MARGERY KEMPE AND THE DRAMATIC IMAGINATION: A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE IN RELATION TO THE MIDDLE ENGLISH CORPUS CHRISTI PLAYS

by

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ABSTRACT

Although medieval literary works are usually examined in relation to other literary sources, other art forms are also relevant in the understanding of literary texts. In a largely illiterate society the visual arts would have been especially significant, particularly medieval drama which was easily apprehended and retained in the memory. This thesis attempts to show how knowledge of the English Corpus Christi plays can illuminate the reader's understanding of both the life and the Book of Margery Kempe.

Used as an educational tool by the Church, the Corpus Christi plays not only reflected the events of the past, they also took a critical look at the moral and social life of society as it existed in the Middle Ages. The religious drama provides important evidence about Margery and the society she lived in, the development of her spirituality, and the nature of her devotional practices.

In Chapter One Margery is viewed in relation to the medieval attitudes towards women as they are reflected in the characterization of Noah's wife, in the Noah plays. In an

antifeminist society, where all women are considered corruptible and disobedient, Mrs. Noah is depicted as the typical female shrew, the label given to any woman threatening the established order of society through a show of independence. Unlike Mrs. Noah whose "rebellious" activity is curbed at the end of each play, Margery's spirit of independence exists both before and after her religious conversion, disturbing religious and laypersons alike. By comparing the behaviour of both Margery and Mrs. Noah, and the reactions each receives, it is possible to show how Margery is able to use the medieval system against itself in order to achieve and maintain a measure of personal independence not usually afforded to women in her time.

Chapter Two discusses two aspects of Margery's spiritual growth: 1) the various influences on Margery which increased her sense of dramatic awareness and participation in her meditations, and 2) the importance of visual stimuli to Margery. The spiritual influences Margery would have encountered included the Franciscan teachings on meditation, and the revelations of various female mystics and visionaries, including those of Saint Bridget of Sweden. The religious drama, however, provided Margery with an effective visual influence, particularly in the characterization of figures like the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, who were role

models for Margery and who, through their shared womanhood, brought Margery closer to Christ.

In Chapter Three the importance of the Passion to medieval Christians is discussed in relation to Margery's own meditations on the Passion. In this section the Corpus Christi Passion sequences are used to explain Margery's heightened awareness of, and devotion to, the Passion, and illustrate Margery's use of the dramas as a direct source for her own meditations.

In the Conclusion, it is suggested that the dramatic qualities which existed in and influenced Margery's life allowed her to live a life essentially of her own making. Like the Corpus Christi plays, Margery could blend the past with the present, fantasy with reality, and reconcile her secular life with her religious vocation. With her active imagination and heightened sense of the dramatic, Margery is able to move back and forth between her daily, physical activities and her all-consuming spiritual meditations while continuing to live in a society which never ceased trying to govern her life for her.

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INTRODUCTION

More often than not medieval literary works are examined in relation to other literary sources. The first English autobiography, The Book of Margery Kempe (c.1373 - c.1440), is no exception and Margery's knowledge of texts such as Hilton's Scale of Perfection, Bonaventura's Stimulus Amoris, Rolle's Meditations on the Passion, and St. Bridget's Revelations is evident throughout her Book. However, the influence of other arts on a literary text can also be significant. In the Book of Margery Kempe, knowledge of medieval drama, as a form of oral literacy,[1] plays an important role.[2] The English Mystery, or Corpus Christi, plays provide important evidence about Margery and the society she lived in, the development of her spirituality, and the nature of her devotional practices. The plays illuminate medieval social expectations of women, along with Margery's own view of herself and others' views of her; they illuminate the heightened participatory and dramatic nature of Margery's meditations--the bringing to life of religious experience in her imagination; and they serve as direct sources for scenes in Margery's visions.

Religious drama, as a "medieval institution"--which came about like many similar institutions, through medieval man's

"adherence to a genuine conservatism sustained by obedience and the willing acceptance of subordination" (Haden 17), regarding both social and sexual roles--was an educational tool used by the Church to reach its largely illiterate flock. The Corpus Christi plays depicted the entire Christian history of the world and were, suggests V. A. Kolve, primarily concerned with "the ways God has allowed Himself to be known 'in time'" (3), and with enhancing "the emotional richness and depth of man's existence as a creature under God" (4). In order to elicit a greater emotional response, the plays combined realistic details with elaborate spectacle (Haden 19). The resulting images in the "living books," or "speaking pictures," of the plays, Rosemary Woolf notes, were "better retained in the memory" and "more vividly apprehended" than any other art form (91). The communal experience of the dramas was enhanced by direct audience participation. At times, actors would address the audience from the stage, or draw the audience into the action by intermingling with them while a play was in progress (Haden 24-5). More important was the plays' use of topical allusions, costumes and settings to establish a time and place reflecting the audiences' own world.

For Kolve, the localizing of place is understood as

> part of the drama's interest in addressing its particular English audiences in their particular moment in time, in holding up to them a mirror of their own society and its moral nature. (113)

Thus, the plays of the Corpus Christi cycle dramas--the York, Towneley, Chester, and Ludus Coventriae--were concerned with more than relating the events of the past, or simply reflecting medieval life; they also, suggests Kolve, furnished "a critical image of moral and social life as lived in the later Middle Ages" (104).

That the Corpus Christi plays aimed to improve one's moral, as well as spiritual well-being is not surprising considering who actually staged the plays. The performing of the plays was left to the various guilds of England which were well-established by the fourteenth century. According to A. M. Kinghorn, these guilds were of religious origin; they developed civic functions, which included the running of local government; they were municipally oriented, building schools, churches and hospitals; and their membership included representatives of the newly-developed bourgeois class (67). These men exercised strict control over every aspect of staging the plays (Kinghorn 69). Evidently, Margery's father, John Brunham, five times Mayor of Lynn and several times member of parliament, was a member of the

Corpus Christi guild of Lynn, as was Margery's husband, John Kempe (Bennett 125-6).[3]

Since her father and husband were members of an influential guild which supported the plays, and since the Corpus Christi dramas "were performed every year in virtually every major English town" between 1335 and 1600 (Campbell 128), it is very likely that Margery was a captive member of the audience at, if not an active participant in, the plays several times throughout her life. According to A. H. Nelson in The Medieval English Stage, Margery's hometown, King's Lynn, "was the center of much dramatic and non-dramatic entertainment"--in 1385, when Margery was about twelve years old, Lynn chamberlains paid 3s 4d to various players for two interludes performed on Corpus Christi day, and in 1409/10 the Lady de Beaufort reportedly arrived in Lynn to see a play (190-1). In nearby Norwich, "at least twelve [plays] were regularly performed by various guilds...in the late fourteenth-century, including The Creation of the World, by the Mercers and Drapers, and The Resurrection, by the Butchers and Fishmongers" (qtd. in Atkinson 95). The latter play would be especially relevant to Margery's own meditations concerning the resurrection. The fact that Margery travelled extensively throughout England and abroad also makes it likely that she encountered the Corpus Christi

plays at some point. For instance, on Corpus Christi Day in 1413, 1415 and 1417, Margery was in York, Norwich or Lynn, and Bristol respectively; she would hardly have ignored the fact that Corpus Christi celebrations were going on around her.

Like all other medieval Christians, Margery learned her faith and social duties through images, especially those found in the medieval religious dramas. The imagery of her meditations reflect not only what she heard, but what she saw as well. Margery's Book itself attests to the impact of visual imagery. According to Wallace, "Margery thinks in pictures, thinks of pictures and thinks from picture to picture," because pictures are "malleable, compliant to imaginative elaboration" (184). For an illiterate person this would be particularly significant. The concept "picture," however, can be extended further to include the word "scene," for Margery often thought in terms of complete scenes, be it the Nativity or the events of the Passion. The plays would have been a more powerful stimulus than still images by being "living scenes," complete with movement and sound.

Notably, the progression of such scenes as they occur within the drama closely resembles the progression of Margery's own thoughts and meditations as they occur in her Book. Just as playgoers did not necessarily view the

Christian story in order from Creation to Judgement Day, but could instead, because of the nature of the staging,[4] turn their attention randomly from one play to any of the others, Margery, too, relates her thoughts in a non-linear fashion. Thus, for Margery, and any other medieval thinker, there was nothing inconsistent about contemplating the Crucifixion before the Nativity, or the Resurrection before the Last Supper.

This thesis addresses three different ways in which the Corpus Christi plays illuminate the Book of Margery Kempe. First, the characterization of Mrs. Noah in the Flood plays provides important evidence about medieval expectations of women--especially those in keeping with the traditional anti-feminist image expounded by clerics--as well as Margery's own behavior in relation to such expectations, both before and after her conversion. Second, the dramatic and participatory aspects associated with drama are evident in Margery's own spiritual practices, particularly in the imaginative dramatization of her meditations, and especially in her identification with, and characterization of, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene. And third, the Passion plays can be shown to be a direct source of influence on Margery's meditations, providing detailed scenes with both biblical and non-biblical elements for Margery to draw from, and emphasizing the

events, actions, and emotions of the people around Christ, in addition to stressing Christ's humanity.

CHAPTER ONE MRS. NOAH AND MARGERY KEMPE

Much can be learned about Margery Kempe and the society which she lived in by viewing her in relation to the medieval attitudes towards women as they are reflected in the Corpus Christi plays, attitudes especially evident in the comic figure of Mrs. Noah in the Noah, or Deluge, plays. Once we have examined the behavior of both Mrs. Noah and Margery, it becomes clear why Margery evokes such strong reactions in her peers. Neither woman actually subscribes to the accepted social behavior expected of her. Instead, both women fulfill social expectations which cast them as stereotypes of the typical female shrew--the label given to any woman who threatened the established order of medieval society through her "disobedience", or independence. Although the disobedient wife was used on stage to provide comic relief, her very presence suggests the social tensions mirrored in The Book of Margery Kempe.

Essentially, there were two traditional views concerning marital relations in medieval times, one negative, the other positive. According to the social historian, Barbara A. Hanawalt, the negative view was based on the notion of war between the sexes (206). This view, which can be applied to the situation between Noah and his wife as represented in the

plays, assumes that women "bring to battle their abilities to intimidate and manipulate men through scolding, crying and withholding sexual favours," and that husbands have wife-beating as their only recourse (Hanawalt 206). Any depiction of role-reversal, or husband-beating, suggests Hanawalt, was "meant for good fun rather than instruction" (206).

The positive view of marriage, and the one couples were supposed to live out, presumes a relationship ruled by good judgment and mutual respect. In such a relationship, explains Hanawalt, it is the man's responsibility to cherish his wife and "correct her faults with fairness and gentleness," and not anger her or burden her, "or call her bad names" (206). In turn, the woman is to be "meek, courteous and wise;" she is to "love and honour her husband above all things;" she is to be cheerful, faithful, and respectable in public; "and, finally, she should be able to manage the household tasks and servants with good order and firmness" (Hanawalt 206).

In view of such criteria it not difficult to see why Margery Kempe's behavior would make her unpopular with her peers both before and after her conversion. Margery's contemporaries were not bothered by the fact that she had her own brewing business or owned her own horse-mill, since in her time it was possible for middle class women to run businesses, belong to guilds and enjoy "legal independence

and substantial financial resources" outside of their families (Atkinson 97). What did upset people was the fact that Margery neglected the two areas traditionally assigned to the wife: "the daily running of the household and raising and training the next generation" (Hanawalt 141). It was not acceptable for the daughter of a key citizen of Lynn, or the wife of an honourable man, or the mother of fourteen children with a houseful of servants, to be acting the way Margery did.

Prior to her conversion it was considered irresponsible of Margery to be so greedy, vain and conceited, only concerned with worldly trappings. At this point she is depicted as the typical "proud female," often described in priests' handbooks. She would wear bright, fashionably "slashed" clothing so "þat it schuld be þe mor staryng to mennys sygth and hir-self þe mor ben worshepd" (Meech & Allen 9).[5] She envied anyone dressed as well as herself, and "Alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of þe pepul" (9). She even took up brewing "for pure coveytyse & for to maynten hir pride" (9).[6] When her husband urges her to leave her showy manner of dressing and proud ways, Margery declares that she has married beneath her (note the word "schrewydly" is actually used here):

> sche answeryd schrewydly & schortly & seyd þat sche was comyn of worthy kenred,--hem semyd neuyr for to a weddyd hir, for hir fadyr was sum-tyme meyr of þe town N. and sythyn he was alderman of þe hey Gylde of þe Trinyte in N. And þerfor sche wold sauyn þe worschyp of hir kynred what-so-euyr ony man seyd. (9)

Margery was no more popular after her conversion. It was considered just as irresponsible and selfish of her to be going to church every day from two in the morning until noon or later, and to be going on pilgrimages which could keep her away from home up to eighteen months at a time, instead of minding her family and household. As far as the citizens of Lynn were concerned, after twenty years of putting up with Margery's antisocial behavior, she was "an old and boring joke," someone who had squandered all her money, had sunk down low on the social scale, and had been the ruin of her family (Collis 176). Margery was even blamed for her husband's fall down a flight of stairs. At the time of his fall, when John was over 60 years old, the Kempes were living in separate residences, having taken a vow of chastity several years earlier and desiring to avoid all risks in keeping the vow. Therefore, because Margery was not where she <u>should</u> have been if she was a <u>proper</u> wife, "pepyl seyd, ȝuf [John] deyd, hys wyfe was worthy to ben hangyn for hys deth, for-as-meche as sche myth a kept hym and dede not" (179). This seems a somewhat harsh attack, considering that the

Kempes were living apart because these same people had vehemently expressed their disbelief in the Kempes' ability to live chastely together.

If one turns to the Corpus Christi plays concerning the Flood and the character of Mrs. Noah, such negative feelings towards Margery can be further illuminated and explained. In the Flood plays Noah, the only obedient man left on earth, is instructed by God to build an Ark. Noah's willing obedience to God is evident in his reactions to God's command. Even though the work is difficult for a man of his age--"sich an old dote,/All dold,/To begyn sich a wark!"(ll. 265-7)--the Towneley Noah conscientiously carries out God's plan. The York Noah, also "full olde and oute of qwarte," declares his loyalty to God when he says, "A! lorde, þi wille sall euer be wrought"--a statement which "is impressive and fittingly forms a moral climax to the play" (Woolf 134). Just as impressive are Noah's sons and their wives who are "models of godly rectitude and obedience" (Beadle & King 21), particularly in the York cycle. And then there is Mrs. Noah.

Although the biblical version of Noah and his Ark simply states that Noah had a wife and married sons, medieval playwrights expanded the role of the wife of such an important man. Moreover, they gave Chaucer reason to bemoan "The sorwe of Noe with his felawshipe,/Er that he myght get

his wyf to shipe" (MilT ll. 3539-3540), for Mrs. Noah would become an "ancestor of the many querulous shrews" in literature (Kinghorn 82), including Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

As a rebellious, obstinate woman, Mrs. Noah's disobedience contrasts with her husband's willing submission to God. Even before the Towneley Noah tells her his important news she interrupts with, "Bot thou were worthi be cled in Stafford blew,/For thou art alway adred, be it fals or trew" (ll. 200-1). In her reluctance to enter the Ark Mrs. Noah becomes "the recalcitrant sinner...who refuses to repent and enter the Church" (Woolf 136). Subsequently, her character undergoes an abrupt transformation once she boards the Ark, becoming meek and submissive. In the Towneley cycle, the 'new' Mrs. Noah's first words are, "I se on the firmament,/Me thynk, the seven starnes" (ll. 422-3), which calls to mind Noah's earlier words as he observed the increasing chaos and disorder--"And the planettys seuen left has thare stall" (l. 345). In the York cycle, Mrs. Noah praises the God whose will she has recently resisted--"Loved be that Lord that giffes all grace,/ That kyndly þus oure care wolde kele" (ll. 196-7).

Medieval audiences would have understood the theological messages inherent in Mrs. Noah's behaviour, and they would have enjoyed the humour and action she brought to the play as

she carried out her dramatic function of providing "a raucous comedy of relief" (Atkinson 97). More importantly, they would have recognized the proposition typified by Noah's wife, that women "are greedy, deceiving, disobedient, angry and evil-tongued" (Woolf 139).[7] Noah, himself, characterizes his wife as such:

> For she is full tethee,
> For litell oft angre,
> Of any thyng wrang be,
> Soyne is she wroth. (Towneley ll. 186-9)

Thus, in attempting to rule her husband, Mrs. Noah became "the root form of the shrewish wife, and her relationship with Noah became the archetype of everyday marital infelicity" (Kolve 146). The Noahs, as children of Adam and Eve, are "the offspring of that initial mistake in marital 'maistrye'," which resulted in God setting the "theological norm for marriage"(Kolve 148). God says to Eve in the Chester Creation play:

> And for thou hast done so to daye,
> the man shall mayster thee alwaye,
> and vnder his power thou shalt be aye,
> thee for to drive and deere. (ll. 317-320)

Another "Eve" who is supposed to typify female disobedience, thereby repeating the pattern of the Fall, is the York Mrs. Noah. She never gives her husband the respect he deserves:

> Trowes þou þat I wol leue þe harde lande,
> And tourne vp here on toure deraye?
> Nay, Noye, I am noust bowne
> to fonde nowe ouer þere ffellis.
> Doo barnes, goo we and trusse to towne. (ll. 77-81)

She even dismisses his Ark-building venture with the words, "In faythe, þou were als goode come downe/And go do somwhat ellis" (ll. 83-4), and with this tart speech:

> Now Noye, in faythe þe fonnes full faste,
> This fare wille I no lenger frayne,
> Þou arte near woode, I am agaste,
> Fare-wele, I wille go home agayne. (ll. 89-92)

When Noah explains to her that it is God's will that she be kept in the dark about his activities, and left sitting at home "To loke þat nowhere were wele aboutte" (l. 116), Mrs. Noah becomes even more indignant--"What? wenys þou so for to go witte?/Nay, be my trouthe, þou getis a clowte" (ll. 119-20). How dare he not consult her--"Thow shulde haue witte my wille,/Yf I wold sente þere tille" (ll. 123-4). Even in the Chester Noah, where the comedy is under more control (Happe 118), the ever-obedient Noah is compelled to say, "Lord, that women be crabbed aye,/And never are meke, that dare I saye" (ll. 105-6). He goes on to implore his wife to "let be all this beere"(l. 109) before everyone thinks she rules the roost--"for all they wene thou art master" (l. 111).

However, despite attempts to dominate her husband, Mrs. Noah remains "typically" female, reinforcing medieval notions which suggest women are generally inferior and corruptible.

One cannot help but suspect the Chester Mrs. Noah's (or the playwright's) motives when she says, "women be weake to vnderfoe/Any great travayle" (ll. 67-8), and agrees to help build the Ark, but only by carrying timber, because women "mon nothing els doe" (l. 66). Although her submissiveness may have some theological significance at this point in the play, this is still the same woman who gives her husband an ultimatum before getting on the Ark; she is not going anywhere without her gossips--"but thou will let them in thy chist,/Els row forth, Noe, whether thou list,/and get thee a new wife" (ll. 206-8).

Although there is no evidence of Margery treating John Kempe with so much cunning,[8] one can imagine Margery listening carefully to the Towneley Mrs. Noah's advice to wives on how to handle their husbands:

> We women may wary all ill husbandys;
> I haue oone, bi Mary! That lowsyd me
> of my bandys;
> If he teyn, I must tary, however so
> it standys,
> With seymland to be full sory, wrygand
> both my handys
> For drede.
> Bot yit other while,
> What with gam and gyle,
> I shall smyte and smyle
> And qwite hym his mede. (ll. 208-216)

Not surprisingly, Noah counters with his own advice to husbands--"Yee men that has wifys, whyls thay ar yong,/If ye luf youre lifys, chastice thare tong"(ll. 397-8).

Somehow it is predictable that, where "malicious, shrewish" wives and suffering husbands are concerned, it is usually the latter who, in the battle of the sexes, is awarded the victory. Mrs. Noah's "rebellion" is doomed from the start; the prescribed domestic order must be restored, "the seven starnes" returned to their proper places. Medieval audiences watching the battling Noah's would have understood that the disorder Mrs. Noah causes is a direct result of a disruption within the universal hierarchy, where God ruled men and men ruled women. The sin and chaos experienced from an interrupted hierarchical order is, according to Atkinson, "ultimately tragic," but could be experienced "for relief," as wildly comic (97). For Atkinson, the Flood plays would have been successful because "the reaction of the audience arose in part from the gulf between their belief in order and the chaos of the play, and perhaps from related discrepancies in their own lives" (97). Margery, too, would disrupt the hierarchical order; however, her behavior would be considered far from "wildly comic."

Despite their attempts to pass Margery off as the town's "eccentric," as someone to "kest a bolful of watyr on" (137)

when the urge struck, the people took Margery much more seriously than they would admit; she was a threat to established institutions. The Mayor of Leicester voices what all husbands fear when he says to Margery, "I trowe þow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us"(116). The men of Beverley are a little kinder to Margery, but are saying the same thing when they say to her, "Damsel, forsake þis lyfe þat þu hast, & go spunne & carde as oþer women don" (129). Finally, the fears of men are brought out in the form of formal charges against Margery, which claim she advised the Lady Greystoke--"þat is a barownys wyfe & dowtyr to my Lady of Westmorlonde" (133)--"to forsakyn" her husband. While Mrs. Noah's rebellious behavior is comic, and harmless, since the audience knows proper order will be re-established by the end of the play, Margery's behavior is not. Margery's lifestyle is outside the range of those accepted by the society she lives in.

To make matters worse, Margery's behavior from a religious point of view was equally unacceptable. After her conversion she becomes even more disagreeable by her continual moralizing and "emphasis on the special signs of favour shown her by God" (Collis 18). Margery translates this "favour" into permission from God to freely "reprove sinners, exhort [others] to virtue, explain the scriptures and exhibit

the most extravagant piety" (Collis 44). Since her conversion occurs at the height of fears of Lollardy and insurrection, she is often in trouble with the authorities who are all too willing to suspect someone of being a heretic or Lollard, and therefore, "suspicious of anyone wandering around and appearing to deliver orations, addresses, harangues, or sermons without proper licence from the Church" (Collis 178). It did not help that someone already thought to be spreading dangerous ideas, was also known for being outspoken and apt to scorn even religious men, especially if she caught them swearing. Margery is constantly accused of being a "fals ypocryte," "fals lollare," "fals strumpet," and in general "a fals deceyuer of þe pepyl."

It is an anchorite who actually voices why people react so negatively to all of Margery's good intentions. When Margery complains to the anchorite that her confessor is "ryght scharp" with her and does not take her seriously--"He wyl not levyn me felyngys; he settyth nowt by hem; he heldyth hem but tryfelys and japys" (44)--the anchorite replys,

> It is no wondyr, dowtyr, yf he kan nowt beleuyn in ȝowr felyngys so sone. He knowyth wel ȝe han ben a synful woman, & þerfor he wenyth þat God wold not ben homly wyth ȝow in so schort tyme. (44)

Margery's peers, like most of the critics of the Book of Margery Kempe, refused to believe that Margery could actually

change--and by medieval social standards she does not--so they contented themselves by abusing her when she became too annoying, and by feeling justified in saying she had no business subjecting herself and her husband "to such hardship and notoriety" (Collis 18). As a married woman who was effectively separated from her husband, and who strove to lead an active and devout life outside of a convent, Margery was a threat to a society comfortable with, and intent on, living by its already-established norms.

This is not to say that there was not a medieval tradition of pious women who were wives and mothers. However, as Susan Dickman points out, such women usually "tried to realize their spiritual aspirations within the context of family life" (157), and not on overseas pilgrimages, like Margery.[9] Dickman quotes St. Frances, "a spiritual sister" of Margery's, who reportedly said, "It is most laudable in a married woman to be devout,...but she must never forget she is a housewife" (157). And, although pious wives did exist, they were something of a problem because their existence radically challenged established traditions through the "recognition of the diversity of individual effort, the breakdown of old institutional forms, and the establishment of personal experience in their place" (Dickman 157). Gone were the simple days when pious women just entered nunneries.

Margery, as an individual with her own ideas of what it meant to serve God, was destined to fall out of step with the tight-knit, dependent society she lived in. Instead, she would look to the more advanced European society to find religious models to follow.

Nevertheless, however outrageous or eccentric their behavior, both Margery and Mrs. Noah are still products of medieval society (literally in Mrs. Noah's case). As such, their stories reflect certain attitudes firmly entrenched in the medieval culture: preoccupation with money, women as property, wifely obedience, men as victims, and the use of ridicule to counter fear.

To begin with, it is appropriate for Mrs. Noah to be concerned with money, both in her role as a shrew and as a member of middle class medieval society, where women were allowed to be financially independent. The York Mrs. Noah questions her husband about how much his latest venture is costing them, only to be reassured that it is not costing her anything--"Now, dame, þe thar noȝt drede adele/For till accounte it cost þe noght" (ll. 131-2).

Margery, too, is one who is "constantly aware of the 'cash nexus'; it pervades her consciousness as it pervaded her world, part of every human endeavour and confrontation" (Delaney 86). Everyone around her, particularly the bourgeois

class, is money conscious, including the Archbishop of York who negotiates the fee for Margery's escort. Sheila Delaney notes that Margery takes pains to register, with "account-book scrupulosity,...every gift, whether alms, cloth for a dress, or payment for her stories," and every expenditure related to her pilgrimages (86). Furthermore, Margery's awareness of money is usually accompanied with anxiety. Throughout her Book she expresses her fear of losing her money or goods, as well as her fear of being unable to provide for herself. This anxiety reflects not only Margery's personal experience of business failure, but also that of her class, "whose fortunes depended on speculation and investment and were therefore always subject to loss" (Delaney 87). Even Margery's vow of chastity is, in effect, bought when she first agrees to pay her husband's debts, and attests to Margery's own state of financial independence.

Related to such economic concerns is the notion of women as property; as a medieval woman Margery is considered the property of first her father and then her husband. Although she can be a property-owner, businesswoman, and guild-member, "she is not free to dispose of her person" (Delaney 88). She needs permission from her husband to live chastely and to go on pilgrimages; she needs permission from Church authorities

to go to communion frequently, wear white clothing, and travel to religious places even within her own country.

Inherent in the necessity of obtaining consent is the notion that women will obey the wishes expressed by their husbands, fathers and the Church. When Mrs. Noah questions the nature of her husband's (and God's) work, Noah can only conclude that his wife has gone mad--"O!, woman, arte þou woode?/Of my werkis þou not wotte" (York ll. 93-4). Margery is also thought to be "affected," rather than exercising her independence, when she challenges male authority. When she is ordered to leave off her distracting habit of weeping, and does not, it is assumed that she is being insincerely devout, or else is being tormented by an illness or wicked spirit. When a priest feels she is challenging his authority he becomes angry with her and says, "Nowe wote I wel þat þu hast a deuyl wyth-inne þe, for I her hym spekyn in þe to me" (85).

In addition to reflecting the importance of money, and the emphasis on women being obedient, in medieval society, both the Flood plays and the Book of Margery Kempe stress the sympathetic treatment granted medieval men, husbands in particular. Significantly, both Noah and John Kempe are characterized in the same manner: quiet, easy-going men victimized by their wives--a literary convention used elsewhere in medieval literature. Noah, the "sole just man,"

a harmless old man, has no option but to defend himself against his wife's harsh words and blows. After all, he is only going about God's business, not disturbing anyone, and certainly not giving his wife cause to wish him dead. But she does:

> Lord, I were at ese, and hertely ful hoylle,
> Might I onys have a measse of wedows coyll;
> For thi saull, without lese, schuld I dele
> penny doyll;
> So wold mo, no frese, that I se on this sole
> Of wifis that ar here,
> For the life that thay leyd,
> Wolde thare husbandis were dede,
> For, as ever ete I brede,
> So wold I oure syre were. (Towneley 11.388-96)

While Mrs. Noah longed for the independence associated with widowhood, Margery longed for the freedom to live a devout and chaste life. She, too, would see her husband harmed if it ensured her own religious freedom or if it meant she could avoid paying the "abhominabyl" debt of matrimony. When John Kempe asks his wife:

> yf her come a man wyth a swerd & wold smyte of myn hed les þan I schulde comown kendly wyth ȝow as I haue do be-for,...wold ȝe suffyr myn hed to be smet of er ellys suffyr me to medele wyth ȝow a-ȝen as I dede sum-tyme? (23).

Margery replies confidently, yet "wyth gret sorwe," that she would rather see her husband "be slayn" (23).

Although in religious terms Margery's answer may be commendable, she nonetheless seems unfeeling, especially when

she earlier states that her husband was "euyr hauyng tendyrnes & compassyon of hir" (8). As Collis suggests, John Kempe was, "a mild, devoted and unassertive man" (17). Like Noah, he was "content wyth þe goodys þat God had sent" (Meech and Allen 9). In short, John Kempe was another Noah, another "just man," who chose to accompany Margery on several of her spiritual wanderings when it was evident he did not share his wife's religious zeal, and that he could have forbidden her to go.

Margery, however, did go on her pilgrimages and the reactions she incited in her fellow pilgrims, and others she met in her journeying, illustrate yet another conventional practice, that of using ridicule against those whose behavior poses a threat to others. Margery's behavior made her the object of much ridicule. At one point, her fellow pilgrims, frustrated with, and resentful of, "the woman who attracted attention, who won the favour of powerful persons, and who claimed privileged relations with God" (Atkinson 100), turned Margery into a comic spectacle. They "dedyn hir mech shame & mech reprefe," by cutting her gown "so schort þat it came but lytil be-nethyn hir kne," and making her wear "a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle, for sche xuld ben heldyn a fool & þe pepyl xuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon" (62).

Another instance of Margery being mocked occurs during her travels to Rome where a group of Roman wives gather around her "into a scornful circle" (Weissman 216). According to H. P. Weissman, this not only testifies to the world's "resistance to the violation of its categories" (216), it also indicates that the desire to break out of such categories exists. For Weissman, the gathering around Margery is "a gathering of women held in subjection;" their scorn is "the resentment of colluders in the system at another's attempt to escape the bonds with which they have been bound" (216). They are jealous of Margery who is able to leave behind home, and family, and social obligations, to follow the urgings of her heart.

While the ridicule used against Margery is vindictive and even desperate, the ridicule used in the Flood plays is more comic in nature. The playwrights, Atkinson suggests, recognized that ridicule in the Flood plays was "an effective weapon against the threat of being 'beaten' by a woman" (100). The men could safely laugh at the Noahs' antics, while reassuring themselves that <u>their</u> wives would never get away with such behaviour. In turn, the women in the audience could get satisfaction by seeing a husband get what he deserved, while convincing themselves that they would <u>never</u> take part

in such scandalous behavior. It was easier to laugh at others' misfortunes than to try to change one's own.

Margery, however, was willing to change her own situation. With a role model like Mrs. Noah, who was able to display a high-spirited independence, if only until the time of her conversion, Margery was encouraged to make her own bid for independence.[10] Unlike Mrs. Noah who was a fictional character, and thus easily manipulated to fit into the prevailing "mold" created for women, Margery was able to use the system--which already "expected" her to be rebellious and disobedient--against itself in order to achieve and maintain a measure of personal independence not usually afforded to women in her time. More importantly, she attained a religious freedom which enabled her to dedicate herself solely to the devotion of Christ and his Mother.

CHAPTER TWO MARGERY KEMPE'S SPIRITUALITY

In turning to religion Margery is, according to Delaney, using "the system against the system--[finding] a way to leave home, travel, establish a name for herself, and meanwhile remain both chaste and respectable" (91). For A. E. Goodman, religion "carried to extremes of perfection" allowed Margery to assuage "her guilt at failing the conventional expectations of her father, husband and kinfolk" (353). Whatever the reason for her "entry[n]g þe way whech wold leden hir to þe place þat sche most desyred" (13), Margery's spiritual life is just as interesting as her secular one, if not more so.

I Spiritual Influences

During Margery's time the focus of religious passion was on the concrete and tangible. Emphasis was placed on the cult of relics and the devotion to the Holy Places, "where the sites of Christ's earthly life could be seen, touched and even measured" (Atkinson 94). Where meditation was concerned, people were encouraged to imagine themselves actively participating in the events of Christ's life. Margery herself is able to apply this dramatic element to her meditations with great success. As Wallace points out, the "imaginative

movement" of Margery's meditations from scene to scene markedly "acknowledges no boundaries between present and past, actuality and fantasy, life and art" (184). Ironically, Denise Despres notes, modern readers tend to discredit Margery's meditations because of the fact that they contain "dramatic scenes and dialogues that we associate with fiction" (12).

In actual fact, Margery would have come under the influence of many sources in her daily life which would have stressed the use of imaginative dramatization as an integral part of one's devotional practices. Such influences would have included the Franciscan teachings on meditation, the revelations of various female mystics and visionaries (among whom those of St. Bridget of Sweden are particularly important). Perhaps equally important, however, were the Corpus Christi plays.

To begin with, the Franciscans developed a form of meditation which "encouraged imaginative participation and embellishment of sacred texts and scriptural narrative to mesh personal history with salvation history" (Despres 13). According to Kolve, the Franciscan influence was revolutionary:

> Men were taught that by feeling--by the experiencing of pity, grief and love of Mary and Christ in their human roles--they could best come to an understanding of the Godhead, to a true awareness of the price of their salvation, and to an adequate sorrow for their own sin. (4)

Despite the "fictional nature of such visions," the Meditations on the Life of Christ--a Franciscan work written for a Poor Clare, outlining a daily program of meditation--urges one "to seek the richest spiritual experience, even at the expense of historical veracity" (Despres 15).

Not surprisingly, the Franciscans, or Grey Friars, whom Margery encounters tend to be delighted with her. One Friar Minor is so impressed with her account of her lifestyle, feelings and revelations that he says he has never heard of anyone "for to be so homly wyth God be lofe & homly dalyawnce as sche was" (79). Like everyone else, Margery has been taught that visual meditation "and extemporaneous creation of sacred scenes" would lead her "to the threshold of a more immediate spiritual realm than hitherto permitted to laypeople" (Despres 15). Margery was encouraged to be on "homely" terms with God.

In addition to the Franciscan elements of Margery's spirituality, there were mystical aspects as well. In this area, too, the criticism of Margery's overly-dramatic descriptions of "her divine dialogues and visions" can be

countered with the observation that "women ecstatics are invariably more imaginative, colourful, sensuous and descriptive" (Lagorio 40). E. A. Petroff notes that it is women who are the visionaries:

> How...is an uneducated woman, who does not know how to write and may at best have a few books read to her, going to communicate her intuitions? Visions provide the language, the discourse, that gave her an audience. (qtd. in Lagorio 40)

One can almost imagine that Petroff is describing Margery specifically, especially when "ful worthy clerkis" of York make the same observation, rejoicing in the Lord "þat had ȝouyn hir not lettryd witte & wisdom to answeryn so many lernyd men wyth-owtyn velani or blame" (128).

Another characteristic which Margery shares with female mystics is her intimate relationship with Christ. Shortly after her "spiritual" marriage to the Godhead, Margery is told by Christ that they will henceforth be intimate with one another:

> þu mayst boldly, whan þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þi weddyd husbond....& þerfor þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi sowle & kyssen my mouth, myn head, & my fete as swetly as thou wylt. (90)

Evidently Margery has experienced the mystical phenomenon of "Brautmystik": "the divine, erotic love affair between Christ

and the soul, leading to spiritual espousal and marriage" (Lagorio 40). Related to this idea is the term "dalliance," a word used often by Margery, and which connotes, in addition to its usual sexual overtones, "the mystical immersion in the Passion of Christ, mystical contemplation, God's communion with [a mystic] and mystical ecstasy" (qtd. in Lagorio 41). Notably it is Christ who uses the lover-like terminology in Margery's visions, and not Margery herself. This suggests that Margery was not as comfortable as she imagined Christ to be, with the highest sanction of intimacy Christ offered her.

Another "intimate" of Christ's was Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), a "Bride of Christ" who was an especially powerful role model for Margery. Like Margery, Bridget was a wife and mother who found her thoughts turning increasingly to God. After the death of her husband in 1343 she "devoted herself to the life of a visionary, pilgrim and foundress of a new order of nuns" (Windeatt 18). The fact that Bridget was a married mystic who underwent the transition from wife to Bride of Christ, and who allowed her visions to direct her life (particularly in denouncing abuses) reaffirmed Margery's own life and experiences. Christ even says as much to Margery:

> For I telle þe forsoþe rygth as I spak to Seynt Bryde ryte so I speke to þe, dowtyr, & I telle þe trewly it is trewe euery word þat is wretyn in Brides boke, & be þe it xal be knowyn for very trewth. (47)

With such vivid traditions to draw from, such as the visions of the Franciscans and women mystics of Margery's time, particularly Bridget of Sweden, it is possible to see how the medieval layperson was able to get close to "the unseen world of devils, angels, saints, the Virgin Mary and Jesus in his humanity" (Medcalf 117). But the Corpus Christi plays also form part of the realm of influences which specifically affected Margery's spirituality, and it becomes clear how Margery, as someone who reacts strongly to visual stimuli, was able to relate so well to "the unseen world."

For someone like Margery, who was "glad and grateful for any link to God, whether physical, emotional, or 'ghostly'" (Atkinson 46), seeing the Corpus Christi plays performed would have made a lasting impression. The plays were able to satisfy the medieval taste for the concrete by "mixing miraculous with ordinary events and the actions of God with those of human beings" (Atkinson 94). This resulted in the Christian story, in both "its historical, literal aspect and its symbolic, figurative aspect," being "simultaneously shown and experienced" (Atkinson 95).

Margery did not merely "think about" events from Christ's life, she actually participated in them. In her Book Margery describes how she is the one who tells the child-Virgin that she "schal be þe Modyr of God" (18); she tells how at the Nativity she "begyyd [for] owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys & kerchys for to swathyn in hir Sone," and how she "beggyd mete" for the Mother and Child (19); and at the Crucifixion, Margery relates how she cried out to the Jews, saying, "ȝe cursyd Iewys, why sle ȝe my Lord Ihesu Crist? Sle me rebar & late hym gon" (192). Margery does not simply talk to Jesus and Mary, she asks them questions and they answer her back. Atkinson notes that Margery's

> intimate knowledge of God came primarily through meditation on joys and sorrows of the human life and death of Jesus, in which her emotions helped her to participate in divine experience through the humanity she shared with Christ. (41)

The plays, too, focussed on the humanity of Christ. That the Corpus Christi plays did in fact leave an impression on Margery is evident in the nature of her meditations. Two specific areas where similarity occurs between Margery's meditations and the plays are (1) the treatment of the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene, which will be discussed next, and (2) the accounts of the events of the Passion, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. By comparing these

aspects of the plays with those of the meditations we can see how the Corpus Christi plays actually help Margery shape her own sense of spirituality and personal salvation.

II The Holy Women

Regarding the characterization of the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene, it should be noted that there were two conceptions of women in the Middle Ages. One conception, discussed earlier in relation to Mrs. Noah, viewed women as "daughters of Eve," who were naturally prone to"disobedience, vanity, cupiditas, indeed to all sin" (Fries 49). The other conception, holding more hope for women, saw the Blessed Virgin Mary as one "who had achieved the highly desirable condition of motherhood without the questionable act of sexual intercourse," and Mary Magdalene as "Christ's most prominent female disciple," who represented "the necessity for all women except the Virgin to reform" (Fries 49). It is this latter view of women which plays an important part in shaping the development of Margery's own spirituality.

According to Power, the cult of the Virgin

> was already supreme by the eleventh century and remained supreme until the end of the Middle Ages. Great pilgrimages to the Virgin's shrines at Chartres, Rocamodour, Mont Saint-Michel, Laon, Soissons, Ipswich, Walsingham, and many scores more, criss-crossed the countries of Europe, while most great churches, not specifically her own, provided themselves with lady Chapels. (19)

Margery herself "offeryd at an ymage of owyr Lady" in the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin at St. Nicholas Church, Yarmouth (Meech & Allen 285), and "dwellyd in þe Chapel of þe Felde," a chapel in Norwich also dedicated to the Blessed Virgin (Meech & Allen 307).

Essentially, the appeal of the Virgin lay in "her concern for human need," there being "no situation in which she would fail to support the weak and despised" (Ward 163). Benedicta Ward notes that the "instances of the power of the Virgin exercised at the prayer of the poor, the sick, and the repentant were accepted as an integral part of the devotion proper to the Virgin" (144). When Margery is in Rome and has "neyther peny ne half-peny to helpyn hir-self wyth" (92), Christ says he will pray for his Mother to beg on Margery's behalf, and Margery actually has a vision of the Virgin doing so--"Than on a nyth sche say in vision how owyr Lady, hir thowt, sat at þe mete wyth many worshepful personys & askyd mete for hir" (93). Also, Marian devotion "was deeply

imbedded in civic piety," with the Virgin having a role in the drama "apart from episodes involving Christ" (Davidson 163). According to Davidson, Mary was "the model of motherhood;" she represented "the condition of being human;" and she was "the mediatrix through whom the deity could be approached," Christ not being able to deny the requests "of his beloved Mother" (163).

As a highly revered figure, and one who exuded "an atmosphere of piety," the Virgin Mary could not be exploited dramatically (Luke 77).[11] In the Corpus Christi plays, the treatment of the Virgin generally adhered to "facts" found in the Gospel--"Clearly the role of Mary was considered too lofty--even to the extent of excluding dramatically good apocryphal matter," which was frequently incorporated in other plays (Luke 43). Instead, the playwrights appear to have taken pains to emphasize the Virgin as Mother.

To begin with, the Virgin is not usually characterized as a child. At age three, when she is taken to the temple, Mary is already referred to as God's wife (Ludus Coventriae) or as God's spouse (York). In Margery's visions, the twelve year old Virgin speaks as an adult, saying first, "I wold I wer worthy to be þe handmayden of hir þat xuld consieve þe Sone of God," and then, "Dowtyr, now am I be-kome þe Modyr of God" (18). When the York Mary actually gives birth to Christ,

her virginity is never mentioned, instead, all the emphasis is placed on her motherhood. In the Ludus Coventriae Annunciation, Cornelius Luke notes that "everything [again] seems to be made to contribute to the honour of the Virgin's divine motherhood" (44), including the fact that she agrees to become the Mother of God. For Luke, traditional Church teaching emphasized "the volitional act of Mary in order to show forth her supreme part in the suffering of Christ and her status as Coredemptrix" (46).

A related topic, and another way of stressing the Virgin-as-Mother role, was the emphasis on purification, and the fact that it was not necessary for the Virgin to be purified after the birth of Christ, although she was. When the Chester Virgin informs Joseph that forty days have passed and she is ready to go to the temple, "and moyses lawe for to fulfill" (l. 124), Joseph replies:

> yea, marye, though it be no nede
> seith thou arte cleane in thoughte and deed,
> yet it is good to do as god bade,
> and worcke after his lawe,
> and to the temple that we goe.
> (Purification ll. 129-133)

In the Middle Ages the Church still honoured the Old Testament ruling that, after a birth, "a woman was impure for

six weeks...[which] prohibited her from attending church" (Hanawalt 217). According to Hanawalt,

> The churching of a woman was the final ritual of childbirth allowing the woman back into society. As Mary became increasingly central to religious ceremonial, the Feast of the Purification of Mary, or Candlemas, in early February became a major celebration and one particularly associated with married women. (217)

This association may have been somewhat of a consolation for Margery who could not be a virgin, and who, after fourteen children, would have been considered "impure" for eighty-four weeks of her life. Actually, Margery relates that she always felt "þe fervowr of lofe & devocyon þat God putte in hir sowle" whenever she thought of anyone being purified--"Sche had swech holy thowtys & meditacyons many tymes whan sche saw women ben purifyid of her childeryn" (198). It made her think of "owr Lady offeryng her blissful Sone owr Sauyowr to þe preyst Simeon in þe Tempyl" (198).

In addition to her role as "mother", the playwrights also stress Mary's "grett humylyte" and her role as "coredemptrix": intercessor for mankind. Again, it is in the Ludus Coventriae cycle, the cycle most "conscious" of the Virgin, that the best examples may be found. In the Mary in the Temple play, Mary expresses her unworthiness by referring to herself as "þe sympelest creature" (1.243). At

the Annunciation "she speaks of her 'grett shamfastness'" (Coletti 254), and "With All mekeness" (l. 285) she receives Gabriel's message. This humble image of the Virgin left its mark on Margery, who in her own visions persistently sees herself as the "vnworthy hand-maydyn" of the Blessed Virgin. A "dramatic representation of the Virgin's capacity as intercessor" can be found in the Ludus Coventriae Death and Assumption play, which celebrates the Virgin's role "in man's redemption and...her potential to participate continuously in the redemptive action through her prayers" (Coletti 265). Paul hails Mary as "mene for mankynde and mendere of mys" (ll. 252), while Mary, even at her death, is only concerned with securing Christ's mercy for all (ll. 282-3). Margery's consciousness of this aspect of the Virgin's role is evident in Margery's own vision of the Virgin's death. When Margery laments the fact that she must "leuyn stille a-lone & no comfort han" with her, Mary immediately promises "to prey for hir to hir Sone" (175). Mary goes on to reassure Margery that everyone who "wyl forsakyn her syn" (175), and is "sory & heuy for þat þei have do & wil don dew penawnce þerfor" (176), will be granted the same pardon which Margery herself has already received. Thus, the Virgin, as a model of charity and the mother of the Church, was someone with whom Margery identified strongly.

For Margery, it is through her "homely" identification with Christ's Mother that she is best able to express her devotion for Christ himself. Margery takes Christ's words to heart when he says, "Dowtyr, thynke on my Modyr, for sche is cause of alle þe grace þat þow hast" (18). As a result, in Margery's meditations the words of the Virgin figure more prominently than those of her Son, which diverges from the practice of the plays which are generally Christocentric. For example, after Christ tells Margery of his great love for her, the Virgin steps in, "wytnessyng" for her "swet Sone" (50). When Christ tells Margery to begin eating meat again, the Virgin sees to it that she stops fasting as well (162). And, when Margery is in need of comfort on her travels, it is the words of the Virgin which assuage her fears, not the words of Christ or the saints who came before (230). Although Christ urges Margery to be on homely terms with him, one senses that Margery finds more comfort in her identification with the Virgin and the notion of holy womanhood.

After her conversion, Margery tries to emulate the behavior of the Holy Mother, and devotes herself to "feminine tasks" such as "helping the destitute and caring for and comforting the sick and dying" (Lagorio 44). Her contemplative life suffers somewhat, since it "was constantly interrupted by caring for the sick or 'oþer nedful occupasyon

as was necessary vn-to-hir er to hir euyn-crystyn'" (Lagorio 45). This was acceptable to Margery, however, since any hardship or inconvenience amounted to a blessing in disguise --"for þe mor schame I suffyr & despite, þe meryar may I ben in owr Lord Ihesu Crist" (135).

Margery also takes the Virgin's dictum--"And þerfor, dowtyr, ȝyf þu wylt be partabyl in owyr joye, þu must be partabil in owyr sorwe" (73)--to heart. Because of this, Margery is able to look after her sick, and later senile, husband when he is in need. Despite the great labour and expense involved in caring for her husband, she "seruyd hym & helpyd hym, as hir thowt, as sche wolde a don Crist hym-self" (181). One senses here the same charity in Margery as when she willingly, in her mind, begs food for the Infant Christ and his Mother. In Rome, Margery is able to "seruyn an hold woman þat was a poure creatur....as sche wolde a don owyr Lady" (85), even though it meant sleeping without bedclothes, being exposed to vermin, fetching water and sticks on her neck, and begging food and drink for the old woman (86).

Margery gets so caught up in taking the pains of the Virgin and Christ on herself that, at one point, she even becomes the mother of God "and, fruitfully, even...mother of all the world" (Higgs 62). Christ actually tells her, "þu art to me a very modir & to al þe world for þat gret charite þat

is in þe" (91). In her meditations on the Passion, and especially the Virgin's sorrow, Margery's grief almost exceeds that of the Virgin--"A, der Lady, how may ȝowr hert lestyn & se ȝowr blisful Sone se al þis wo? Lady, I may not dur it, & ȝyt am I not hys Modyr" (189). Her weeping becomes so excessive at times that her peers begin to question her sincerity, saying Christ's own Mother "cryed not as sche dede" (164). If she could, Margery would have borne all of the Blessed Virgin's suffering herself. The Virgin was her special mentor--"Dowtyr, I am thy modyr, þi lady,/and thy maystres for to teche þe in al wyse how þu schalt plese God best" (50)--the one who would instruct Margery on matters "so hy and so holy" (50).

The other holy woman Margery relates to spiritually is Mary Magdalene. For Margery, the Magdalene is the closest woman to Christ, after the Blessed Virgin, and, thus, someone well worth emulating. The Magdalene is also the other holy woman whom the playwrights take special care in characterizing.

Mary Magdalene, according to Eleanor Prosser, is "the symbol of the penitent, the symbol of love, the symbol of the redeeming power of Christ's Mercy" (132). Having been a "fallen" woman initially, she becomes "a moving and human figure" who can touch her followers "as one of them" (Prosser

117). This is possible because she is given 'hope,' which according to Davidson makes her the representative of holy "eros"--"the desire which presses to break through to the mysteries of the Being and to be united with him" (156). Davidson goes on to suggest the "self" the Magdalene of the plays discovers "is a creature essentially on a pilgrimage to the place of eternal bliss where she may be forever joined with the Bridegroom" (156). During the Crucifixion she suffers a moment of despair since Christ "is the one whom she perceives as central to her existence" (Davidson 156), and whom she feels she has now lost:

> Alas, to dy with doyll am I dyght!
> In warld was never a wofuller wight;
> I drope, I dare, for seyng of sight
> That I can se;
> My Lord, that mekill was of myght,
> Is ded fro me. (Towneley, Resurrection ll. 334-9)

Margery is equally distraught at Christ's death:

> And þe sayd creatur thowt þat sche ran euyr to & fro as it had be a woman wyth-owtyn reson, gretly desyryng to an had þe precyows body be hir-self a-lone þat sche myth a wept a-now in presens of þat precyows body, for hir thowt þat sche wolde a deyid wyth wepyng & mornyng in hys deth for loue þat sche had to hym. (194)

Once the Magdalene experiences the resurrected Christ, however, the "focus of her earthly pilgrimage...return[s] along with her joy" (Davidson 157):

> Mi blys is commen, my care is gone,
> That lufly have I mett alone;
> I am as blyth in blood and bone
> As ever was wight;
> Now is he resyn that ere was slone,
> Mi hart is light.
> (Towneley, Resurrection ll.619-24)

As another "bride" waiting for her Holy Bridegroom, Mary Magdalene's words take on the "lover-like" quality associated with the Brautmystik. As fellow "pilgrims and strangers," medieval playgoers would have related to, and shared in, the experience of transcendence with the Magdalene.

Aware "that the audience would respond to every dramatized incident as to an 'exemplum'," the Chester playwright gave Mary Magdalene an expanded role (Prosser 114). The fear was that, if the Magdalene was not dramatically amplified "as a fully repentant character," the resulting "emphasis on her tears alone, the symbol of her contrition, would create a dangerous temptation [for] the simple housewife in the audience" (Prosser 115). Thus, in the Chester Christ's Visit to Simon the Leper Mary Magdalene is given a "big entrance": she comes alive, "made vivid as a person--rather than merely posited as an annointer who occasions certain responses--the author's portraying her as a fully developed penitent" (Prosser 117). Her simple two-stanza speech is particularly effective:

> My Christ, my comfort, and my kinge!
> I worship thee in all thinge;
> for now my hart is in lykinge,
> and I at my above.
>
> Seven Devills now, as I well see,
> thou hast dreven now out of me,
> and from foule lyfe vnto great lee
> releved me, lord, for loue. (ll. 129-136)

Margery's own conversion from a worldly life to that of a devout penitent is equally dramatic. In the initial stages of her conversion, Margery is also plagued by fire-breathing devils who threaten her and pull her and haul her about (7). However, like the Magdalene who recognized her sins were offensive to Christ, Margery perceives the "aduersytes comyng on euery syde...[as] skowrges of owyr Lord þat wold chastyse hir for hir synn" (11). Also, like the Magdalene, Margery puts her faith in Christ's mercy:

> Þan sche askyd God mercy & forsoke hir pride, hir coueytyse, & desyr þat sche had of þe worshepys of þe world, & dede grett bodyly penawnce, & gan to entyr þe wey of euyr-lestyng lyfe, as schal be seyd afteyr. (11)

In the Ludus Coventriae cycle, emphasis is taken away from Mary Magdalene, "the true penitent sinner," and placed on the Magdalene as an "Everyman" figure, a symbol of love and Christ's Mercy, with whom the audience can identify (Prosser 135). By being left on stage throughout the Last Supper and until Christ's betrayal at Gethsemane--an

important break from tradition (134)--Mary Magdalene becomes the norm against which the conspirators and Judas are judged (135). More significant, however, is the notion that by having the Magdalene, a woman, present during these scenes, the increasing acceptability of women's participation in the events of Christ's life was being stressed. Margery and all women could legitimately visualize themselves taking part in Christian history during the time of Christ.

Thus, Mary Magdalene, as a symbol of Christ's Mercy, is also the norm against which Margery judges herself--"'A, blysful Lord,' seyd sche, 'I wolde I wer as worthy to ben sekyr of thy lofe as Mary Mawdelyn was'" (176). The Magdalene is discussed in Margery's visions often. Meech and Allen suggest that when Christ says, "I...forȝefe þe þi synnes to þe vtterest poynt" (16), he seems to be reproducing for Margery "the miracle granted to Mary Magdalene" (262). Christ tells Margery he knows how she feels about the Magdalene, and that her feelings are appropriate:

> I knowe....how þu clepist Mary Mawdelyn in-to þi sowle to welcomyn me, for, dowtyr, I wot wel a-now what þu/thynkyst. Þu thynkst þat sche is worthiest in þi sowle, & most þu trustyst in hir preyerys next my Modyr, & so þu maist ryth wel, dowtyr, for sche is a ryth gret mene to me for þe in þe blysse of Heuyn. (210)

Just as the playwrights had made her presence immediate and significant to playgoers, the figure of the Magdalene was essential to Margery's spirituality.

For Margery, the medieval figures of the Virgin and the Magdalene were strong devotional stimuli. In addition to their spiritual roles, these Holy Women were occasionally cast by medieval playwrights into secular roles as well. One such instance is the use of the Virgin to instruct medieval women on the necessity of prudence when dealing with temptation. This was a topic of special concern for Margery throughout her Book.

Kathleen M. Ashley notes that in the Towneley Annunciation "Mary does not immediately accept the news of her virgin conception" (26). Instead, she asks Gabriel, "What is thi name?" and "how shuld it be?" According to Ashley, Mary's hesitation was interpreted "within various medieval traditions of exegesis as evidence not of a lack of faith but of her 'prudence' in the face of possible temptation" (26). In the mystical tradition one has to be wary of Satan, 'the tempter,' "who roams about in the guise of an angel seeking vulnerable souls to delude with false visions and messages" (26).

Throughout her lifetime Margery questions, as do others, whether her visions are truly from God, or the work of the

devil. One young monk says to her, "Eyþyr þow hast þe Holy Gost or ellys þow hast a devyl wyth-in þe" (28). Margery goes to several people to reaffirm that her thoughts are inspired by the Holy Ghost, including an anchorite in Lynn, who tells her she has "an ernest-peny of Heuyn" (18), and the famed Julian of Norwich, who was "expert in swech thyngys & good cownsel cowd ȝeuyn" (42). Even after reassurance from several authorities, Margery continues to treat her visions with caution, so much so that God withdraws His favour from her for a time:

> Sche wolde ȝeuyn no credens to þe cownsel of God, but raþer leuyd it was sum euyl spiryt for to deceyuyn hir. Than for hir frowardnes & hir vnbeleue owr Lord drow fro hir alle good thowtys & alle good mendys of holy spechys & dalyawns & þe hy contemplacyon whech sche had ben vsyd to be-for-tyme, & suffyrd hir to haue as many euyl thowtys as sche had be-forn of good thowtys. (144)

Spiritual temptations were not the only kind of temptations to watch for, however, and Ashley points out that Mary's hesitation on receiving Gabriel can also be viewed as moral and behavioral prudence which allows young women "to resist the seductive words of young men who would lead them astray" (27). This is social rather than spiritual behavior, imprudence leading to "blame" and not sin (Ashley 27). Margery, herself, has just cause to fear sexual temptation

since, by "þe Deuelys suasyons," she almost consents to go with a man who says "þat for any-thyng he wold ly be hir & haue hys lust of hys body, & sche xuld not wythstond hym" (14). Thus, the Virgin's actions were a lesson for women--especially those like Margery who were tempted by "fowle thowtys & fowle mendys of letchery & alle vnclennes as thow sche xulde a be comown to al maner of pepyl" (144-5)--to practice "virtuous caution" in order to remain "honoured" in the eyes of society.

Perhaps, though, the strongest identification Margery makes with the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene is through their shared devotional tears. By Margery's time, the tradition of holy tears already existed in medieval Christianity, both the Virgin and the Magdalene having been granted "the special office of tears" (Meech & Allen 331). According to Atkinson, the tears of the Virgin, not reflected in the Gospels, represented the "Mother of Sorrows" weeping for the "Man of Sorrows;" the Magdalene, as "lover and weeper," was one who was "redeemed by her tears" (58). Both the weeping Magdalene and the "pieta"--the elderly Virgin "crying at the foot of the Cross or holding in her lap her crucified Son"-- were powerful images in medieval spirituality (Atkinson 58).

Notably, the only reference Margery makes to being particularly moved by an image involves viewing a pieta:

> ÞIS creatur sey a fayr ymage of owr Lady clepyd a pyte. And thorw Þe beholdyng of Þat pete hir mende was al holy ocupyed in Þe Passyon of owr Lord Ihesu Crist & in Þe compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be whech sche was compellyd to cryyn ful lowde & wepyn ful sor, as Þei sche xulde a deyd. (148)

Like the tears of the Holy Women, Margery's conspicuous "habit of tears" was essential to her vocation since she was "called to inspire sorrow, by her 'great sorrow,' in her fellow Christians" (Atkinson 58).

Although the sorrow and tears of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene would have been dramatically emphasized in the plays concerning the scourging, the crucifixion, and the death and burial of Christ--e.g."for sorow I water both/my eeyn" (Towneley, Scourging, 1.331) and "Howe schulde I but wepe for thy woo?" (York, Death and Burial, 1.149)--and although one would imagine Margery to be delighted to associate her grief with the Holy Women's own, Margery, surprisingly, was not always appreciative of her tears. When she asks Christ why she "had to have such noticeable and awkward tears" (Atkinson 63) Margery is reminded that her cries are

> a token of his love, of his desire that the Virgin's suffering be appreciated, of the bliss that comes from compassion, of the redemption available to sinners, and a sign to Margery that the pains she might have had in dying, and in the next world, were being exchanged for present suffering.(Atkinson 63)

While Christ, himself, says her "terys of comu[n]ccyon, devocyon, & compassyon arn þe heyest & sekerest ȝyftys" that one can receive on earth (31), it is Julian of Norwich who is able to assure Margery that her tears, "the tears of Magdalene," are a special gift--

> What creature þat hath þes tokenys he m[uste] stedfastlych belevyn þat þe Holy Gost dwellyth in hys sowle. And mech mor, when God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, deuosyn, er compassyon, he may & owyth to leuyn þat þe Holy Gost is in hys sowle.(42-3)

It is the Virgin who points out to Margery the connection between Margery's tears and those of the Holy Women:

> be not aschamyd of hym þat is þi God, þi Lord, & þi lofe, no more þan I was whan I saw hym hangyn on þe Cros, my swete Sone, Ihesu, for to cryen & to wepyn for þe peyn of my swete Sone,...ne Mary Mawdelyn was not aschamyd to cryen & wepyn for my Sonys lofe. (73)

Weissman suggests that this particular speech of the Virgin "redefines the traditional understanding of the persecution of Christ's Mother in order to justify the scorn elicited by Margery's extravagances of compassion" (210). In Margery's

account of the Passion, the Jews treat the Virgin roughly, speaking "boystowsly" to her and putting her away from her son. By suggesting that the censure of the Holy Women was like that experienced by Margery, the Virgin implies that "Margery's hysteria is the truest realization of the 'imitatio Mariae'--the self-subjection, through sorrow, to shame" (Weissman 210). Emphasis of the persecution of the Holy Women could also be found in the plays. The Torturers of the Towneley Scourging had no patience for the weeping women --"Say wherto abyde we here abowte/ Thise qwenes with scremyng and with showte?/ May no man thare wordys stere?" (ll.348-50)--and John at the Cross is told to "Go, hy the hens with all or yll hayll cam thou here" (ll.355).

In any event, Margery's use of the familiar devotional tradition of weeping can be interpreted as "a sign that Margery has performed an effective penance, has identified with the Virgin in her love and purity, and, finally, has associated her personal suffering with that of the persecuted Christ (Weissman 209-110). Although somewhat excessive, even by medieval standards, Margery's devotional practices do have roots in the tradition of Marian Compassion (Weissman 211), and they do illustrate the influence that the Holy Women, especially as they were portrayed by medieval playwrights, had on Margery.

For Margery, the Maries of the plays not only represented the spiritual models of motherhood, intercession, penitence and mercy, they also signalled the importance of women being present in Christ's life. Through her shared womanhood with the Holy Women, and by patterning her own life and devotions after theirs, Margery is able to dramatically bring to life her own religious experiences. Thus, whether as instructors or as role models, or both, the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene figured prominently in the participatory nature of Margery's spirituality.

CHAPTER THREE THE PASSION

The only element in the drama which exceeds the influence of the Holy Women on Margery's spirituality is that of the Passion. Recalling the Franciscan teachings, medieval Christians were "above all to contemplate the human tragedy of the Passion," through which they could "share in its transcendental victory" (Kolve 4-5). This chapter will discuss the nature of Margery's devotion to the Passion and will illustrate her use of the Corpus Christi dramas as a direct source for her meditations on the Passion.

By Margery's time, Christ was no longer "the majestic ruler" reigning from the cross; instead, he was the "Man of Sorrows," suffering for the sins of the world (Kolve 175). In medieval devotion to the Passion Christians, especially the saints, recognized

> that what God demands in particular is suffering. They viewed suffering as the specific means God has chosen both for Christ's redemptive work and for the sanctification of those who imitate Christ. Atonement came not from charitable works, nor from prayer, nor from enlightenment, but from pain. If God's wrath was appeased by suffering, this meant that suffering was somehow pleasing to God, and that God saw value in it which one must acknowledge even if one did not understand it. (Kieckhefer 89)

According to Richard Kieckhefer, the "four reactions that the meditations on the Passion were supposed to evoke....(were) gratitude, penance, compassion and imitation" (91). He notes that compassion was "extended not only to Christ" but the Virgin whose

> position at the foot of the cross gave her a double role in the spirituality of the passion: on the one hand she was a model for others to imitate in her compassion for her dying son; on the other, she was herself a fitting subject for compassion, since her identification with him caused her suffering comparable to his. (93)

This teaching of the devotion to the Passion was available to all medieval Christians, not just aspiring saints, as Margery's devotional practices will attest.

Sarah Beckwith notes that "Margery's book is a dense source of responses to the Passion" (49). Significant is Margery's strong identification with Christ and the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Christ tells Margery, "þei þat worshep þe þei worshep me; þei þat despysyn þe þei despysyn me, & I schal chastysen hem þerfor. I am in þe,/and þow in me. And þei þat heryn þe þei heryn þe voys of God" (23). Margery is particularly moved to suffer and share Christ's pain when she is at the site of the crucifixion during her pilgrimage to Jerusalem:

> þe frerys lyftud up a cros & led þe pylgrimys a-bowte fro [on] place to anoþer wher owyr Lord had sufferyd hys [peynys] and hys passyons...& þe forseyd creatur wept and sobbyd so plentyvowsly as þow sche had seyn owyr Lord wythhir boldyly ey sufferyng hys Passyon at þat tyme. (68)

It is on this same pilgrimage that Margery receives the violent and uncontrollable crying which would accompany all her thoughts on the Passion. Beckwith associates this "crying" not only as a further means of identification with Christ, but also, at the time which it begins, as "Margery's 'gostly labowr,' her conception of spiritual childbirth" (51):

> And þerfor, whan sche knew þat sche xulde cryen, sche kept it in as long as sche mygth & dede al þat sche cowde to withstond it er ellys to put it a-wey til sche wex as blo as any leed, & euyr it xuld labowryn in hir mende mor and mor in-to þe tyme þat it broke owte. &, when þe body myth ne lengar enduryn þe gostly labowr but was ouyrcome wyth þe vnspekabyl lofe þat wrowt so fervently in þe sowle, þan fel sche down & cryed wondyr lowde. & þe mor þat sche wold labowryn to kepe it in er to put it a-wey, mech þe mor xulde sche cryen & þe mor lowder. (69-70)

Thus, through the "birth" of the "passion cries," even thoughts of the Infant Christ (and probably his Mother) "trigger[ed] off Margery's identification with the Passion" (Beckwith 51).

Margery's physical environment supplied her with various sources for her meditation on the Passion--sermons, liturgy, devotional writings, etc. However, as an illiterate person, Margery's meditations would have been even more inspired by works of art (Atkinson 94), and especially drama. For instance, the "Corpus Christi cycles show Christ 'don on þe rood' in greater circumstantial detail, and with greater force and artistic complexity, than any other art form in the Middle Ages" (Kolve 175). Someone as actively imaginative as Margery was bound to be affected.

Haden recalls that "the controlling purpose of drama was to serve doctrinal ends" (21). Although the crucifixion "was man's most vile act, the summation of all the evil that had begun with Adam's first sin and which had grown to monstrous proportions throughout the centuries," Haden suggests it was also "the way for man's salvation" (21-2). To attain salvation one had to have true repentance, which was gained by having contrition, which, in turn, was to be gotten by recognizing one's sins and having a "sincere love of God" (Haden 22). This proves to be somewhat of a problem for Margery who gets caught up in the tension between "God's increasing love for...[her] as his chosen and favourite servant, and her correlative and increasing sense of unworthiness and sorrow for all of her sins" (Lagorio 47).

The dramas were used to evoke an emotional response "designed to create in the audience a sincere compassion for Christ, who suffered such agony for them" (Haden 22). Careful characterization of Christ would have been necessary to obtain the desired response.

Whereas Christian theological focus on the Passion tends to emphasize the miraculous nature of Christ's Divinity, the Corpus Christi Passion sequences "emphasize dramatically and realistically Christ's human and mortal nature" (Haden 20). For T. W. Craik, Christ, "though he is God as well as Man," is characterized in the plays as one who

> is the victim of worldly authority: helpless, passive, resigned, his plight excites nothing but pity, which is increased for the thoughtful spectator by the paradox of his omnipotence (to which attention is drawn by the Jews' scornful invitation to work a miracle and come down from the cross). (193)

Since Christ's bodily and emotional suffering was a necessary part of the divine scheme to redeem mankind (Craik 193), the playwrights built "dramatic and emotional intensity by expansion of the realistic details of Christ's physical suffering" (Haden 20). For Kolve, it is "moments of conscious cruelty" throughout the Passion sequence which "deepen the horror and pity" with which the audience responds to the action (179).

Although Christ's humanity is emphasized, "He is still God the Son--a personification of the Divine and a symbol of salvation" (Haden 20). Because of who he is and what he represents, the playwrights are not at liberty to develop Christ's character and must, therefore, focus more on the actions of the people surrounding Christ, in order to elicit from the audience and emotional sympathy for Christ. In the Crucifixion plays, particularly those of York and Towneley (Kinghorn 93), Christ's silent suffering is contrasted to the noisy activity of the soldiers and torturers who scorn and then kill Him. Essentially, Christ is killed "in outbursts of great energy, violence, laughter and delight," by men "dramatized as too self-aware, too conscious of their own need for amusement, distraction and gratification, to be more than sporadically aware of the man they kill" (Kolve 180). While the men air their complaints about the weight of the cross and state of their backs, and then show their delight in letting the cross drop into the mortice, Christ is left to suffer in silence. According to Kolve, "drama alone among religious writing, sought to reveal as much about the men who scorn and kill Christ as about the pathos and dignity of his suffering" (180): an embellishment that served to enhance the spiritual message of sin and salvation.

How much the Corpus Christi plays, as opposed to other sources, were responsible for Margery's turn to the road of salvation cannot be determined. What is obvious, however, is that the plays of the Passion did leave an impression on Margery, and influenced her meditations on the Passion both directly--notably in her depiction of the Blessed Virgin and the Crucifixion--as well as indirectly.

For instance, a non-biblical element used in the Towneley Scourging, that of the Virgin Mary offering to take up Christ's cross, is also used by Margery. M. D. Anderson suggests that the Towneley playwright

> knew well that no mother could watch a dearly loved son led past her, weak and bleeding from torture, yet compelled to carry the gibbet on which he must shortly die, and not long with all the forces of her being to lighten that burden by sharing it. (109-110)

Thus, the Towneley Mary says to Christ:

> Alas, dere son for care I se ƿi body blede;
> My self I wille for fare for ƿe in ƿis grete drede,
> ƿis cross on ƿi shulder bare, to help ƿe in ƿis nede,
> I wille it bere wyth greatt hart sare wheder ƿi wille ƿe lede. (ll.316-319)

When Christ says the cross is too large and heavy, Mary insists that she try--"A, dere son, ƿou let me help ƿe in ƿis case!" (l.322). In Margery's meditations Mary says to her

Son--"A, my swete Sone, late me help to ber þat hevy crosse" (191).

Margery's account of the Virgin's reaction to the sight of Christ being nailed to the cross closely resembles the grief expressed by the Towneley Virgin in the Crucifixion. Margery relates how

> þe cruel Iewys ledyn hys precyows body to þe Crosse & sithyn tokyn a long nayle, a row & a boistews, & sett to hys on hand & wyth gret violens & cruelnes þei drevyn it thorw hys hande. Hys blisful Modyr beholdyng...how hys precyows body schrynkyd & drew to-gedyr with alle senwys & veynys in þat precyows body for peyne þat it suffyrd & felt...sorwyd and mornyd and syhyd ful sor. (192)

Similarily, The Towneley Virgin says:

> Fastened by hands and feet.
> With nails that his fleshe eat
> With wounds his foes him greet
> Alas, my child for care!
> Thy flesh is open wide
> I see on either side
> Tears of blood down glide
> Over all thy body bare.
> Alas that I should bide
> To see my son thus fare! (ll. 329-338)

Another scene which Margery follows closely is that of Christ being nailed to the cross. In the York Crucifixion, the soldiers set about their business with "Bothe hammeres and nayles large and lange" (1.30). Having nailed one hand in place, they discover that the other one does not reach the hole already bored--"It failis a foote and more,/The senous

are so gone ynne" (l. 107-8). The first soldier suggests using ropes to pull Christ's arms and legs until they reach the holes--"Why carpe ȝe so? Faste on a corde/And tugge hym to, by toppe and taile" (l. 113-114). Once both hands are nailed, they secure Christ's feet:

> III Mil.: And I schall tacche hym too
> Full nemely with a nayle.
> Þis werke will holde, þat
> dar I heete,
> For nowe are feste faste both
> his handis.
> IV Mil.: Go we all foure þanne to his
> feete,
> So schall oure space be
> spedely spende.
> (ll. 119-124)

Margery also makes note of the nail driven into Christ's hand--"sithyn token a long nayle, a row & a boistews, & sett to hys on hand & with gret violens & cruelnes þei dreuyn it thorw hys hand"--and then goes on to describe the soldiers efforts in putting Christ on the cross:

> Than sey sche...how þe Iewys fastenyd ropis on þe oþer hand, for þe senwys & veynys were so shrynkyn wyth peyne þat it myth not come to þe hole þat þei had morkyn þerfor, & drowyn þeron to makyn it mete wyth þe hole...And sithyn þei drowyn hys blisful feet on þe same maner. (192)

Once the soldiers have secured Christ to the cross, Margery describes how the cross is raised:

& a-non sche sey hem takyn vp þe Crosse wyth owr Lordys body hangyng þer-on & madyn gret noyse & gret crye & lyftyd it vp fro þe erthe a certeyn distawnce & sithyn letyn þe Crosse fallyn down in-to þe morteys. & þan owr Lordys body schakyd & schoderyd, & alle þe joyntys of þat blisful body brostyn & wentyn a-sundyr, & hys precyows wowndys ronnyn dow wyth reuerys of blood on eurcy syde. (192)

The "gret noyse and gret crye" the York soldiers make as they lift the cross are complaints about the cross' weight and how far they must take it:

I Mil.: I badde we schulde hym hyng
On heghte þat men myght see.
.....
II Mil.: But, sir, þat dede will do vs dere.
I Mil.: It may not mende for to moote more,
Þis harlotte muste be hanged here.
.....
IV Mil.: I wene it wolle neuere come þore.
We foure rayse it noȝt right, to yere.
.....
III Mil.: Now certis, I hope it schall noght nede
To calle to vs more companye.
Me thynke we foure schulde do þis dede,
And bere hym to ȝone hille on high.
(ll. 155-172)

Having agreed to take the cross to the proper place on the hill, they have difficulty raising it:

II Mil.: Owe! Lifte a-lang!
III Mil.: Fro all þis harme he schulde hym hyde,
And he war God.
.....
I Mil.: For grete harme haue I hente,
My schuldir is in soundre.

II Mil.: And sertis I am nere schente,
So lange haue I borne vndir.
III Mil.: This crosse and I in twoo
muste twynne,
Ellis brekis my bakke in
sondre sone. (ll.186-194)

Once at the mortice, the soldiers ungraciously unload their burden:

I Mil.: Nowe raise hym nemely for þe
nonys,
And sette hym be þis mortas
heere.
And latte hym falle in alle at
ones,
For certis þat payne schall
haue no pere.
III Mil.: Heue uppe!
IV Mil.: Latte doune, so all his bones
Are a-soundre nowe on sides
seere.
I Mil.: Þis fallyng was more felle
Þan all the harmes he hadde,
Nowe may a man wele telle,
Þe leste lith of þis ladde.
(ll. 219-228)

These accounts of the Crucifixion are too similar for one not to draw the conclusion that Margery carried over into her meditations the images she saw in the plays. There are, however, subtler ways in which elements of the plays are linked to Margery's meditations on the Passion. For example, Kolve points out that the plays of the Passion, intent on the "imitation of total action," proceed "with a vast expenditure of noise and energy and activity, only a small part of which is effectively focused upon Christ" (198). It is this "boistrous" atmosphere that Margery is recalling when she

says, "Whyl sche dalyed in þe Passion of owr Lord...sche herd so hedows a melody þat sche mygth not ber it" (39). Margery usually hears "a sound of melodye so swete & delectable" (11).

Margery's vehement battle against the swearing of oaths is also related to the Passion. Allen suggests that Margery's association of "the crusade against swearing with devotion to the Passion" is common, and that Margery's special feeling for the Passion gives added violence to her feelings against swearing (Meech & Allen 275). Oaths were felt to torture Christ all over again and Margery would not tolerate them:

> ther were many of þe Erchebysshoppys clerkys & oþer rekles men boþe swyers & ȝeman whech sworyn many gret oþis & spokyn many rekles wordys, & þis creatur boldly vndyrname hem & seyd þei schuld ben dampnyd but þei left her sweryng & oþer synnes þat þei vsyd. (36)

Margery's abhorrence of swearing would have been fueled by the plays' "game element," whereby Christ is cruelly mocked and taunted from the time of his capture in the garden until his death, by characters who show a complete lack of reverence towards him. In the Towneley Buffeting, Caiaphas mocks Christ's "noble" birth and status--"Where was thi syre at bord when he met with thi dame?/What, nawder bowated ne spurd and a lord of name!" (ll. 146-7). When the Torturers say they are going to beat Christ--"For we shall so rok

hym,/And with buffettys knok hym"(ll. 330-1)--Caiaphas wholeheartedly approves--"Now he shall have my blyssyng/That knokys hym the best" (ll. 341-2). One can imagine Margery's distress when hearing Froward curse the Torturer, who blindfolds Christ for the game of Hot Cockles, by saying, "Cryst curs myght he have/That last bond his head! (ll.395-6).

In Margery's visions Christ is also caught up in the Jews' cruel game:

> þe sayd creatur beheld wyth hir gostly eye þe Iewys puttyng a cloth be-forn owr Lordys eyne, betyng hym & bofetyng hym in þe heuyd & bobyng hym be-forn hys swete mowth, criyng ful cruelly vn-to hym, 'Telle us now how smet þe'. (190)

Christ's tormentors would not even "spare to luggen hys blisful erys & drawyn þe her of hys berd" (190). For Margery, the scorn and contempt shown for Christ is suffered by her as well. Christ tells her, "& herby mayst thow knowyn þat I suffyr many schrewyd wordys, for...I schuld be newe crucifyed in þe be schrewyd wordys, for þu schalt non oþer-wyse ben slayn þan be schrewyd wordys sufferyng" (85).

Essentially, the nature of Margery's meditations are an example of the effectiveness of the dramas to establish personal relevance, "to each individual, of a story the magnitude and profundity of which dwarfed man's power of

comprehension" (Haden 23). In the York Crucifixion, Christ's final speech dramatically intensifies each person's sense of guilt, by being "directed to the audience who, through watching this scene and concentrating along with the soldiers on the physical details of the act, have been implicated in the crime" (Haden 21). Christ says:

> Al men þat walkis by waye or strete,
> Takes tente ȝe schalle no trauayle tyne,
> Be-holdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,
> And fully feele nowe or ȝe fyne,
> Yf any mournyng may be méete
> Or myscheue mesured vnto myne.
> My Fadir, þat alle bales may bete,
> For-giffis þes men þat dois me pyne.
> What þai wirke wotte þai noght;
> Therfore, my Fadir I craue,
> Latte neuere þer synnys be sought
> But see þer saules to saue. (ll. 253-264)

Thus, through the Corpus Christi dramas, each individual in the audience, as a "protagonist," is offered "an opportunity to understand his position in the created universe and the possible consequences of the choices he made in his life" (Haden 26). For Margery, who was constantly aware of the intense suffering of Christ and the Virgin, and who was especially concerned with increasing her "meryte in Heuyn," the Corpus Christi plays would have offered a powerful message which could not possibly have left her unmoved.

CONCLUSION

When examining the Book of Margery Kempe in relation to medieval religion and society, as they are depicted in the Corpus Christi dramas, the plays become more than an entertaining lesson on the topics of Christian history and fifteen-century medieval life. For the reader, the plays are an instrument of illumination, mirroring the society Margery lived in and, ultimately, bringing Margery Kempe to life.

Essentially, knowledge of the medieval characterization of Noah's wife can be used to illuminate the largely antifeminist society Margery lived in, where all women were considered inferior, corruptible and disobedient. For Margery, living in a male-dominated society--which attempted to rule both her social and spiritual life, and which shunned any sign of independence, even in the name of religion--was her greatest challenge. Knowledge of the playwrights' characterizations of the Holy Women can be used to illustrate the influence of visual stimuli on Margery, and, also, how Margery's association with, and assimilation of, their roles in relation to the events of Christ's life increases her own dramatic sense of involvement in religious experiences. Finally, the Corpus Christi Passion sequences can be used to explain Margery's own heightened awareness of, and

participation in, the Passion, as well as being shown as a direct source for Margery's meditations.

As stated earlier, the Corpus Christi plays "did more than teach: they participated in the [Divine] mystery itself" (Davidson 155). Participation in the dramas

> as a devotional experience is actually posited on taking the human condition from its current state--a state which involves the alienation inevitable among fallen men--and insisting upon beginning the pilgrimage which will open up that condition to the joy of heavenly bliss. (Davidson 155)

Such participation by an individual would inevitably foster spiritual growth, as was the case with Margery Kempe.

Like the Corpus Christi plays which were able to blend the past with present, fantasy with reality, Margery is able to combine her secular life with her religious vocation. Equipped with an active imagination and heightened sense of the dramatic, she easily moves back and forth between her daily, physical activities and her all-consuming spiritual meditations. More importantly, she is able to experience each of these aspects of her life to the fullest, having achieved a freedom uniquely her own.

In spite of the largely antifeminist criticism facing Margery in seemingly every facet of her life, she is still able to lead the life she desired. Although still answerable

to the authorities, she was an unenclosed, effectively single woman able to devote herself entirely to the work of God, without having to burden herself with the everyday concerns of family and home. As for her spiritual development, Margery's ability to reach such intimate and emotional heights in her relationship with Christ, the Virgin and the saints, strengthened her devotion and enabled her to grow even in the face of constraints placed upon her by the Church and society.

In summary, the dramatic qualities which existed in and influenced her life, supplied Margery Kempe with the courage and conviction to live a life of her own making--to say and do what she felt was necessary--while remaining in a society which never ceased trying to convince her that it knew best how she should live.

NOTES

[1] Denise L. Despres uses the term 'oral literacy' in her article, "The Meditative Art of Scriptural Interpolation in The Book of Margery Kempe" (Downside Review, Oct., 1989), to discuss Margery's own own sense of literacy and awareness of texts.

[2] Because of Margery's retentive oral memory and her choice of the visionary mode, the influence of drama seems especially important, contributing to both her oral and visual literacy.

[3] The precise function of a Corpus Christi guild is unclear. The Records of Early English Drama for Newcastle, ed. J. J. Anderson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982), note that

> in some other towns (eg. York, Beverley) the Corpus Christi guild was a religious guild, with priests and laymen as members, and it was chiefly responsible for the management of the procession on Corpus Christi Day. (xi)

On p. 190 of The Medieval English Stage (Chicago, 1974), A. H. Nelson cites the following:"The Lynn Corpus Christi guild was founded in response to the plague of 1349" (PRO MS C. 47/43/279; cf. Westlake, PGME, p. 50).

[4] See Alan H. Nelson, "Configurations of Staging in Medieval English Drama," in Medieval English Drama: Essays

Critical and Contextual, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972).

[5] Margery Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. H. E. Allen S. B. Meech, E.E.T.S. O.S. 212 (1940, rpd. 1961). Subsequent quotations will be given in the text with the page number in parentheses.

[6] These criticisms of Margery, it should be noted, are highly conventional, and perhaps best treated with caution. For a discussion of medieval preaching against vanity and the love of finery see, for instance, G. R. Owst's Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), pp.391-414.

7 Examples of the antifeminist tradition, dating back to scriptural times and highly developed by Margery's time, can be found in the following sources: Proverbs vii, Ecclesiastes xxv, Saint Jerome's The Epistle against Jovinian, Peter Abelard's Story of Misfortunes, and Jean de Meun's continuation of Romance of the Rose.

[8] Unfortunately, Margery's Book is "one-sided" in that it lacks a sense of how others really felt about Margery, and how she actually interacted with others on a day-to-day basis. Instead, the Book consists of Margery's own interpretations of what others thought of her.

[9] In this regard, Bridget of Sweden, as someone who did extensive travelling, would have been an important model for Margery. For a discussion of the availability of Bridget's revelations in England since the fourteenth century, see Revelations, ed. W. P. Cumming, E.E.T.S. O.S. 178 (London: Oxford UP, 1929), pp.xxix-xxxi.

[10] Mrs. Noah was only one of several possible role models for Margery. Other figures included Mary of Oignies (d.1213), Catherine of Siena (d.1380), Angela of Foligno (c.1249-1309), and Dorthea of Montau (1347-1394).

[11] This factor makes it difficult to measure the impact of the Marian plays on Margery.

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