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Introduction

The subject of this work is a unique persona of a fourteenth century English woman Margery Kempe. In 1943 the Butler-Bowdon family, an old Yorkshire Catholic family, discovered among their possessions a manuscript volume which was identified as *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Goodman 1). Until then Margery Kempe was known as the author of a series of extracts printed as ‘short treatise’ by Wynkyn de Worde of London, in 1501 (Knowles 139). The assumption was that Margery Kempe is a late medieval mystic of the type of Julian of Norwich, therefore, the discovery of the manuscript was initially perceived as a great success filled with expectations. However, *The Book* soon became a disappointment due to its extensive depiction of, what was perceived as, hysterical behaviour, and critics dismissed it as not tantamount to the devotional depth of medieval mystics, Julian of Norwich above all. Disregarding the initial response to the text, *The Book* is a miracle indeed: it confirms certain devotional ambition, proves to be the first autobiography in English language, and a singular testimony to the late medieval life from the perspective of an outstanding pious woman. Recent revival of interest in the female piety of the Middle Ages highly contributed to the re-evaluation and acknowledgement of the accomplishments and piety of Margery Kempe and her *Book*. One of the main assessments is the fact that the uniqueness of Margery Kempe resists categorical classification, yet, by and large, she has been labeled a mystic.

From the twenty-first century point of view, it is difficult to identify with Margery Kempe and her *Book*; nothing could be more distant than half-insane religious ravings of a medieval woman. The medieval world, and the world Margery creates in her *Book*, is a distinct and unfamiliar reality, comparable to a different
planet, however, Margery’s *Book* challenges us with intriguing questions about our own accessibility and capability to appraise extreme experience.

I chose Margery’s attribute of a mirror to be my walking-stick in the landscape of Margery Kempe in order to alleviate my exploration of her intrinsically incomprehensible spiritual experience and impalpable world. Towards the end of *The Book*, when Margery weeps for the people who do not show their love for Christ in an appropriate way and who react to her way of religious piety with scorn and ridicule, Christ says to her:

“My daughter, I have ordained you to be a mirror amongst them, to have great sorrow, so that they should take example from you to have some little sorrow in their hearts for their sins, so that they might through that be saved; yet they have no love to hear of sorrow or of contrition. But, good daughter, do your duty and pray for them while you are in this world, and you shall have the same reward in heaven, as if all the world were saved by your good will and your prayer.” (*B.M.K.* 186)

(‘Nevertheless, daughter, I have ordained you to be a mirror amongst them, to have great sorrow, so that they should take example from you to have some little sorrow in their hearts for their sins, so that they might through that be saved; yet they have no love to hear of sorrow or of contrition. But, good daughter, do your duty and pray for them while you are in this world, and you shall have the same reward in heaven, as if all the world were saved by your good will and your prayer.’) (Windeatt 226)

Christ ordained Margery to be a mirror to reflect the divine presence among recalcitrant human hearts so that they notice the reflection of the divine light and direct their mind and heart to repentance over their sins. Therefore, the status of a mirror ascribed to Margery by Christ presents an explanation and impulse for her extraordinary response to the divine working in her.

Before embarking on the study of Margery Kemp and her *Book*, I decided to devote extensive space to the elucidation of historical, social and ecclesiastical
background of the era of late medieval mystics. One certainly cannot conclude that Margery’s unique persona and idiosyncratic spirituality was a result of the time, however, I would like to point, that the fourteenth and fifteenth century with its times of disease and warfare, political and religious decline, and public frustration, greatly contributed to the rise of individualism and to the demand for an intimate connection to God.

The goal of Chapter two is to adumbrate the fundamental aspects of mysticism and mystical experience; moreover, it strives to outline the features and characteristics of the late medieval English piety with regard to the problem which Margery’s classification as a late medieval English mystic imposes. Chapters three and four attempt to summarize the extraordinary adventures of one Margery Kempe of Lynn, and to bring the idiosyncratic features of her spiritual life and religious experience closer to the reader.

Chapter five is wholly devoted to Margery’s status as a mirror. Drawing on both the theological symbolism of mirrors, and modern semiotic and cultural attributes of mirrors, I establish three significant aspects of Margery’s devotional expression as imitation, reflection and liminality. Exploring the two crucial scenes of Margery’s spiritual life, I argue that Margery’s bodily experience of the divine is an attempt at communication and instruction, consequently, Margery’s attempt at assuming identity. Her body as a mirror becomes a significant place of reflection of the divine, and her bodily imitation of Christ’s suffering renders a didactic message for mankind. Moreover, Margery’s bodily and mental imitation of Christ’s humanity complies with fundamental features of late medieval female mysticism.

Another point of my argument is liminality of Margery’s status of a mirror. Her deliberate withdrawal into a liminal zone allows her to point out social and religious
anxieties of the medieval community. Moreover, Margery’s liminality is instrumental
in her becoming fully autonomous in the male-dominated, hierarchical community and
Church.

1 England of the Mystics

Social and cultural environment significantly partake in the form and shape of
spiritual knowledge and experience of every mystic. It certainly cannot be plainly
stated that the late medieval English mystics and Margery Kempe in particular, were
products of their time. Yet, to be able to esteem the significance of English mysticism
of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, it is vital to become acquainted with social and
cultural background of the late Middle Ages, and, above all, with the state of the
Church in period Europe and England.

1.1 The Late Medieval Society

The fourteenth century ominously started with famine, which was part of the
Great European Famine of 1315-17. The Famine began with bad weather all over
Europe in the summer of 1315; crop failures lasted until 1317, and Europe did not
recuperate until 1322. The period of the Famine was accompanied by massive death
rate, disease, and increase in criminality, which consequently had a severe impact on
all social classes. Subsequent catastrophe of the epidemic of bubonic plague,
infamously known as the Black Death, arrived in England in 1348, returning again in
1361-2, 1368-9, and in the 1370s. It was transmitted by rats and fleas; the spread of

1 This chapter is entirely based on:
Atkinson, Clarissa W. Mystic and Pilgrim. The Book and the World of Margery Kempe. New York:
the Black Death was further fuelled by the lack of sanitation and medical knowledge. Altogether up to forty percent of the population succumbed to the disease.

The heyday of the English mystical tradition surprisingly took place at the time of political and social unrest when the country rather suffered by either ineffective, weak rulers or radically militant ones.

The final years of the reign of the House of Plantagenet (Edward III, Richard II) marked a period of great change and transformation from the age of considerable prosperity and expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the period of regression (described as the ‘age of adversity’ and ‘calamitous’) of the fourteenth century. Even though Edward III’s reign spanned fifty years (1327-1377), it was no time of thriving or prosperity. Edward’s principal attention was claiming the territory of France, and having proclaimed himself the king of both England and France in 1340, he virtually initiated the Hundred Years’ War. Edward III’s successor Richard II ascended the English throne at the age of ten, and the whole of his reign was pervaded with problems. Constant friction between landlords and peasants led to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The causes were both political and economic: frustration at the Hundred Years’ War, peasants’ dissatisfaction with the villeinage, and the notorious Poll Tax² resulted in a violent uprising led by Wat Tyler known as the Peasants’ Revolt. After the uprising, Richard II’s reign became autocratic, the arbitrariness of the king started to threaten the nobility, and resulted in a coup d'état led by Henry Bolingbroke, future Henry IV.

The reigns of the Lancastrians, Henry IV and Henry V, brought about the revival of the Hundred Years’ War. Henry IV had to justify his rights for having usurped the throne, and consequently faced two rebellions. Henry V, probably one of the greatest

² The taxation was levied 1377-1381 to finance mostly unsuccessful military actions in France.
medieval warriors, proved his military abilities in suppressing Owen Glendower’s rebellion against his father, and his reign entirely concentrated on his claim to the French throne. Henry’s almost four-year-long military campaign in France was successful. He was proclaimed an heir to the French throne, however, died unexpectedly of dysentery in 1422. Henry V’s son was a nine-year-old baby when he ascended the throne after his father’s death. Henry VI was a pious man, yet, ineffective ruler. He lost the French territory his father had claimed for him by 1450 due to the success of the Dauphin and Joan of Arc, and the loss together with the ongoing domestic problems contributed to the King’s mental breakdown. Frustration over the results of the war and bitter political struggle brought England towards civil war, the War of the Roses, which resulted in Henry VI’s murder in 1471.

The above instant description suggests the fourteenth and fifteenth century England was certainly not a stimulating place to live. The battles of the time consisted in butchering, looting and raping, and were far from the glorious ideals of chivalry; the inevitable consequences such as diseases, taxes, financial stringency, political and personal intrigues, bad government, banditry, rebellions, and general decline of ideals were ominous for the entire society.

However, this is not the whole picture of the period England. The two centuries are also the time of great victories in France and of displays of chivalry, national glory and pride; moreover, England, for the first time, becomes aware of its nationhood. Furthermore, one must not forget the rise of arts and literature. The fourteenth century witnessed the rise of vernacular literature, Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland being the absolute prime of poetic genius. Gothic architecture was enriched by the most distinctive of English styles, the Decorated Gothic and the Perpendicular Gothic; the first can be found in many English churches and cathedrals, for example the

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unique octagonal lantern tower and the Lady Chapel at Ely and the spires of Salisbury, Norwich, and Chichester. A remarkable example of the latter is the Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey, Gloucester cathedral; the style also appears in the naves of Canterbury and Winchester cathedrals.

The English academic field provided European thought with philosophers and theologians Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, and with famous Oxford Calculators: Thomas Bradwardine, William Heytesbury, Richard Swineshead, and John Dumbleton, who were the cream of medieval logic, philosophy and mathematics.

1.2 The Late Medieval Church

The late medieval Church was suffering from a similar period of disruption, confusion and revolt. Until the fourteenth century, the Church enjoyed a period of development and increase in centralization upon the Roman Curia; papacy and Gregorian reform of the Church gradually extended the influence of the Church over Western Europe. The new canon law drew the Church into a tightly woven network with Rome as the only source of law and the only court of appeal. New religious orders or the reformed older ones filled Europe. In England, as well as in other countries, great religious organization and evangelization was in progress; churches and cathedrals were under construction, parishes were organized and the newly arrived friars preached and confessed people. During this period, literacy was restricted to clergy; all education and culture was identical all over Western Europe, composed in Latin, and grounded in monastic and ecclesiastical traditions. Spiritual instruction and expression of religious thoughts was given by clergy and was intended for clergy. Among the few exceptions of religious thinking by a spiritual writer addressed to a devout lay individual were the directories to anchoresses, such as Ancrene Wisse or Guide for Anchoresses written in Middle English in the early thirteenth century;
however, guides for enchoresses were a kind of manual for solitary life, not an instruction in contemplation or acquirement of virtues.

A change began to emerge in the fourteenth century. Even though Latin was still the language of academic discussion and French was used for legal contact, vernacular started to enter the language of religious literature. Sermons, treatises and prayer-books were translated into English, and original work in vernacular started to appear as well, undoubtedly fuelled by the works of Langland and Chaucer. The emergence of lay literate class allowed for the first time religious instruction, furthermore, allowed a lay person to describe his/her religious experience in vernacular language. There was an unparalleled rise in mysticism, as well as in reforming tendencies of John Wycliffe and his followers. The mystics, together with reformers, began to emphasize the spiritual role of an individual and individualized contact with God.

However, vernacular not only provided for an individual spiritual expression but, above all, to certain extent provided space for discussion, polemic and disagreement. The behaviour of the Church dignitaries began to raise objections among lay people. The French Pope Clement V moved Roman Curia from Rome to Avignon and thus started the ‘Babylonian captivity’, which lasted from 1309 to 1377. Clement’s court in Avignon alarmed by luxury, decadence, and scandals, trade with church offices, pardons, dispensations and heavy taxation.

The papal court stayed at Avignon until 1377, when Pope Gregory XI, under the influence of great Italian mystic Catherine of Siena, returned to Rome; unfortunately, he died one year later. Roman citizens became anxious that another French Pope will be elected and demanded from the cardinals an Italian Pope, who would remain in Rome. Therefore, Urban VI was chosen; however, he immediately attacked his cardinals for their decadent lifestyle and imposed various restrictions as far as their
income was concerned. The cardinals took their revenge on the Pope immediately, proclaimed his election invalid and forced on them by the Roman mob, and elected another Pope, the Frenchman Clement VII\(^3\), who located his court in Avignon again.

Thus began the Great Schism lasting for almost forty years (1378-1417). Urban VI rejected to surrender his papacy and the whole of Europe became divided between the two Popes; naturally, England endorsed the Italian Urban VI. The Popes excommunicated one another, and one can only imagine the effect of the Schism upon ordinary people and their faith, as supporting the wrong Pope would mean eternal damnation of one’s soul. Moreover, only a natural effect of the Schism was doubt and confusion as far as the competence of the clergy to mediate the divine message is concerned.

Other reason of clergy’s failure to meet the expectations of late medieval lay community was also their lack of education, even illiteracy. The education of a parish priest consisted of attendance at a cathedral school or local grammar school, or he may have learned from a senior priest; besides, priests were often so poor that there was nothing that would differentiate them from their neighbours. The monastic orders were not necessarily corrupt but they turned into restricted elite clubs of upper-class members and the entry was rather expensive. Yet, the Church vigorously protected all its members. The increasing standard of education and sophistication of the lay people made it for the Church more difficult to defend all its shortcomings. At the same time, it helped to shift the attention to the spirituality of an individual and to the lay religiosity, which is reflected in the development of sermon and confession. Sermon gradually became an utmost essence of medieval lay religiosity and central event of Christian life.

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\(^3\) Robert of Geneva, infamous ‘butcher of Cesena’. As papal legate, he is said to have committed the atrocity of slaughtering 4000 people in Cesena, northern Italy, to repress a rebellion in the Pontifical States. (Turner)
Radical notions of reform sprang to life all over Europe at the time; the popular appeal of Cathars, Albigensians, Waldensians, Brethren of Free Spirit and others lay primarily in their reforming zeal for simpler and purer Church. England achieved a significant voice of reform in John Wycliffe. Wycliffe’s philosophy and theology, which he himself understood as based on Holy Scripture and the early Church, promoted changes seen by some of his contemporaries as heretical. Principal of his attacks was on the concept of clergy, and the Pope, being mediators between God and men. Wycliffe envisioned a complete overhaul of the Church advocating the elimination of hierarchical authority, the clerical priesthood, and religious orders. All the above mentioned reasons led Wycliffe to the initiation of the so-called Wyclif’s Bible, the first translation of Bible into English. Among his other concerns were the concept of predestination, transubstantiation and the reverence of images; however, Wycliffe was predominantly philosopher and theologian, not reformer, and neither an aspiring martyr. Sacrifice and martyrdom belonged to his followers, the Lollards.

The Lollard movement, fuelled by Wycliffe’s zealous followers, became less academic in tone and was soon abandoned by Wycliffe’s aristocratic and academic followers. Lollards demanded direct access to Scripture and individual interpretation of its meaning, this fact was even more popular due to the atmosphere created by the growing vernacular literacy. As the Lollard movement became more and more critical of the matters of the church, they started to be perceived as an imminent threat to the ecclesiastical authority. In 1401 the penalty of death by burning for heretics was written into English law under the statute De Haeretico Comburendo and the first Lollard was burnt the same year.

The above described changes lead me to the conclusion that all of them greatly contributed to the expression late medieval religiosity achieved. Plague, famine, wars
and consequent suffering must have contributed to the change of the way the divine was perceived. The people certainly did not doubt the existence of God, but their comprehension of what He is like shifted. The image of the stern Judge of the Old Testament shifted to suffering Christ crucified whose sacrifice presented an example and promise of eternal salvation. The problematic image the Church reached at the end of the fourteenth century was also instrumental in the transformation of the relationship between a devout person and God; it became more individualistic, intimate and based on mutual love.

2 Christian Mysticism

Since mystical experience and mystical knowledge apply to any religious system and it is not my aim to discuss mysticism as such, any further discussion about the mysticism of Margery Kempe will be misleading without a frame of reference; Margery Kempe, and all other mystics to be mentioned, was a devout Catholic, therefore Catholic Christianity will constitute the frame within which all further discussion will be conducted from now on.

Etymology of the word mysticism indicates a relation to secret, and mysticism, as a religious tendency, is the desire of the human soul towards an intimate union with the Divinity, or a system growing out of such a tendency and desire (Sauvage). The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church defines mysticism as an immediate knowledge of God attained in this life through personal religious experience; furthermore, it is formulated as a state of prayer, and as such admits of various degrees from short and rare ‘touches’ to the practically permanent union with God in the so-called ‘mystical marriage’ (Livingstone 187)

Mystical theology, on the other hand, is a science, describing all special and extraordinary relations between the human and the divine. The experimental content of
mystical theology (Poulain) has gradually developed since the earliest times of Christianity from the accounts given by those who experienced the union with God (Knowles 3). The doctrinal content provides rules for guidance based on the authority of the Scriptures, on the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, and on the explanations of theologians (Poulain).

In accordance with the traditional teaching of the Church, David Knowles distinguishes mystical theology from natural theology and from dogmatic and speculative theology (Knowles 2). He defines natural theology as understanding of God as our Maker and Governor by a cognitive process. Dogmatic and speculative theology is the knowledge of God obtained by both Jews and Christians from the Scripture and from the life and words of his son, Jesus Christ (Knowles 2). This kind of knowledge of God is accessible to anyone who wishes to reach a union with God, however, this kind of knowledge has been perceived as a secondary one (Knowles 2). The third kind of knowledge, the mystical theology, can be directly known or experienced without a conscious effort of creating union with the divine (Knowles 2).

According to Joan M. Nuth mystical knowledge has three main characteristics – the recipient comprehends it as an entirely new perception, which is wholly different from the previous knowledge and experience of God; it is perceived as something transcendent and wholly out of logic or rational mind; above all, such knowledge cannot be transferred or communicated because human utterance is inadequate and incapable of transmitting the divine knowledge. Furthermore, such knowledge of God often causes a dramatic transformation in the recipient (Nuth 15).

All Christians have the capacity to experience a profound awareness of the presence of God and to achieve extraordinary knowledge and love of God, however, the mystical knowledge cannot be achieved intentionally, it can neither be deserved
nor initiated by any human activity; yet, it can be desired, it can be pleaded for, and it can even be partially prepared for (Nuth 15). All in all, the nature of the mystical experience is that of a gift freely given and is comparable to a talent. Mystic’s mind and imagination become very much part of the spiritual experience, and because mind and imagination are to certain extent shaped socially and culturally, whatever is received, is received according to the capacity of the receiver (Knowles 5).

The evidence we have suggests that mystics can be divided into two groups. There are those who were born as mystics and since childhood have experienced divine grace. Then there are those who had to undergo a difficult passage of self-denial, service to God, and abandonment of all earthly pleasures to reach the union with God.

Certain mystics demonstrate their experience through various psycho-somatic phenomena, such as ecstasies, visions, voices, smells, levitation and other extraordinary occurrences. These have been considered of hardly any consequence and often rather misleading. They provoked questions about the nature and worth of their stimulus, which could be divine but, on the other hand, could also be a mere provocation of the Evil Spirit. Moreover, this problem of psycho-somatic reaction to the divine is reflected on a higher, theological, level; according to some theologians, pure mystical life is in no connection with human senses or body and it takes place only within the soul (Knowles 10). Yet, the above mentioned psycho-somatic phenomena certainly create a significant part of the divine experience of some, predominantly woman, mystics. The only conclusion is that the experience of the divine is unforeseeable, and that God communicates in any way He finds pleasing.

Going further, what is this transcendent knowledge of God and how does mystical life differ from a common Christian life in God? The answer is problematized
by the fact that as the knowledge and experience of God cannot be communicated, so the mystical life must be incomprehensible and indescribable, in addition to that, such experience is rare and always extraordinary. The evidence of mystics’ lives hints that the exceptionality is located in the manner of responding to God’s activity in one’s soul (Knowles 21). To be able to respond, mystic’s soul has to be pure to reach the unity with God – purity is achieved in four stages: purity of consciousness (sin is the main obstacle here), purity of heart (heart, as the symbol of affections has to be clear from all affections, which do not lead to God), purity of spirit (i.e. purity of imagination and memory), and purity of action (Poulain).

Mystic’s soul is then freed from all inordinate love of anything but God. The soul is prepared to accept divine knowledge and love, and becomes united in love and will with God (Knowles 18).

Christian mystics acquired numerous ways of reaching the union with God through their mind and reason, or emotions and senses. The two most influential traditions of reaching the contemplative union with God are denoted as ‘apophatic’ and ‘cataphatic’, in other words, via negativa and via positiva (Nuth 57). The via negativa of mystical tradition is also known as ‘Dionysian’ tradition and stems from the teachings of the sixth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (Atkinson 40). To be able to reach the contemplative union through via negativa, a mystic is obliged to abandon all emotions, feelings, ideas, thoughts, or images, thus approaching the divine with nothing but emptiness that provides space for the unintelligible mystery of God. The apophatic tradition defines God by what He is not, and therefore expresses the fundamental incomprehensibility of God to men.

On the other hand, via positiva is the contemplative experience based on the definition of what God is to a man; the positive way encourages mystic to enter the
contemplative union with God through images, emotions, thoughts, senses, recollections, and reflects the image of God in every human being through creation and incarnation (Atkinson 41). Theologians and church historians tend to respect via negativa as superior to other traditions, and even though such differentiation has been questioned, it greatly influenced the judgments about the adherents of the positive way (Nuth 57).

The essence of Christian mysticism with its mighty and incomprehensible knowledge and love of God has always been the same. To critically examine and appraise its nature is problematic due to the permanent feature of subjectivity and inexpressibility of mystical experience. However, one significant message, predominantly significant for the subject of this work, arises - that we must not degrade what we do not understand.

2.1 English Mysticism of the Late Middle Ages

In many aspects of life, religion including, the fourteenth century was that of stress and transition. The rise of religious individualism, provoked by the usage of vernacular, discontent, and spread of education and literacy, resulted in the rise of mysticism and mystical writing. Yet, it is not an out-of-the-blue movement. English mystical tradition and mystical writing has its origins in the spirituality of the Continent which arises from the ideas of classical philosophy.

As pointed above, Christian mysticism consists of various ways of reaching the union with God. English mystical tradition embraced both via negativa, especially in the works of the Author of the Cloud of Unknowing and Walter Hilton, and, above all, via positiva, which manifested itself in the tradition of affective piety, the most significant aspect of medieval English mysticism (Atkinson 129). The principal objective of affective piety was not adherence to the doctrine or formal veneration of
God, but rather stimulation of emotions of a devout person, which would draw him/her to faith and repentance. In order to achieve union with God, the believer fixed his/her thoughts on the humanity of Jesus Christ, specifically, to the aspects of his life that relate to the general human experience, such as birth, love, suffering, and death (Atkinson 130).

Affective meditations were often induced by the contemplation of the Scripture. The English mystics had a deep appreciation of Scripture and the monastic Benedictine tradition of lectio divina as foundational for the life of prayer (Nuth 16). This method of Scripture interpretation, or, in other words, of the prayer with Scripture, is based on four steps: lectio, reading of scriptural passage; meditatio, the passage is learned by heart or the scenes of Scripture are visualized in detail, and virtually become an integral part of one's consciousness; oratio or prayer, praise of God through lectio and meditatio; and contemplatio, in which one is able to unite with God and contemplate peacefully in the presence of God (Nuth 16).

Imagination was employed in the visualization and reconstruction of the scenes of the life of Christ, Virgin Mary and Holy Family, and saints. The reconstruction of the scenes, which presumably took shape of a real mini-play with characters, setting and sound, was meant to stimulate compassion for Christ’s suffering and so guide one to penitence and deeper faith; such self-authorized recreation of the Christian story allows one to partake in the visualized story either actively or passively, in other words, be either a participant or observer (Le Vert 73).

Emotional outbursts, such as excessive feelings of joy, wonder, sadness, or grief were seen as natural complements to prayer and were actively pursued. The gift of uncontrollable tears was more than welcomed. The tradition of holy tears accompanied prayer from the earliest times, its paradigm were grief-stricken tears of Virgin Mary
and Mary Magdalene; moreover, it was deeply embedded in medieval affective piety and English religious writers perceived tears as instrumental in the alleviation of the hold of sin (Atkinson 58).

Love was the essential link between God and the believer; mystical writers of the tradition of affective piety employed all kinds of human love to interpret the divine love. God and a mystic enter together any possible relation bound by love – lover, husband, wife, mother, father, or child. Clarissa W. Atkinson points that: “The God of affective piety was less Judge or Creator then Love, Lover, and Loved.” (Atkinson 130). This metamorphosis of the divine into all-embracing Love is the reason why the tradition of affective piety so powerfully resonated in the writings of English mystics of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, for it does not indicate any elaborate theological point of view, only that love of God takes precedence over reason or distinctive way of life. Special training, education, or position, present no value, since any lay individual was able to achieve the knowledge of the divine solely through love.

At the time of general decline and doubt about the trustworthiness of clergy’s abilities to inspire and hold the mediatory position between people and God, it must have been a vital revelation for an individual to be able to achieve direct and intimate relation to God. Furthermore, the relation was possible with the means of universal experience, and assured the individual of a better place than this.

Franciscans held the forefront position in the formation and spread of popular devotion, which gradually evolved into the affective tradition. They were able to reach to all classes owing to their emphasis on emotion, they brought the devotion out of monastery through sermons, and their spiritual ethos and pathos not only shaped every
aspect of later affective tradition but also pervaded art, literature, drama and Christian education (Atkinson 140).

The English tradition of affective piety, prayers and meditations is generally traced to Anselm of Canterbury and his circle; the affective tradition was different from the so far practiced Carolingian piety, which was entirely based on psalms, and highlighted topics such as stories of Christian history and the lives of the saints in meditation or prayer (Atkinson 131). The language Saint Anselm introduces in his *Devotions* illustrates a significant shift; it s no longer the language of allegory and symbol, it is very concrete in the portrayal, focused on the suffering and humanity of Christ. His language seeks the emotional reception of its audience; moreover, the language becomes sexually equivocal:

Father adorable and terrible, worthy of worship and of fear, I bless Thee, whom I have loved, whom I have sought, whom I have ever desired. My God, my lover, I thirst after Thee, I hunger for Thee, I pour out my supplications to Thee, with all the groanings of my heart I crave for Thee. Even as a mother, when her only son is taken from her, sitteth weeping and lamenting continually beside his sepulchre, even so I also, as I can, not as I ought, having in mind Thy passion, Thy buffetings, Thy scourgings, Thy wounds, remembering how Thou wast slain for my sake, how Thou wast embalmed, how and where Thou wast buried, sit with Mary at the sepulchre in my heart, weeping. Where faith hath laid Thee, hope seeketh to find Thee, love to anoint Thee. Most gracious, most excellent, most sweet, who will bring me to find Thee without the sepulchre, to wash Thy wounds with my tears, even the marks of the nails. Ye daughters of Jerusalem, tell my Beloved that I am sick of love. Let Him show Himself to me, let Him
make Himself known unto me. Let Him call me by my name; let Him give me rest from my sorrow.”

Saint Anselm wrote instructions, prayers, and rules, which he also addressed to pious women, who frequently desired spiritual guidance in study and reading from respected members of clergy (Atkinson 134).

Among the followers of the meditative tradition of St Anselm and the tradition of affective piety was the English Cistercian Ailred of Rievaulx. One of his most interesting works linked to the tradition of affective piety was the ‘Triple Meditation’, part of a Rule of Life as a Recluse, a guide for women who decided to enclose themselves (Atkinson 134). The Rule served as a model for the most significant religious text of the thirteenth century intended as a guide for recluses - the Ancrene Wisse; however the Ancrene Wisse does not comply with the tradition of affective piety.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux belonged among Ailred’s fellow Cistercians contributing to the affective tradition and his immense influence inspired many pious works. Clarissa W. Atkinson sums up his complex and sophisticated theology: “He regarded the sensory and emotional adoration of the human Jesus as a step toward the rational grasp of Christian truth and the ultimate goal of spiritual union.” (Atkinson 137). The theology of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians was articulated in countless meditations, poems, hymns and prayers designed with a single aim to stimulate the feelings of a devout person by detailing those episodes of Christ’s life that relate him to humanity, and so give voice to an intense and intimate love for Christ (Gildas).

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5 Instruction to pious women can be traced back to Saint Jerome (340 – 420) who addressed many of his letters to Roman noble ladies (Saltet)
Another characteristic of English medieval spirituality was solitary life; mystic writers, such as Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the Author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich, all either lived as recluses, or spent a period of their life in solitude; consequently, they often devoted their works to anchoresses or anchorites. Those who decided to spend their life in isolation from society were known as hermits and anchorites, and the tradition of solitary life has always presented an important religious statement in Christian history going back to the Desert Fathers. In England the eremitic life seemed to have been extremely popular, *The Book of Margery Kempe* mentions several anchorites and anchoresses Margery visited. Hermits practiced life of seclusion in isolated places. On the other hand, anchorites and anchoresses commonly lived in towns. They usually enclosed themselves in a dwelling attached to a church; a small window, through which the inhabitant participated on the religious celebrations and Holy Communion, connected the anchorite with the church. Another window, oriented to the outside, usually a market place, was meant for the communication with the world. Anchoresses often provided spiritual advice and guidance, moreover, sometimes even provided schooling for the local children through their small window (Goodman 64). The primary reason for enclosing oneself was to escape the traps of worldly life, achieve purity of heart, soul, and body, dedicate one’s life to contemplation and become a bride of Christ. Another motivation for anchoritic life could have been the status of heroism and holiness as the role models for anchorites and anchoresses were the martyrdom stories of saints together with imitation of Christ who suffered his passion without reproach and sacrificed himself for mankind (Nuth 20).

By the fourteenth century the influence of affective piety was present everywhere. The mayor themes were: an intense, intimate relationship with Christ,
deep emotionality, vivid details of the passion and the fact that Christ’s suffering signifies his personal love for each individual; the literary production of the affective tradition included meditative and devotional treatises, religious and secular lyrics and liturgical drama (Le Vert 73).

There are some other characteristics illustrating English medieval spirituality: it was orthodox and always loyal to the doctrine, it preferred a concrete, practical portrayal to an abstract one (La Vert 73), it was subjective, and it was not intellectual (however this claim does not suggest that the affective tradition held education in contempt), and above all, it was written in the vernacular (Knowles 43).

The vernacular starts to appear in the Western religious writings in the thirteenth century, and even though it was still significantly dependent on Latin sources, it ceased to be a mere translation, furthermore, it created new possibilities for religious expression (Nuth 23). The interconnection of the vernacular and the affective tradition is such a significant change that some scholars feel the need to recognize the movement as a new kind of theology – vernacular theology (Watson 822). Vernacular theology follows the same aim as any theology, which is to venerate God together with all the divine beings and cultivate profound comprehension of religious belief; however, such authority had most usually been restricted to the members of the Church. The difference of vernacular theology rests on its accessibility to lay audience; Nicholas Watson understands it as any kind of writing, sermon, or play that communicates theological knowledge, furthermore, the term is intended to point to the specific cultural-linguistic environment contributing to the development of vernacular theology (Watson 823).
The group labeled as the fourteenth-century-English-mystics is generally ascribed to the following spiritual writers: the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich.

No two accounts of mystical experience could be more contrasting than that of *The Cloud* and Richard Role’s, as they represent the negative and the positive mystical approach to the divine. *The Cloud* adheres to the Dionysian tradition, and consequently lacks sensual feelings, imagery, and thoughts; it has a nature of a simple guide for how to dispose of oneself to receive the divine grace, and how to fully focus concentration upon the cloud of unknowing which exists between the self and God (Nuth 65-9). Richard Role, on the other hand, is the prime representative of the tradition of affective piety, and the multitude of surviving manuscripts indicates his immense popularity (Knowles 65). Among his major works is *The Fire of Love* (*Incendium Amoris*), which abounds in emotional expression divine grace provokes in him, moreover, he describes his mystical experience of approach to God in four stages of sweetness, heat, and melody. His works are deeply devoted to the meditation of the Passion, and the ultimate essence of his mysticism is Love.

Walter Hilton’s masterpiece *The Scale of Perfection* (or *Ladder of Perfection*) presents the progress of Christian life to heaven, the absolute objective of spiritual life (Nuth 98). Owing to its wisdom, practicality, and meditation drawn from scriptural passages, Hilton’s book became a well-known and widely read manual for devotional progress, and assurance that lay persons could progress in contemplation (Knowles 117).

Both the author of the Cloud of Unknowing and Walter Hilton were primarily understood as teachers and directors (Knowles 119), while Richard Role’s writings are compared to that of a poet (Nuth 35). With the anchoress Julian of Norwich we enter
the realm of theology as a reflection on the actual experience of the divine (Nuth 100). Evelyn Underhill describes Julian of Norwich and her *Revelations of Divine Love* as, ‘exquisitely human yet profoundly meditative … the finest flower of English religious literature’⁶. Julian of Norwich was, above all, a theologian, and her *Revelations*, based on her experience of the divine, touch on all the significant topics of Christianity. Compared to the above mentioned texts, Julian’s writing is pregnant with God’s motherly love for people, hope, and redemption. If Julian’s teaching could be concentrated into one word, it would be love (Nuth 119).

Margery Kempe is generally accepted as a member of the group of late medieval English mystics; however, many perceive her as not a true equal of the mystical profundity of her predecessors and contemporaries. Her *Book* is not comparable to the perception and wisdom of spiritual doctrine of the above mentioned, neither does it aspire to claim any theological statements or conclusions (Knowles 139). Margery Kempe and her *Book* suffer and become marginalized when strictly positioned among late medieval English mystics, even though all of them are grounded in the medieval spiritual tradition, and Margery Kempe frequently made references to the writings of Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton; furthermore, she consulted the nature of her devotion with Julian of Norwich. Margery Kempe has always resisted categorization; she did not fit into social and religious patterns of her time (Atkinson 13), and she still defies any fixed labeling by contemporary critics.

2.2 Women Mystics

If one insists on Margery Kempe’s categorization, it seems to be more contributive to contextualize Margery Kempe in the tradition of Continental women mystics and holy women of the Middle Ages. As David Knowles noted the fourteenth

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and fifteenth century witnessed remarkable rise in the number of women saints and holy women, ‘several of whom were, or had been, married women, all of whom led lives of external movement in which the visionary and abnormal elements were strongly in evidence, and most of whom wrote accounts of their experience’ (Knowles 142). Probably the best known of women mystics are St Catherine of Siena, Bl. Angela of Foligno, St Dorothea of Montau, St Bridget of Sweden, and St Catherine of Sweden; moreover, Margery Kempe mentions Julian of Norwich, Marie d’Oignies and Elizabeth of Hungary in her Book.

As the medieval Church was an international organization and every holy woman was surrounded by a network of spiritual guides and followers, the knowledge about these women spread throughout Christian world, and certainly influenced other women and their environment. Margery Kempe did shape her life in the fashion of a holy woman and it is certain that behind the pattern of her religious expression exist women role models of Continental holy women.

The only ecclesiastical role available to women of early Middle Ages was that of a nun, however, only few female monasteries existed and little attention was paid to religious needs of women (Bynum 14). During the thirteenth and fourteenth century new opportunities for religious life appeared; holy women joined tertiary and mendicant orders, Franciscans predominantly, but they could also enter beguine communities or anchorhold. Moreover, heretic movements represented significant opportunity for female religious expression as well.

While male religious role was connected to hierarchy and authority of office, women generally established authority on their experience of the divine; therefore mysticism became prominent in women’s religiosity and claims to sanctity (Bynum 26). Women mysticism and piety had its reoccurring features. Majority of women
mystics cut their ties from all earthly relations to be able to concentrate on the reception of the divine, thus the conflict with sexuality, marriage, and motherhood was an essential part of female devotion. Holy women also inclined to the tradition of affective piety with its emphasis on humanity of Christ and excessive meditation on the Passion; consequently, holy tears, clamorous weeping, and holy conversations were significant features of female devotion too. Moreover, female devotion was far more often based on psycho-somatic manifestations of the experience than male. Another prevalent feature of holy women was their writing, albeit they insisted on their illiteracy, and their works were dictated to scribes, clerics usually, who acted as spiritual guides, confessors, and amanuensis at the same time.

The tradition of *vita* of Continental holy women certainly influenced the piety of Margery Kempe and her *Book*. Some scholars claim that Margery’s *Book* was intentionally tailored to spread Brigittine piety (piety of St Bridgett of Sweden) in England (Goodman 120), however, Margery Kempe was English, shared cultural and social background with the English mystics, and her *Book* predominantly clarifies and justifies aspects of her religious behaviour. Therefore *The Book of Margery Kempe* must not be taken out of the context of either Continental women mystics or late medieval English mystics.

3 Margery Kempe – life and pilgrimages

A middle-class burgess housewife, Margery Kempe, was born in a thriving medieval port of King’s Lynn (then called Bishop’s Lynn) in Norfolk, probably in 1373, as she indicates in the fifth chapter of her second book dated 1438, that she was about sixty years of age. Her family belonged to prosperous merchant middle-class, and the book makes it clear how highly Margery thought of her family’s social status and accomplishments owing to her biting reproofs directed at her husband about her
descent of “worthy kindred”. Another significant indication of her family’s highest rank status is Margery’s pride of her father’s office-holding. Margery’s father, identified by Hope Emily Allen as John Brunham, was five times Mayor of Lynn, alderman of the prominent Trinity Gild, Member of Parliament, coroner, justice of the peace, and chamberlain in the course of his lifetime (Windeatt 10). There is no evidence of her mother in the town record (Windeatt 10); neither does Margery noticeably touch on the subject of her mother’s existence in her book. Her childhood remains veiled, with the exception of a horrible sin committed by her or inflicted on her, which haunted Margery’s conscience, has never been clarified and with all probability was among the stimuli of Margery’s intense penitential activities early in her life.

Margery informs us that at the age of twenty (in about 1393) she was married to one John Kempe, who came from similar social background. Unfortunately, he never attained Margery’s father’s accomplishments, de facto Margery remarks about his anxiety over his debts, which she later had to settle up as a part of their breakup agreement.

Soon after their marriage the first of her fourteen children was born. Margery describes labour as difficult “sche dyspered of hyr lyfe, wenyng sche myght not levyn” (she despaired of her life, believing she might not live) (B.M.K. 6), and being troubled about her life, she asked for confession. However, as she could not bring herself to the confession of the horrible sin of her childhood, the confessor sharply rebuked her and left her with the prospect of eternal damnation. Such disturbing experience triggered a severe illness, which has mostly been diagnosed as post-partum psychosis; Margery became self-destructive and violent, and had to be tied up night and day for the period
of six months. Her depiction of her post-natal condition is rich in vivid diabolical imagery.

The burden of this spiritual crisis was taken off her by the revelation of Christ who asked her: “Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke nevr the?” (B.M.K. 8). Restored to physical health, reassured and confident in the religious one, she strives to enter the proper Christian life of service to God. Yet, unable to accommodate herself to the spiritual lesson of her experience, she soon returns to worldly ways. She embarks on brewing, later milling business and prides herself on her status, wealth and lavish clothes. Only the ensuing failure of her entrepreneur ventures dealt a blow to her vanity. Thus she humbly returned to God, begged for forgiveness and reform of her soul, and the period of great contrition followed. Margery underwent mystical conversion radically transforming especially her self-conception and relation to God, and she embraced severe ascetic practices of fasting and prayer too. Her literally overnight shift from a proud burgess wife to a holy “creature” together with her newly adopted habits of frequent sobbing and constant thought and talk of heaven aroused puzzlement and subsequent antagonism not only in her neighbourhood, but also on her travels to holy persons (anchorites, friars, preaches, etc.) and places, which she repeatedly made.

Her conversion was the first step to the discovery of her new identity together with the emergence of her absolutely unique religious expression. She put emphasis on the necessity of celibacy required for her vocation, as a matter of fact she regarded sex as rather disgusting, however, her husband insisted on his marital rights, and she bore him fourteen children before she managed to convince him of mutual life in celibacy. She does not touch on the subject of her children at all throughout her narrative, apart from a brief appearance of her son in the second part of the Book.
At the time of her conversion, she records how Christ frequently entered into conversations with her during her meditations – conversations that lasted for the time of her whole life – encouraged her and raised her spirits, and later discussed pros and cons of her unique vocation with her. She started to have wondrously realistic and vivid meditations, in which she became involved in the life of the Holy Family; moreover, she not only received spiritual support and guidance from Christ and Virgin Mary but also from numerous saints and angels.

Such episodes of her post-conversion spiritual experiences span over twenty years, after which, with the instrumental hand of Christ, who inspired Margery to strike a financial bargain with her husband, Margery finally triumphed over John Kempe, and persuaded him to live a life of celibacy. He consented to taking a vow of celibacy in front of the bishop in exchange for Margery’s promise to eat and drink with him on Fridays (her day of fasting), and to pay all his debts. She was about forty years old, and having obtained an official approval, she could live apart from her husband and family. What is more, the approval allowed her to travel freely without the consent of her husband, and Margery was able to become a pilgrim. However, she frequently traveled all over England, visiting shrines and holy persons even before obtaining the approval.

In the autumn of 1413 she set on the journey to the primary pilgrim destination - Holy Land. She traveled with a group of fellow pilgrims via Switzerland and Venice reaching Jerusalem on boat in the spring or summer of 1414; on her way back the same summer, she spent the winter in Rome, another pilgrim top destination of the period. In the spring of 1415 she returned to England, stopping at Assisi en route.

In the Holy Land, besides having visited the Holy Places, she obtained “the gift of tears”. Due to her singular religious expression she also regularly encountered
malice, accusations, even threats on her pilgrimage to Holy Land, however, unexpected support and help at the same time.

Two years after her arrival from the Holy Land, she sailed from Bristol to the resting place of Saint James’ Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, where she spent two weeks and upon her arrival to England, she immediately set off on pilgrimage to Hayles to venerate the Holy Blood. In her late years, on Christ’s command, she made her last recorded pilgrimage to Prussia, where she saw the Precious Blood at Wilsnack and visited the cathedral at Aachen among other places.

Her travels certainly must have broadened Margery’s horizons; however, it seems that no other traveler was ever less interested in the experience of traveling and discovery of new places. Norbert Ohler in his book Náboženské poutě ve středověku a novověku [Religious Pilgrimages in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times] vividly describes the ordeal of medieval pilgrims: hunger and thirst, weather, turmoil and overcrowding, lack of privacy and fatal perils both on routes and boats. All the above mentioned problems, which bothered her contemporaries as if did not exist for Margery Kempe; the only thing she reveals are her instant problems and worries triggered by the response to her religious expression. Anything she perceives as spiritually insignificant, therefore not beneficial to her devotion, is in her narrative simply omitted, presumably even excluded from her memory.

After her return from Italy, she faced series of arrests and accusations of heresy while traveling around England. She was imprisoned in Leicester and later examined by the Abbot, yet, her testimony only confirmed her orthodoxy and loyalty to the doctrine. She progressed to York, where she was again summoned to clarify her religious views, before the Archbishop Arundel this time, who acknowledged her orthodoxy, but ordered her out of his diocese, for the agitation and turmoil she sparked
wherever she went. On her way south of York, she is again arrested for Lollardy and taken back to the Archbishop, who let her go on the condition that she continues to Canterbury to be questioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Such events are abundant in the Book and Margery’s depiction is predominantly absorbed in the amalgam of scorn and support her devotion arises.

Towards the final chapters of the Book, Margery’s spiritual retrospections, visions and meditations gradually prevail over the earthly events of her life and also the chronology of events becomes more disordered. She continued to magnetize rather polarized attention, frequently suffered from various pains and illnesses and in 1431 returned to Lynn to her husband’s house to attend to him, now paralyzed and demented after an accidental fall. During this period, she started dictation of her Book to the scribe and for the first time becomes concerned about the fate of one of her children. Her son returned from Germany with a wife and child, and Margery accounts the joy this errant son of hers brought into her life by his turn to god-fearing, pious way of life. Unfortunately, he died a month later, and Margery decided to set off on her last (recorded) journey accompanying her daughter-in-law to her home in Prussia, and then on pilgrimages to Wilsnack and Aachen. Being an old woman, she was no longer able to take into her stride the inconvenience of her pilgrimage; therefore she remarks more on her worries, loneliness and feelings while traveling. Upon her return to England in 1434 she makes a visit to Syon Abbey and in 1438 she, together with her scribe, begins to work on Book II. After ten chapters her narrative stops without any climax or conclusion, Margery simply ceases to speak. One can only fantasize about her last years when she probably settled down in Lynn and reconciled with its inhabitants, for the last known imprint left by Margery is the admission to the Guild of the Trinity at Lynn in 1438 (Meech, Allen Introduction li ).
Margery Kempe assures the reader of her *Book* she could neither read nor write several times throughout her *Book*. The story of how her *Book* finally came to existence is described in the Proem and Chapter 89. Her first effort to dictate her *Book* ends up in an utterly illegible text. Many years later Margery strives to have her text rewritten, however, it takes much time and exertion to persuade a new amanuensis. He is affected by an inexplicable incapability to read the text and by consequent blindness. However, Margery hints that the circumstances are a result of his distrust of Margery’s vocation. Eventually, after having heard about another holy woman, Marie d’Oignies, he becomes miraculously able to read and understand the first manuscript. Margery recounted the events of her life about twenty years after they actually occurred, consequently, the narrative is characterized by time and place lapses.

4 **Form of Devotion in the Book of Margery Kempe**

*The Book of Margery Kempe* presents a highly idiosyncratic, yet significant, form of female devotion. A display of various aspects of her rather disturbing religious expression is the central theme of her book. The significance of the portrayal of Margery’s devotion lies in exploration and reconstruction of an individual’s devotional life in the fifteenth century England with a notable emphasis on the social context and social consequence of Margery’s unusual devotional expression. Margery’s vivid portrayal of social context offers an extraordinary insight into various modes of religious behaviour and forms of worship that were both practiced and accepted in medieval society (Goodman 100).

Margery’s behaviour is presented as confusing and disturbing. Those who were exposed to it became upset, even annoyed, by her spiritual roaring, and it is no surprise that her remarkable text raises mixed feelings among contemporary readers as well. Therefore, let me summarize the process of Margery’s spiritual growth and the
ingredients constituting the form of her devotional practices which allowed her spiritually mature persona to blossom.

Margery starts her narrative with an event of her first spiritual experience that probably occurred in mid 1390s. Soon after the birth of her first child, she suffered from breakdown and subsequent mental illness, which lasted for almost a year and ended with her first vision of Christ appearing at her bedside asking: “Dowtyr, why hast thou forsakyn me, and I forsoke neyrr the?” (B.M.K. 8). However, the experience did not have a proper impact on Margery’s spiritual perception; she returned to her mundane ways and set up brewing, later milling, business, both of which she failed after a short time.

One night after the failure of her enterprise, as she was lying in bed with her husband, she heard heavenly melody that made her jump out of her marital bed – a rather comical gesture. This experience led Margery to the period of increased spirituality, albeit rather composed, which lasted for two years. She engaged in conventional devotional activities of the time – she frequently attended church services, confessed three times a day, fasted, and did bodily penance\(^7\). However, this period did not turn out to be spiritually edifying enough and three years of great temptations (lechery especially) followed.

The pivotal moment of her spiritual life came on Friday\(^8\) before Christmas Day, when she was weeping and asking mercy for her sins in St. John’s chapel in St. Margaret’s church in Lynn. A true conversion episode and a moment of sudden illumination, which has created or transformed Christians from St Paul onwards, took place (Goodman 101). The conversion experience changed Margery from an ordinary burgess wife into a holy woman. Christ ‘ravished her spirit’ and instructed her in an

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\(^7\) Margery wore a hair-shirt, an uncomfortable shirt made of coarse animal hair worn next to the skin.

\(^8\) Majority of spiritually significant events happen on a Friday in The Book of Margery Kempe.
appropriate way of her future life – she was to give up wearing hairshirt, meat, and frequent praying with beads. She was instructed to receive sacrament every Sunday and to ‘thynk swych thowtys as I wyl putt in thi mend’ (B.M.K. 17). In return, Margery was to receive ultimate bliss of heaven after her death, contrition until her death, ability to discuss scripture and devotional schooling in questions of faith. The last order was to go to the anchorite at the Dominican house, reveal her experience to him and follow his advice afterwards. This conversion moment and Christ’s subsequent direction of Margery’s devotional practices reveals corner-stone elements of Margery’s emerging spiritual persona.

Reoccurring feature of medieval women mystics is that of their illiteracy (Margery herself keeps confirming this fact throughout her book) and majority of medieval religious texts by women were put down by a scribe. Yet Margery maintained a very intimate relationship with textual culture of the time via the mediation of her instructors. The text makes it obvious that various members of clergy participated in her devotional schooling and were instrumental in forging of her ability to debate Scripture. The above mentioned Dominican anchorite is probably one of the first contributors to her spiritual progress and he immediately not only recognized but also voiced one of the central themes of Margery’s devotion: “Dowtvr, ye sowkyne evyn on Crysts brest, and ye han an ernst peny of hevyn.”9 (B.M.K. 52). He reacted by urging her to meditate on Christ’s spiritual motherhood. He also advised her to reveal to him all her future revelations so that he could tell apart those from the Holy Ghost and those from the Devil.

Other ‘masters of divinity’ appearing at Margery’s side over the years were the Carmelite Master Aleyn and a secular priest Robert Sryngrolle, who trained her in the

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9 Julian of Norwich articulates the same idea in her Revelations of Divine Love: “… Jesus is our very moder, not fedynge us with mylke but with himselfe…” (Julian of Norwich 97)
technique of meditation (Goodman 103). An unnamed priest who settled with his mother in Lynn read to Margery for as long as eight years from the Bible and from the available devotional literature of the time – among the books she is likely to had heard read to her were Hilton’s Ladder of Perfection, Bridget of Sweden’s The Revelations of Saint Birgitta, Richard Role’s Incendium Amoris and Stimulus amoris. She also must have obtained much religious knowledge from sermons, homilies and interaction with fellow Christians.

In 1413 Archbishop Arundel rendered Margery the privilege of choosing a confessor according to her liking, such advantage undoubtedly provided her with potential for deepening of her spiritual abilities. Owing to Margery’s opportunity of profound training by learned clergymen who conscientiously led her to an unassailable orthodox approach, Margery was never mistreated by any of the bishops or archbishops she encountered; the Bishop of Lincoln Philip Repingdon, the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel, or the Archbishop of Canterbury Henry Chichele behaved towards Margery with respect if not fondness.

Margery certainly received the attention which was in accord with the social status of her family; however, one has to take into account the possibility of disguised intentions of her spiritual guides. Margery’s idiosyncratic spiritual expression might have been perceived as a mystical development gone slightly amiss (Margery was on many occasions accused of Lollardy and witchcraft), therefore, the support and effort invested in Margery’s spiritual education might have been an attempt to soothe and direct her spiritual identity by providing her with role models and comparison in various devotional texts.

Margery’s contemplation took form in two essential ways. The first was that of an inner dialogue with Christ, Virgin Mary, various saints, God the Father or even all
of them together. With the growth of Margery’s spiritual identity and strengthening of her spiritual authority, her ‘dalliances’ with Christ altered as well; Margery’s respectful and timid tone of their initial conversations changed to general and friendly chitchat. All entities of the Holy Trinity, Christ, Virgin Mary, and various saints frequently praised Margery, assured her of the rightness and greatness of her vocation, and also of her ultimate redemption. The conversations appeared at random fashion, but mostly during her meditations in church; interestingly, Margery used to kneel or lie outstretched on the ground during her meditations.

The other form of contemplation was an inner vision of important scenes from the life of Christ or Virgin Mary. Her visions of the Christian story are vivid, audio-visual, and in colour; they were not mere pictures, and Margery was not reduced to a simple viewer but she took an active part in the scenes.

Moreover, Margery was intensely influenced by Richard Rolle’s writings; she often heard heavenly ‘sounds and melodies’, sometimes so loud that she could not talk, she experienced sweetness and the heat of ‘the fire of love’ in her heart.

*The Book* devotes large space to bodily demonstrations of her religious experience, their spiritual significance, and also to the polarized reactions they provoked. The principal bodily demonstrations of her contemplations were boisterous tears, weeping and sobbing. Margery’s tears were always public and usually took place during masses and religious celebrations, but could also be provoked by images, or handsome young men and babies reminding her of Christ:

“On the Purificacyon Day er ellys Candilmesse Day whan the sayd creatur beheld the pepil wyth her candelys in cherch, hir mende was raveschyd into beholdyng of owr Lady offeryng hyr blisful sone owr Savyowr to the preyst Simeon in the tempyl … [she] went waveryng on eche syde as it had ben a
dronkyn woman, wepyng and sobbyng so sor that unethe sche myth stondyn on hir feet for the fervowyr of lofe and devocyon that God putte in hir sowle thowr hy contemplacyon. And sumtyme sche myth not stondyn but fel downe amonge the pepil and cryid ful lowde, that many man on hir wonderyd and merveylyd what hir eyled, for the fervowyr of the spiryt was so meche that the body fayld and myth not endur it. Sche had swech holy thowtys and meditacyons many tymes whan sche saw women ben purifyid of her childeryn … Hir mende was al drawyn fro the erdly thowtys and erdly syghtys and sett al togedyr in gostly syghtys, whech wer so delectabyl and so devowt that sche myth not in the tyme of fervowyr wythstondyn hir wepyng, hir sobbyng, ne hir crying, and therfor suffyrde sche ful mech wonderyng, many a jape and many a scorne.” (B.M.K. 198-199)

(On the Purification day – otherwise Candlemas Day – when the said creature saw the people with their candels in church, her mind was ravished into beholding our Lady offering her blessed son, our Saviour, to the priest Simeon in the Temple … [she] went on reeling about on all sides as if she were a drunk woman, weeping and sobbing so intensely that she could hardly stand on her feet, for the fervour of love and devotion that God put into her soul through high contemplation. And sometimes she could not stand, but fell down amongst the people and cried very loudly, so that many men wondered at her, and marveled at what was the matter with her, for the fervour of the spirit was so great that the body failed, and could not endure it. She had such holy thoughtsaand meditations many times when she saw women being purified after childbirth. … her mind was so wholly drawn from earthly thoughts and earthly sights, and set altogether upon spiritual sights, which were so delectable and so devout, that she could not in the time of fervour withstand her weeping, her sobbing, nor her crying, and therefore she endured much wondering at herself, many a jibe, and much scorn.) (Windeatt 239)

Margery herself distinguished between the tears of ‘sweet devotion’ and the clamorous roaring, accompanied by fainting and fits of madness, of ‘true contemplation’ she experienced after her visit to the Holy Land. Even though she made efforts to repress her emotions due to the hostile reactions they provoked, she gradually came to perceive them as an integral part of her religious experience. Margery’s reasons for her tears developed with the growth of her spiritual identity as well. At the beginning, her crying resulted from Margery’s sinfulness, and was a sign of her penitence and desire
for Heaven. As she gradually started to receive frequent affirmation of her salvation from Christ, the nature of her tears shifted into the tears of universal salvation of humanity. On the other hand, wild roaring was provoked by the contemplation of Christ’s suffering on the Cross. Apart from compassion for Christ’s sacrifice, the function of this clamorous crying was predominantly didactic, as it was supposed to move the sinful and disobedient spectators to piety.

Other features of Margery’s piety were constant talking of God, discussion of Scripture, suffering of scorn for Christ’s sake, frequent communion, pilgrimages, tending to the sick ones, and prophecies.

5 … ordained to be a mirror

Mirrors have accompanied people since the Iron Age (Anderson 16). They evolved from small valuables objects of luxury put into graves with their owners into everyday trinkets or pieces of furniture. The understanding of the reflection that mirror sends back to retina has also evolved – people used to ascribe to mirrors properties of magic or divination and seeing one’s own unfamiliar reflection must have been surprising as well threatening; the impact on human receptiveness of encountering oneself from head to toe gradually changed from utter shock to complete indifference. Mirrors have not only been the utilitarian objects witnessing maintenance and beauty of human beings, their uncanny reflecting nature raised questions about oneself, subjectivity and identity, and consequently about image, reflection and imitation.

Our ancestors appreciated mirror as a miraculous object allowing not only to explore geography of face or body but also to perceive the invisible by the means of the visible; the reflection in the mirror calls on the mind to free itself from the tangible and the real and focus on the essence, the immaterial and the symbolic (Melchior-Bonnet 104). The ancient mirror offers to the viewing person not only the reflection of
the corporeal but also the mysterious spiritual knowledge of him/herself. According to Plato, the lowest degree of knowledge is the unquestioned and prideful specular illusion; the one Narcissus became obsessed by (Melchior-Bonnet 106). The reflection, if used well, aids meditation between a person and his/her self by reflecting the interior bearing; when the reflection ceases to be a tool of introspection, the image becomes deceitful and misleading (Melchior-Bonnet 106).

Medieval spirituality largely exploited the symbolic meaning of the mirror; however the utilitarian and self-reflexive use of the mirror was neglected, for the medieval mirror is either a reflection of God or an instrument of the devil (Melchior-Bonnet 108).

The concept of imitation and reflecting is deeply embedded in Christian philosophy. Genesis says: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis 1:27), and since the Bible is described as God’s great spiritual mirror, which reveals every imperfection in the character of man (2 Timothy 3:16-17), therefore the image seen in this mirror reflects the divine in men - his/her spiritual identity.

The medieval concept of the mirror evolved around two Christian texts. Saint Paul describes the indirect and always imperfect knowledge of the divine during earthly life, which he compares to an unclear reflection: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12). The second is Saint James who contemplates human ignorance of the ability to resemble the divine, to the ignorance and loss of the true self: “For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.” (James 1:23; 1:24)
Christian thinkers like Denis the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine drew many of their ideas about reflection from classical Greek philosophers like Plotinus or Timaeus, and Saint Augustine especially largely built on the richness of spiritual symbolism of the mirror. Melchior-Bonnet states three motifs stemming from the Christian symbolism of the mirror found in the works of Saint Augustine - the theme of analogy, the principle of imitation and the search for moral enrichment through knowledge (Melchior-Bennet 111). Theologians generally accepted the activity of viewing oneself in the mirror, as the knowledge of the self brings man closer to the knowledge of God, and refusing to see the divine reflection in one’s self is like Narcissus’s transgression.

Early medieval theologians and mystics continued to employ semantic opportunities of the mirror in their thoughts. Hildegard of Bingen says God, “flashes out in every creature”\textsuperscript{10}. Meister Eckhart in his \textit{Sermon I} uses a similar image, “… for every man’s nature is an image and likeness and mirror of the Trinity, of Godhead and of eternity”\textsuperscript{11}, and his follower Henry Suso becomes even more explicit: “For the creatures are a kind of mirror, in which God shines. This knowledge is called speculation, by which we contemplate the great Architect of the world in His works.”\textsuperscript{12} Suso here conveys the original thought of Saint Augustine that to know is to reflect, speculate, hence drawing the link between the visual and the cognitive, establishing the human mind in cognitive process of the contemplation of God as the clear mirror - speculum, which reflects God (Anderson, 64).

The symbolic value of the mirror and speculation also permeated into compendia of medieval knowledge in the genre of speculum literature, which perceived the mode

\textsuperscript{10} Hildegard, Abbes of Bingen and Mystic. 22 Feb. 2009 <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/41685_88039_ENG_HTM.htm>
\textsuperscript{11} Eckhart, Johannes. \textit{Meister Eckhart’s Sermons}. 22 Feb 2009 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/eckhart/sermons.txt>
of thought of speculation as a consideration of a relationship between two subjects like that between a mirror and what it reflects (Melchior-Bonnet 113). *Speculum*, meaning mirror or reflection, was used in the titles of medieval writings such as *Speculum Ecclesiae* of Honorius of Atun, the *Speculum Maius* of Vincent of Beauvais, or the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Bradley 100-115).

Except for theological references, speculum literature and mirror symbolism summarized general knowledge to set forth the role model of ideal behaviour, thus speculum literature provided didactic guide determining examples of good and bad behaviour; ladies’ mirrors, mirrors of princes, and moral mirrors originated as books, paintings and reflections (Bradley 100-115).

When Margery Kempe states that Christ nominated her to be the mirror among people, she further develops both the theological concept of the mirror and the didactic features of the speculum literature. For Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, human beings become mirrors once they cleanse their souls and only then are they able to reflect the divine light like angels do, and to Augustine, we all have the capacity to participate in the divine resemblance (Melchior-Bonnet 110). Margery is chosen to reflect the immaterial reality of the divine in the concreteness of her persona; she is the visible, which points to the essence of primary cause; she is transformed from a wife and mother into the reflection of the divine truth. Her life and body represent an analogy and imitation that externalizes the life and suffering of Christ, and her idiosyncratic behaviour provides an example of the life of a true Christian.

Margery’s status as a mirror is based on the Christian tradition which has been profoundly elaborated on, however Christian thinkers develop the problem of the divine mirror in a one-fold way, as the existence of God is for them indisputable. They largely concentrate on the mirror and its abilities to reflect.
Yet, if there is a mirror reflecting, one must take into consideration, that there must exist something which is being reflected, to put it differently, reflection is the sign of existence. The semiotics of mirrors was explored by Umberto Eco, and his theory of mirror as a semiotic phenomenon and reflection as a sign throws highly illuminating light on the mirror of Margery Kempe. One of Eco’s significant points is that mirror functions as a prosthesis extending the range of action of an eye, and as a channel of information:

“…a mirror is an absolutely neutral prosthesis, and it allows us to catch visual stimuli from where our eye could not reach (in front of our own body, around the corner, in a hole) with the eye’s same evidence and force … since mirrors are prosthesis, they are channels, too. A channel is any material medium for the passage of information …” (Eco 208).

Further drawing on Eco’s theory, mirrors are rigid designators, they name the object standing in front of them and they are consequently determined in their origin and physical existence by an object they reflect called referent (Eco 211).

Having fully realized the potential of mirrors, Margery Kempe’s actions and behaviour acquire deeper significance. Margery becomes a transmitter of images and information, which are for an ordinary human being always conveyed, in Saint Paul’s words, through a glass, darkly. She is the prosthesis allowing the eye to reach the hidden stimuli; she reflects the referent that fully determines her physical existence. The visible in her is the ultimate proof of the existence/designation of the invisible. In other words, the mirror/Margery is fully dictated by its referent/Christ. Moreover, one must accept that Margery is the divine attempt at communication, as prosthesis is a channel for the transmission of information.
Another important feature of the mirror reflected in the character of Margery Kempe is the fact that the mirror is a “structural crossroads” or a threshold phenomenon, somewhere between the nature and culture, between the referent and those who are able to see (Eco 203). As the mirror occupies the *terra nullis*, the place between the referent dictating the mirrored image and those who are able to observe, Margery’s status of the mirror confines her to no man’s land in between her referent and the community observing her.

Lynn Staley defines the place situated somewhere between the divine and the community as a liminal zone (Staley 40). Margery’s liminality inflicted by her status as a mirror is further problematized by the paradox of all transcendent experience – it is fully subjective, grounded in personal experience, and above all, its communication to others is unfeasible. To come back to Lynn Staley, religious experience exploits the conflict between internally perceived and externally imposed codes (Staley 40), or in other words, between *being* and *appearing* (Irigaray 197). Margery Kempe’s vocation as a divine mirror has no tangible evidence, it is only her personal experience dictated and determined only by God, or the invisible. Margery Kempe is appointed to be the mirror, yet, the referent is invisible.

Margery Kempe claims to be a holy person, whose extraordinary actions and idiosyncratic behaviour are of deeper significance; however her dissimilarity is problematized by the fact that the authority behind her actions is divine inspiration (Lochrie 63). It is Luce Irigaray’s *being* without *appearing*, therefore liminal space open to doubt. What if the mirror is no prosthesis? What if there is no invisible truth reflected in Margery’s mirror and the referent is not divine but human, with all probability dictated by Margery herself? Then her mirror would become simulacrum (Yates 76), a mere copy pretending to be the real image of the divine.
My argument in the following discussion is that Margery Kempe further develops the concept of medieval spiritual mirror, fully exploits attributes of mirror such as imitation, reflection, and liminality, and consequently employs these attributes as the core principles in the construction of the text of her Book.

5.1 Divine Mirror – Imitation and Reflection

Body has always been of profound significance in the veneration of God. The cult of saints elevated the body into the ‘place’ of divine presence and miracles (Lochrie 13); bodies of saints were miraculously preserved from decay after death; holy bodies exuded miraculous aroma and fluid. Relics and their power bestowed grace on the area and community they were stored in and drew thousands for worship. And above all, Eucharist, the body of Christ, occupies the central position in the worship of God (Pohle).

Mysticism from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century attached great importance to the humanity of Christ, devotion to the Passion and Christ’s suffering. Meditation on Christ’s passion was part of a large movement of affective piety, and the influence of Franciscan and Cistercian spirituality together with later Carthusian translation and circulation of mystical texts were instrumental in its wide dissemination (Nuth 16). Such meditation was closely linked to physical effects transforming the bodies of mystics, which were an ultimate sign of mystical union with God, and consequently measured the abilities of the soul to imitate the suffering God (Lochrie 32). Scholars widely agree that the significance of body together with the bodily imitation of Christ’s suffering, known as a component of imitatio Christi, were fundamental elements of the tradition of affective piety.

The imitation of Christ’s suffering humanity was and still is highly problematic. The then criticism is to be found in the works of authors of Pseudo-Dionysian
tradition; they define contemplation of God as a cognitive process of clear mind, thus favouring forgetfulness over recollection. The modern sensibility finds it rather difficult to identify with the corporeal religious experience likewise, and it was Carolyn Walker Bynum who highlighted the problem of ‘strangeness’ of medieval religious experience.

Women mystics in particular fervently conformed to the affective way of worship, thus discovered the source of religious significance their bodies represented, and psychosomatic manipulation of body became for them a prominent theme (Bynum 210).

The prominence of body for women mystics is the outcome of medieval understanding of the male-female dichotomy. In medieval understanding man and woman do neither balance nor supplement each other, man is always superior, woman is always inferior. The male principle was associated with spirit and reason, on the other side, senses and flesh were associated with the female principle (Le Goff 416). Therefore, woman symbolizes the physical, lustful, material and appetitive part of human nature, while man symbolizes the spiritual, rational and mental part (Bynum 262). This concept of male-female dichotomy was drawn from the ancient philosophy, and was deeply rooted in medieval science and philosophy. The medieval dichotomy male/female was both unquestionable and unchallengeable, for it was perceived as natural, divine state of matter.

Albeit some male writers did exploit the dichotomy for their benefit, women writers, and with all probability women in general, did not draw from the dichotomy any conclusion of female inadequacy; they either ignored gender completely or embraced their fleshly nature as closer to human Christ and understood themselves not only as below but also above reason (Bynum 262). Remarkably, Margery Kempe
successfully incorporates both these notions into her devotion and text, as she fully
embraces feminity in her imitation of Christ, yet refers to herself with the unisex term
‘creature’ in her text. Consequently, women mystics transcended the dichotomy of
male/female, they utilized the analogy between their weak and suffering bodies, and
the suffering body of Christ, as the most accurate image of humanity (Le Goff 420).

Caroline Walker Bynum lists the transformation of mystical female bodies in
detail, as for example wounds imitating those of Christ’s passion, red marks known as
espousal rings appearing on ring-fingers, miraculous elongations, levitation,
miraculous fluid and odor emanation, or denying fluid and food intake for years
(Bynum 211). Saint Theresa of Avila had her heart pierced with a long spear of gold,
and Clare of Montefalco claimed to have a cross painfully implanted in her heart.
When Clare’s body was posthumously inspected (her fellow sisters tore it out of her
body), not only cross but other symbols of Christ’s crucifixion, thorns and sponge
including, were found rooted in her heart. Bodily punishment and systematic
mortification of body was a commonplace for medieval religious women - Catherine
of Siena virtually starved herself to death, and Catherine of Sweden performed
horrendous self-mortification practices; even more extravagant behaviour was rolling
in broken glass, hanging from a gibbet, praying upside down (the skirt of the mystic
miraculously covered private areas), and jumping into ovens (Bynum 210). Such
bodily transformations were important indications of holiness and their nature was
neither symbolic nor metaphorical for their recipients, moreover, the above mentioned
practices were not manifestations of madness, sadism nor masochism, their nature
possesses much deeper purpose and objective; body transformations were a quest for
the acquirement of female power and meaning caused by female exclusion from male
institutional life (Lochrie 14).
The medieval religious significance of body is predominantly grounded in the bodily connection of men and Christ; Christ’s agony on the cross was re-experienced in the human body, and it is human body and its ability to experience pain that brings men the closest to God. Therefore, what the modern sensibility perceives as horrific self-mutilation and psychosomatic abuse, the medieval religious viewed as imitation of Christ’s suffering during his Passion. The body of the mystic became intimate and united with God in the gesture of bodily reflection of Christ’s suffering. The examples of women mystics indicate that *imitatio Christi* practice was not a homogenous concept emulated by all mystics in unison; on the contrary, its practice was substantially individual and practiced variously, in other words, as many mystics there were as many ways of *imitatio* practice existed.

However, extreme way of *imitatio Christi* had its then critics as well. In his treatise *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas á Kempis outlines the numerous ways *imitatio Christi* was conducted and his argument for the imitation of Christ is stated at the very beginning of his treatise:

“He who follows Me, walks not in darkness,” says the Lord. By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate His life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ. The teaching of Christ is more excellent than all the advice of the saints, and he who has His spirit will find in it a hidden manna. Now, there are many who hear the Gospel often but care little for it because they have not the spirit of Christ. Yet whoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ.”

*The Imitation of Christ*
Thomas à Kempis states the virtues of the proper life in harmony with that of Christ as humility, goodness and peace in man, purity of mind and good consciences, patience in suffering and self-denial. He does not argue for the bodily imitation of Christ’s suffering in its extreme forms practiced by medieval women mystics, but rather understands it as conformity to the virtues of Christ’s life leading to spiritual enlightenment and insight.

5.1.1 Imitatio Christi in The Book of Margery Kempe

The Book of Margery Kempe and Margery’s devotional behaviour presents rather temperate ways of *imitatio Christi*. Even though she conformed to some extreme practices, such as fasting or wearing of hair-shirt, she never reached the bizarreness of some of her female fellow mystics, moreover, it is always Christ who directs her religious behaviour:

“Fastynge, dowtyr, is good for yong begynnars and discrete penawns, namly that her gostly fadyr gevth hem er injoyneth hem for to do. And for to byddyn many bedys it is good to hem that can no bettyr do, and yet it is not parfyte. But it is a good wey to perfeccyonward. For I telle the, dowtyr, thei that arn gret fastarys and gret doers of penawnce thei wold that it schuld ben holdyn the best lyfe; also thei that gevyn hem to sey many devocyon thei wold han that the best lyfe, and thei that gevyn mech almes thei wold that that wer holdyn the best lyfe. And I have oftyntymes, dowtyr, teld the that thynkyng, wepyng, and hy contemplacyon is the best lyfe in erthe.” (*B.M.K. 89*)

(‘Fasting, daughter, is good for young beginners, and discreet penance, especially what their confessor gives them or enjoins them to do. And to pray many beads is good for those who can do no better, yet it is not perfect. But it is a good way towards perfection. For I tell you daughter, those who are great fasters and great doers of penance want it to be considered the best life; those also who give themselves over to saying many devotions would have that to be the best life; and those who give very generous alms would like that considered the best life. And I have often told you, daughter, that thinking, weeping and high contemplation is the best life on Earth.’) (Windeatt 126)
As commanded by Christ, Margery’s devotion has three persistent features: weeping, continuous thinking and talking of God, and, in addition to that, wish for chastity. Together with her pilgrimages and suffering of people’s scorn, these features constitute the base for her imitation of Christ. Margery’s meditations and experiences, as described in her Book, are to a large extent focused on the humanity of Christ and she does go to a specific extreme of hers, mere seeing of a male child or a handsome young man provokes in her the contemplation of Christ’s humanity and suffering. Margery’s meditations are accompanied by bodily experience of her devotion; she weeps, roars, her body twists. The pain Christ suffered during his Crucifixion is the point of fusion between Margery and Christ; his Passion is reflected in her own body which thus becomes an image of Christ’s suffering body. In other words, Christ’s wounded body is reflected in Margery’s bodily reaction of weeping and crying.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth century, theologians identified the crucial moment of Christianity as Crucifixion rather than Incarnation or Resurrection and visionaries saw Christ no longer as a warrior, chalice, host, or Lord but as a suffering crucified man; therefore Margery’s weeping is less a metaphor of lack of self-control at the loss of Christ than an image of never-satiated, sensual and agonizing desire for Christ (Bynum 252).

Margery’s imitation of the suffering of Christ is not only corporeal (weeping) but also mental, actualized as continuous remembrance and talking about Christ. Exploring the mirror significance in the Book of Margery Kempe, I perceive her imitatio Christi as corresponding with the concept of her body and mind being a divine mirror reflecting the suffering of Christ; furthermore, the mirror is understood as both prosthesis and didactic mirror.
5.1.1.1 Mount Calvary Scene

Before her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Margery’s visions mainly reside in “holy speeches and dalliances with our Lord Jesus Christ” (B.M.K. 25). The weeping she experiences during her meditations on Christ’s Passion by and large conforms to *imitatio Christi* of Thomas á Kempis, as Margery weeps for humility, atonement, suffering of others, and her separation from heaven:

… wyth many swet thowtys and hy medytacyons and also hy contemplacyons, sumtyme durynge wyepyng two oowyres and oftyn lenyar in the mend of owyr Lordys Passyon wythowtyt sesynge, sumtyme for hir owyn synne, sumtyme for the synne of the pepyl, sumtyme for the sowlys in purgatory, sumtyme for hem that arn in poverté er in any dysese, for sche desyred to comfort hem alle. Sumtyme sche wept ful plenteuowsly and ful oystowsly for desyr of the blys of hevyn and for sche was so long dyfferryd therfro. Than this creatyr coveyted gretly to be deleyvyrd owt of this wretchyd world. (B.M.K. 20-1)

(… with many sweet thoughts and high meditations, and also high contemplations, sometimes continuing 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 are in poverty or in any distress, for she wanted to comfort them all.

Sometimes she wept very abundantly and violently out of desire for the bliss of heaven, and because she was being kept from it for so long. Then this creature longed very much to be delivered out of this wretched world.) (Windeatt 54)

Her weeping and conversations before the turning point in the Holy Land are a prerequisite for the real bodily imitation of Christ; they confirm her ability to lead life in harmony with Christian virtues and to perceive the divine. Christ and Virgin Mary continually assure her of forgiveness of all her sins and of her exceptional status among men. Besides, Margery devotes the narrative to her prophetic abilities, miraculous escape from a disastrous accident, search for institutional confirmation of her status as a holy person, quest for chastity. She also concentrates on other effects of
her meditations, such as the fire of love in her heart, sweetness, wondrous melodies, and scorn she suffers for her behaviour.

The turning point in her way of bodily imitation of Christ’s Passion, which Margery herself calls a “true contemplation” (B.M.K. 70), occurs in the Holy Land on the Mount Calvary.

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and pilgrimage as such, represented yet another way of *imitatio Christi*, and was embraced by the religious lay people above all. The journey of a pilgrimage itself carried deep spiritual significance, as the destination appoints superior meaning to the physical and mental endeavour (Le Goff 504). Pilgrims to the Holy Land collectively faced heat, hunger, thirst, and danger, as well as death. They visited significant places, which were meant to inspire in their visitors recollection of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and consequent contemplation of Christ’s suffering. Devout feelings of pilgrims were stirred by the notion of Christ’s bodily presence and his own suffering endured in the places. Moreover, the visit of the places of the Passion provided pilgrims with ability to recall and reconstruct the locations and feelings for the rest of their lives, thus furnishing them with possibilities of further mediation and imitation. Karma Lochrie uses the term sacred geography when referring to places, such as Mount Calvary, the room of the Last Supper, Mount Zion or Bethlehem, which allowed imitation through inhabitation (Lochrie 28).

Mount Calvary is the place of both Margery’s first roaring during contemplation and corporeal imitation of the Passion. Her vision of Christ’s suffering is depicted in great clarity as a catalogue of physical suffering endured by Christ to which Margery is a spectator and consequent reflection:

“And thus sche dede in the Mownt of Calvare, as it is wretyn beforne. Sche had so very contemplacyon in the sygth of hir sowle as yf Crist had hangyn befor hir
bodily eye in his manhood. And, when thorw dispensacyon of the hy mercy of
owyr sovereignty saywyr Crist Jhesu it was grawntd this creatur to beholdyn so
verily hys precyows tendyr body, alto rent and toryn wyth scorgys, mor ful of
wowndys than eyr was duffehows of holys, hangyng upon the cros wyth the
corown of thorn upon hys hevyd, hys blysful handys, hys tendyr fete nayled to
the hard tre, the reverys of blood flowing owt plenteuosly of every membr, the
gresly and grevows wownde in hys precyows syde schedyng owt blood and
watyr for hir lofe and hir salvacyon, than sche fel down and cryed wyth lowde
voys, wondyrfully turnyng and wrestyng hir body on every syde, spredyng hir
armys abrode as yyf sche schulde a deyd, and not cowde kepyn hir fro crying,
and these bodily mevyngys for the fyer of lofe that brent so fervently in hir
sowle wyth pur pyté and compassyon.” (B.M.K. 70)

(And thus she did on the Mount Calvary, as it is written before: she had as true
contemplation in the sight of her soul as if Christ had hung before her bodily eye in his manhood.
And when through dispensation of the high mercy of our sovereign saviour, Christ Jesus, it was
granted to this creature to behold so truly his precious tender body, all rent and torn with
scourges, more full of wounds than a dove-cot ever was of holes, hanging upon the cross with
the crown of thorns upon his head, his blessed hands, his tender feet nailed to the hard wood, the
rivers of blood flowing out plenteously from every limb, the grisly and grievous wound in his
precious side shedding out blood and water for her love and her salvation. Then she fell down
and cried with loud voice, twisting and turning her body amazingly on every side, spreading her
arms out wide as if she would have died, and could not keep herself from crying and these
physical movements, because of the fire of love that burned so fervently in her soul with pure
pity and compassion.) (Windeatt 105-6)

As I have already stated, the style and significance of Margery’s weeping underwent
several alterations. This new kind of experience of weeping was violent and physically
active uncontrollable roaring, very unlike her previous calm weeping; Margery herself
differentiates between her weeping, and crying or roaring. This new way of emotional
erience originated in extraordinary circumstances of the Holy Land; Hope Allen

13 Richard Rolle in his Meditations on the Passion employs identical metaphor: “Efte, swet Jhesu, thy
body is like to a dufhouse. For a dufhouse is ful of holys, so is thy body ful of woundes…” (Meech, Allen
291).
suggests that her desire to identify herself with the Passion was so intense that the
instigating element for her cries could have been the recollection of the dying cry of
the Saviour (Meech and Allen 290). Similar recollection instigated the Revelation of
Julian of Norwich and was experienced by Bridget of Sweden on the Mount Calvary
as well (Lochrie 196). The bodily experience of the vision of the Passion is stimulated
by remembrance in Margery’s mind and compassion in her heart. The crucified body
of Christ becomes reflected in Margery’s gesture of spreading of hands and the pain of
his wounds is reflected in her writhing body and cries. The recollection of the
wounded body of Christ is projected into her own damaged body; in her pantomimic
gesture she mirrors Christ’s suffering.

The emotional outbursts and clamorous crying lasted for the period of ten years
(Meech and Allen 291), they appeared frequently in the Holy Land and in Rome,
declined after her arrival to England; later increased again even improved by the cry of
dying Christ. The instigating moments were always connected to Christ’s suffering,
such as recollection of Passion during religious festivals or prayer, sight of a crucifix,
or when she saw a men or an animal beaten. Margery ceaselessly enumerates the
appearances of her crying, moreover consistently declares its divine, random nature:

“… and onys sche had fourteene on o day, and an other day sche had seuen, and
so as God wolde visiten hir, sumtyme in the cherch, sumtyme in the strete,
sumptym in the chawmbre, sumtyme in the felde whean God wold sendyn hem, for
sche knew nevyr tyme ne owyr whean thei Schulde come.” (B.M.K. 70)

(… and once she had fourteen in one day, and another day she had seven, just as God would visit
her with them, sometimes in church, sometimes in the street, sometimes in her chamber,
sometimes in the fields, when God would send them, for she never knew the time nor hour when
they would come.) (Windeatt 106)
On Corpus Cristi Day … sche cryed, "I dey, I dey," and roryd also wondirfully
that the pepil wonderyd upon hir, havyng gret merveyl what hir eyled. (*B.M.K.
107)*

(On Corpus Christi Day … she cried out, ‘I die, I die,’ and roared so astonishingly that people
were amazed at her and wondered very much what was wrong with her.) (*Windeat* 145)

The reappearing of Margery’s outbursts and clamorous crying, together with frequent
gratitude and praise expressed by Christ for her courageousness to suffer such fits of
excessive expression, indicate Margery’s ceaseless meditation on Christ’s wounded
body. These facts suggest Margery understood her status of a mirror as a privileged
one; she was the mirror fully dictated by her referent – the suffering body of Christ.

Her mirror and the reflection it shows is never private, all her fits of roaring
always appear publicly, as God refuses to provide her with more acceptable form of
devotion. The publicity of her fits complies with her status of the mirror/prosthesis that
helps to see the invisible. Dictated by the invisible divine Margery’s
body/mirror/prosthesis reflects God’s grace, exposes sin among men and exhorts to
improvement of mankind. Her body/mirror/prosthesis assumes the didactic function
challenging unworthy ways of live by setting an example worth following. She, bold
as she is, assumes the role model position of Saint Paul and calls upon mankind: “Be
ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (*1 Corinthians* 11:1)

5.1.1.2 Flagellation Scene

Comprehensive and realistic description of the vision of Christ’s passion appears
twice in the Book: it is Mount Calvary experience and towards the end of the Book in
Chapter 80. In her second vision, Margery concentrates on the scene of Flagellation,
and quite interestingly, she multiplies the number of executioners to sixteen with
sixteen scourges each having eight tips of lead on its end. Hope Ellen finds this
numbers rather extravagant (sixteen men with sixteen scourges with metal-tipped ends would probably become more dangerous to each other then to the executed one) and with all probability they are Margery’s invention to intensify the suffering of Christ in compliance with the general medieval tendency to develop the horrors of the Passion (Meech, Allen 334)

In her vision of Flagellation, Margery is no longer a mere spectator; she actively participates in the scene of the Passion side by side with Virgin Mary. Her narrative of Crucifixion scene extensively and repeatedly describes Christ’s mutilated body; moreover, her interpretation includes the maternal narrative of Virgin Mary (Lochrie 178).

As the body of Christ is being dismembered, nails driven through his palms and feet, his joints crushed, Margery’s body imitates Christ’s in bodily wounding of its own, which is demonstrated in her fits of crying and madness. During the Crucifixion Virgin Mary faints seeing her son die on the cross and Margery’s pain and sorrow become so unbearable “that sche ran al abowte the place as it had ben a mad woman, crying and roryng.” (B.M.K. 194) During her contemplation, her body again becomes a reflection of Christ’s suffering, as well as a spectacle of the eternally unfulfilled desire for the body of Christ, as she wishes to stay with the body alone:

“And the sayd creatur thowt that sche ran evyr to and fro as it had be a woman wythowtyn reson, gretyly desyryng to an had the precyows body be hirself alone that sche myth a wept anow in presens of that precyows body, for hir thowt that sche wolde a deyid wyth wepyng and mornyng in hys deth for love that sche had to hym.” (B.M.K. 193)

(And the said creature thought that she continually ran to and fro, as if she were a woman without reason, greatly desiring to have had the precious body by herself alone, so that she might have wept enough in the presence of that precious body, for she thought she would have died weeping and mourning for his death, for love that she had for him.) (Windeatt 233)
The significance of this scene is magnified by the appearance of another referent to Margery’s mirror. Extreme grief and sorrow of Virgin Mary at witnessing the death of her son drive her near to madness in Margery’s narrative. She screams, offers her body in place of her son’s and eventually faints. Margery stays alongside her and reflects Virgin’s suffering in her parallel fits of roaring, consequently, in her own fit of madness over Virgin’s unconsciousness, she fully and actively undertakes Virgin’s grief. Their parallel despair and temporary madness are simultaneous over the whole time of the Passion narrative.

Margery Kempe distinctly identifies herself with Virgin Mary several times throughout the book. One of her very first visions, when Margery is at a loss about how to approach contemplation, is instigated by Christ’s words: “Dow tyr, thynke on my modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that thow hast.” (B.M.K. 18). In her vision, she plays an active role in the early life of the Holy family and she attends to Virgin from her birth, assists at the birth of Jesus, and follows the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt. Several moments of the vision are of great significance; Margery assumes the position of angel Gabriel and announces to child Mary the arrival of her divine son, and specifically concentrates on the attendance to baby Jesus. This vision again complies with the affective piety and concentration on humanity of Christ; however, it is Virgin’s motherhood in the forefront of Margery’s vision.

Mary is an important point in the discussion of Christ’s association with the feminine, as Christ’s humanity arises from the body/flesh of his mother. This is the context of Margery’s devotion to Mary, who is less virgin to her than mother of Christ. This is a generally accepted fact, albeit surprising, that Virgin Mary was not as important for women mystics as one might expect and her relevance was
predominantly emphasizes by their male counterparts (Bynum 269). Christ becomes flesh through Mary’s body and only through her body Redemption of mankind is possible. Veneration of Virgin Mary is a prologue to the devotion of Christ and it is primarily her body/flesh, container of Christ and thus bearer of humanity, which is glorified (Bynum 269). The fact that one of Margery’s first visions is of Mary’s life and the birth of Christ, what is more, instigated by Christ himself, carries deep significance of the meaning of female body in the devotion of Margery Kempe, moreover, she affiliates with such mystics as Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Catherine of Siena, who implied Mary as pre-existent humanity of Christ as Logos was his pre-existent divinity (Bynum, 265).

However, Margery elaborates even further on the significance of Virgin Mary during the vision of the Crucifixion. Margery Kempe’s wild roaring gains a crucial paradigm in the Virgin Mary’s body, for Mary’s body itself becomes a reflection of the suffering of Christ during the passion. Mary thus becomes a precedent for Margery’s weeping. Moreover, Margery’s body as a mirror of grief, dictated by Virgin Mary, achieves privileged status not only under the cross but among her contemporaries as well. Christ himself states five tokens of Margery’s tears, weeping and roaring included, among which is the compassion with Virgin’s grief:

“I gyf the sumtyme smale wepyngys and soft teerys for a tokyn that I lofe the, and sumtyme I geve the gret cryis and roryngys for to makyn the pepil aferd wyth the grace that I putte in the into a tokyn that I wil that my modrys sorwe be knowyn by the that men and women myth have the mor compassion of hir sorwe that sche suffyrd for me.” (B.M.K. 183)

(‘I sometimes give you slight weeping and soft tears, as a token I love you. And sometimes I give you great cries and roarings, to make people afraid at the grace that I put into you, in token that I wish that my mother’s sorrow be known through you, so that men and women might have the more compassion of her sorrow she suffered for me.’) (Windeatt 223)
The elaborated description of the flagellation scene, Margery’s imitation of Virgin’s grief, together with her bodily didactic mirror/prostheses of Christ’s suffering, have perennial purpose to unsettle the confidence of the reader and remind him of the suffering of both Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary they underwent to relieve human sin. Margery’s body/mirror/prostheses communicates Christ’s humanity arising from female body, thus establishing the female body as a universal symbol of humanity. Furthermore, Margery’s violent outbursts of crying dictated by Virgin’s grief and its cause - the sacrifice of Christ – challenge the Gospel accounts of Crucifixion, as the patristic tradition does not list Virgin Mary as a witness to the death of Christ (the only reference to Mary’s participation appears in John 19:25); however, Mary’s scriptural silence over the death of her son is invested with meaning, which is attributed to Mary’s patient stoicism resulting from her assurance of Christ’s Resurrection (Lochrie 178).

Margery’s bodily experience of Christ’s suffering and her boisterous tears are not a mere reflection of Virgin’s grief in the Crucifixion scene; they are a statement about the female body, its religious meaning and about her privileged status of a polished mirror, owing to which she is able to lay claim to the secret knowledge and at the same time to transmit the knowledge, otherwise unutterable, through her body.

Another significant motive arising from female medieval religiosity emerges in Chapter fourteen, when Christ says to Margery:

“And yet schal no man sle the, ne fyer bren the, ne watyr drynch the, ne wynd deryn the, for I may not forgetyn the how thow art wretyn in myn handys and my fete; it lykyn me wel the peynes that I have sufferyd for the.” (B.M.K. 30)

(’And yet no man shall slay you, nor fire burn you, nor water drown you, nor winds harm you, for I may not forget you and how you are written upon my hands and my feet – I am well pleased with the pains that I have suffered for you.’) (Windeatt 65)
The idea of mystic’s reflection on Christ’s body appears also in The Ancrene Wisse and the revelations of Mechtilde of Magdeburg (Lochrie 175), and in Margery’s Book is analogically repeated in Christ’s: “I am in the, and thou in me.” in Chapter 10 and later in Chapter 34. The fusion of Christ’s suffering body with female body is echoed once again, as Christ’s wounds become the place of reflection of Margery’s body, their bodies merging into one in the latter quotation.

In Margery Kempe’s interpretation of mystical union with Christ, her love and feeling for Christ’s Passion become reflected in his wounded hands and feet in the same way as Passion becomes reflected in roaring and twisting of her body. Margery’s *imitatio Christi*, her desire for body of Christ, results in mystical union actualized as a reciprocal reflection on both her and Christ’s body. In the mystical union, actuated by mystics love and desire, Christ’s body transfigures into mystic’s body and mystic’s into Christ’s. Margery is defined by/in God as God is defined by/in Margery. They become one. Richard Rolle in his *Incendium Amoris* elaborates on the mystical union in the form of a transfiguration into the loved one in a similar way:

“What is love but the transforming of desire into the thing loved? Or love is great desire for the fair, the good, and lovely, with continuance of thought going in to that thing that it loves, the which, when it has, then it joys; for joy is not caused save by love. All those loving are truly made like to their love, and love makes him that loves like to that that is loved.” (*Fire of Love*)

In Richard Rolle’s words, desire for and thoughts about Christ, *imitatio Christi*, bring the mystic into mystical union with God, which transforms the lover into the image of the loved one. Margery’s reflection on the body of Christ is an analogy to her ability to reflect the divine; her life, body, behaviour, and her text as well, is fully reflected in Christ’s body, therefore it is prescribed in and by the divine; consequently, her mirror
and its reflection is unquestionable and unutterable at the same time. In their mutual reflection Margery becomes divine, yet Saint Margery remains human.

Luce Irigaray in her essay *La Mystère*ique observes the potency of the mirror symbolism for women mystics. Both mystic and God is a mirror; when their reflections merge in unity, the mystic and Christ become one in the reflection, yet they eternally remain separate:

“A living mirror, thus, am I (to) your resemblance as you are mine. We are both singular and plural, one and ones, provided that nothing tarnishes the mirrors that fuse in the purity of their exchange.” (Irigaray 197)

As Margery becomes divine in Christ’s body, so Christ becomes human. Yet, Margery’s reflection on Christ’s body insinuates another significant religious concept. Christ’s body was associated with the feminine in medieval religiosity and medieval writers and artists keenly employed the idea; his wounded body bears the attributes of suffering, bleeding and nurturing, which appertain to the realm of the feminine; thus Christ’s body on the cross undergoes a gender reversal from male to female (Bynum 293).

Nurturing Christ was a commonplace theme for medieval mystical writers. The cult of Virgin’s milk was wide-spread in late medieval Europe and breastfeeding Mary was a favoured motif of art (Bynum 270) Nursing imagery regularly resonated in the portrayals of Christ as well, whose blood-pouring wounds on the cross provided nourishment for souls, his blood transformed into breast milk and his wounds into nursing breasts. Christ’s dying body on the cross was perceived in its suffering humanity as female body nourishing mankind with its blood. Catherine of Siena noted on drinking blood from the breast of mother Jesus, glossing blood as suffering, both
Christ’s and hers, and Margaret of Oingt elaborated on Christ’s birth pangs (Bynum 271).

Generally, the concept of Jesus as Mother was common to all medieval devotional literature, and it is thought that the chief representatives of the idea were St Anselm and St Bernard, who based their thoughts on some sort of scriptural warrant for regarding God as our Mother (e.g. Isaiah 49, 1, 15; Matthew 23, 37) (Walters 34). The devotion to Mother Jesus actualized in three analogies drawn between Christ’s Redemption of mankind and aspects of motherhood (Nuth 112). The first is the analogy of Christ giving birth to new humanity in his suffering, the second is Christ’s motherly care for all his Christian children, and the third is the above mentioned analogy of nourishment.

The concept of Christ’s motherhood was especially developed by Julian of Norwich. The word ‘mother’ with all its caring and nursing connotations is fully embedded in Julian’s theology; there is Holy Mother Church, Mother Mary, Mother of our Lord and all Christians, but above all Mother Jesus. What is new in her motherhood of Christ is the idea that God’s motherhood is expressed in Christ, not only as motherly love and compassion, but also as a taking on of our physical humanity in the Incarnation, just as a mother gives herself to foetus (Bynum 266). Incarnation is thus a kind of new creation of humanity through motherhood of Christ; Mother Christ takes on our flesh in Mary’s womb and recreates it with his own imprint:

“Our kynd moder, our gracious moder, for he wold al holy become our moder in althyng, he toke the ground of his werke full low and full myldely in the maydens womb. And that he shewid in the first [Shewing,] where he browte that meke mayde aforn the eye of myn understondyng in the simple statur as she was
Margery Kempe’s bodily demonstration of Christ’s suffering in her boisterous tears and twisting body is a significant part of her *imitatio Christi*. In her weeping Christ’s suffering on the Cross is reflected, and her body becomes reflection of his bodily agony. Margery’s body in imitation renders a place of reflection for the divine. She is a body/mirror/prosthesis dictated by the divine referent, which communicates the most important message of Christian story – Christ’s sacrifice for mankind. Margery’s body/mirror/prostheses reveals and at the same time conceals the divine message in her weeping body, and her mirror reminds both of the Passion and sins of men.

### 5.1.1.3 Recollection as Imitatio Christi

Continuous thinking and talking of God, the very process of continuous imagination and recollection, is not only another feature of Margery’s devotion, it is yet another kind of *imitatio Christi* (Lochrie 29). When Christ instructs Margery: “Drede the not but speke boldly in my name in the name of Jhesu, for thei [his speeches] arn no leesyngys.” (*B.M.K.* 26), he authorizes her to speak publicly about holy topics, a thing unusual and rather dangerous for a medieval woman. The greatest obstruction for a woman publicly speaking was men’s prejudice that she has not the essential authority to speak; this claim is rooted in the notorious statements in the Bible: the first is the genesis declaration that Eve, after the Fall, must subordinate to
the power of her husband; the second is Saint Paul’s declaration that women should not teach, should remain silent in Church, should have no authority over men, and should confine their questions to their husbands at home (Dinshaw 144). Such justification of male monopoly over public speaking was furthermore sustained by the medieval understanding of male/female dichotomy. Moreover, Margery Kempe several times faced the danger of accusations of Lollardy, for which she could have been burnt at stake. Lollards rendered to women direct access to the studying of Scripture and considered all Christians to be themselves priests, women included, so that everyone should be able to speak (Dinshaw 218).

Medieval women mystics generally challenged the prejudice against the authority of women to speak. Margery’s contemporary Julian of Norwich voices in Chapter six of the shorter version of Revelation her frustration at the silence women were confined to and echoes Margery’s obligation to speak authorized by Christ: “Ought I to believe, simply because I am a woman that I should not tell you of God’s goodness? When I saw the vision I also saw that he wants it to be known -”. (Wolters 27)

Despite the misogynist obstacles, prevailing feature of Margery’s life is continuous thinking and speaking not only about Christ and bliss of heaven, but also about herself. Whenever Margery encounters somebody worth telling, she recollects both her experiences and life in Christ, various episodes from the Gospel or expresses her desire for heaven, however, the focal point and prevalent subtext of all her recollections remains the life and suffering of Christ. While thinking about God, Margery’s memory continually constructs mental images which provoke recollection of Christ’s suffering for humankind, and, in so doing, provokes meditation on the experience of suffering, imaginative imitatio (Lochrie 34). While talking about her
life, she certainly recollects her distinctive vocation, which is to a large extent again connected to Christ’s suffering, therefore images of her devotional experiences serve the same purpose of recollection, and consequent meditation of Christ’s suffering. Walter Hilton, the fourteenth-century English mystic explains the usage of images as inspiration for recollection and consequent imitation of suffering.

“Amongst which signs the Church sets up images of Our Lord crucified… in order that the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ and also the martyrdom of other saints may be recalled to the memory by looking at these images; and thus slow and carnal minds may be stirred to compunction and devotion.” (In Lochrie 31)

Margery’s mental images are not material ones, yet their function is the same; the intention of images is to evoke imitation of Christ through their meditation, in other words, the purpose of mystic’s recollection and imaginative imitation of Christ is the experience of suffering, which brings a mystic to the union with God.

In order to retrieve Christ’s suffering, recollection of a detailed image of the Passion was widely encouraged by medieval meditative treatises. Julian of Norwich desires an image of suffering Christ to be able to join him and participate on his ordeal as if a witness to the Passion:

“… I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of the compassion our lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time his peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him. Other sight ner sheweing of God desired I never none till the soule was departid fro the body. The cause of this petition was that after the sheweing I should have the more trew minde in the passion of Christe.” (A Revelation of Love 3)
Compared to Julian of Norwich’s, Margery Kempe’s vision of the Passion is vivid, Technicolor, and stereo sound (Goodman 105). The characters, Margery encountered in then art, stained windows, and literature, start to move and speak. Julian’s recollection acquires a sophisticated form of a memory system consisting of successively occurring images guiding her memory amongst signposts of the bleeding head, the discoloration of the face, the copious bleeding of the body from scourging, the shriveling of the flesh, the joy and bliss of the Passion, and instruments of Christ’s Passion, such as scourges, thorns, nails and cross (Lochrie 32). The images become the means by which Julian is able to become the witness of Christ’s suffering and by their contemplation achieve imaginative imitatio.

Julian’s desire for recollection of the Passion is not exclusively imaginative; she expresses wishes for bodily experience of suffering as well:

“Than came suddenly to my minde that I should desyre the second wounde of our Lords gracious gift, that my body might be fullfilled with minde and felying of his blissid passion, for I would that His peynes were my peynes, with compassion, and afterward, longeing to God. But in this I desired never bodily sight nor sheweing of God, but compassion, as a kinde soule might have with our Lord Jesus that for love would beene a dedely man, and therefore I desired to suffer with Him.” (A Revelation of Love 5)

Julian’s request for her body to render a place of reflection of Christ’s suffering is compatible with Margery’s bodily experience of the Passion. Both mystics identify the potentiality of their bodies as places of remembrance, imitation and reflection of Christ; however, their objective of imitatio Christi is dissimilar. While Margery’s suffering body becomes a didactic mirror of God’s infinite grace among people, in
which they may observe their sinful and unrepentant hearts, Julian’s desire for bodily imitation of Christ is driven by her hunger for profound knowledge of God.

Mystical recollection is a principal part of Margery’s spirituality identity, as constant talking and thinking of Heaven and of her spiritual experience was a crucial part of her devotion. Margery’s continuous recollection of Christ’s suffering prepares her body and her emotions for the bodily reenactment of the Passion. The mystical recollection makes her body receptive, allows it to absorb images and tokens of suffering Christ underwent on the Cross for mankind, and thus renders her body as a mirror of the Christ’s suffering. The images of Christ’s Passion are reflected both outwardly on the body, and inwardly in the mind, thus continual contemplation of suffering produces physical effect on Margery Kempe’s body (Lochrie 35)

5.2 Critical Mirror – Liminality

The status of a mirror allows Margery Kempe to create of herself an original figure. Being a divine mirror, she dwells in two worlds. The spiritual world, she withdraws to, is invisible to the “bodily eye” and Margery acquires the status of a spiritual authority here. However, she can never fully escape the everyday world which does not comprehend Margery’s spiritual status. The everyday world stubbornly imposes its codes on her, and mercilessly degrades her for precisely the authority she holds in the spiritual world.

Margery Kempe begins her narrative with the description of her crossing into the zone in-between, the liminal zone, as she reconstitutes Margery Kempe, the burghess wife, into a holy woman. Her liminality of the mirror bestows on her the ability to dramatize the conflict between internally perceived and externally imposed codes (Staley 40). To put it differently, she recedes from the community and exploits her perception of the communal reality to her benefit. The image of Margery Kempe
presented in the text asserts Margery’s principal position in the community; throughout her Book, she occupies the forefront position owing to the narrow-minded, oppressive, violent, and superficial environment around her. Lynn Staley observes how mystics draw on conventional elements of sacred biography: “By deliberately placing themselves on the margins of society, the holy men and women of the Middle Ages dramatized the nature of their spiritual quest for perfection in terms of their separation from conventional modes of life.” (Staley 40) Margery Kempe similarly utilizes her liminal status. Her quest for authority leads her to the marginal position of a holy woman – she rejects the values of the everyday world, abandons her family, wanders the world, and her religious behavior is inappropriate. Her liminality conflicts with the conformist community, however, her deliberate positioning in the liminal zone and the subsequent conflict it provokes, guarantees space and freedom for observance and comment.

Margery operates her liminal status on several levels. Most basically, she undergoes quintessential problem of all female lay mystics, she struggles against her husband and female social role. Another level of operation is that of acquiring status within Church and religious institutions.

5.2.1 Social Liminality

Margery Kempe ceaselessly and persistently avoids the essential gender roles of a wife and mother ascribed to a medieval woman, for these categories present the foremost obstacle to Margery’s spiritual vocation. Moreover, to be the clear mirror of divine will, she is obliged to renounce all earthly ties distracting her spiritual endeavour. Her spiritual authority fully rests on her nonconforming ways of behaviour in the everyday world and Margery largely exploits her liminality in order to achieve the authority over her body and platform for critical perspective (Staley 42); her social
liminality predominantly manifests itself in her family relations and clothing, and in her attitude to food.

Even though, Margery Kempe conscientiously avoids association of her person with family and the gender roles family ascribes to a woman, the text echoes the expectations medieval women had to meet in relation to their family. Consequently, the text reveals Margery’s awareness of what expectations she should have met in family relations:

“Therfore I preve that thow art a very dowtyr to me and a modyr also, a syster, a wyfe, and a spowse, wyntessyng the gospel wher owyr Lord seyth to hys dyscyles, 'He that doth the wyl of my Fadyr in hevynt he is bothyn modyr, brothyr, and syster unto me.' Whant thow stodyst to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepyst and mornyst for my peyn and for my passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adverstytés, than art thow a very syster; and, whant thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens.” (B.M.K. 31)

(‘Therefore I prove that you are a daughter indeed to me, and a mother also, a sister, a wife and a spouse, as witness the Gospel where our Lord says to his disciples: ‘he who does the will of my Father in heaven is both mother, brother, and sister to me’. When you strive to please me, then thou are a true daughter; when you weep and mourn for my pain and my Passion, then you are a true mother having compassion on her child; when you weep for other people’s sins and adversities, then you are a true sister; and when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are a true spouse and wife, for it is the wife’s part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company.’) (Windeatt 67)

Margery Kempe uses the variety of family relationships to illustrate the aspects of relationship to God; moreover, the significance of the above theological analogies draws strength from Margery’s understanding of what the family ties should look like, although she herself secedes from them. In her visions she indicates her motherly
abilities of a mother of fourteen children, as she actively participates as a caretaker and
tender to both Mary and baby Jesus in her visions and many times receives praise for
her tending skills from various saints; however, Margery shows interest in
housewifery only when it can be shown to have spiritual significance (Dinshaw 124).
As her true family was located in the spiritual world, Margery skillfully gained
autonomy from her family in the real world.

Throughout the Book, Margery relates to the two men of her real life, her father
and husband. Her father’s revered status was Margery’s source of self-confidence and
courage, and to some extent it guaranteed her legal protection as well.

On the other hand, John Kempe and the ‘marital’ debt to him undermined and
derogated Margery’s spiritual vocation. She endured strenuous contest to live a chaste
married life with her husband, for:

“… the dette of matrimony was so abominably to hir that sche had levar, hir
thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to
any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyens.” (B.M.K. 11)

(… the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, have
eaten and drunk the oozo and muck in the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of
obedience.) (Windeatt 46)

and succeeded in convincing him to take the public vow of chastity in front of bishop
Repingdon. The break-up scene of Margery and John has a Monty-Python-esque
comical overtone. Margery is able to strike the deal with her husband on account of his
temporal impotency wrought on him by Christ. Therefore, again on Christ’s command,
Margery virtually bribes John with the payment of his debts in exchange for life in
chastity. Despite the comical subtext, it is a significant moment in Margery’s life;
from now on, her spiritual identity is allowed to blossom fully breaking free from the
limitations of married life.
However, not only the repulsiveness of the carnal act inspired Margery in her quest for chastity; in the spiritual world, Margery Kempe reinvented herself as a virgin. Medieval social structure viewed women’s ‘estate’ as the triad of virgin-mother-widow, of which virginity offered the greatest heavenly returns. Moreover, a great number of female saints, the so-called Katherine Group of virgin martyrs, who acted as role models for medieval women, promoted virginity too (Dinshaw 25). Margery Kempe did not comprehend her virginity as a return into the state of physical intactness, but rather as a recovery of a spiritual state, which stands outside the externally imposed codes of immaculate before and polluted after. The bodily intactness was less crucial than the will to remain chaste; therefore Margery exploited the fundamental temporality of virginity and perceived her reinvented spiritual virginity as an escape from the human world (Dinshaw 27). As Margery’s spiritual virginity is practically inexpressible by/on the body, she chose, on Christ’s command of course, to wear white dress, as an expression of her chastity and obedience of Christ’s private rule. It is no wonder, that her white clothing as a claim for virginity met hostile public reaction; moreover, it is especially men who see the woman in white as a threat, which could disturb the hegemonies upon which the late medieval society was based (Staley 54). The Mayor of Leicester voiced the male insecurity face to face with Margery:” "I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han awey owr wyvys fro us and ledyn hem wyth the.” (B.M.K. 115) (I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us and lead them off with you.) (Windeatt 153). Margery’s liminal position rendered her freedom from male dictated gender roles. Having abandoned her family and resolutely pursuing her spiritual aim, Margery Kempe became an alarming phenomenon and possible example for other women.
Although wife and mother of fourteen children, she reinvented herself as a determined woman, able to accomplish her ambition of spiritual life, thus able to usurp the authority over her body fully.

Yet, another ‘powerful’ person emerges from the account for Margery’s quest for authority over her body. John Kempe is hardly given any attention in scholarly work dealing with Margery Kempe; however, Margery’s liberation from the family ties would have never been possible without the consent of her husband. In this respect Margery is exceptional, as many woman mystics suffered terrible physical and mental abuse from their husbands due to their vocation. It must have been an extremely difficult role for John to be reduced into a mere observer of his headstrong wife’s spiritual growth, her public religious behaviour, her attachment to learned religious men, her pilgrimages across Europe, and above all, of his utter loss of authority over his own wife. Yet, humiliating as it might have been, he never ceased to express support for his wife’s spiritual endeavour to a certain extent and, even though surprisingly, Margery never ceased to identify herself as a wife of John Kempe of Lynn when in England.

Margery Kempe’s treatment of food is rather startling, as it differs widely from the food perception of other female mystics, such as Catherine of Siena or Christina Mirabilis who by their food practices of fasting manifested liberation from the codes imposed on them by family and society. Margery, on the other hand, used food practices to express her desire to be part of the earthly community; consequently, her eating habits served as criticism of medieval bigotry and conformity.

Margery established very distinctive eating practices during her ‘dalliances’ with Christ, who instructed her to give up eating meat and to fast on Fridays, and later conversely allowed her to eat meat and cease fasting. From the religious point of view,
such eating habits were not remarkable, or atypical; yet, remarkable is the space Margery provided for the community reaction to her eating habits. In the Middle Ages, eating was a communal act of deep spiritual significance (Bynum 3), also, eating has always been an important ritual of participation (Staley 51). The importance of eating together is best depicted in the already mentioned break-up scene between Margery and John; in exchange for their mutual life in chastity, John Kempe demands that Margery pays his financial debts, and eats and drinks with him on Fridays again.

Owing to the fact that Margery fulfills the eating practices prescribed to her by Christ, she distances from the communal practice and subsequently collides with the externally imposed codes. This clash is made very explicit on Margery’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when she becomes excluded from the society of her fellow pilgrims not only because of her specific religious behaviour but also because of her eating habits:

“And sone afty thorw mevyng of summe of her cumpany hyr confessowr was dysplesyd for sche ete no flech, and so was mech of alle the cumpany. And thei wer most dysplesyd for sche wepyd so mech and spak alwey of the lofe and goodnes of owyr Lord as wel at the tabyl as in other place. … And so sche dede, and went forth wyth hem tyl sche cam at Constawns wyth gret disesse and gret turbyl, for thei dedyn hir mech shame and mech reprefe as thei wentyn in dyvers placys. They cuttyd hir gown so schort that it come but lytl benethyn hir kne and dedyn hir don on a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle, for sche schuld ben holdyn a fool and the pepyl schuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon. Thei madyn hir to syttyn at the tabelys ende benethyn alle other that sche durst ful evyl spekyn a word.” (B.M.K. 62)

(And soon after, because of prompting by some of her companions, her confessor was displeased because she ate no meat, and so were many at the company. And they were most annoyed because she wept so much and spoke all the time about the love and goodness of our Lord, as much at the table as in other places. … And so she did, and went on with them until she
came to Constance with great distress and trouble, for they caused her much shame and reproof as they went along, in various places. They cut her gown so short that it only came a little below her knee, and made her put on some white canvas in a kind of sacking apron, so that she would be taken for a fool, and people would not make much of her or hold her in any repute. They made her sit at the end of the table below all others, so that she scarcely dared to speak a word. (Windeatt 97-8)

Margery points to the exclusivity of the group by calling them ‘company’ and ‘fellowship’, terms commonly used for guild, moreover, by referring to them with the pronoun ‘we’, she defines them as a collective mentality opposed to her because she separates herself from them by not eating meat (Staley 53). Margery critically observes that spiritual individuality has no place in this ‘fellowship’ of Christians, as this pious group on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land, excludes from their midst a woman talking of God. The irony of the situation even escalates, as Margery repeatedly despairs at the sanctimonious behaviour of her fellow pilgrims even though she still genuinely longs to be part of the Christian company during meal times, however, she finally chooses eating in isolation unable to conform to the hypocrisy and bigotry of the community. Once again, the dramatic situation caused by Margery’s liminal status provides her with a critical distance to pinpoint the problem of sanctimoniousness of the community.

Although Margery’s Book abounds in passages describing violent reactions to her clamorous religious expression, life-style, clothing and eating practices, she occasionally inserts cameos of benevolent and receptive characters into the text. Their acts of kindness towards Margery are often realized through the ritual of eating together. In the Holy Land, when excluded from the company of her fellow pilgrims, the Grey Friars invite Margery to share their meal with them; in Rome, when in great poverty, Margery is invited to the table of Dame Margaret Florentyn three days a week and a man called Marcelle feeds her for two days. After her return to England, a man in Norwich feeds her and gives her white clothes, and during her problematic stay in
Leicester, the jailor takes her home and offers her place at his own table with his family. Furthermore, while she refers to her opponents with nouns and pronouns, the congenial individuals who offer Margery charity are more likely to have a name or epithet to mark them apart. Margery takes advantage of precisely that aspect of her life, which singularizes her, and by consistent indication of her liminal status, divides the community into the good and the bad ones according to their acceptance of her eating habits.

Margery Kempe repetitively uses food as an indication of the nature of the medieval community which seems to dread anything that is not capable of instant congruity. The mini-drama on the pilgrimage is an analogy to the whole of Margery’s life during which she had to encounter various constrictions imposed by society on women; her deliberate withdrawal to the liminal position expressed in her family relations, clothing, and eating practices provides her with the opportunities for criticism and authority assumption. Moreover, it is a statement of her profound knowledge of the community and the power of the destabilizing force her vocation represents. By various self-restricting practices she reaches the liminal position of the clean mirror, which reflects not only the divine but also the problematic in the community.

5.2.2 Religious Liminality

Religious liminality of Margery Kempe is rooted in her highly idiosyncratic lay spirituality. As stated at the beginning of this work, mysticism is a matter of heart, not mind, status or authority; therefore, all the lay mystics occupy a liminal position not only in their relation to community but also to the Church, as they are not part of the religious institution. Paradoxically, both the Church and lay mystics operate within the same framework of divine inspiration. Margery Kempe conventionally related to the
figures of holy women of the time, whose often extreme religious behaviour designated the liminal zone as well; however, in comparison with, for example, Catherine of Sienna, Catherine of Sweden or Christina Mirabilis, Margery’s religious behaviour is rather temperate. While some female mystics conquer their flesh and achieve the authority over their bodies in self-mutilation and similar horrendous practices, Margery Kempe restrains her eating habits according to Christ’s command, wears white clothing, and imitates Christ crucified in boisterous tears. Margery does not indulge in severe self-mortification practices and she is very delicate as far as physical pain is concerned. Although Margery frequently positions herself among Christian martyrs, such as St Katherine of Alexandria, she simultaneously stresses incapability to bear pain, even if in Christ’s name:

“Sche ymagyned in hirselft what deth sche myghth deyn for Crystys sake. Hyr thowt sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred for the poyn of deth, and therfor sche ymagyned hyrselft the mostt soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, that was to be bowndyn hyr hed and hir fet to a stokke and hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe.” (B.M.K. 30)

(Shet imagined to herself what death she might die for Christ’s sake. She thought she would have liked to be slain for God’s love but feared the point of death, and therefore she imagined for herself the most the most easy death, as she thought, because she feared her lack of fortitude – and that was to be tied at her head and her feet to a stake, and her head to be struck off with a sharp axe, for the love of God.) (Windeat 65)

In relation to the Church, Margery does not use the liminal status of her religious experience in order to shock, but to point to a rather problematic, and even dangerous, issue of spiritual authority – this was a sensitive issue at the time of Lollard movement (Staley 102). Once again, Margery very skillfully exploits her liminal status of a woman and lay mystic within the male dominated, hierarchical institution of Church,
in order to point to problematic matters of the Church, and, above all, to achieve spiritual authority.

In much the same way Margery’s religious expression irritated the majority of her community, it irritated some members of clergy; therefore, due to her behaviour, it is of no surprise that she frequently clashed with the less congenial members of clergy. One of the re-emerging motifs of these clashes is the incompetence of male priestly office, generally actualized as a clash between boisterous religious expressions of Margery and her male spiritual guide, confessor or preacher; the outcome always challenges the competence of the medieval Church to encompass Margery Kempe’s religious expression, and consequently all emotion and subjectivity related to the affective piety (Staley 105). Thus, when a renowned Franciscan preacher orders Margery out of his sermon because ‘sche noyith the pepil’ (she annoyed the people) (B.M.K. 149), he is not only expelling the problematic Margery Kempe, but also the female, the subjective, and the emotional of the religion, moreover, as Lynn Staley points, he is in fact risking the banishment of the Holy Spirit residing in Margery as well (Staley 107).

Margery also raises the issue of many ecclesiastical figures whose devotion lacks the grandeur their authority abounds in. The household of Thomas Arundel, the archbishop of Canterbury, became the target of her criticism due to its similarity to aristocratic palaces and the profane ways of their inhabitants. Other members of clergy become positively hateful and malevolent towards Margery usually because of her disobedience of their commands. During such situations she stresses the typical female attributes of weakness and frailty encircled by male power and authority, furthermore, she shrewdly seasons such critical situations with mocking undercurrent:
“And also sche had many enmyis whech slawndryd hir, scornyd hir, and despysed hir, of whech o prest cam to hir whil sche was in the seyd Mynstyr and, takyng hir be the coler of the gowne, seyd, "Thu wolf, what is this cloth that thu hast on?" Sche stod stylle and not wolde answeryn in hir owyn cause.

Childer of the monastery goyng besyde seyd to the prest, "Ser, it is wulle." The prest was anoyed for sche wolde not answer and gan to sweryn many gret othis. Than sche gan to spekyn for Goddy's cause; sche was not aferd. Sche seyd, "Ser, ye schulde kepe the comawndmentys of God and not sweryn so necligently as ye do." The prest askyd hir hoo kept the comawndmentys. Sche seyd, "Ser, thei that kepyn hem." Than seyd he, "Kepyst thu hem?" Sche seyd ageyn, "Syr, it is my wille to kepyn hem, for I am bownde therto, and so ar ye and every man that wil be savyd at the last." Whan he had long jangelyd wyth hir, he went awey prevyly er sche was war, that sche wist not wher he becam.” (B.M.K. 120)

(And also she had many enemies who slandered her, scorned her, and despised her, of whom one priest came to her while she was in the said Minster, and taking her by the collar of her gown, said, ‘You wolf, what is this cloth that you have on?’

She stood still and would not answer in her own defence. Children of the monastery going past said to the priest, ‘Sir, it is wool.’

The priest was annoyed because she would not answer, and began to swear many great oaths. Then she began to speak for God’s cause – she was not afraid. She said, ‘Sir, you should keep the commandments of God, and not swear as negligently as you do.’

The priest asked her who kept the commandments.

She said, ‘Sir, they who keep them.’

Then he said, ‘Do you keep them?’

She replied, ‘Sir, it is my will to keep them, for I am bound to do so, and so are you and every man who will be saved at last.’

After he had wrangled with her for a long time, he slipped away before she noticed, so that she did not know where he went.) (Windeatt 158)

Margery’s proceedings in her quest for spiritual authority are very diplomatic, as she is tackling a sensitive issue of the impotence of male spiritual authority. She ensures her religious views and behaviour are confirmed as orthodox by prominent representatives of the Church, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Lincoln and after that she proceeds to convince the local religious representatives. When at
conversation with both the ecclesiastical dignitaries and local clergymen, she always first establishes her orthodoxy by enumerating her privileged supporters, and consequently recounts the conflicts triggered by her idiosyncratic religious expression. The majority of the conflicts deal with the spiritual authority Margery should be granted to interpret the private ‘dalliances’ she shares with Christ (Staley 108). While speaking with prominent religious figures she frequently expresses doubt about the divine inspiration of her religious experience, thus carefully navigating her chosen arbiters into words of consolation and encouragement.

Archbishop Arundel grants Margery the privilege to choose her own confessor according to her liking, who would be able to satisfy her demands for autonomy in their relationship; moreover, who would acknowledge her spiritual status of a holy woman. Margery’s need for a reliable confessor is one of her primary concerns and is based on one of her worst experiences of male religious incompetence:

“Wherfor, aftyr that hir chyld was born, sche, not trostying hir lyfe, sent for hir gostly fadyr, as ful wyl to be schrevyn of alle hir lyfetym as ner as sche cowde. And, whan sche cam to the poynft for to seyn that thing whech sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye and gan scharpely to undyrnymyn hir er than sche had fully seyd hir entent, and so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he myght do. And anoon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd with spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days.” (B.M.K. 7)

Therefore, after her child was born, she sent for her confessor, as said before, fully wishing to be shriven of her whole lifetime, as near as she could. And when she came to the point of saying 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 what she meant, and so she would say no more in spite of anything he might do. And soon after, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and his sharp reproving on the other, this creature went out of her mind and was
amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days. (Windeatt 41)

Her spiritual life had not even begun yet and Margery already perceived a true picture of the difference between the female/male dichotomies of religious experience; the feminine, the subjective, and the emotional, and the masculine, the objective, and the logical clash in the story of Margery’s confession (Staley 108). The man expected to provide Margery with spiritual consolation and sympathy utterly fails to read her behaviour, what is more, the restricting power of male authority is for Margery more frightening than damnation. Since this early miserable experience, Margery seeks only those religious guides who would be able to identify the divine inspiration in her feminine, emotional and subjective religious expression, and consequently grant her spiritual authority stemming from Margery’s exceptional relationship with Christ.

Handling the topic of ecclesiastical impotency, it is clear that Margery is aware of the thin ice she is skating on, but she fully lays the responsibility for her actions in Christ’s hands and consequently replaces male religious authority with that of God:

“… yyf thy knew, dowtyr, how meche thu plesyst me whan thu suffyrst me wilfully to spekyn in the, thu schuldist neyvr do otherwise, for this is an holy lyfe and the tyme is ryth wel spent. For, dowtyr, this lyfe plesyth me mor than weryng of the haburjon or of the hayr or fastyng of bred and watyr, for, yyf thou seydest every day a thowsand Pater Noster, thu schuldist not plesyn me so wel as thu dost whan thu art in silens and sufferyst me to speke in thy sowle.” (B.M.K. 89)

(‘… if you knew, daughter, how much you please me when you willingly allow me to speak in you, you would never do otherwise, for this is holy life and the time is very well spent. For, daughter, this life pleases me more than wearing the coat of mail for penance, or the hair-shirt, or fasting on bread and water; for if you said a thousand paternosters every day you would not please me as much as you do when you are in silence and allow me to speak in your soul.’) (Windeatt 125)
Several times throughout the Book Christ assures Margery that her private way of
worship is more significant and pleasing than all official ecclesiastical rituals. When
the Church officials make Margery’s foremost confessor Master Aleyn cease his
contacts with her in order to restrict her access to knowledge, Christ assures her that he
will multiply his ‘dalliance’ with her so that she does not lack spiritual edification.
Through preference of Margery’s private devotion and by substituting her spiritual
guide, Christ renders Margery a way around strictly male hierarchical access to God
and spiritual knowledge offered by the Church (Staley 113).

Margery’s absolute triumph over male spiritual authority is nowhere as explicit
as in the second part of the Book, during her last mentioned pilgrimage in Germany;
yet, she again deals with the problematic topic of authority with great caution. After
the deaths of her husband and son Margery’s daughter-in-law decides to return home
to Germany and Margery’s mind is stirred to accompany her to Germany, even though
she dreads the sea voyage. When she desires to ask leave from her confessor, Christ
commands her: “… I wyl that thu speke no word to hym of this mater” (B.M.K. 226),
however, Margery does ask her confessor for the permission to accompany her
daughter-in-law to Ipswich where she will board the ship. On their way to Ipswich
Margery has a recurrent feeling that she must travel to Germany, therefore she
becomes a focal point of the clash between the two authorities commanding her
devotion, Christ and her confessor:

“Lord, thu wost wel I have no leve of my gostly fadyr, and I am bowndyn to
obediens. Therfor I may not do thus wythowtyn hys wil and hys consentyng.” It
was answeryd ageyn to hir thowt, "I bydde the gon in my name, Jhesu, for I am
abovyn thy gostly fadyr and I schal excusyn the and ledyn the and bryngyn the
ageyn in safté”. (B.M.K. 227)
Naturally, Margery embarks on the pilgrimage according to Christ’s command, fully leaving all responsibility on Christ. However, having realized the unsettled position she is entering, she seeks out confirmation from a Franciscan, doctor of divinity, whom they meet en route, and the Franciscan assures Margery of the divine will working in her. If in this gesture of independence, Margery assumes autonomy from male religious authority; consequently, upon her arrival home from Germany she is finally able to assume spiritual authority in her own right.

Returning to England, Margery’s first steps lead to the abbey of Shene to acquire a pardon for her disobedience. There she finds out that her confessor denounced her. Nevertheless, Margery Kempe is not the frail, insecure and self-doubting mystical beginner any more. She has ‘dallied’ with Christ, Virgin Mary and numerous saints, has traveled half Europe as a pilgrim, has had prophetic visions as well as witnessed miracles, what is more, she dared to doubt the suitability of Christ’s command to travel to Germany; her spiritual authority and religious autonomy possess firm roots of direct, subjective, and emotional knowledge of the divine. Margery’s spiritual self-confidence reached almost radical form due to her liminal position; therefore, her confessor outraged by her disobedience and surpassing of ecclesiastical, male hierarchy poses no obstacle in her female spiritual way:

“Whan sche was come hom to Lynne, sche obeyd hir to hir confessowr. He gaf hir ful scharp wordys, for sche was hys obediercer and had takyn upon hir swech a jurné wythowtyn hys wetyng. Therfor he was mevyd the mor ageyn hir,
but our Lord halpe hir so that sche had as good love of hym and of other frendys afty as sche had befor, worshepyd be God. Amen.” (B.M.K. 247)

(When she came home from Lynn, she humbled herself obediently to her confessor. He gave her some sharp words, because she was under his obedience and had taken such a journey upon her without his knowing. Therefore he was all the angrier with her, but our Lord helped her so that she had as good love from him and other friends afterwards as she had before – God be worshipped. Amen.) (Windeatt 292)

The spiritual authority Margery Kempe acquires during her life originates in her exceptional relationship with the divine, Christ predominantly. Her liminal position stemming from her closeness to God, her being the mirror of the divine, allows her to point to the incompetence and impotence of strictly male, hierarchical Church to accommodate woman and the feminine, subjective, and emotional form of devotion. Margery demonstrates great mastery in the manipulation of the controversial topic of spiritual authority; her strategy is not only to exploit her liminal status of a woman and lay mystic but also to gain support of privileged supporters, who confirm her status of a clear mirror fully dictated by the divine.

**Conclusion**

This thesis ponders a late medieval woman mystic Margery Kempe in the context of her status as a divine mirror. *The Book of Margery Kempe* presents a unique devotional expression of lay medieval piety and the influence that the affective tradition had on the community. Strange as Margery’s devotion may appear, it was a genuine response to lay spiritual expression and to the tradition of holy women extending all over Europe; moreover, it was a consequence of centuries of development and instruction in piety. On the other hand Margery should not be perceived as a simple product of the tradition of affective piety. Her singular
devotional expression was deeply rooted in her extraordinary vocation and fully
dictated by the divine.

Initially, the thesis presents a general characterization of mysticism and mystical
experience. Furthermore, it has attempted to outline possible influences which
Margery’s idiosyncratic spiritual expression was shaped by: cultural and social
background of English late medieval community, the tradition of affective piety, and
the tradition of Continental holy women.

The thesis continues with a delineation of the symbolism of mirrors for religious
writers and thinkers. Mirrors represented an important intersection where the divine
and men meet, and the mirror attributes of reflection and imitation are deeply rooted in
religious medieval thinking. Moreover, mirror symbolism was invested with didactic
function in speculum literature. Consequently, recent semiotic theory of mirrors by
Umberto Eco provides the thesis with concepts of prosthesis and liminality, which
allow to approach the mirror of Margery Kempe in a novel way.

Imitation of Christ, *imitatio Christi*, is the principal aspect of Margery’s unique
spiritual expression. She discovers the opportunities of her weeping
body/mirror/prosthesis/ as a place of reflection of the divine, therefore an attempt at
communication, edification, and instruction. The analysis of two significant visions of
Christ’s Passion and Flagellation scene follows. Margery’s weeping body in her
*imitatio Christi* reflects the divine will and in mutual reflection reaches mystical union
with Christ. Moreover, Margery’s reflection on Christ’s body introduces a significant
medieval topic of Christ’s humanity and feminity. Consequently, continuous
recollection of Christ’s suffering humanity is discussed as another way of Margery’s
*imitatio Christi*. 

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The thesis then proceeds to the topic of liminality. Margery’s status of a mirror situates her in a liminal zone between the spiritual and everyday world. Social liminality is manifested in Margery’s family relations, eating and clothing practices. Her liminal position renders Margery a platform for criticism of the bigotry and hypocrisy of the community; furthermore, it allows Margery’s liberation from family ties and assumption of authority over her body.

Religious liminality is the last point of discussion of this thesis. Her religious liminality is grounded in her closeness to God, subjective response to the divine, emotionality, and feminity. The liminal position once again allows Margery to question the ability of male oriented, hierarchical church to accept and comprehend female form of devotion. Her deliberate withdrawal into the liminal zone also provides her with the access to spiritual authority.

Looking into the mirror of Margery Kempe this thesis caught a glimpse of a determined, spirited, and ambitious woman whose status as a mirror enabled her to acquire unprecedented autonomy, respect, and authority in the generally misogynist environment of the late Middle Ages.

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