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Locating Margery Kempe

An Examination of the Meaning of Space and Sexuality in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

This article examines the use of space and the experience of sexuality in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Initially looking at the "traditional" uses of space and the gendering of location and occupation, the article then looks in depth at how Kempe operates her piety spatially. In medieval culture femininity is associated with the untrustworthy body and so the female must be confined to the safe inner space while the masculine body is free to exist in the outer world. Margery Kempe resists this categorisation despite the abuse she receives from her community in Lynn and from others on pilgrimage. The article argues that the strong reaction received by Kempe to her voice and physical presence in the world is primarily a reflection of the attitude of the Church and lay community towards gender and female sexuality. The article also discusses the apparent sexual nature of Kempe's experiences and how the sexualisation of Kempe may reflect the space she chooses to occupy. The article argues that as a married woman who chooses to exercise her piety in a public sphere, Kempe comes up against challenges and has experiences which are largely unmatched in the lives of nuns or anchoresses who may be able physically to avoid worldly corruption after their enclosure.

Of all the medieval mystics studied today, the most difficult to locate is Margery Kempe.[1] Kempe does not reside in any of the places usually designated for women

1. For discussions of Kempe in relation to space, see Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages,* ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 195–215; Margaret Hostetler, " 'I Wold Thow Wer Closyd in an Hows of Ston': Re-Imagining Religious Enclosure in *The Book of Margery Kempe,*" *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 20.2 (2003) 71–94; Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 168–9; Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 7–8; McAvoy, " 'Closyd in an hows of ston': Discourses of Anchoritism and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Anchorites Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 182–94. My

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in the late Middle Ages. We do not find her confined to an anchorage, a nunnery, a marital bed or as a mourning widow. Kempe moves out of the space permitted for a married mother, and develops for herself a new sphere in which to operate her piety.[2] She uses the existing traditions of affective piety and compunction in an attempt to legitimise her position in society. I would argue that Kempe uses both of these devotional practices as a means to move from the home and marital bed into a wholly new sphere. This article examines the ways in which Kempe's spatial practices result in the liminal nature of her position within her society.[3] I will also discuss how the paradox of inner and outer, body and soul is dealt with by Kempe.

Theoretically, space in the Middle Ages was markedly defined.[4] Each space was clearly distinct as suitable for either men or women, with the inner and private spaces being most often the feminine and the outer and public remaining the domain of the masculine.[5] Lay women were expected to occupy domestic space – the home, bedroom and kitchen – while men's lives were conducted away from the home in the fields of the rural areas and the streets of the urban centres.[6] Traditionally one may have seen clearly the division of labour among the lower classes where women engaged in tasks which did not bring them into the public sphere, involving

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interest here is not so much in Kempe and anchoritism. Rather my focus is on Kempe's use of worldly space and how she portrays her position within the community.

2. For a discussion of women's liminality and rejection of allocated space, see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* pp. 3–8.

3. For a discussion of these issues in relation to the life of an anchoress, see *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure,* ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

4. Daphne Spain points out that space is ideological, not just physical; see Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

5. Salih has questioned how strictly space was divided by gender in practice; see Sarah Salih, "At Home Out of the House," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Caroline Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124–40, p. 130. McAvoy has noted that Kempe's attempts at brewing and milling show how more options were becoming available to women, although a number of avenues did remain closed; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 96. The negative reaction of Kempe's community to her might suggest that these more masculine occupations were not yet acceptable for women.

6. The importance of domestic power to women is seen in Kempe's text in the relevance of having the buttery keys returned to her following her illness after the birth of her first child; see Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* ed. Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London: Early English Text Society, 1940 [reprint 1961]), p. 8. All further references to Kempe's text will be to this edition. This scene has been discussed by a number of critics; see, for instance, Salih, "At Home Out of the House"; Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 89.

them with domestic cleaning, cooking and washing.[7] Tellingly, that most transgressive of female occupations, prostitution, took place in that most private arena – the bedroom – but solicitation was conducted in public.[8]

Kempe's community express their desire for her to be removed from the world and enclosed. Kempe reports this wish when describing the reaction of the people of Canterbury to her weeping: "I wold þow wer closyd in an hows of ston þat þer schild no man speke wyth þe."[9] Kempe's response to this insult is to say that she is not the first of God's servants to suffer slander because of his name. Kempe cleverly shifts the focus from herself to God; her right to appear in public is aligned with Christ's. [10]

In their 2000 study *Medieval Practices of Space*, Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka argue that "the practice of space in the Middle Ages was never homogeneous, but always in flux, and depended on how its attributes were defined at the time and disseminated by the historical agents."[11] Hanawalt and Kobialka note that space in the Middle Ages falls into three distinct categories: geographical space and mapping, theological and ecclesiastical space, and space as a means to express belonging or position. One may relate all three of these areas to a study of Margery Kempe's use of space in her *Book*. Kempe's pilgrimages bring her through various geographical spaces and cultures and one may explore Kempe's use of these various spaces.[12] Her sense of displacement in her own country may be contrasted with the somewhat increased feeling of belonging she experiences while on pilgrimage.[13] As a pilgrim Kempe is harassed by her fellow countrymen and suffers because of their disapproval of her; however, she does not suffer the trials and imprison-

7. Salih has noted that in medieval cultural tradition the house was the location of the "good wife" and that the Book of Proverbs defines female virtue and vice in terms of the domestic sphere; see Salih, "At Home Out of the House," p. 125.

8. For a discussion of Margery Kempe in relation to the discourse of prostitution, see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* pp. 96–130.

9. Kempe, p. 27.

10. McAvoy notes that this hostile reaction to Kempe comes as a result of her usurping male space and presuming she is fit to engage in discussion of God, again usually a male occupation; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body,* pp. 7–8. See also McAvoy, "Closyd in an hows of ston."

11. "Introduction," in *Medieval Practices of Space,* ed. Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), ix–xviii, p. x.

12. On the tenuous position of the female mystic, see Susan S. Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000). For Morrison's discussion of Margery Kempe as a pilgrim, see *Women Pilgrims*, pp. 128–41.

13. For a discussion of Kempe's use of space when on pilgrimage, see Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, pp. 128–41.

ments to which she is subjected at home.[14] She is given alms by a number of individuals and although she lacks financial means, she is cared for in a way that we do not see either in Lynn or anywhere else in England.[15]

Kempe's book also brings to light the interesting dynamics which existed within theological space, which was primarily a male and masculine sphere. Sarah Beckwith notes that Kempe refuses to occupy space traditionally associated with women. [16] I would argue that Kempe uses private space to perform publicly while practising private matters in what were considered public spaces. In the private space of her prison cell Kempe becomes a preacher and in the public space of the Church she expresses her personal devotion to Christ.[17] Kempe's inverted use of space brought her much slander and was yet another reason for the way she was displaced from her community.[18]

Margery Kempe's closest contemporary within the canon of English mystics, Julian of Norwich, represents the acceptable use of space for female piety in late medieval England. Julian was an anchoress; she lived a fully enclosed life. Attached to the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, her identity revolved fully around her inner life and this inner existence was the most acceptable expression of piety available to her.[19] The dynamics of space within the anchorhold is a subject which has been well explored but it is important to note a number of points for the current discussion.[20]

The anchorhold is the most internal and private space and in many ways mirrors the body of the anchoress who inhabits it.[21] As the funeral ceremony is cele-

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14. While in Rome, Kempe is asked to prove that her confessor can understand her but this does not arise in a formal setting but rather occurs while at a dinner; see Kempe p. 97.

15. See the numerous alms-givers who support Kempe while she is Rome; Kempe, pp. 92–93.

16. Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism," p. 37. Margaret Hostetler, in " 'I Wold Thow Wer Closyd in an Hows of Ston,' " claims that Kempe turned public places into performances of enclosure.

17. For Kempe preaching while imprisoned, see Kempe, pp. 130–31.

18. Salih has noted that the space Kempe occupies dictates the reactions of others around her, citing the positive reaction to Elizabeth of Spalbeck whose behaviour was similar to Kempe's – the obvious difference being that she was in an enclosed space; see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 168–9.

19. While it is generally accepted currently that Julian was not the original name of this anchoress but rather that she took the name of the Church to which she was attached, E. A. Jones warns that we cannot take this fact for granted and more research is needed on the matter; see Jones, "Anchoritic Aspects of Julian of Norwich," in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 75–87, pp. 76–77.

20. See *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold,* ed. McAvoy.

21. Here the anchoress as gender lies at the core of my argument. For a detailed discussion of anchoritism as well as its relationship to gender, see *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs*.

brated at the time that the anchoress enters the enclosure, one could say that the death involved is not only the removal of the person from the world but also the shedding of the physical body for the new spiritual body that the anchorhold represents. This may seem like a contradiction as the body is the outer and the soul the inner, while the gendering of spaces places the female in the private and the male in the public. However this spatial demarcation does make sense when we consider that the association of the body with the female may well be the cause of the female's position in the inner private space. The danger of the body is contained, allowing the soul to be free of temptation.

The anchorhold represents the safety of the virgin enclosed within it and Kempe's existence outside this enclosure is a source of danger to her, and danger posed by her. The relationship between this dangerous body and conversely safe soul in *The Book of Margery Kempe* is most effectively demonstrated in Kempe's search for a renewed virginity. By escaping the bedroom, Kempe simultaneously liberates and incarcerates herself by moving into a space which allows her freedom in her piety but forces her into emotional and psychological exile from her community.[22]

Kempe's exile from her community begins in the text with the illness she suffers following the birth of her first child. This illness is the direct result of a sin which Kempe says the devil fooled her into not confessing while she was well, and which she was unable to confess while ill because of the quick temper and judgement of her confessor. Kempe describes the effects of this unconfessed sin as devastating:

> And þan sche sent for hyr gostly fadyr, for sche had a thyng in conscyens whech sche had neuyr schewyd be-forn þat tyme in alle hyr lyfe. For sche was euyr lettyd by hyr enmy, þe Deuel, euyr-mor seyng to hyr whyl sche was in good heele hir nedyd no confessyon but don penawns be hir-self a-loone, & all schuld be forȝouyn, for God is mercyful j-now.[23]

Many critics have now come to the conclusion that this unnamed sin is of a sexual nature.[24] They often do so on the basis that Kempe periodically experiences

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22. McAvoy notes that Eve's words in the N-Town play *The Creation of the World: The Fall of Man* describe her desire to move beyond her allocated space; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 1. This is mirrored in Kempe's text as she too wishes to move away from her husband's side and into space she might create for herself. For a discussion of women's sexuality in the Middle Ages, see Roberta Bosse, "Female Sexual Behavior in the Late Middle Ages: Ideal and Actual," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 10 (1984) 15–37.

23. Kempe, pp. 6–7.

24. See, for example, McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 34–40; Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: *Hysterica Compassio* in the Late Middle Ages," in

sexual temptation.[25] However, there is insufficient evidence in the text to determine with certainty what the nature of this sin might have been; it may have been sexual but it could equally have been heresy or a number of other sins.[26] In fact I would argue that Kempe's omission of William Sawtrey from her text could be seen as evidence of her discomfort around the topic and, as is evident in the inclusion of the sexual temptation in the text, heresy is something she is far less prone to discuss than sexuality.[27]

In fact Kempe's rather open discussion of her sexual relationship with her husband and her description of her sexual temptation and her desire for a man who later refused her advances proves a willingness not only to discuss sex but also to admit to sexual sin as, if we follow Augustine's model, her desire for this man constitutes the sin of lechery even if the act did not take place. [28] Kempe sees the temp-

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Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts 700–1600, ed. Mary Carruthers and Elizabeth Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 201–17, p. 208. Salih argues that Kempe's text becomes the confession she was unable to make to her confessor; however, this argument is problematic as the sin is also not confessed within the text; see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, p. 180.

25. McAvoy, for example, argues that the sin may be deemed sexual because of the juxtaposition of the sin and Kempe's expression of desire to be free from her husband. McAvoy sees Kempe's potential adultery as a type of confession in the text, noting that in psychoanalytic theory the subject often repeats a negative experience. McAvoy also sees the length of Kempe's illness as evidence of a sexual sin as it mirrors the term of a pregnancy. See McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 34–36.

26. It has been posited that the nature of this unspoken sin was heresy; see Stephen Medcalf, "Inner and Outer," in *The Later Middle Ages,* ed. Stephen Medcalf (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 108–71, pp. 116–17; Charity Scott Stokes, "Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book," *Mystics Quarterly* 25 (1999) 9–67, p. 25. Kim M. Philips points out that if the sin was Lollard sympathies the desire not to identify it specifically could easily be explained; see Philips, "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Women," in *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 17–34, p. 30. McAvoy notes that Kempe's desire to deal with the sin alone reflects the heretical belief that confession to a priest was unnecessary; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 37, n. 30. Staley argues that by Kempe saying it was the devil's will that she deal with her sin herself rather than confessing she depicts herself as orthodox early on. Staley also notes that this scene is used as a criticism of those members of the clergy who did not properly administer the sacrament of confession. See Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, pp. 90–91.

27. McAvoy notes Sawtrey may well have had an influence on Kempe especially with regard to her confessional practices and her choice to record her accusations of Lollardy and Arundel's subsequent approval of her; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, p. 35 and pp. 182–85.

28. Lochrie discusses Kempe's sexual temptation as a source of laughter and comedy in the text as she argues that punishment by lechery is comic for the medieval reader. Lochrie cites

tations she experiences as a punishment for believing that she loved God more than he loved her.[29] Surely if this punishment was meted out in response to her unmentioned sin, then Kempe would tell her reader.

The sexual nature of Kempe's temptations may well reflect her position as wife to a living husband and the need she experienced to fulfil her marital debt to him. As a married woman who chooses to exercise her piety in a public sphere, Kempe comes up against challenges and has experiences which are unmatched in the lives of nuns or anchoresses who may be able physically to avoid worldly corruption after their enclosure. However, it would be wrong to assume that those who were enclosed did not experience their sexuality; these figures also used their sexuality but did so in a way which was more acceptable both to their own contemporaries and ours. Roberta Gilchrist has noted that

> through the processes of sexual denial and strict physical enclosure, the sexuality of medieval religious women was turned inside out: sexuality became an interior space, a place of elevated senses and ecstatic states of consciousness. Celibacy, enclosure and contemplation were the avenues through which religious women discovered an intense, profound desire for the suffering body of Christ.[30]

Margery Kempe too expressed a deep desire for the human Christ, often identifying with his suffering state. However, her lack of virginity makes her desire for Christ problematic in the eyes of her own community. Moreover, this lack of virginity is made starkly obvious by her living family and the need for a vow of chastity with her husband who still wishes Kempe to fulfil her marriage contract in the marital bed. Her refusal to live an enclosed existence means that she remains both wife and mother in the eyes of her community.

Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" as an example of this literary trope; see Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 152–56. However, I would argue that this assertion is largely flawed. Kempe's text as a whole at no point suggests that laughter is to be found in any instance of sexual indiscretion. There is an obvious difference between a text which sets out to be outlandish and comedic and one which sets out to give religious instruction; therefore, we cannot base an argument on an assumption that the results of two texts with such wildly differing motivations and readerships would somehow be mirrored.

29. See Kempe, pp. 13–14. Staley argues that these temptations represent Kempe's struggle against her own sexuality rather than any outside influence; see Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, p. 92.

30. Roberta Gilchrist, "Unsexing the Body: The Interior Sexuality of Medieval Religious Women," in *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, ed. A. Schmidt and Barbara L. Voss (London: Routledge, 2000), 89–103, p. 89.

Kempe chooses to live in the world, to be spiritual lover and virgin as well as earthly wife and mother. This points to another important aspect of Kempe's text and person: her choices. Rather than accept the limits placed upon her as a married woman, Kempe merely sees these aspects of her life as things which she may choose to change or exploit for her own ends. She chooses to move within the masculine-dominated metaphorical and physical places in society and she chooses to put an end to her sexual contract with her husband. Kempe also decides not to dismiss her body as untrustworthy and negative and instead chooses to use it as a tool in her attempt to achieve her goals in piety and religiosity. Kempe uses her body, the site of her sins of pride, vainglory, avarice, gluttony and sexual pleasure with her husband, and transforms it into the site of her repentance as she suffers physically throughout the text in seeking forgiveness for her own sins and those of others.

Margery Kempe's marriage to the Godhead is significant for a number of reasons.[31] Here I will discuss its relevance to a bodily love for a corporeal Christ and the sensual and sexual language used to describe the "marriage bed" scene which follows the wedding ceremony:

> As þis creatur was in þe Postelys Cherch at Rome on Seynt Laterynes Day, þe Fadyr of Hevyn seyd to hir "Dowtyr, I am wel plesyd wyth þe in-asmeche as þu beleuyst in alle þe Sacramentys of Holy Chirche & in al feyth þat longith þerto, & specialy for þat þu beleuyst in manhode of my Sone & for þe gret compassyon þat þu hast of hys bittyr Passyon."[32]

In preparation for the proposal of marriage God tells Kempe that he is happy with her for many reasons but most of all he is pleased that she believes in the manhood of Jesus Christ. At this stage we are reminded that it is Kempe's love of the corporeal Christ that has given her access to the heavenly sphere and the presence of the Godhead:

> Also þe Fadyr seyd to þis creatur, "Dowtyr, I wil han þe weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn þe my preuyteys & my cownselys, for þu xalt wonyn wyth me wyth-owtyn ende." Þan þe creatur kept sylens in hir sowle & answeryd not þerto, for sche was ful sor aferd of þe Godhede, for al hir

31. For a discussion of Kempe's marriage compared to the spiritual marriage of St. Bridget of Sweden, see Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, "Margery Kempe's Mystical Marriage and Roman Sojourn: The Influence of St. Bridget of Sweden," *Reading Medieval Studies* 28 (2002) 39–57. It should be noted that the mystical marriage was, of course, not uncommon in descriptions of medieval mystical experiences.

32. Kempe, p. 86.

> lofe & al hir affeccyon was set in þe manhode of Crist & þerof cowde sche good skylle & sche wolde for no-thyng a partyd þerfro.[33]

Kempe's reluctance to accept the proposal of the father because of her love for the son is further evidence that Kempe's physical devotion to the incarnate Christ is all consuming. Kempe attempts to rationalise her reaction by explaining the extreme nature of her devotion to the manhood of Christ:

> Sche was so meche affectyd to þe manhode of Crist þat whan sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her armys, ʒyf sche myth wetyn þat þei wer ony men children, sche shuld þan cryin, roryn, & wepyn as þei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode. And, yf sche myth an had hir wille, oftyntymes sche wolde a takyn þe childeryn owt of þe moderys armys & a kyssed hem in þe stede of Criste. And ʒyf sche sey a semly man, sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym les þan sche myth a seyn hym þat was boþe God and man. & þerfor sche cryed many tymes & oftyn whan sche met a semly man & wept & sobbyd ful sor in þe manhod of Crist as sche went in þe stretys at Rome þat þei þat seyn hir wondryd ful mych on hir, for þei knew not þe cawse. & þerfor it was no wondyr ʒyf sche wer stille & answeryd not þe Fadyr of Hevyn whan he teld hir þat sche xuld be weddyd to hys Godhed.[34]

Kempe loves both the child and adult corporeal Christ. It would seem that all masculine beauty reminds her of him and she weeps profusely because of it. The fierce loyalty which Kempe feels towards Christ may be strengthened because she is alone in a foreign country with no male companion. She is certainly familiar with the meaning of the Holy Trinity, and this is not an issue as the passage goes on to discuss Christ as the second member of it before she agrees to the marriage:

> Than seyd þe Secunde Persone, Crist Ihesu, whoys manhode sche louyd so meche, to hir, "What seyst þu, Margery, dowtyr, to my Fadyr of þes wordys þat he spekyth to þe? Art þu wel plesyd þat it be so?" And þan sche wold not answeryd þe Secunde Persone but wept wondir sor, desiryng to haue stille hym-selfe & in no wyse to be departyd from hym. Than þe Secunde Persone in Trinite answeryd to hys Fadyr for hir & seyde, "Fadyr, haue hir excused, for sche is ʒet but ʒong & not fully lernyd how sche xulde answeryn." And þan þe Fadyr toke hir be þe hand in hir sowle be-for þe Sone & þe Holy Gost & þe Modyr of Ihesu and alle þe xij apostelys & Seynt Kateryn & Seynt Margarete & many oþer seyntys & holy virgynes wyth gret

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33. Kempe, p. 86.
34. Kempe, pp. 86–87.

> multitude of awngelys, seying to hir sowle, "I take þe, Margery, for my weddyd wife, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richer, for powerar, so þat þu be buxom & bonyr to do what I byd þe do. For, dowtyr, þer was neuyr childe so buxom to þe modyr as I xal be to þe boþe in wel & in wo, – to help þe and comfort þe. And þerto I make þe suyrte." And þan þe Modyr of God & alle þe seyntys þat wer þer present in hir sowle preyde þat þei myth haue mech joy to-gedyr. And þan þe creatur with hy deuocyon, wyth gret plente of treys, thankyd God of þis gostly comfort, heldyng hir-self in hir owyn felyng ryth vnworthy to any swech grace as sche felt, for sche felt many gret comfortys, boþe gostly comfortys & bodily comfortys.[35]

This wedding scene conforms closely to the traditional wedding scene between man and woman and lacks the formality of the wedding ceremony that would have taken place at the vow taking in a nunnery.[36] As with a traditional wedding the guests come to congratulate Kempe and these heavenly figures take the place of the friends and family who would attend nuptials. In fact these guests are noted as being "þer present in hir sowle." This demarcation of Kempe's soul not only as a place of experience but also as a commodious quasi-three-dimensional arena in which a rather large number of other figures may congregate shows the ease with which Kempe exploits her understanding of both her body and soul; the rhetorical transition between, and combination of, the physical and the spiritual is achieved with no fuss or worry as Kempe is comfortable with this dynamic body/soul relationship.

The differentiation here between the experience of body and soul is particularly interesting. When discussing Christ, Kempe does not specify whether his words or actions are heard or felt bodily or in her soul. However, when she moves on to discuss her interaction with the Godhead she qualifies her statements, describing her experience of the Godhead as "in hir sowle." The vows she exchanges with God, his holding of her hand, the wedding ceremony and the comforts she receives directly from the first person of the trinity are described in this way. The "bodily" comforts which Kempe receives once she has become a bride of Christ must be differentiated from those experiences which involve direct contact with the Godhead. Evidently, for Kempe, Christ – God Incarnate – is bodily, physical, and of this world, while God the father is spiritual, ghostly and heavenly.

35. Kempe, p. 87.

36. For a detailed discussion of the medieval wedding ceremony, see D. L. D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 141–56. On the nun's entrance ceremony, see Susan McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 37–40.

The multivalent relationship depicted between the Godhead and Kempe reflects the variety of ways in which the intensity of their connection is felt by her. The marriage vows exchanged in this scene include the usual spousal references but God also refers to both himself and Kempe as "buxom" or obedient children. God notes that following their marriage Kempe will be more obedient and he in turn will be more "buxom" than any child ever was to their mother. Kempe's use of multi-directional parental and spousal relationships to express extremity of feeling and passion is yet another indicator of the freedom she feels within her relationship with Christ.

Following the ceremony Kempe is filled with joy and describes the sweet heavenly odours, heavenly music and sights of angels she experienced:

> Sum-tyme sche felt swet smellys with hir nose; it wer swettar, hir thowt, þan euyr was ony swet erdly thing þat sche smellyd be-forn, ne sche myth neuyr tellyn how swet it wern, for hir thowt sche myth a leuyd þerby ȝyf they wolde a lestyd. Sum-tyme sche herd wyth hir bodily erys sweche sowndys & melodijs þat sche myth not wel heryn what a man seyd to hir in þat tyme les he spoke þe lowder. Þes sowndys & melodijs had sche herd nyhand euery day þe terme of xxv ȝere whan þis boke was wretyn, & specialy whan sche was in deuowt prayer, also many tymes whil sche was at Rome & in Inglond boþe. Sche sey wyth hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al a-bowte hir on euery syde as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne.[37]

Kempe experienced these anomalies in a number of diverse places and their presence, as they appear only after the marriage, may serve to remind Kempe continually of her position as Bride of Christ. Once again Kempe's experience is described as "bodily" both in terms of her sight and hearing; there is no mistaking the ways in which she felt the effects of her piety. While one could argue that she merely uses the word "bodily" to emphasis the intensity of her experience we have seen that she does differentiate between those actions which are bodily and those which occur in the soul. For Kempe her spiritual experiences lead to a physical, corporeal understanding of mysticism and specifically of Christ.

I will now move on to discuss the scene which has sparked so much controversy in many discussions of Kempe. As Christ speaks to Kempe following their marriage he speaks of the ways in which their relationship is both natural and mutually pleasing:

> And, ȝyf I wer in erde as bodily as I was er I deyd on þe Cros, I schuld not ben a-schamyd of þe as many oþer men ben, for I schuld take þe be þe hand a-mongs þe pepil & make þe gret cher þat þei schuldyn wel knowyn

37. Kempe, pp. 87–88.

> þat I louyd þe ryth wel. For it is conuenyent þe wyf to be homly wyth hir husbond. Be he neuyr so gret a lorde & sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth hir, ȝet þei must ly to-gedir & rest to-gedir in joy & pes. Ryght so mot it be twyx þe & me, for I take non hed what þu hast be but what þu woldist be. And oftyn-tymes haue I telde þe þat I haue clene forȝoue þe alle thy synnes. Þerfore most I nedys be homly wyth þe & lyn in þi bed wyth þe. Dowtyr thow desyrest gretly to se me, & þu mayst boldly, whan þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, & as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be louyd as a sone shuld be louyd wyth þe modyr & wil þat þu loue me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to loue hir husbonde. & þerfor þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi sowle & kyssen my mowth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wylt. &, as oftyn-tymes as þu thynkyst on me er woldyst don any good dede to me, þu schalt haue þe same mede in Heuyn as ȝyf þu dedist it to myn owyn precyows body whech is in Heuyn, for I aske no mor of þe but þin hert for to louyn me þat louyth þe, for my lofe is euyr redy to þe.[38]

When Christ says that he would gladly walk with Kempe among people in the streets unashamed, there is a note of defiance. It would seem that in composing these words Kempe is expressing condemnation of those who found her behaviour humiliating and disgraceful. Christ takes on the role of husband or lover to Kempe, acting as both protector and defender. He goes on to say that it is befitting for a husband to be familiar with a wife. It is at this stage in the text that Christ tells Kempe that he wishes to know her as a husband would: in the marital bed.

Christ informs Kempe that her desire to see his body will be fulfilled when she takes him as her husband in bed.[39] Doubleness in language and meaning arises when in the same sentence Christ refers to himself as Kempe's son and to Kempe as his daughter. Is Kempe's text sexualising her relationship with Christ or is she merely trying to express an intensity of feeling through the language familiar to her?[40] There are strong connections with the Song of Songs especially in the refer-

38. Kempe, p. 90.

39. Staley discusses the insertion of "ghostly" before "bed" by one of the text's annotators of the surviving manuscript of the text. She argues that the language must have disturbed the later reader; see Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, p. 95.

40. The practice of putting into words that which is ultimately ineffable is reflected on by a number of medieval mystics. The use of earthly images to describe a heavenly experience is seen as limited and frustrating by the mystics. They often also recognise the danger of using such language. In the Prologue to *The Cloud of Unknowing* the author issues a warning to readers: those who do not understand mystical experience should not read the text because they will almost certainly misunderstand its meaning. For a discussion of this warning see

ence to kissing Christ's mouth, head and feet. The language here is certainly sexual, as is the language in the Song of Songs.[41] However the sexuality in Kempe's text is calm and peaceful and describes marital sexual serenity rather than an excited passionate encounter.[42]

We may compare the passage above with a passage from Mechthild's *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, in which the Lord tells her to remove her clothes as

> Nothing shall come between them:
> Then a blessed stillness
> That both desire comes over them.
> He surrenders himself to her,
> And she surrenders herself to him.[43]

This passage is filled with a passion and directness not found in Kempe's text which in comparison is revealed to be a slow-paced example of a sensual companionship rather than a passionate tryst as described by Mechthild. Perhaps Mechthild's passion and physical desires are made safer for the reader through their metaphoricity and the delivery of the scenes in the third person. Margery Kempe's text is presented most often as if literal and always as a somewhat more personal account, so we cannot claim the same safety for her. However, much like the encounters described by Bernard in his commentary on the Song of Songs, Kempe's marriage to Christ is depicted as occurring in the soul, as was her experience of him in the marital bed.

McAvoy argues that Christ's ravishment of Kempe represents, to Kempe herself, absolution and is in opposition to what amounts to the marital rape carried out by her husband.[44] I would agree that Kempe's sensual experience with Christ repre-

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Evelyn Underhill, "Introduction," in *The Cloud of Unknowing: A Book of Contemplation* (London: J. M. Watkins, 1956), 1–12, p. 4.

41. For a discussion of the language of the Song of Songs and Kempe's text, see Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, pp. 225–27.

42. Here I concur with Salih who has recently argued that those texts which discuss and depict sexual pleasure, such as fabliaux, romance and allegorical texts, are very different from Kempe's text; see Sarah Salih, "When Is a Bosom Not a Bosom? Problems with 'Erotic Mysticism,' " in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 14–32, p. 17. Staley also refers to Kempe's text as "rather a tame story" when considered with other holy figures; see Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, p. 101.

43. Mechthild of Magdaberg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 44.

44. See Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Spiritual Virgin to Virgin Mother: The Confessions of Margery Kempe," *Parergon: Bulletin of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 17.1 (1999) 9–44, p. 26.

sents a type of salvation; here she is removed from those sexual encounters which have plagued her and instead she becomes part of a mystical union with her true lover, Christ. This scene represents far more than a sexual encounter; it is the physical expression of Kempe's spiritual progression and her desire to depart from her physical family and to replace it with those biblical figures with whom she surrounds herself in her visions.

Kempe's text is full of dualisms: she is at once mother and virgin, parent and child, follower and leader, student and teacher, weeper and comforter, servant and master, flesh and spirit. She used the power of her body to position herself in a new and quite unusual sphere. She moved away from the enclosed space which so many religious women of the Middle Ages occupied. Rather than live in an unexposed and relatively safe space Kempe existed in the world – a space usually acceptable only for men. To move into this space she used her body by choosing affective piety to express her religiosity. Her affective piety of course included her gift of tears. While tears may be perceived as a private form of expression, they are one of the most commonly recognised forms of the outward expression of emotion. The act of weeping therefore brings together the private with the public and may be seen as an act of exposing what is inner. Her tears and affective piety also worked to move Kempe not only into the worldly sphere but into a dangerous position within that sphere; by forcing her community to acknowledge her existence Kempe opens herself up to slander, abuse and questions from her contemporaries regarding the authenticity of her tears and piety as a whole.

It is interesting to note also that both the act of weeping and the issue of sexuality not only move Kempe into a worldly position but also push her closer to a comparison with the most controversial biblical figure, Mary Magdalene. In many ways we could liken Kempe's quest to escape the bedroom with Mary Magdalene's spiritual rebirth, transforming each from a sexual to a "pure" being. The Magdalene, however, whose position as commercial prostitute was assumed by readers rather than stated in the Bible, represents the redeemed sexual woman, while Kempe does not appear as a reborn individual, but is rather, for a significant part of her own community, a failed wife and mother.

Kempe fears rape when away from her husband and the safety of her domestic domain.[45] The household was the only location in which a secular woman could safely escape the scrutiny and sexual advances of men as the mere act of being seen and desired constituted a sinful act on the part of a woman. Kempe's position as a

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45. *Ancrene Wisse* uses the example of Dina whose departure from her house invites the threat of rape; see *The Ancrene Riwle,* ed. and trans. M. B. Salu (New York: Burns and Oats, 1955), p. 24.

wife and mother – a figure already sexualised – also represented in the culture of the time a danger of rape or sexual assault. Salih has noted that in the texts of the Katherine group sexualised torture was carried out on transgressive women who had already become sexual beings while the torture of virgins was not sexualised.[46]

While the house represented a safe haven it still offered some potential for misappropriation of space. The eroticisation of the window in medieval literature provides an interesting example of how women might express transgressiveness even within sanctioned space. The window becomes a possible place of breech of a woman's contract of either marriage of chastity.[47] It also appears as a site of danger and transgression in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.[48] During her imprisonment at Beverly, Kempe preaches through her window to a group of women who have gathered to show their support:

> Þan stode sche lokyng owt at a wyndown, telling many good talys to hem þat wolde heryn hir, in so mech þat women wept sor & seyde wyth gret heuynes of her hertys, "Alas, woman, why xalt þu be brent?" Than sche preyid þe good wife of þe hows to ȝeuyn hir drynke, for sche was euyl for thryste. And þe good wife seyd hir husband had born a-wey þe key, wherfor sche myth not comyn to hir ne ȝeuyn hir drynke. And þan þe women tokyn a leddyr & set up to þe wyndown & ȝouyn hir a pynte of wyn in a potte & toke hir a pece, besechyng hir to settyn a-wey þe potte preuyly & þe peve þat what þe good man come he myth not aspye it.[49]

This window becomes a passage of exchange between these women: Kempe imparts her knowledge of God and gives the women tears of devotion and they, in turn, give Kempe sustenance. The window is still a site of transgression as the women must hide their actions from the male figure of authority.

In many ways this scene encapsulates the meaning of space for Kempe. That place which offers the most potential for sin becomes a site of penitence giving instead the opportunity for repentance and salvation to those willing to listen and engage with her. Rather than offering sexual transgression, as the window did in

46. See Sarah Salih, "Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in The Katherine Group," in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Jane Angela Weisl (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 95–112, p. 104.

47. For discussion of the window's erotic potential, see Salih, "At Home: Out of the House," pp. 131–32.

48. McAvoy discusses Kempe preaching from the window, noting the resemblance of the scene, which she argues is feminised, to one of Mary Magdalene preaching while in Gaul; see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 193–34.

49. See Kempe, pp. 130–31.

other texts, here it is transformed into an important place of opportunity for Kempe's words and her followers' devotion. This transformation of a site of potential transgression reflects her desire to change from a sexual being to a virginal Bride of Christ. For Kempe this transformation is a long journey which, I would argue, ends with the death of her, now infantile, husband.[50] As John Kempe's mental age diminishes so too does Kempe's position as earthly wife as her role becomes that of a nurturing mother rather than a sexual partner.

Kempe's description of her own body as the simultaneous site of sin, repentance, punishment and reward remains focused on her corporeality and her connection to the physical rather than spiritual world. The female medieval body is possibly one of the most interesting that history has to offer; medieval women mystics were public figures (none more so than Kempe) but medieval society preferred to keep women inside their prescribed space within homes, convents and brothels. Women's bodies were seen as dangerous to men who categorised themselves as beings of mind or soul.[51] However, Laurie Fink has noted that "the discourse of the female mystic was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body, and it is, paradoxically, through these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power . . . [and] fashioned . . . the means of transcending [her] . . . own secondariness."[52] Thus Kempe uses the methods recommended in the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* to empower herself, although this text was not written specifically for women.[53] Her visions of Jesus Christ move her into the mystical sphere, and, further, her use of her body becomes legitimised, for herself, through the use of her existing resources as a wife and mother.[54] She uses the language of the body to discuss her relationship with God, culminating in sharing a marital bed with Christ following her marriage to the Godhead in Rome.

Kempe's text also reflects the cultural "trustworthiness" of the woman and her body. Historically women, and especially their bodies, have been demonised and

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50. See Kempe, pp. 179–81.

51. For a discussion of the medieval association of the male with mind or soul, see Alcuin Blamires, "Paradox in the Medieval Gender Doctrine of Head and Body," in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, ed. Peter Biller and A. J. Minnis (York: York Medieval Press, 1997), 13–30.

52. *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics,* ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), p. 29.

53. For a discussion of the particular relevance of the *Meditations* to women, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book of Margery Kempe* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 147–54.

54. On Kempe's use of motherhood, see McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, pp. 28–63.

characterised negatively. John Lydgate's sarcastic poem praising the steadfastness of women offers us an interesting insight into an opinion of the late fifteenth century:

> This worlde is full of variaunce
> In everything, who taketh hede:
> That feith and trust and all contaunce
> Exiled ben, this is no drede;
> And, save oonly in womanhede,
> I can see no silkernesse.
> But, for all that, yet, as I rede,
> Bewar always of doublenesse.[55]

The distrust of women by men was ultimately caused by men's attempts to categorise and define the role of women. The duality which emerged in feminine roles arose because women were told they were simultaneously powerful and weak, destructive and creative by the Church and therefore society. The space in which women were permitted to operate reflected the desire of men to diminish the power that women may have and Kempe's movement into the masculine sphere may well have led to her exclusion from her community. Kempe is not a stable figure in her community; she is subjected to, and the product of, the variance which, as Lydgate notes, is a condition of life in this world.

55. *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. T. Davies (London: Faber, 1963), p. 189.