an ideal, holy community often led to dangerous situations and public disapproval. This was evident through being frequently charged with heresy and poor relationships. Hopenwasser believes that Kempe was "particularly unsuccessful in maintaining good relations with her neighbors and former friends."[152] Negative implications resulted from Margery Kempe's pursuit for spiritual perfection when she was left feeling troubled and frustrated.

Kempe left the individual comfort of private life and inward perfection to enter public life and encourage others to join in her pursuits. As a type of prophet, she felt led to spread God's message and the understanding of the suffering Christ to surrounding communities. Yet, social humiliation, scorn, and suspicion of mental craziness often

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[148] Ibid, 121.
[149] Ibid, 120.
[150] Kempe, 160.
[151] Neuburger, 116.
[152] Hopenwasser, 160.

followed.[153] Intrinsically, she must have oddly enjoyed or either ignored the social disdain, because she knew inwardly that she was "doing the best she could" to emulate the suffering of Christ.

Amidst social abandonment, Kempe often remained hopeful and admitted that she was a humble representation for God. Not considering herself exceptionally holy, she asserted a faithful, humble symbolization for God and suffering. She could understand the people's common needs and desire for devotion. This motivation to educate others was the reason she dictated her experiences to a priest. "Kempe could serve as a spokesperson for common sinners, people like herself who wished to do God's will but retained their innate sinfulness as a function of the human condition."[154] She was either especially humble or obstinately stubborn when she refused to acknowledge her God-given gift of prophecy. For example, chapter fifty-nine of *The Book* stated,

> She would give no credence to the counsel [foreknowledge] of God, but rather believed it was some evil spirit deceiving her. Then for her frowardness and her unbelief, Our Lord withdrew from her all good thoughts and all good remembrances of holy speeches and dalliance, and the high contemplation which she had been used to before, and suffered her to have as many evil thoughts as she before had good ones.[155]

As punishment for her denial, God disassociated himself from her for twelve days.[156]

In chapter twenty God provided Kempe with foreknowledge of an earthquake to satisfy the people's sins.[157] Kempe, similar to other prophets, feared not many people

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[153] Ibid, 153-154.
[154] Hopenwasser, 157.
[155] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 132.
[156] Ibid, 159.

would heed her message and warning from God. Stirred with compassion, she fervently prayed for mercy and pity on those who would have been affected. God granted her prayers and spared the sinful people the earthquake. Kempe also demonstrated notions of foreknowledge when she knew the condition of dead souls.[158] Boldly, she also pronounced who was going to live or die.[159] Kempe even predicted the ecclesiastical ruling that the Benedictine chapel of St. Nicholas in Lynn would fail to receive the right to baptize and purify.[160]

If regarded as a prophet, Margery Kempe still found herself in the double-edged sword of perfection. On the one hand she had the desire and inner motivation to please and seek assurance from God. Yet, in foreknowledge situations, her spiritual perfection often had pejorative results on relationships with others. For example, in chapter nineteen a woman came to Kempe to ask about the condition of her dead husband's soul. Kempe responded, "Madam, Our Lord Jesus Christ bade me tell you that your husband is in Purgatory, and that ye shall be saved, but that it shall be long ere ye come to Heaven."[161] The lady became displeased and refused to accept that her husband was in Purgatory. She left Kempe's counsel upset and sought one of Kempe's confessors. There, the woman wanted the confessor to forsake Kempe's revelation, but he refused to do so. Instead, he comforted Kempe and strengthened her in her faith.[162]

For all her difficulties with others, there were various relational instances that proved beneficial for Margery Kempe. Through either compassion or maternal instinct, Kempe demonstrated works of mercy her entire life, and people near death requested her

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[157] Kempe, (Butler-Bowdon), 38.
[158] Ibid, 37.
[159] Ibid, 43.
[160] Kempe, 94-95.

presence. "For though they loved not her weeping nor her crying in their lifetime, they desired that she should both week and cry when they should die." Additionally, she kissed lepers and led people away from impure thoughts.[163]

Evidence of her tenderness included the closest relationship in her life--as a wife to a husband. In chapter seventy-six, when her husband neared death after falling down a set of stairs and suffering a head injury, Kempe adhered to her marriage vows while caring for and nursing him. But this compassion toward her husband also served as an example of devotion. She hoped all people would illustrate God's love by helping others. Such an exemplary example of compassion was a lesson, but Kempe might not have entirely desired devotion. Although she did care for her ailing husband, she also had alternative motives and yearnings to please God and others through such care. People blamed Kempe for her husband's accident, and she prayed that he would live to prove them wrong. But she also wanted to continue on her journeys and not be responsible for a bed-ridden husband. The Lord asked her to take him home and care for him, but she politely rejected this in order to tend to spiritual matters. But the Lord convinced her saying, "thou shalt have as much reward for keeping him and helping him in his need at home, as if thou wert in church, making thy prayers. Thou has said many times thou wouldst fain keep Me. I pray thee now keep him for the love of Me, for he hath some time fulfilled thy will and My will, both."[164] Although reluctant, she was determined to please God and follow his wishes.

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[161] Kempe (Butler-Bowdon), 37.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Fries, 225.
[164] Kempe (Bowdon-Butler), 165.

Because God wished for Margery Kempe to understand Christ's Passion, pain and suffering were familiar aspects and emotions of her life. Although her bodily pain was an attempt for her to identify with the suffering Christ and to become more spiritual in a harsh environment, Kempe's bodily senses were also an instrument for comfort. She spoke of smelling an unexplainable sweetness or euphoria. Often overtaken by hearing melodious sounds, Kempe could sometimes not hear when people were attempting to speak to her. These comforting tones were heard most during times of prayer.[165] On various occasions, Kempe also heard bellowing or chirping noises like from a bird, but God reassured her that these were only the sounds of the Holy Ghost, which were given to her to demonstrate how much Christ loved her.[166] Her olfactory and auditory senses, as well as her eyes, brought comfort. Besides her visions of Christ, Kempe spoke of being engulfed by radiant light. And at all times she saw "many white things flying all about her on all sides, as thickly in a way as specks in a sunbeam".[167] God reassured Kempe that the specks of light were angels for her protection from evil.[168]

Such consolations would by no means eliminate Kempe's discomfort. The spiritual quest for perfection through suffering took prominence in her religious life and this was what ultimately brought her comfort, but never peace. Perfectionism never satisfies—it only frustrates. Yet, Margery Kempe persisted to value and identify with the suffering of Christ. She sought alternative means for spiritual expression.

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[165] Ibid., 124.
[166] Ibid., 127.
[167] Ibid., 124.
[168] Ibid.

Afterword

Margery Kempe's story has long fascinated readers. Characterized by her intimate conversations with God, boisterous tears, and exhausting pilgrimages, she could be described as "unusual" at the very least. Yet, at the same time, Kempe was also a housewife, mother, and businesswoman. To some extent, these characteristics normalize her story. But Kempe transformed normal characteristics into exceptional pursuits towards spiritual perfection, which resulted in idiosyncrasies and an added dimension of complexity to her nature.

Within the intricacy of her personality and array of perfectionistic tendencies, Kempe attracts modern psychological analysis. The psychological perspective allows scholars in literature, history, and feminist studies to relate and connect with a woman who lived over five hundred years ago. Her unique tears, for example, might interest the social historian as a manifestation of mystical behavior of the late Middle Ages, while the feminist scholar might study these same tears as evidence of a communication tool in a patriarchal context. And finally, the literary scholar might regard the weeping as a language for conversations and dialogue with God.

Understanding Margery Kempe as a perfectionist offers a fresh perspective. It gives a cohesive portrayal and rationale for a woman whose complexities are so widely studied. Gathering pieces from an assortment of disciplines help shape Kempe's

perfection, and each of these areas deserves further study in order to contribute to the whole conversation.

Perhaps comparative studies of other mystics, ascetics, and lay people of the time period would best support or negate Kempe's quest for perfection. Even if these women were anchoresses, such as Julian of Norwich, their spiritual pursuits might not be generalized as exhibiting perfectionist tendencies. However, six hundred years later Margery's spiritual pursuits might serve as a springboard for comparisons to contemporary religious women. For example, a religious woman struggling with perfection today might not evince tendencies of mysticism, but she could demonstrate new forms of asceticism. The woman might deny herself any self-fulfillment as a result of her perfectionist drives. She could experience strained sexual relationships, bouts of depression, difficulties making decisions, struggles with eating disorders, desires to be the best employee, and pressures to manage a perfect family. All these manifestations of inward and outward perfectionism are similar to those of Kempe. In addition, both Kempe and the modern perfectionist woman experience the self-inflected pressure of pleasing a perfect God. Constantly on the pursuit for perfection, Kempe and the woman of the twenty-first century might have complications defining and experiencing grace.

For a contemporary century woman perfectionist to identify with Margery Kempe might not be of any surprise. At first, the female reader might think Kempe was mentally deranged, but later she might sympathize with and embrace Kempe's passion for spirituality. The perfectionist reader could even champion Kempe's courage to assert her independence, and be empowered to do the same. Although Kempe was at times independent, this liberty was limited because she still demonstrated outward perfection

when seeking approval from others. This leaves the perfectionist reader frustrated because Kempe's relationships remained so insecure. Both the modern religious perfectionist and Margery Kempe teeter on fine lines of pleasing themselves and others.

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