CHAPTER TWO

'I believe there never was woman in England so treated as she is, and has been.'
(The Archbishop of York)\(^1\)

*The Book of Margery Kempe* has been a source of controversy ever since its completion in approximately 1438.\(^2\) Margery's contemporaries, who appear alternately amused, amazed and angered by Margery's unusual spiritual vocation and ecstatic religious expression, must have been equally confounded by her decision to record her life experiences in writing. The audacity of her project which makes implicit presumptions about the unique value of Margery's life is reinforced by her gender and her illiteracy. The threat which her text offers to both religious orthodoxy and the established textual traditions of her time is demonstrated by her contemporary reception as both a mystic and an author. Three times Margery is arrested and charged with heresy despite constant protestations of her devotion and adherence to the ordinances of the Catholic Church. Her Book, once written is almost immediately lost and survived in only a few misrepresentative extracts until the accidental discovery of the complete manuscript in 1934.
Margery's modern reception as a writer and religious figure is marked by an ambivalence which reveals the continuing unease caused by her Book. Her highly individualistic spirituality and the fact that she produced any written record of her life, let alone a book-length account of it, has made her a source of interest and dispute for the medieval literary critic and for religious historian alike. It is fair to say that across the centuries Margery's Book has met with an unusual amount of suspicion.

My aim in this chapter is to analyse this response to Margery's Book and question why Margery's 'writing' has proved so disruptive and threatening to those in her own time, and now to both literary and theological scholars. In Section One I shall examine how this uneducated, illiterate woman came to produce a book in a period when textual production was regulated within a strong literary tradition and the construction of literary authority involved a narrow and intensely male definition of authorship. I will look at the ways in which Margery engages this inhibiting textual tradition and the specific problems
raised by her gender and inability to physically write her own book. In order to comprehend the difficulties Margery overcomes, her act of 'writing' must be situated within the dominant textual modes of the late medieval period.

It is also necessary to examine the unorthodoxy of her religious lifestyle, in relation both to the accepted forms of religious expression and the fear of heresy in England at the time and to the culturally pervasive views of women religious which exacerbate Margery's vulnerability. The way she is perceived and treated by her contemporaries affects Margery's image of herself and creates the need to record her life.

There are many parallels between Margery's audacious circumvention of the 'laws' of textual authority and her transgression of accepted religious and social norms. Her Book contravenes socio-religious definitions of Woman, Orthodoxy and Authority as much as it challenges the rigid medieval concepts of authorship.

An examination of the social and textual climate in which
Margery's Book is written leads to a discussion of her contemporary reception. The suppression of her text so soon after its completion drastically curtails the textual history of her Book, leaving a telling silence, broken only by the accidental discovery of the Salthows manuscript a little over fifty years ago. However, an account of the Book's textual genesis alone provides an invaluable insight into its textual history and reception.

Section Two will be devoted to an analysis of Margery's recent reception. It is from the burst of post-1934 criticism that our present views of Margery have been formed. In particular, I will examine the recent application of the label 'autobiography' to Margery's Book and probe the critical assumptions and bias underlying this attribution. It will become evident from this investigation that many of Margery's modern critics still encounter considerable difficulties reading her Book. The reasons for this require investigation in themselves. Many of the problems relate, I believe, to the highly gendered subjectivity of her religious expression and the threat which it poses to traditional constructions of female identity.
The recuperation of Margery has also provided productive new ways of constructing Margery's identity and analysing the broader problems facing those women who pursued a religious vocation in the late medieval period. Sheila Delany and David Aers, in particular, have done much to challenge traditional readings of Margery. Feminist literary historians, too, have begun to reassess Margery's brand of mysticism and have hailed it as an example of the first feminist movement in Europe. The potential historical inaccuracies associated with this description of Margery and with other labels like 'the first woman autobiographer' and 'proto-feminist' will conclude this chapter and provide an introduction to the more prevalent and problematic use of the term 'proto-feminist' in the critical reception of Christine de Pisan.
SECTION ONE

Medieval Textual Production

On reading The Book of Margery Kempe one is forced to address the question of how this woman came to compose a book-length account of her life and spiritual calling - and why? Despite all the research so far undertaken these questions still remain primary to any reading of Margery's work. Unless we confront these issues Margery's Book becomes little more than a useful insight into the social history of town life in fifteenth-century England or the eccentric ramblings of a mentally disturbed religious enthusiast.

This first section will examine the problems surrounding the textual genesis of Margery's Book, focusing in particular on the factors affecting her access to the written word and to the literary authority necessary to compose a religious text in this environment of controlled textual production. These factors are Margery's gender, her irregular religious expression and her
illiteracy.

The Early Textual History of Margery's Book

Margery's illiteracy is, of course, a primary obstacle to her access to the written medium. Deprived of the ability to read the stories of others and unable to write her own, Margery is disadvantaged as a writer in a fundamental way. Moreover, the emphasis on 'authority' in medieval literary theory required an author to establish any new act of writing via the authority of already recognised classical and ecclesiastical writers. The highly scholastic and derivative constructions of literary authority prevent Margery from validating her act of writing in any recognised manner. Unable to authorise her religious treatise in the conventional way, Margery resists recording her story for twenty years. During this time, as will be seen, she seeks an alternative means by which to endorse her life - a method which replaces textual constructions of authority.

Margery eventually attains the confidence and authority to write, but she is still thwarted by the inability to write. She is dependent upon a scribe to record her story. The vulnerability of
her position is testified to by the complex textual history of the Book.

Margery's Book, rather unusually, provides 'an account of its own difficult textual genesis.'\textsuperscript{4} Margery explains that the first scribe she engages deceives her by producing a text so ill-written that, upon his death, Margery could find no other scribe able to read it.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, when a later copyist eventually deciphers the text he discovers 'there was so much obloquy and slander of this creature [Margery] that few men would believe her' (38). The second scribe, a priest in Lynn, promises to rewrite the manuscript but becomes reluctant when he sees the original text. His reticence is compounded by growing criticism of Margery within the local community, sparked by the visiting friar. She gains such a bad reputation within the town that the scribe refuses to consult Margery about her own Book: 'Then there was such evil talk about this creature and her weeping, that the priest out of cowardice dared not speak with her but seldom, nor would write as he had promised the said creature' (36). He finally returns the manuscript to her four years later without having written a word.
On his advice, Margery takes her story to a third scribe who could supposedly read the writing of the first scribe and offers him a large sum of money to insure the work is completed. By this stage, Margery is so discouraged by delays and self-doubt that she instructs the scribe to withhold the transcription until after her death. The anonymous scribe agrees but returns the manuscript with less than one page finished. It is only after the second scribe reads the *vita* of Mary d'Oignies and is again convinced of Margery's spiritual gifts that he resumes the task. On this occasion he even seeks Margery's advise: 'And so he read over every word of it in this creature's presence, she sometimes helping where there was any difficulty' (36). His copy no longer survives. The extant manuscript, dated ca. 1450, is the work of a copyist called Salthows. Whether other copyists influenced the text between these two versions is not known.

The extent of the scribal influence is much contested in recent readings of Margery's Book. Clarissa Atkinson regards the second scribe as a mere instrument used to record Margery's story, although she concedes that his anxiety to preserve his
reputation may have led him to introduce his concerns and his learning, especially in areas regarding Margery's supposed heresy. Many critics maintain the same position, acknowledging the 'bookish concerns of the scribe', but hearing in the Book 'the accent of an authentic voice, the voice of a medieval Englishwomen.'

In opposition to this view Anthony Goodman believes, 'the "Book's" content and argument are probably deeply influenced by the evolution of his [the second scribe's] thought about the nature of Margery's spirituality, and slanted to what he considers appropriate to it...'. John Hirsh goes even further and contends, 'it may be safely stated that the second scribe, no less than Margery, should be regarded as the author of The Book of Margery Kempe.'

The extent of the scribal remains largely hypothetical. There are occasional moments when the presence of the narrator is revealed by a slippage in language. However, these examples do not suggest significant intervention on the part of the scribe. There seems little to be gained from pursuing the question of
scribal influence beyond a recognition of his/their presence.

The danger of misrepresentation does not end with the completion of the second scribe's manuscript or with the Salthows version. Susan Schibanoff points out that until 1934 Margery was only known of through a version of her Book printed in 1501 by Wynkyn de Worde. It was comprised of twelve extracts from Margery's Book, carefully selected to include only the quiet, meditational moments of Margery's spirituality. De Worde removed all accounts of Margery's demonstrative and public expressions of devotion, her numerous pilgrimages and her many 'feelings'. The controversial elements of her story like her heresy trials and her separation from her husband are also omitted. Henry Pepwell reinforces this image of Margery in his re-publication de Worde's version in 1521 by adding the misleading epithet, 'a devout ancre' after Margery's name.

Medieval Literary Theory

Before discussing the ways in which Margery overcomes obstacles to her "writing", it is first necessary to establish the dominant attitude towards textual production and literary
authority against which Margery must define herself. Such a task is far from straightforward, given the present state of the field of medieval literary theory. The study of medieval ideas of textuality, from its earliest proponents such as Ernst Curtius to its more recent scholars like A. J. Minnis, Brian Stock and Jesse Gellrich has been dependent upon the traditional masculinist style of education and shrouded in a degree of isolatory elitism which discourages the entrance of new academics into the area. As a result, women and young academics have found themselves effectively barred from this area of research because of a lack of specialised knowledge of Latin and other classical languages previously provided by this now largely defunct educational system. We remain, therefore, very much reliant on the forementioned scholars for an understanding of medieval theories of textual production.

The narrow, scholarly contexts of these critics provide added problems to any attempt to position Margery within the textual tradition of her day. Minnis derives his theory of medieval authorship from a highly institutionalised context (school and university lectures). However, Margery was excluded from any
form of scholarly enterprise because of her illiteracy. As a result Minnis' work must be read with a critical perspective to make it useful to this study. His theories of medieval authorship do, however, provide a useful starting point from which to begin a discussion on medieval constructions of literary authority.

In *Medieval Theory of Authorship* Minnis argues that during the Middle Ages it is possible to speak of "'theory" of authorship rather than "theories" because of the high degree of consistency with which medieval scholars treated the subject and employed its characteristic vocabulary.'14 He is not alone in this unified vision of medieval textuality. Gellrich in his study of the significance of the book in the medieval period also speaks of 'the unique homogeneity of medieval learning'.15

The fixity in language and the treatment of most subjects was due, in large part, to a strict adherence to the works and philosophies of recognised *auctores*. Gellrich even goes as far as to suggest that the history of medieval ideas about writing, speaking and texts can be summarised as 'the history of *auctores* ("authors") and *actoritates* ("sources")'.16
An auctor is defined by Thomas Greene as 'a writer whose work had commanded respect for so many centuries as to have become an authority (authoritā), to be read as an authentic source of knowledge.' The title was bestowed according to tacit criteria of intrinsic worth and authenticity. The definition of 'worth' required conformity to or compatibility with Christian truths.

The Bible, because it is the embodiment of Christian Truth, formed the basis for medieval literary theory. Eugene Vance explains that literary ideas of authorship and composition were founded upon a single book whose letter and law were thought to 'kill' if not read with the right spirit. It was maintained that because the Bible was God's verbum only figures of recognised religious authority were capable of revealing its Truth. The four evangelists were thus regarded as the most reliable auctores, followed by the Church Fathers, Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. To compete with such figures of authority was considered hubris.

During the Middle Ages the Book remained firmly grounded in
Augustinian and Platonic concepts of imitation. There was no expectation of the kinds of transcendence that Harold Bloom finds to be formative in his construction of modern authorship.\(^9\) The function of an *auctor* lay in providing a fixed frame of reference which could be called upon to bear witness to the validity of a later writer's position, vicariously establishing his own authority as an author. Despite the necessity of conforming to Christian ideology, the title of *auctor* did not exclude the authors of antiquity. Men such as Aristotle and Ovid, once sufficiently distanced from their socio-religious heritage and moralised to comply with Christian orthodoxy, were regarded with the same respect as the traditional Church Patriarchs and ecclesiastical authorities.

The emphasis on the figure of the author rather than the integrity of the text created the need for authenticity. The *auctoritates* had to be recognised as the genuine production of an *auctor*. Works of unknown or uncertain origin were viewed as apocryphal and deemed to possess *auctoritas* of an inferior quality. The indivisible association between the concept of literary worth and the work of an *auctor* caused by the medieval
concern for the reputation of the individual author effectively prevented any expansion of literary authority.

Toward the end of the medieval period these scholastic practices were still dominant. However, writers such as Chaucer and Gower are beginning to exploit this static theory of literary authority whilst still working within its ideological perimeters. In his discussion of Chaucer's literary inheritance Gellrich claims that Chaucer challenges one of the most fundamental premises of the Book in the medieval period. He moves away from the rich tradition of scriptural exegesis which flourished in fourteenth-century English literature and favours a more literal and historical reading of pagan texts. Minnis points to the narrowing of the stylistic gap between sacred and profane poetry in Chaucer's work as a major influence in the literary movement away from the rigid construction of literary authority which constrained his predecessors. The tradition of emphasising one's truth by reference to an auctor is still ingrained in Chaucer but his usage of such sources is far more inventive. For Gellrich, this progression represents a movement away from imitation to interpretation. It is the transition
within literary theory 'from mirror to method' to quote a recent book on the subject. For Chaucer and his followers writing is no longer the straightforward validation of meaning via the authority of an 'old book'.

_Margery and Textuality_

This discussion may seem to carry us away from Margery's own literary experience. Although Margery is influenced by the need for textual validation her Book bears no marks of the self-conscious knowledge of such theories of textuality and literary authority. However, it is important to recognise the limited ways in which Margery does engage the dominant textual traditions which surround and influence her, despite her lack of direct access to them.

Walter Ong, in his study of the oral traditions of different cultures is quick to point out that, 'the Middle Ages were far more textually-centred than antiquity had been.' Although many were still illiterate, the power of the written word had permeated throughout medieval society. Ong explains that commonplace expressions and _auctoritates_, including the
religious sayings that Margery employs, which had been the stock-in-trade of an earlier, essentially oral culture were, from the thirteenth-century onwards gathered together and learned from written (and later printed) collections, rather than remaining reliant on oral transmission. Beryl Smalley's study of fourteenth-century English friars reinforces this point. She states that parish preachers favoured the use of writing in the composition of sermons, although it was an ostensibly oral genre. The sermon, she argues, was concerned with permanent human dispositions (greed, lust, envy) rather than individual circumstances (like legal or political oratory) and could be repeated on several occasions. There was therefore a strong motivation for the clergy to write down and circulate their own sermons and re-use those of others. The popularity of this system is testified to by the enormous number and variety of extant sermon manuals, dating from the thirteenth-century onwards.

The sermon is of considerable importance to Margery. She is dismayed by the decision of the visiting friar at Lynn to barr her from his sermons and attempts everything in her power to
reverse his decision.26 Her distress is so great that eventually Christ quells her loud sobbing, enabling her to once again attend: "...our Lord said to her..., "Daughter, I bid you go back into the Church, for I shall take away from you your crying" (194).

The scant scriptural knowledge Margery acquires from sermons is increased by the aid of a priest who read books to her 'for the most part of seven or eight years' (182). She remembers the books well enough to name several of them for her readers. The Bible 'with doctors' commentaries on it' (182) is, of course, the primary text, although the other texts cited provide important clues to the origin of Margery's religious expression and vocation.

The benefits of access to sermons, ecclesiastical commentary and saint's vitae are acknowledged by Margery several times: 'Thus, through listening to holy books and through listening to holy sermons, she was always increasing in contemplation and holy meditation' (183). They are the sole means by which she has access to the large body of inspirational and instructional religious literature which was produced during this period and
her only means of engaging the textual authorities against which she must defend herself. The textual knowledge she acquires is so vital to Margery that, together with the aid of Christ, it provides her with the 'ability to answer every clerk': 'an important compensation for an illiterate woman, for it empowers her with learning she never had.'

Margery's knowledge of holy texts is most evident in her awareness of the auctoritates of St Paul and St Jerome. It is no coincidence that both these Church Fathers were noted for their disparaging estimation of women. Their outspoken relegation of women in the Church to passive, silent and subordinate roles presents them as perhaps the greatest threat to Margery's vocation as a mystic.

Their anti-feminist stance was widely disseminated in secular and religious works alike. Rose Woodburn claims that Jerome was one of the principal ecclesiastical writers employed in sermons; a point with which G. R. Owst also concurs. Chaucer, too, incorporates the sayings of Jerome and Paul into the tale of the 'Wif of Bath'. In the story, Alice describes how her fifth
husband read to her from his 'Book of Wikked Wives' to reinforce the view of women's innate moral and intellectual inferiority. The book named is imaginary but many works of this type did exist and were frequently used to similar effect. In the controversial *Querelle de la Rose* Christine de Pisan, whose writing we will later examine, complains bitterly that the *Roman de la Rose* is misused by men to the detriment of women. In a letter to Pierre Col, Christine declares that she knows of a man who reads the poem to his wife to vindicate his violent and shameful treatment of her:

Not long ago, I heard one of your familiar companions and colleagues, a man with authority, say that he knew a married man who believed in the *Roman de la Rose* as in the gospel. This was an extremely jealous man, who, whenever in the grip of passion, would go and find the book and read it to his wife; then he would become violent and strike her and say horrible things as, "These are the kinds of tricks you pull on me. This good wise man Jeun de Meun knew well what women are capable of."\(^{30}\)

During her trial at Leicester Margery uses her limited textual knowledge to confront the considerable threat posed by Paul's
opposition to women's public speech. The cleric who examines Margery on this issue declares, 'she has the devil in her'. He claims that her position on women's right to teach aligns her with the Lollard heresy and contradicts the teaching of Paul, which he eagerly recites: 'A cleric quickly produced a book and quoted St Paul for his part against her, that no woman should preach' (164). Margery seems to be faced with either contradicting Paul or betraying herself. She does neither. She defends her public speech by distinguishing between preaching in the pulpit (which is formally invested with authority from the Church) and speaking of God in conversation.31 This clever, if not entirely new distinction disarms the Pauline admonitions of 1 Timothy 2.32

On the same occasion Margery, herself, quotes from the Bible, using the passage in Luke 11: 27-28 to refute the Archbishop's decision that she 'should not teach people or call them to account' (164). Curiously, the same passage she quotes, although not a particularly explicit defence of women's public speech, is also used by William Brute, a self-confessed Lollard who defended women's right to preach, and again by Christine de
Pisan in *The Book of the City of Ladies*.³³

One other contentious biblical text which Margery addresses is Paul's description of the hierarchy of virgin, widow and wife. According to Paul's teaching only virgins could achieve true mystical espousal with Christ. Despite some concessions to its importance late in the medieval period, the prevalent teaching of the Church still presented marriage as a necessary evil.³⁴ The *Ancrene Riwle* and *Hali Meihad*, both medieval religious treatises designed specifically for women, deprecate marriage and present a most discouraging portrait of its domestic life.³⁵ Margery, who is both wife and mother at the time she receives her spiritual calling, urgently needs to establish the legitimacy of her vocation in the face of such prevalent Church attitudes.

Margery's method of coping with the blatant conflict between Paul's sexual hierarchy and her own marital status presents difficulties of its own. Unable to counter Paul's very specific *auctoritas* on this matter without contradiction, Margery finds herself able to claim special exemption from God, who comes to her in the form of a vision and declares:
...rest assured that I love wives also...For though the state of maidenhood be far more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet I love you, daughter, as much as any maiden in the world. (pp. 84-85) [emphasis mine]

The question of the origin of such convenient visions is unavoidable. Naturally, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which Margery's visions are unconscious manifestations of wish-fulfilment. In this circumstance and in others they offer a solution to otherwise insurmountable obstacles to her vocation. The completely individualised way in which Margery transcends such problems further suggests that they originate within herself at some level. The temptation to psychoanalyse at this point is great but must be avoided for the present moment.

Although the counter-argument Margery offers to Paul's text is insufficient and unsatisfying, it reveals a degree of respect for textual authority which we would not expect from one who is illiterate. This respect for the 'text' can be most effectively highlighted by a brief comparison between Margery and her most
famous fictional counterpart, the Wife of Bath.

The parallels between Margery and Alice have been frequently overemphasised by critics who wish to view Margery as an historical incarnation of Alice and prove Chaucer the unrivalled creator of 'real' characters. However, there are obvious superficial comparisons to be made. Both are middle-aged, bourgeois women with strong personalities and a degree of personal autonomy rare for women of the period. They are also both illiterate. Despite this their attitudes to textual authority are markedly different. Alice is aware of Paul's teaching on women through her husband's treasured "Book of Wikked Wives" and feels the same need to confront these anti-feminist claims as Margery. Unfettered by religious conviction, Alice mocks the passages and dismisses them without a strong sense of anxiety. She displays no respect for the authority of the text. Not only does she refute Paul's allegations openly, but she tries to burn the book in a symbolic act of defiance. Margery, as we have seen, is unable merely to disregard or cast aside Paul's statements. Instead she is driven to find a method, however untenable, to overcome the implications of Paul's text, whilst leaving its
authority intact.

Margery and Orality

It has to be acknowledged that despite Margery's comparative respect for the written word her interaction with the established modes of textual production and literary validation is limited. She is unwilling to discount Paul's statements or challenge their anti-feminism but she is prepared to override his claims with heavenly exemptions. Even when she employs the authority of Paul and Jerome to her advantage, in the question of her holy tears, she continues to display her willingness to supplant fixed textual validation with intangible personal affirmation provided in her visions. Margery is aware that the saints' approval of holy tears as a legitimate and praiseworthy gift is vital to the public acceptance of her mystical calling. She therefore exploits their written advocacy of her tears (which she no doubt memorised) to the full.

The impersonal nature of an auctoritas must seem insubstantial to Margery when compared to the highly personalised oral forms of affirmation she receives from her revelations and from living
spiritual authorities. It is not then surprising that in addition to their written advocacy of tears both Paul and Jerome are sent to Margery in visions to provide her with personal assurances which could not be derived from their writing alone. Jerome appears to Margery when she visits his tomb in Rome and reaffirms her tears as a 'singular and special gift' (136). Furthermore, Margery describes how, 'with a manner of conversing he highly comforted her spirits. And he also gave great praise and thanks to God for the grace he wrought in her soul' (136).

While Jerome gives his personal blessing to Margery's tears Paul plays an even more significant role, dismissing once and for all any doubts Margery has, or is confronted with, regarding her right as a woman and a wife to serve God as she has chosen. In what amounts to a virtual retraction of his biblical stance, Paul is sent by God to apologise to Margery for the trouble he has caused:

[God reminds Margery that]..St Paul said to you that you had suffered much tribulation because of his writing and he promised you that because of this you should have as much grace for his love as you ever had shame or reproof.
for his love. (p. 199) [emphasis mine]

Once more Margery reveals her willingness to transcend the
textual with the oral.

The unconscious prioritisation of the oral over the written is so
integral to Margery that it is directly manifested in the
composition of the text. The words Margery selects to describe
her visit to Julian of Norwich directly reveal her elevation of
the spoken word above the authority of the written word. Julian
was not an influential member of the Church hierarchy but she
was a famed anchorite in her own lifetime and much respected
in the district in which she and Margery both lived.

Julian reassures Margery of the divine origin of her tears by
quoting the auctoritas of Paul and Jerome. As a literate and well-
read woman Julian is able to use such textual authorities with
ease. However, although the quotation from Paul is accurate, the
quotation which Julian attributes to St Jerome has no precise
equivalent in Jerome's writing. Julian states, 'St Jerome says
that tears torment the devil more than do the pains of hell' (78).
It is an expression commonly attributed to Jerome but its.
closest equivalent is found in the words of St Bernard: 'Tears of a sinner torment the devil more than every kind of torture.'\textsuperscript{37} Jerome says something quite different: 'Prayers please God, but tears constrain him [to show mercy]; prayers soften, but tears compel.'\textsuperscript{38} This error would not be significant in itself given the equal status of the \textit{auctores}, except that further on in the Book Margery echoes Jerome's actual words when she asks God for tears of contemplation: 'Therefore, Lord, I wish I had a well of tears to constrain you with, so that you would not take utter vengeance on man's soul' (180). Lochrie, in her comment on this discrepancy, suggests: 'Although she doesn't attribute her words to Jerome, she is apparently aware of his doctrine of tears, for she invokes his words at least one other time in the prayer printed at the end of the Meech/Allen edition (p. 249).\textsuperscript{39} Lochrie fails to notice that Margery makes reference to this saying on still another occasion. In her vision of Jerome he almost exactly repeats the \textit{auctoritas} attributed to him: 'Blessed are you, daughter in the weeping that you weep for people's sins, for many shall be saved thereby' (41). Lochrie offers no suggestion as to why Margery failed to correct the error. If Margery did not correct Julian it is not because she did not recognise the
mistake. Yet it would be remarkable if Margery recognised the error and left it unaltered without a reason. To amend the quotation would have done no harm, as Jerome's true statement on tears is positive anyway. Therefore it would seem probable that Margery deliberately included the mistake. This leads to the conclusion that Margery elevated Julian's personal affirmation above the textual quotation she uses. The oral testimony, regardless of its textual inaccuracies, is of greater personal value to Margery than the correct auctoritas.

In each of these efforts to validate her tears Margery reveals her prioritisation of oral and directly personal forms of affirmation. Texts remain static, impersonal and ultimately alien to Margery. Despite her familiarity with some of the most famous religious auctores and their sayings, Margery cannot make the transition from an oral to a textual culture. She derives the authority to record her story from oral forms of support (material and transcendental) and it is to this aspect of the struggle for recognition that we can now turn.

**Oral Structure**
In the *Proem* to her narrative Margery reveals the source from which she derives the confidence to consider herself worthy to write a religious treatise. She explains, how, in order to seek affirmation of her spiritual calling she went ‘to many worthy clerics, both archbishops and bishops, doctors of divinity, and bachelors as well’ (34). The continual search for personal affirmation is an arduous task and as a result Margery informs us that ‘it was twenty years and more from the time that this creature first had feelings and revelations before she had any written’ (35). During this time Margery receives personal confirmation of her lifestyle, tears and visions from the majority of her contemporary spiritual leaders. Her list of mentors includes the local anchorite of the Preaching Friars who becomes her confessor, the Bishop of Lincoln, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Bristol, the Dean of Leicester, the Papal Legate in Constance, a German priest of high office in Rome and belatedly, the Archbishop of York. The description of just one of these visits must suffice to show the way in which Margery was received by the Church and the personal approval she elicits.
Soon after her second vision and full conversion to a spiritual vocation Margery journeys with her husband to visit the Bishop of Lincoln. He greets her warmly and grants her an interview in which to discuss such visions 'as the Lord revealed to her soul' (69). Initially, she paraphrases his response, stating that he 'greatly commended her feelings and high contemplations, saying they were high matters, and inspired by the Holy Ghost, advising her seriously that her feelings should be written down' (69). Later when the Bishop addresses the issue of the white robe and ring that Margery seeks permission to wear, a matter of great significance to Margery, she repeats the conversation in full. At their first meeting she reports the Bishop as declaring, "I will fulfil your desire [to wear white] if your husband will consent to it" (69). She describes how on a later day this agreement was repealed. The Bishop admits, "...I am advised not to profess you in such singular clothing without more consideration" (70). He goes on to promise that the question will be reconsidered after Margery has returned from her pilgrimage to Jerusalem and proved her devotion. The account does not end at this point. Margery continues to explain that, after much deliberation and a vision from God, she returns to
the Bishop and condemns his decision as cowardice. A portion of her response to her criticism is retained in the first person to impress upon the reader the exactness with which the words are recorded: 'Then he prayed to her to go to the Archbishop of Canterbury - Arundel - "and pray him to grant leave to me, the Bishop of Lincoln," to give her the mantle and the ring, inasmuch as she was not from his diocese' (71). The verbatim repetition of a number of her meetings with Church leaders demonstrates the enormous emphasis Margery puts upon their personal testimony. As Lochrie explains in her essay on Margery's search for literary authority: 'As witnesses to her living and counsellors to her text, these spiritual consultants supplant traditional medieval textual authority.'

The style and structure of Margery's Book reveal other indications of the entrenched oral habits of the author. Brian Stock, in his analysis of the transition from an oral- to a textually-based culture during the Middle Ages, explains that the oral traditions still flourished for some time despite the growth of lay literacy. Oral traditions often focused on gestures, rituals and symbols whose long-established
significance functioned as efficiently as the sententious 'textualised' sayings of the recognised auctores. This view would seem to explain the frequent parallels Margery establishes between the events of her life and those of other religious figures, in particular, Mary Magdelene and St Bridget. Margery identifies with Mary Magdelene on several occasions. The guilt of her repressed sexuality, exacerbated by the cynical response to her late conversion to a spiritual life of celibacy is no doubt part of the reason for this close association. Mary Magdalene was the archetype of the sexually sinful woman who converts to a life of purity and becomes one of the Christian role models available to women of the period. Christ reassures Margery that her status as a wife and mother is no barrier to her complete union with Him, by comparing her to Mary: "'Ah, daughter," said the Lord, "do not be afraid. I take no notice of what a man has been, but I take heed of what he will be...Bear in mind daughter, what Mary Magdelene was...for of the unworthy, I make worthy, and of sinful, I make righteous"" (85).

The other characteristic with which Margery identifies is Mary's weeping. In another vision the Virgin Mary appears and directly
alludes to this shared gift: "Nor was Mary Magdelene ashamed to cry and weep for my son's love. And therefore, daughter, if you will be a partaker in our joy, you must be a partaker in our sorrow" (109). On another occasion Margery intensifies this experience by imagining herself to be with Mary Magdelene at the discovery of Christ's empty tomb: 'And soon after, this creature was in contemplation with Mary Magdelene, mourning and seeking our Lord at the grave...' (238).

Margery's concern with the way in which her life mirrors those of the holy family and saints might also account for the lack of didacticism in her text. Margery does not attempt to formulate any theological premises or challenge biblical exegesis. Neither does she extrapolate from her own experience to that of other women. This failure to insist upon any correlation between her own struggles and those of other contemporary women poses important interpretative limitations on any feminist readings of Margery's work; a point which will be returned to in more detail.

The narrative style, despite its transmission through a literate scribe, continues to reflect the orally-based form of the book.
This is not to say that there is no imposed sense of bookishness. The Proem self-consciously invokes several common rhetorical devices in an attempt to lend authority to the text. The use of literary devices is, however, strictly limited. The book retains an undeniably oral prose style and format. The text is narrated very much in the style of an oral account that has found its way onto paper. The episodes are arranged in an associative rather than sequential fashion. The narration leaps from one occurrence to another as one event calls another to mind. The images, too, are often homely, as several modern critics have disparagingly observed and the overall tone is informal, almost conversational.44

One explanation for the often clumsy structure of the Book is Margery’s inability to refer to any literary models. She has no textual framework on which to base her composition. Verbal accounts of the lives of continental women religious no doubt provided Margery with many of her models for religious expression. Her imagery, visions and lifestyle reflect their influence. However the disparate formats of verbal and textual narrative renders them useless to Margery at a textual level.
Although Margery has no access to the written accounts of the mystics lives which influence her form of spirituality, it would no doubt have been possible, should she have so desired, to imitate the formal structure of the saints *vitae*. These *vitae* were common and often available in vernacular translation. They retained such a rigid narrative format that they were a relatively easy model to imitate from loud readings alone. We therefore need to look at reasons for Margery's rejection of the one available literary model of a religious life.

The hagiographical format is not suitable to the purpose of sanctifying Margery. It is too formulaic, relying heavily on a fixed narrative structure (childhood devotion to Christ, rejection of marriage etc...) Margery's pre-conversion life and irregular 'manner of living' does not lend itself to such a framework. The account of a saintly infancy, for example, has no place in Margery's story. Instead she has to bypass her youth altogether and begin with her first pregnancy and the vision she received during post-partum depression. The composition of the text during Margery's lifetime increases the difficulty of
rewriting Margery's life to fit the hagiographical form. Her previous sinful life cannot be ignored, given her high social profile within the township as the mayor's daughter.

Margery's Book veers still further away from textual traditions because of its unresolved conclusion. It finishes without resolution and offers no explanation for its cessation at this point. The story does not close on a note of triumph or at a moment which suggests the final achievement of Margery's quest for spiritual validation and recognition. Her future is left completely undetermined, leaving the reader to speculate in vain about Margery's fate.

The inconclusiveness of the text provides a possible clue to its proposed audience. The lack of closure suggests the possibility of an ongoing relationship with its readers. Margery's local community would therefore seem to be the probable audience for the Book. It would stand to reason that if Margery intended her Book to be read (either in her lifetime or shortly after her death) by her fellow townsfolk then she would/could not conclude it with any artificially imposed sense of finality and
The constant suspicion and hostility maintained toward Margery by the inhabitants of Lynn would make them the most likely recipients of this effort to explain her behaviour from a spiritual perspective. Her unswerving determination to be accepted in the township as a genuine mystic is demonstrated by her refusal to leave Lynn in the face of community opposition to her presence: 'Then some of her friends came to her and said it would be more comfortable for her to go out of the town than stay there, because so many people were against her. And she said she would stay there as long as God wanted' (193).

In summary, it can be seen that Margery's Book is undoubtedly a literary work created by a substantially oral mentality. Margery achieves limited access to the written word through such oral mediums as sermons and loud readings. She is aware of the potency of the written word and uses such knowledge as she has to its full extent. However, Margery's search for spiritual validation ultimately relies on the personal affirmation offered to her by living spiritual leaders and her mystical visions. The
text reflects an oral culture in its structure and style. The open-ended nature of the book ignores established textual traditions of closure and indicates that its composition was probably an attempt to silence Margery's closest and harshest critics.

**Contemporary Response**

The possible readership Margery intended for her Book leads to the question of the reception Margery received from her contemporaries. To understand the personal motives that drove Margery to undertake the demanding task of having her story recorded it is necessary to examine the range of responses which Margery describes in her Book to her 'manner of living'. Given the non-linear sequence of the narrative and the absence of a meta-narrative to clarify the detailed individual responses to Margery, any definitive statement would require enormous over-simplification. Not only is the narrative itself confusing but the disparity of response creates a large degree of ambiguity concerning the way in which Margery was treated. To facilitate a clearer notion of just where Margery's main opposition lay, and why she may have provoked such an extreme
and often hostile response, I have divided contemporary responses to Margery into three groupings. These distinctions are necessarily artificial and are not intended to provide clear cut comparisons. However, by examining reactions to Margery along the definitions of these groupings, the various objections to Margery and their underlying causes and promoters will be better exposed.

The first distinction, between secular and clerical responses to Margery's mysticism will touch upon some of the reasons for their difference in attitude to this woman. The second section will address the closely related question of the lay and clerical intolerance shown toward Margery's mode of religious expression. It will contrast the continental tradition of affective piety from which Margery draws much inspiration against the form of ascetic piety which characterised English expressions of the mystical devotion during the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. Margery's relationship with both models of piety must be examined because her attraction to continental expressions of devotion is distorted by the entrenched and contradictory nature of religious expression in England. The
final section addresses the gendered nature of the reaction to Margery and questions the socio-political basis of contemporary response. By examining the specific accusations laid against Margery, it will investigate the degree to which Margery's 'heresy' is attributable to a shared perception of Margery's social threat. The response of women to Margery's behaviour and the extent to which they respond to the implications of Margery's example will also receive attention.

**Clerical Response**

The reaction of the clerical community to Margery is, on the whole, marked by tolerance, acceptance and approval. The list of respected religious personages from whom Margery claims to have received confirmation of her gifts and lifestyle contains some of the most prestigious Church names from Margery's surrounding countryside and also further afield throughout England and the continent. Of the religious figures whom Margery seeks out in person, none refuse to admit her or repudiate her once she has spoken with them. The Archbishop of Canterbury, we are told 'did not find fault at all, but approved of her manner of life' (72) and the Dean of Leicester is reported to
have 'had great confidence that our Lord loved her' (155). Even the Archbishop of York, who initially accuses Margery of being a 'false heretic' is forced to admit after questioning her that he also 'found no fault in her' (170).

Margery's conflict with religious figures invariably arises when she encounters lesser members of the clergy and mendicant orders by chance. Margery meets no serious clerical opposition until she joins a company on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land two years after her conversion. The priest in the company does not raise any theological reasons for his repudiation of Margery, but like the other members of the pilgrimage, he quickly becomes 'annoyed because she wept so much and spoke all the time about the love and goodness of our Lord' (97). Personal animosity alone is unlikely to be the cause of this priest's continuous, vicious attacks on Margery. He seems to have reacted to her rejection of his authority. Margery simply exclaims: 'The cause of his malice was that she would not obey him' (120). This explanation cannot, of course, be substantiated but it would account for the priest's vehement desire to destroy Margery's spiritual reputation.
Margery's other major religious opponent is the visiting friar at her local church in Lynn. Margery's joy at hearing a man whose name and ...skill in preaching were very widely known' (187), is short lived. The friar's impatience with Margery's sobbing leads to her expulsion from his sermons. Despite the efforts of two local priests and a White Friar, the new friar remains unconvinced of the divine origin of Margery's weeping: 'Then he, neither giving credence to the doctor's words nor the bachelor's, trusting a great deal on the favour of the people, said he would not look favourably on her crying...for he would not believe that it was a gift of God' (189). The debate about Margery's tears reaches a point where the friar tries to bribe Margery by stating, 'he would have patience with her and allow her to cry enough, if she would say it was a natural illness' (190). Such a denial is impossible for Margery and she is forced to endure exile until Christ removes her violent sobs.

During the trials for heresy, the representatives of the Church are unable to discern any error in Margery's adherence to the Catholic faith. The Archbishop of York, initially hostile, is soon satisfied with her religious orthodoxy. A friar, working for the
Duke of Bedford, accuses her of Lollardy but his claim that she is the daughter of Cobham, the contemporary arch-Lollard, sent to carry letters about the country, attracts little serious attention. Other heretical charges at both trials are quickly dismissed and Margery is sent away from the second trial with a letter from the Archbishop as a record of her vindication against all charges of heresy.

The few remaining religious figures who object to Margery do so as a result of local rumour. Margery tells how an anchorite in York who had greatly loved her before she went to Jerusalem later refused to receive her ‘because she had heard so much evil talked about her’ (157). Another anchorite, in the Chapel-in-the-Fields, secluded from all but local slander also turns against her ‘through evil talk that he had heard about her’ (140). The lack of any clear foundation for their negative opinions of Margery makes their estimations of her useless, but provides a telling indication of the strength and prevalence of false rumours about Margery.
Margery and the Fifteenth-Century Counter-Revolution

The clerical response can be portrayed as largely positive. Yet there remains an undeniable sense of ambivalence amongst the higher ranks of the Church which goes beyond personal estimations of this woman. Their treatment of Margery is far more polite and approving than that of the lesser religious figures who meet Margery informally. It is accompanied, however, by reserve and caution. Philip Repyngdon is forced to moderate his original assessment of Margery by denying her permission to wear white. The Archbishop of York finds nothing irregular in Margery's religious expression but is still anxious to curtail her visit and have her escorted out of his diocese as soon as possible. At the trials, even those clergy who believe Margery a godly woman, such as a master of divinity who promises to defend her, distance themselves until they discover whether the trial will go against her. Those who examine Margery condone her religious vocation but do not commend it. Margery is never openly acclaimed by the Church. She receives numerous oral affirmations in private, but in public she is only grudgingly vindicated after she has defended herself against
heresy charges based on suspicion and religious intolerance.

The reasons for the duality of the Church's response to Margery are complex and need to be disentangled. Margery's own relationship with the Church is ambiguous in the extreme and the threat she poses is reflected in the clerical reaction to Margery.

Margery's call to reside in the world, whilst remaining separate from it, dooms her to live on the margins of society. As a consequence she is, in one sense, highly dependent on the clergy. It is to these spiritual leaders and not her family or friends that Margery turns for emotional and spiritual support. However, her position within the Church is vulnerable because the people on whom Margery relies for the affirmation necessary to establish her credibility as a mystic are the very ones who are reluctant to grant her any overt tokens of approval. The clergy are threatened by Margery despite her scriptural orthodoxy. One monk goes so far as to exclaim: 'I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you' (63).
Margery's position within the Church is made even more tenuous by the nature of her spiritual gifts. The continual mistrust with which her sobbing is greeted makes open advocacy of such a gift difficult. More seriously, Margery's spiritual revelations strike a raw nerve in the Catholic Church at this time. The recent furore over the authenticity of St Bridget of Sweden's visions made the Church wary of the origins of any mystical visions. The growing threat of Lollardy throughout England exacerbates the Church's fear further.

Lollardy was initially inspired by the attacks made upon the Catholic Church by John Wyclif in the second half of the fourteenth-century. Wyclif, an Oxford theologian, criticised the Church on two fronts; he deplored the political hierarchy of the Church and its encumbrance of institutional religious orders and he challenged the doctrine of transubstantiation and other Catholic beliefs. His central thesis was simple, but radical for its time. He contended that all organised bodies of the Christian community as they stood in their worldly forms had strayed from the apostolic model established by Christ's disciples. As a result, all four orders of the Church, the Papacy, the monks, the
canons and the friars incur intense criticism.

Atkinson points out that the popularist movement of Lollardy had less to do with doctrine than with religious disposition and moral attitude. The movement, which quickly expanded beyond Wyclif's provocative tracts, represented a growing protest against the corruption, greed and wealth of the Church. Lollardy stressed scriptural simplicity, declaring many of the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church not specifically mentioned in the Bible to be idolatrous.

With the accession of the rigidly orthodox Lancastrians to the throne came the anti-Lollard act of 1401, *De haeretico comburendo*. The first heretic to be burned at the stake was William Sawtre(y), the parish priest of St Margaret's, Lynn. Margery, although she had not yet commenced her spiritual vocation, could hardly fail to have been effected by the proximity and sensationalism of the event. As Allen observes: 'In view of the Lollard burnings all around Margery, martyrdom was no longer the academic subject it had been at most periods in England.'
The association made by Sir John Oldcastle between heresy and sedition excited the fear of Lollardy. A. C. Spearing observes that in response to this threat a 'more restricted and repressive intellectual climate' developed. In the early fourteenth-century Chaucer may well have been free to speculate about classical paganism and associate with members of the 'Lollard knights' but his successors, Lydgate and Hoccleve, wrote in an atmosphere of increasing religious intolerance:

There is much evidence, ...after the opening decade of the fifteenth-century, of a growth in fear and intolerance. The determination to take shelter within a more rigidly defined orthodoxy against what were perceived as terrifying dangers to the Church and state seems likely to have discouraged any further developments of Chaucer's questioning attitude.

Margery's urgent need for spiritual guidance and support is not surprising in this environment. Her identity is so completely absorbed in these manifestations of her religious devotion that she must be certain of their divine, rather than diabolic origin:
'She would rather have suffered any bodily penance than these feelings, if she might put them aside, such was the fear that she had of delusions and deceptions by her spiritual enemies. She had such great trouble with such feelings...that her confessor feared that she would fall into despair at them' (90). Margery's own insecurities and lack of theological training mean that peace of mind can only be achieved through the endorsement of the Church. To this end, Margery is anxious to demonstrate her adherence to the authority of the Church whenever possible.

Ironically, the visions which Margery desperately seeks to legitimate through the support of the Church, are the very obstacle to her full participation within it. Margery's intense mystical experience and direct communication with God prevents her spirituality from being totally subsumed by the Church. In Jerusalem Christ appears to Margery and describes her privileged spiritual position. She is to remain obedient to the Church but will no longer be placed under its authority. Instead, she is to accept Christ's direct authority over her life and follow his commands: 'And I am well pleased with you, daughter, because you are obedient to Holy Church, and you obey
your confessor and follow his council, who, by authority of Holy Church, has absolved you of your sins and dispensed you, so that you need not go to Rome or to St James at Compostella unless you wish to yourself. Notwithstanding all this, I command you in the name of Jesus, daughter, that you go to visit these holy places and do as I bid you, for, I am above Holy Church, and I shall go with you and keep you safe' (108). In essence, Margery is placed in the paradoxical position of relying on the Church to provide validation for her religious existence outside its control.

The implications of Margery's visions are recognised by the Church, although not directly. As Atkinson points out, Margery, like all mystics, is vulnerable to charges of heresy because her direct relationship with Christ bypasses the services of the Church.56 This vulnerability and the perception of the threat she poses is exaggerated by already present challenges to the Church at home and abroad in the form of the Schism, the growth of alternative religious movements and, in England the particular threat of the Lollard heresy. In this climate of religious turmoil it is not surprising that Margery is mistakenly
confused for a Lollard.

The Church's response to Margery's position of dependency, on the one hand, and autonomy on the other is of a somewhat contradictory nature. The English Church in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries responded to Lollardy and other threats to its dominance with a combination of repression and reformation. In her article on Margery, Sarah Beckwith declares: 'Medieval mystics often presented a source of intense anxiety to the Church which regarded itself as the "Keeper of the Word," an anxiety intensified in a period of increasing lay literacy, where mysticism was a vital form of religious distress and dissent. But often mystic and the mystical experience could, just as readily be used as a "bulwark against heresy."' 57

The religious distress and dissent of which Beckwith speaks finds its earliest articulation in the work of Hope Emily Allen. She states: 'One influence on Margery's mysticism, which touched the very safety of life and limb, was probably subject to repercussion from the careers of contemporary mystics abroad.' 58 This was, she elucidates, the problem of the
'discernment of spirits' which was a heavily debated question of the time. The problem had featured prominently in the canonisation of St Bridget and the acceptance of her *Book of Revelations*. Margery, who claims a special bond with Bridget and was influenced by her mysticism, was doubtless deeply troubled by the rumours of her demonically-inspired visions. A number of prominent English clergy, including 'the Cardinal of England' participated in this debate and raised the profile of mysticism and its potential dangers to the Church.\textsuperscript{59}

The Church matched its increasing suppression and unease with what Allen names the 'fifteenth-century Counter-Reformation'. The Church attempted to revive its emotional appeal, making it more accessible to its disillusioned parishioners. Instructional and devotional texts were made available in the vernacular and people were encouraged to focus on the more human, and easily identifiable side of Christ. Atkinson contends that this reformation might account for Margery's widespread clerical acceptance. As the war against heresy intensified throughout Europe influential members of the Church, such as Jacques de Vitry and Thomas de Cantimpré, noted the value of the growing
women's religious movement for the Church. Continuing the example of the more overtly politicised women figures like Catherine of Siena and Ss Beatrice I and II of Este, the beguine communities in southern France and the Lowlands participated in the struggle against the Church's political and ideological foes by attracting women away from the heretical sects to which they were drifting in increasing numbers. The passive nature of the female saint in the early Middle Ages, whose devotion was commonly expressed through silent suffering was transformed. Women mystics of the fourteenth-century were seen to represent 'an alternative to and criticism of male power' whilst remaining loyal to the Papacy. According to Susan Dickman their 'lack of worldly power' made them 'an indictment and a correction of male failing' but precluded any serious threat to the Church's own power. The clergy were certainly more familiar with Margery's demonstrative form of religious expression and mystical devotion because of the current queries concerning spiritual discernment and the growing number of continental women who professed similar religious experiences to Margery. Margery's overt and unquestioning loyalty to the Catholic Church made her a useful means of propaganda. She was
evidently no Lollard, despite the accusations. She fasted, attended regular priestly confession, held a completely orthodox view of the Eucharist and travelled extensively to visit religious relics and sites; in short, she was devoted to all the rituals and practices of the Catholic Church condemned by the Lollards. However, it must be added that her use as a counter-measure against growing religious discontent and the emergence of new 'heretical' movements was necessarily limited. Her own position in the Church was too tenuous for the clergy to openly endorse Margery and she remained very much an 'unpaid' servant of the Catholic Church.

Secular Response

The secular response to Margery is less ambivalent, but no more positive. The dual extremes of hostility and enthusiasm with which she is greeted are not ambiguous, but simply contradictory.

The lay people who display the most overt disapproval of Margery are the inhabitants of Lynn. Their knowledge of Margery in her pre-conversion life makes her sudden calling to God...
unusual, and hence suspicious. Margery portrays herself, in her pre-conversion life, as the archetype of the sinful woman: she is vain, proud, greedy and very much 'of the flesh.' Her 'showy manner of dressing' and her overt snobbery attracts 'many adverse comments' (43) from her neighbours. Her reputation is such that the townsfolk attribute the failure of her business enterprises to divine retribution for her sins: 'Then it was noised about in the town of N [Lynn] that neither man nor beast would serve the said creature, and some said she was accursed; some said God openly took vengeance on her' (45).

When Margery adopts her new spiritual vocation she is met with even greater criticism. She explains that 'very many people who loved her before while she was in the world abandoned her' (48). Her neighbours find difficulty in accepting that Margery, once so proud and ambitious for worldly success, should transform so completely. Shortly after her conversion, Margery narrates one telling encounter: 'And those people who knew of her behaviour previously and now heard her talk so of the joy of heaven said to her, "Why do you talk so much of the bliss of heaven? You don't know it, and you haven't been there any more than we have"' (46).
This response is perhaps initially understandable given the radical inversion of Margery's lifestyle. Christ, too, was rejected in his hometown by those who could not believe the local carpenter to be the Son of God.

The doubt about Margery's sincerity is reinforced by the refusal of a temporary confessor to accept her 'feelings' as divinely inspired. Her regular confessor re-affirms Margery's gift but exonerates his companion: 'It is no wonder, daughter, that he cannot believe in your feelings so soon. He knows very well that you have been a sinful woman, and he therefore thinks that God would not be on terms of homely familiarity with you so soon' (80).

The continuing doubts expressed in Lynn about Margery's spiritual status and sincerity characterise the local attitude to Margery's religious vocation. Outside Lynn, Margery is accused of numerous offenses including, seeking to lead women astray, being a prostitute, having illegitimate children and practising Lollardy. The main criticism she faces from the local community is that of hypocrisy. From the moment of her conversion her
weeping incites shouts of hypocrisy and exhibitionism: '...and therefore many people said she was a false hypocrite and wept when in company for advantage and profit' (48).

The depth of feeling against Margery produces stories of her false behaviour which travel throughout England and to some parts of the continent. The most widespread story of Margery's hypocrisy almost certainly originated in Lynn. Whilst visiting London later in life, Margery is confronted by a persistent rumour about her which she has already heard 'many times and in many places' (288), and which she believes was contrived 'not long after the conversion of the said creature' (288). It is first related to her by some-one who recognises her as 'Mar Kempe of Lynn' (289), and when she later questions other narrators of the same story they declare, 'we have heard tell that there is such a false and pretending hypocrite in Lynn' (289). Given the assumed time of creation and the emphasis on geographical locality, it seems probable that these rumours began in Margery's hometown.

Local attitudes towards Margery are not completely
antipathetic. There are some amongst both the clergy and the lay population who are tolerant, if not actively supportive, of Margery's religious vocation. When a dispute arises concerning the new church font it is Margery that the local priest consults. Similarly, during the fire which threatens the township Margery is summoned to use her powers to save the church: 'And notwithstanding that at other times they could not endure her crying ... on this day, in order to lessen their physical danger, they allowed her to cry and weep as much as she liked, ...fully trusting and believing that through her crying and weeping our Lord would take them to mercy' (202). There are even those who, at various times, defend Margery against the slander of the visiting friar. The fickle response of parishioners to the conflict between the friar and Margery reflects the community's overall uncertainty about Margery's spiritual status. There are those who 'turned against Margery and were glad that the good friar held against her' (180). Yet when the friar speaks openly against Margery, 'there was much protest amongst the people for many men and many women trusted and loved her very much' (191). Of those that had forsaken her because of the friar's preaching, many 'repented and turned to her once more' (193).
Secular opposition to Margery, despite some 'change of heart' remains more pervasive and adamant than the support she receives. Her confessor is alternately threatened and bribed by important lay members of the town to retract his support for her:

Priest: 'I have heard much evil talk of you since you went away, and I have been strongly advised to leave you and great friendships have been promised to me on condition that I give you up.'

When this attempt fails another is made, again attacking Margery indirectly, by forbidding her association with the local friar who reads to her. Both efforts by the lay people of Lynn seek to undermine Margery's clerical support and isolate her from the community. Fortunately, Margery's local confessor, the parish priest and several other religious figures protect Margery and encourage tolerance toward her.

On her pilgrimages Margery is forced to survive without any permanent spiritual support. Her husband travels with her on
occasion but even he abandons her when faced by a mob of angry townspeople in Canterbury. Her reception in Canterbury is indicative of her reception throughout England. Everywhere she is met with a polarity of response, some defending her spiritual gifts and lifestyle and others calling for her execution as a heretic. The one distinctive feature in all towns is the enormous interest which Margery generates throughout the secular community. When she is bought to trial in Leicester we are told: 'There were so many people that they stood upon stools to look at her and marvel at her' (152). Upon her entrance to most towns she is met by flocks of people who have heard rumours about her. At Hessle Margery describes how 'women came running out of their houses with their distaffs, crying to the people, "Burn this false heretic"' (168).

The community plays an important role in Margery’s heresy trials. They participate in both the prosecution and the defence. Whilst the Mayor of Leicester and the Duke of Bedford represent the secular community's complaints against Margery, many of the townsfolk offer to take responsibility for her protection. When the Archbishop of York orders her detention, members of
the city answer for her: 'They said she should not go to prison, for they would themselves undertake for her and go to the Archbishop with her' (161). Throughout these ordeals Margery is fed and sheltered by local residents who often endure ostracism to help her. Margery is a divisive force in England, splitting local opinion and causing scandal wherever she goes.

On the continent Margery is given a warm reception by local inhabitants. Those she encounters on the journey from Constance to Bologna 'did not have a bad word to say to this creature' (107). Similarly, a group of women she speaks to in Jerusalem marvel at her tears and invite her to stay with them. Beyond those who are influenced by slander about Margery, the secular reception to Margery on the continent reveals a far greater acceptance of her ecstatic religious expression than that witnessed in England. The scorn and inhospitality she does experience can most often be attributed to the slander and complaints of her fellow countrymen. Her companions undermine her reputation whenever possible. In Constance they denounce her to the Papal Legate and hand her over to him. When they cannot be rid of her, she explains how 'they cut her gown so
short...that she would be taken for a fool, and people would not make much of her and hold her in any repute' (98). According to Margery, their plans fail: 'And notwithstanding all their malice, she was held in more esteem than they were, wherever they went' (98). In fact, Margery goes on to comment that 'she found all people good and gentle to her, except her own countrymen' (111). And in another more pronounced and bitter statement, she declares: 'they [her fellow countrymen] were always her greatest enemies, and caused her much unhappiness in every place she went...' (120).

During her travels in Europe Margery's ecstatic displays of devotion do not attract ridicule and scorn. Her holy tears are recognised as a spiritual gift divinely bestowed upon many respected holy women. At home, although the clergy's open-minded treatment of Margery suggests an increasing awareness of the growing movement of affective piety, the lay population still react with ignorance and intolerance towards her. This contrast in response can be partly accounted for by the differing modes of religious expression practised in England and on the continent during this period.
Margery and the English Tradition of Ascetic Piety

In England the cloister was the preferred option for women religious. Hope Emily Allen notes: "Enclosure was .. the time honoured life for holy women."66 This claim was especially pertinent during Margery's lifetime because the king's confessor, the Carmelite Provincial, Thomas Netter of Walden, was a bitter opponent of a public identity for women and was a strong patron of anchoresses.67

The evangelical awakening of the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries, associated with the foundation of new religious and lay communities in southern and northern Europe exerted little influence over English spirituality in the thirteenth- and fourteenth- centuries. A life of silence, celibacy and enclosure was still considered the most holy and appropriate expression of religious devotion. The nature of Margery's religious expression in the face of these expectations can only properly be assessed by understanding the way in which she struggles with this restrictive definition of the religious life for women. Her religious identity is strained with the tension of failing to
conform to this lifestyle even though it was unavailable to her. Margery’s mysticism is more visibly influenced by the affective piety practised by women mystics on the continent but the English model of female piety remains a continual source of personal and spiritual anxiety.

The ascetic life of piety which dominated English expression of spirituality well into the fourteenth-century had existed unchallenged from the time of St Augustine. It had always been assumed from the biblical story of Mary and Martha (Lazarus’ sisters) that the contemplative life was the perfect consummation of the Christian life.

The ascetic mystical tradition had two major early influences; Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. In his sermons in the commentary to St John’s gospel, Augustine lays down a program of Christian education which progressively merges into a spiritual ascent toward God.68 He discusses in detail the relationship between the active and contemplative lives, already touched upon by early philosophers such as Origen and his follower Clement of Alexandria of the school of the
Christian Platonists at Alexandria. For Augustine the contemplative life is one of study, meditation and reflection, founded upon his model of the Christian's intellectual ascent to God. Its ultimate attainment is a vision of God unveiled, although this is rarely achieved. But it is a way of life potentially available to a whole class of Christians and not only to divinely-called individuals.

Pseudo-Dionysius, by contrast, enunciates the wholly supernatural experience of union with the Divine. He is thought to have been a Syrian monk in ca. 500 A.D. who was influenced by St Gregory of Nyssa - the man whom Knowles refers to as 'the father of Christian mysticism.' Another strong influence came from the Alexandrian Platonists and the Neoplatonism of Proclus. Dionysius incorporated Neoplatonic concepts into an orthodox Christian doctrine of mysticism. In his treatise, *Theologia Mystica*, Pseudo-Dionysius portrays the human soul climbing the ladder of denial to ascend to a God who is ineffable, unknowable and inexpressible. Whereas for Augustine, God is the God of the Old and New Testaments, 'the Father of all, the Light which enlightens every-one,' for Dionysius He remains
super-essential. Correspondingly, in Augustine's scheme any Christian may attain fleeting glimpses of the Godhead. According to Dionysius, only the chosen may experience a rare ecstatic union with God. The expressions referring to this mystical union, 'the ray of darkness' and the 'cloud of unknowing' exemplify the hidden and incommunicable nature of the experience.

Whereas Augustine's philosophy received attention almost continuously throughout the early Middle Ages, Dionysius' theories were not widely disseminated until the intellectual and spiritual revival of the eleventh- and twelfth-century when translations of Pseudo-Dionysius began to multiply and be refined. The Augustinian mystical tradition reached its clearest medieval articulation in the thirteenth-century through St Bonaventure's dissertation, *Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum*. However, throughout the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries the mystical life, under the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, began to change its traditionally Augustinian focus from the mental and intellectual toward the devotional and spiritual. Knowles characterises the 'new' contemplative idea as a progression
from meditation through the process of abstraction to contemplation and then to ecstasy. Richard of St Victor was one of the first scholastics of the 'revival' to reshape Augustine's work and incorporate much of Pseudo-Dionysian theory into it. By the fourteenth-century those who inherited the Victorine tradition succeeded in assimilating the two.\textsuperscript{70}

The implications for medieval women of these models for the contemplative life are clearly exemplified in a religious treatise specifically addressed to three English anchoresses, the \textit{Ancrene Riwle}. Although written in the twelfth-century it still characterises the prevailing ideology of the fourteenth- and fifteenth- centuries. It advocates complete withdrawal from the world, enclosure, silence and the suppression of all sexuality.

Known as the \textit{Via Negativa} the ascetic lifestyle practised by the majority of the monastic orders in the medieval period involves a stripping away of the senses and the products of reason until the body and mind are made an empty vessel able to receive divine revelations. Atkinson observes that amongst monastic
orders the purging of the distractions of sense experience was strongly emphasised through such practices as fasting, flagellation, chastity and isolation. These ascetic practices and their association with monastic orders have led to the continuing belief that the ascetic piety practised by the Pseudo-Dionysian forms of mysticism represents the purest articulation of spirituality.

Margery cannot fully separate her spirituality from the tradition of ascetic piety. The ideal of the contemplative life still pervades almost all aspects of religious life in England, both institutional and secular. Margery challenges the narrowly defined roles available to women religious by drawing upon the affective piety and active lifestyle of the continental female mystics, like St Bridget but despite her struggle against the ascetic tradition Margery is unable to fully disregard the prevailing model for holy women countenanced by the English Church. The conflict between the two models of religious devotion exacerbates Margery's already exaggerated sense of anxiety. Despite her attempts at re-definition and personal exemption, Margery's ability to conform to the contemplative
ideal is severely impaired by her social and economic status. Like many women, Margery was not given the opportunity to enter a religious community. Because of her social position she is married early for political and social advancement and forced into the roles of wife, mother and housewife. It is true that the fourteenth- and fifteenth- centuries record a growing number of women religious who were wives and mothers. Yet it must not be forgotten that they are most often distinguished from other women by their renunciation of sexuality. In a liberalisation rather than refutation of the older ascetic requirements of virginity, most of the married female figures of the time are widowed before they receive their visions or live chastely within the marriage bond. Most enter religious orders or seek enclosure in a cell late in life and accept the rigours and deprivations of the ascetic orders. The condemnation of the role of wife and mother remains implicit in the need for sexual abstinence, widowhood or isolation on the part of these women. The stringent sexual qualifications required for female spiritual perfection are left essentially unchallenged. The battle for virginity chronicled in so many early accounts of female sainthood is merely transformed into the struggle for chastity.
within marriage.\textsuperscript{72}

This need for chastity within marriage was made essential by the limited roles available to holy women. The only model for women religious offered by the Church was 'the Bride of Christ'. This inevitably necessitated the rejection of an earthly husband in favour of a spiritual one. Such a state of celibacy was not available for most women, who like Margery were forced into marriage at an early age. Margery bears fourteen children and after her conversion endures four years of enforced sexuality before her husband consents to live chastely. At this point she must literally buy her sexual freedom from her husband in exchange for the repayment of his debts.\textsuperscript{73}

This belated attainment of a chaste lifestyle leaves Margery far from the ideal of the holy woman in England. Her ecstatic form of religious expression and her commitment to an active life within the secular world distinguish her from her English contemporaries and point instead to what Allen names 'the remarkable contemporary feminist movement to which Margery seems to belong.'\textsuperscript{74}
Margery and the Continental Tradition of Affective Piety

In her opening discussion of female continental mystics Allen notes 'that what we are inclined to call the English tradition of medieval piety, which seems to run with such continuity from the early Middle English Ancrene Riwle, through Rolle, Hilton, the Cloud of Unknowing, must always have represented the piety of a minority.' The demands of the ascetic lifestyle left it beyond the reach of most women and men whose economic imperatives did not allow for the luxury of abstaining from worldly activities. On the continent a very different type of devotional piety arose and flourished in response to the lay demand for greater access to their religion.

As early as the twelfth-century a growing number of women on the continent became increasingly attracted to a religious lifestyle. Dickman notes that whereas women made up ten percent of those canonised before 1100, over the next three hundred years women represented about thirty percent of new saints. In Jesus as Mother, Caroline Bynum identifies the distinctly female versions of piety which arose during the
Middle Ages. Although diverse, these movements all focused primarily on the humanity of Christ. Margery even goes as far as to exclaim that she 'had no knowledge of the conversation of the Godhead, for all her love and affection were focused on the manhood of Christ' (122-123). Female movements of affective piety dwelt on the three particularly 'manly' aspects of Christ; the Infant Jesus, Christ the Bridegroom and the dying Saviour. Associated with this aspect of devotion was an intense devotion to the Eucharist, although as Dickman observes, Margery does not seem to share this interest to the same extent.

Many of the women on the continent heralded as ecstatic visionaries emerged out of the beguines and other nominally supervised orders. These quasi-religious communities for women, common in the Rhineland and Southern France required no formal vows and existed as loosely organised groups whose members lived co-terminously with the world. These communities, 'extended the possibility of serious religious commitment to new social classes and showed that it might be pursued without formal religious vows, without severing secular ties or abandoning the world's work.'
Women of the thirteenth-century, such as Mary d'Oignies, associated with the beguines in Liège, developed a piety which focused on the emotional power of contemplation. In what Sarah Beckwith names a 'very material mysticism', Mary and other mystics like her, used human emotions and physical images of intimacy to communicate their experience of the Divine. In contrast to ascetic piety which scorns and reviles sensory experience, affective piety seeks to understand the nature of God through a relationship with the 'human side' of the Godhead: Christ. For example, Dorothea of Montau, Catherine of Siena and Margery all experience a spiritual marriage to Christ which takes a very literal, 'human' form. The sensory re-enactment of Christ's Passion serves a similar purpose, allowing the mystic to participate and experience 'first hand' the true vision of Christ's suffering.

Mary d'Oignies provides a useful exemplum of the early continental tradition of affective piety; one that is particularly relevant to Margery. It appears that Mary's mysticism, as recounted by Jacques de Vitry, served as a model for Margery's
life and as an example to her reluctant scribe of the orthodoxy and heritage of Margery's religious expression. Although Mary died in 1213, she was still a well-known religious identity in Margery's time. Margery's scribe who, after the friar's arrival 'resolved never again to believe her feelings' (191), is only convinced to return to his task after reading about Mary. Many aspects of Mary's experiences are mirrored in the mysticism of Margery Kempe. Most significantly, Mary has the gift of holy tears. She weeps excessively at any reference to the Passion and, like Margery, she faints at the very sight of a crucifix. She is unable to restrain her tears even in Church and during confession weeps copiously over the smallest sin. There are additional similarities. The coat and mantle she wears are made of white wool. Like Margery, she is told she will ascend directly to heaven and she enjoys the sweet music and speech of blessed spirits who advise and delight her.

Like many women in this movement, she appears less restricted in her religious ambitions than Margery. In contrast to the stringent demands of wife and mother placed upon Margery and the years of compulsory sexuality she is forced to endure, Mary
is able to re-define her gendered identity from wife to visionary without community or husbandly opposition. Mary is married against her will at fourteen, but persuades her husband to live chastely and work with her among the leper colonies at Williambroux. However, later in life she retreats, like most women, to an anchorite's cell and under the supervision of the Church adopts a life of great austerity.

Mary's status as wife and mystic reflects the more tolerant view of marriage adopted by the canonists and theologians in the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries. Numerous political and social motivations required the Church to review its disparaging assessment of the marital bond which had survived since apostolic times and bestow a fuller blessing on the marriage institution. However, it is not until the fourteenth-century that female saints appear who are mothers as well as wives and who attempt to realise their spiritual calling within a family context. The accounts of 'holy matrons', St Frances of Rome and Dorothea of Montau, provide an important insight into the development of women's lay access to religion on the continent and expose the doubts and obstacles which had to be overcome
to permit and encourage serious religious commitment for those of the secular world. The European transition to a more flexible identity for women religious was not completely smooth or wholly welcomed, however, in England, the change was far slower and met with greater opposition. The new status of marriage was accepted for the lay population but the Church still strongly advocated a life of celibacy to all those who aspired to a spiritual life.

Mary's visions also reflect the new social and political roles available to continental pious women. In the thirteenth-century several women, including Mary, spoke out against Rome's enemies. On one occasion she receives revelations concerning God's destruction of the 'heretical' Albigensians and on another she sees the crusaders battling the infidel in the Holy Land. Unlike the passive, silent women martyrs who typify early female saints, the thirteenth-century female movement of affective piety extended the life of the cloister into the world and began to advise and criticise Church leaders and shape the religious politics of the day. Those of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century went the next step. They moved beyond the
fixed nature of the beguine communities and became more mobile and independent. Whereas previously, 'physical stability was regarded as a guarantee of their spiritual legitimacy by church officials', women such as Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) and Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) legitimised the pilgrimage for women and pursued other 'active' versions of the religious life.\textsuperscript{83}

Bridget's \textit{Book of Revelations} is specifically acknowledged by Margery as one of the books read to her by her priest.\textsuperscript{84} Margery not only names Bridget's book but claims a special affinity to the saint (similar to her closeness to Mary Magdelene). In Chapter Twenty, Christ confirms the connection between the two women by selecting Margery as a vessel by which the truth of Bridget's life and visions is to be spread: '[$\text{God said}]...and I tell you truly that every word that is written in Bridget's book is true and through you it shall be recognised as truth indeed.' (83). Against the backdrop of contention surrounding the authenticity of Bridget's revelations this statement takes on a controversial and highly personalised aspect. As we noted earlier, the challenge to Bridget's divine inspiration has severe
ramifications for the validation of Margery's own visions. The attempt simultaneously to defend Bridget and establish her relationship with the saint serves the dual purpose of reaffirming the legitimacy of the mystical tradition with which Margery identifies and assures Margery a place of equal, if not greater, status within the heavenly hierarchy.\(^{85}\)

Married at thirteen, Bridget bore eight children even though she was drawn at an early age to the religious life. She went on pilgrimages with her husband while he was alive but it was not until his death in 1343 that she committed herself to the vocation of visionary, pilgrim and founder of the Bridgettine order of nuns. Bridget's social status was more exalted than Margery's and as such she had greater social and financial autonomy. However, as Windeatt observes, 'the pattern of her life as a married mystic, the transition from wife to Bride of Christ, the sustainedly visionary experience of her life - all such things will have appealed to Margery in vindicating the potential of the female mystic.'\(^{86}\)

The other mystic who is believed to have been a strong influence
on Margery is Dorothea of Montau. Margery makes no direct reference to Dorothea but Ute Stargardt, in her unpublished doctorate contends that the shared traits are too many to be coincidental. Like Margery, Dorothea is influenced by the example of St Bridget. Her demonstrative and exaggerated displays of devotion bear close resemblance to Margery's experience of uncontrollable tears and ecstatic rapture. Stargardt provides extensive textual evidence to verify her claim that Margery must have had some access to a vernacular account of Dorothea's life. We know that no less than seventeen Latin versions of her vitæ were produced and at least one vernacular account for the benefit of the local population for whom she had assumed a high spiritual status. Lynn's widespread trade links make it quite feasible for the story of Dorothea to reach the international port, or failing there, the Bridgettine convent, Syon Abbey, which served as the centre for female mysticism in England. Moreover, Margery can hardly fail to have heard of Dorothea during her stay in Danzig, where Dorothea spent her married life, and this may have even inspired her visit to Syon Abbey upon her return to England in 1434.
All three women, Dorothea, Bridget and Mary, doubtless contributed to Margery's personal expression of affective piety, and stories of others such as Elizabeth of Hungary (whose cult experienced a revival in the late medieval period), Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena may have also reached and influenced her. The similarities Margery shares with these women are well documented but the differences are left largely unexplained.\textsuperscript{88} Admittedly Margery's anachronistic balance of the dominant English forms of ascetic piety and the growing continental female tradition of ecstatic devotion clouds clear-cut distinctions between Margery's own brand of piety and those of her contemporaries. Atkinson observes at the start of her book that one of the greatest obstacles to Margery's acceptance as a genuine mystic is the inability to fit her comfortably into accepted categories of social and religious history.\textsuperscript{89} Her highly individualised model of religious expression has caused her to slip conveniently between such proponents of ascetic mysticism as Knowles and Chambers and the recent scholarship on continental traditions of piety by Bynum and Goodich.

Margery needs to be distinguished from European women mystics
not only because of her uneasy association with English models of ascetic piety but because of the transmutation of continental traditions within Margery's specific cultural climate. In a hasty conclusion to her essay, Dickman claims that Margery 'represents a medieval, English, middle-class version' of continental religious fervour. Although she offers little discussion of the way Margery differs from her European 'sisters' she does pinpoint Margery's geographical isolation as a key element in the development of her highly individualised brand of affective piety. However, I believe it is the social isolation Margery endures that has the most significant effect on her spiritual development.

Margery lives very much alone and with the exception of Julian and brief visits to Denney convent and Syon Abbey she has no contact at all with other women religious. In contrast, the European mystics tended to attract a large contingent of followers and supporters. Despite their equally exaggerated religious behaviour, women like Dorothea and Angela are revered and develop a cult following, whereas Margery is not only ridiculed but accused of heresy. Even Angela of Foligna, whose
background and expressions of devotion were possibly more unusual than Margery's own is tolerated by clerical and lay authorities alike.\textsuperscript{91} None of these women seems to have experienced the continuous hostility and suspicion to which Margery is exposed. Finally, the retreat to the convent or cell made by most of these mystics serves to add credibility and legitimacy to their claims. Their biographers were invariably associated with the order or church to which they belonged. Their posthumous \textit{vitae} were produced in order to seek papal recognition for the women and their spiritual advisers. Without this level of support Margery remains marginalised and ostracised from her social community. She must search out and pay a scribe to record her 'feelings'. She must also create her own text while she is still alive. Unlike these women, she cannot and does not rely upon any figures of male authority to preserve her revelations and message of salvation.

Local response to Margery reflects the cultural disparity in religious attitudes between England and the continent in this period. Margery's religious vocation and lifestyle, although declared orthodox, offended the narrow, entrenched and
specifically English definitions of women religious. Virginity continued to be the key to female spiritual salvation in England. Margery's married state is not only inferior to virginity but to widowhood also. Her fourteen children can only have emphasised how far Margery transgressed the traditional image of the holy woman. In addition, Margery's many pilgrimages, whether overseas or at home blatantly disregard the tradition of enclosure. Margery fails to acknowledge the superiority of the contemplative life over the active. There is no indication that she ever considered becoming a contemplative. In fact, there is a strong imperative for action present in Margery's mysticism which defies the expectations of women religious in England.

Margery, then, must be distinguished from her European contemporaries by more than geographical distance alone. More fundamental is the lack of community support and the absence of open clerical recognition. It is at this level of popular support that Margery most differs from female mystics of the continent. The religious cause for this hostile reception amongst the lay community can be largely attributed to Margery's unorthodox religious expression which alarmed an
already suspicious community. However, religious antagonism cannot entirely account for the treatment Margery receives.

Religious or Social Heresy

The hostility of Margery's community goes far deeper than religious intolerance. The explanation for the lay community's ostracism of Margery lies not in Margery's religious heresy, but in what I have termed her 'social heresy'.

Margery's lifestyle, because of its marginality and isolation from the community, is seen by male figures of authority as a threat to the social hierarchy. Aers identifies the source of her contemporaries' hostility and suspicion:

For Margery's religious identity involved an earthly rupture with the family, an energetic struggle against the nuclear family, its bonds, its defences in the lay community, and its threatening ideologies.92

Margery's repudiation of the domestic roles of wife and mother, and her rejection of her social position within the township as
the mayor's daughter threatens the official version of a correct sexual and social order. By refusing to constrain herself within the traditional models of Woman/Wife/Mother, she becomes a source of anxiety to the foundations of Law/Man/Order. The danger of social revolt which Margery's relative freedom from masculine control evokes is most clearly demonstrated in the actual accusations made against her.

The first judgment of Margery's behaviour is made by her husband. After years of forcing Margery into unwanted sexual relations he finally challenges her aversion to sexual union with him. When she reaffirms her repugnance at the idea of sex, he replies, 'You are no good wife' (58). Her determination to live separately from him involves a fundamental social travesty. Having 'chosen' marriage, there is a strong cultural belief that women should not avoid the sacred duties of reproduction and child-rearing or revoke the implicit commitment to meet a husband's sexual and emotional needs. The gender arrangements which Margery's lifestyle threatens to destabilise are summarised by Aers: 'To the respectable lay man Margery represents a way of life which will detach women from the
patriarchal family: this would deprive adult males of emotional and physical resources infancy has told them to expect only from females and which had been secured in adulthood by prevailing gender arrangements and ideologies.\textsuperscript{93}

Sylvia Thrupp states that the primary role for women was to 'be amenable to male authority.'\textsuperscript{94} Medieval instructional manuals for women like the books of the Goodman of Paris and the Knight of the Tour Landry\textsuperscript{95} present all too clearly the model of passive subservience which women were expected to follow within marriage - 'a model which negates female subjectivity and imagination.'\textsuperscript{96} Even prior to her conversion Margery confronts these constructions of her identity by entering into a business venture against her husband's wishes. However, it is only with her mystical calling that these roles come into irreconcilable conflict with Margery's own sense of identity.

Margery's independent behaviour challenges traditional male authority within the household and arouses specifically male anxieties about female autonomy. In an rare insight into the relationship with her husband, Margery records the conditions of
John's agreement to grant her chastity. He demands that Margery must pay his debts and adds that she must continue to share meals and reside with him. His main concern is to contain Margery within the home. He opposes her decision to pursue a vocation in which he is not the central focus.

The charges laid against Margery during her trials reveal a similar fear of her irregular lifestyle. When she is first arrested the mayor interrogates her in an attempt to identify and contain Margery in one of the comfortable categories to which women were expected to conform. Behind his line of questioning lies the assumption that once he determines who Margery is he will know what she cannot be. He discovers, however, that Margery defies the mutually exclusive options with which she is presented; she is neither married or unmarried, she is not associated with a religious order but neither is she a housewife. Finally, the mayor concludes she must be a 'false strumpet', using the rational that if she is not a virgin and not under the supervision of her husband, then she must be a whore.
At the trial, after the accusations of heresy have been dismissed, the real objections to Margery are raised. The mayor announces that Margery has 'come here to lure away our wives from us' (153). At a later trial the charge is re-echoed; this time Margery is suspected of advising an aristocratic woman to leave her husband. Although both these accusations are absurd, they reveal the conviction that Margery's life of self-determination might prove too attractive to the wives of Leicester. In one sense this perceived danger to the foundations of gender relations may not be as far fetched as it first seems. Although Margery's life of continual opposition and isolation cannot have appealed in its actuality, the degree of personal freedom which she attains must have been viewed as, in some ways, desirable. The mayor certainly does not doubt its appeal to women. Furthermore, Jesus, in a vision to Margery, states that there are many women who would like to live, 'frely fro her husbadys' (212). Whether or not this is another symptom of wish-fulfilment on Margery's behalf, the vision confirms the appeal she feels her life has for other women.

The account of Margery's relationships with the women of
Leicester would have confirmed the mayor's suspicions. The text provides us with a rare insight into women interacting with one another without the anti-feminist bias present in nearly all early documentation. When Margery is arrested and imprisoned the women of the neighbourhood gather around outside her window to hear her speak: 'Then she stood looking out at the window, telling many edifying tales...so much so that women wept bitterly, and said with great heaviness of heart,"Alas, woman, why should you be burned?"' (169). Similarly, when Margery says she is thirsty, the guard's wife finds a ladder and secretly provides her with food and drink. They do exactly what the men fear - they defy male authority which forbids them contact with Margery.

As well as the actual accusations made against Margery, her decision to care for her husband, John, after his accident bears testimony to the enormous amount of pressure placed upon her by social expectations of her duty as 'wife'. At this point her guilt over her failure as a wife overrides her commitment to her vocation and she is forced into an uneasy compromise with Christ whereby she permits herself to nurse her husband as a
punishment for her sinful life with him. Maureen Fries notes: 'Conforming to societal expectations in caring for her ill husband - a function of ancient importance to men if we are to judge by Hesiod, who cites nursing by a wife in old age as one of the few reasons for marrying, she earns the praise of her contemporaries.' Indeed, the community's aggressive response leaves Margery with little choice: 'And then people said, if he died, his wife deserved to be hanged for his death for as much as she could have looked after him and did not' (219). Such hostility reflects the fact that, 'For these people Margery has failed to fulfil the very criteria by which her identity as wife is constituted: namely, a sub-ordinate servicer of man's domestic and intimate needs.'

Margery's behaviour is viewed by secular male authority as nothing less than sexually subversive. Her active and independent lifestyle not only transgresses all expectations of a holy woman but defies women's traditional roles in secular society as well. Her decision to leave her husband, find childcare for her children and pursue her spiritual calling shows that a woman could break away from these supposedly sacred
and inescapable duties and achieve certain powers of self-
determination. This knowledge in itself is enough to destabilise
the foundations of the social order - the nuclear family.
Margery's many unaccompanied pilgrimages further testify to
the fact that a woman could not only survive without the
support of a man but that this freedom from direct male
authority could be liberating. When analysed in terms of the
established gender relations of her day, Margery is far more of a
social threat than a religious heretic; a fact borne out by the
strong anti-feminist reception she has received in the modern
period.
SECTION TWO

Five hundred years after the composition of Margery’s Book it remains a source of anxiety to the modern reader. The inability to comprehend and accept Margery’s religious expression and ‘manner of living’ continues to dominate the history of Margery’s post-1934 reception. It is my contention that aspects of Margery’s social, religious and literary transgressions, discussed in Section One remain a point of tension for the modern critic. Even criticism that isolates the textual aspects of the Book is highly gendered in its description and assessment of the literary worth of the text. In particular, the term ‘autobiography’ conceals a number of unspoken assumptions about the authority, authenticity and nature of Margery’s spiritual vocation.

The scholarship focusing on Margery as mystic and woman is also riddled with symptoms of suspicion and contempt which often assume a distinctly anti-feminist nature. Margery’s challenge to the role of wife and mother remains almost as
potent a threat today as it was in her own time. Similarly, the response to the genuinely female elements of her religious expression and the relative autonomy which her vocation requires expose a continuing critical prejudice concerning those religious figures who do not conform to monastic expressions of ascetic piety. Margery's Book challenges traditional versions of religious history and destabilises definitions of women's religious, social and cultural identity in the late medieval period. The description of her life contradicts many of our assumptions about the socio-economic power and autonomy available to women. In short, she disrupts the comfortable, passivised image of women constructed by patriarchal versions of history. As a result Margery has remained marginalised within modern criticism and is still denied the recognition for which she so bitterly struggled.

The work of R. W. Chambers, one of the first medievalists to work with the Salthows manuscript, reflects the earliest and most prevalent response to the text. In 1932, two years before the re-appearance of the full text, Chambers praised the fragments of Margery's text in De Wordes and Pepwell's
versions, calling them 'noble' extracts of the type of medieval religious prose that is 'ordinary' but 'exceedingly beautiful'.

His response to the full version of the text can only be described as markedly different. In his introduction to Butler-Bowden's modernisation one senses Chamber's personal distress at discovering the true nature of Margery's mysticism. He warns those who have high expectations of Margery's Book that it may 'disappoint' or 'even shock' them:

> These fragments from [De Worde and Pepwell] were enough to arouse great expectations; to those who had hoped to find a new Scale of Perfection Margery's book must be, from certain points of view, painful.

On a textual level Margery's narrative has been commonly assigned the epithet 'homely', which generally signifies a condescending tolerance of Margery's informal prose style. Her everyday metaphors and commonplace descriptions are deemed quaint but accorded little genuine merit. Anthony Goodman finds Margery's 'homely' descriptions to be a sign of 'mental banality' and comments disparagingly that her visions 'did not flourish
into the arresting allegories of St Bridget's revelations.'\textsuperscript{102} This belittlement of her literary achievement is fuelled by the constant and somewhat irrelevant comparison of Margery to her contemporary, Julian of Norwich. Although Julian practises a very different form of piety from Margery and has the benefit of being literate and remarkably well-read, critics have persistently regarded Margery as a more vulgar and self-indulgent imitation of the anchoress. In contrasting Margery and Julian, David Knowles concludes that Margery's book is 'more homely...but of an altogether coarser nature.'\textsuperscript{103} Wolfgang Riehle goes as far as to postulate that Margery, 'inspired by Julian as her model, tried to adopt her language without, however, being able to attain Julian's high stylistic level...',\textsuperscript{104} hardly surprising one might say, given that Margery is illiterate. Such comments all carry the same dismissive tone, implying a need for indulgence when dealing with Margery's text and a tacit devaluation of the literary value of the Book.

One literary label that has been consistently and uncritically applied to Margery's work by historians and literary critics, has been the term 'autobiography'. It has been unanimously adopted
without question by nearly all scholars working on Margery’s text. The label determinedly turns the focus away from the stated subject of Margery’s Book, the mercy of Christ and its saving work in her life, to draw attention to the other subject of the Book, Margery herself. Although this may seem a legitimate critical approach it is rarely acknowledged that this categorisation of the text opposes the stated intentions of the narrative. There are undeniable elements of self-construction and validation in Margery’s text but it is still important to examine why this label has avoided critical challenge.\textsuperscript{105} It is my belief that the ‘autobiographical’ attribution reinforces assumptions and values which lie at the heart of Margery’s negative reception in modern times.

\textbf{Religious Tract or Autobiography?}

The genre of autobiography is now broadly accepted as a recent critical construction that has been redefined several times over recent years. In his work on the development of the genre, James Olney explains how differing approaches have emphasised alternative aspects of its defining term.\textsuperscript{106} The earliest interpretation focused on the \textit{bios}. The text was supposed to
cover a whole life or a large portion of it in a coherent narratological order. Much criticism concentrated on the Truth of the story, attempting to substantiate or falsify the claims made by the author about his/her life. According to Sidonie Smith, who examines the autobiographical genre as it has affected women writers, one reason for this mode of criticism is the initial treatment of autobiography as a sub-category of biography.\textsuperscript{107} The autobiographical text was compared to the facticity of a biography and was perceived as complying to the same rules of objectivity.

There is now wide critical agreement that any act of creation cannot embody objective truth, that in writing one's life story there must inevitably be an element of interpretation. In his study of narrativity, Gérard Genette demonstrates the subjectivised nature of autobiography by calculating the time (of life) to space (ie. number of pages) ratio of a text. It quickly becomes obvious that within a single text ten years of a life can sometimes takes up one page and a month more than fifty pages, depending on the importance assigned by the author to different moments of the past.\textsuperscript{108}
The acceptance of the idea of the narrator’s subjectivity changes the emphasis from *bios* to *autos*, offering greater room for critical analysis and enabling autobiography to become a more reputable literary genre. With the rise of the *autos* comes the conception of autobiography as the struggle to shape an 'identity'. The critic, as Smith notes, becomes a psycho-analyst of sorts, interpreting truth in its psychological dimensions, rather than its factual or moral ones. Previously, it had been assumed an autobiography would approach an objective historical account and that it would confront no agonising questions of identity, self-definition and self-creation. The possibility of self-deception or of deliberate re-interpretation within the narrative were left unconsidered.

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism have repeatedly challenged notions of referentiality, undermining the comfortable assumptions about an informing 'I' on which this second generation of autobiographical criticism depends. Recent reconsideration of the concepts of language and textuality has brought *graphe* to the fore. It is now maintained that only
through the act of writing do the self (autos) and life (bios) take a certain form and shape. The autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence or identity that does not exist outside language. Given the indeterminate nature of language the text contains only the alternative and deferred identities of the narrator which constantly subvert any pretensions of truthfulness or to put it in Olney's terms - both the life and the self are a 'fiction' and behind the autobiography lies only the text of an 'autobiography.' This latest re-reading of the genre has not as yet been generally applied to Margery Kempe and the analysis of modern criticism of Margery offered here will focus on the two earlier, but still much practised forms of autobiographical criticism.\textsuperscript{109}

These earlier modes of autobiographical analysis have distinct qualitative implications in their application to Margery's Book. The label has, I believe, been manipulated by many critics to suggest a lowering of the literary status of Margery's Book. Autobiography, in its traditional formulations of 'life story' or 'self-writing', is accorded a humble position as a literary form. Olney claims autobiography is not only considered the most
common writing activity but also the least 'literary', produced often by people who would not regard themselves as 'writers'. Its accessibility is attributable to the lack of formal requirements for composition. Unlike many literary genres, such as poetry, epic, novellas or even critical discourse, autobiography has no structural or linguistic rules to which the writer must adhere. There are no models or structures shaped out of a long developing tradition and imposed on each individual writer. Without any restrictions autobiographical works often create interpretive difficulties for literary critics by crossing established generic boundaries. For example, the earliest so-called autobiographical text, Augustine's *Confessions*, offers a detailed commentary on the Creation story in Genesis which can alternately be considered theology, philosophy, exegesis, or autobiography. As Olney concedes, 'what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another.' Some academics display a contempt for the lack of formal organisation of the genre. Until recently it has been considered the poor cousin of biography, whose authors are at least accredited with some degree of professional status.
The use of the autobiographical label for Margery's Book has another equally malign consequence. It immediately secularises the work, disavowing its explicit aims. It reduces the work's lofty status as a religious treatise endowed with a serious and authoritative voice to the life story of a middle-class illiterate woman, whose views provide a useful insight into fifteenth-century life but contain little that is spiritually enlightening. Conveniently it removes any obligation for the twentieth-century reader seriously to confront the exaggerated displays of religious fervour with which they might feel impatient and uncomfortable.

Once secularised, Margery's 'feelings' can be rationalised, or simply dismissed. Butler-Bowdon's modernisation of Margery's Book highlights the critical discrediting of Margery's spirituality which the term 'autobiography' permits. In the American publication of the text the visionary and mystical elements of Margery's work are printed in a smaller case than the remainder of the narrative and in the English printing they are relegated to an appendix. This diminishes their importance
to the reader in an inexcusably prescriptive manner and shows
the extent to which Margery's text has disconcerted some of its
readers. Fries rightly points out that such a distortion of her
Book 'turns her into a mere memoirist of the fifteenth-century
rather than a religious aspirant in touch with God, as the text
portrays her.'111

One reason for the devaluation of her text from religious
treatise to autobiography can be found in the overwhelming
critical opinion that Margery is too 'present' in her text to
achieve her theological aims. The term 'autobiography', employed
in reference to Margery has come to connote critical disapproval
of the strong presence of the author within this supposedly
devotional text. One of the first and most notable theological
historians to articulate this distinction between autobiography
and religious treatise is David Knowles. He declares that
Margery is only 'improperly and accidentally' to be classed
among the English mystics. The intensely individualised nature
of Margery's mysticism convinces him that her revelations do
not have 'any other origin than the vivid imagination and
retentive memory of a sincere and devout, but very hysterical
woman.' Yet another statement which exposes the unacknowledged bias of the label is found as recently as 1985 in Barry Windeatt's introduction to his translation of the text:

By comparison with the recollected revelations of the great mystics, Margery's Book is almost too autobiographical, too concerned with the mundane difficulties and obstacles that confronted Margery in life.113

These and other critics from both literary studies and history all maintain the opinion that Margery would have written a weightier and more praiseworthy religious text if she had omitted all personal details. It is as if Margery has, not abased herself sufficiently for her work to have credibility as a religious tract.

Modern Anti-Feminist Criticism

Criticism of Margery is not restricted to her term 'autobiography' and does not often take such a sublime form. Many scholars show no hesitation in disparaging Margery openly. Fries declares that 'Margery's press has been almost as bad in
the twentieth-century, as in her own.¹¹⁴ Little work has been conducted to explore why this is the case. In her essay on the transgressive quality of Margery's lifestyle, Fries lists the various objections and criticisms raised by modern scholars but fails to offer an explanation for the pervasive sense of discomfort and scorn manifest in the bulk of Margery's recent criticism. A comparable flaw is to be found in Elona Lucas' discussion of her recent reception. Whilst Lucas recognises the bias present in many interpretations, she is content to challenge the validity of these interpretations by inferring an inadequacy on the part of the individual critic rather than investigating the phenomenon as a whole. Yet, if we are to understand the textual history of Margery's Book and how this has affected our reading of the text, this is just what we must do.

The two most virulent critics of Margery's mysticism are undoubtedly David Knowles and R. W. Chambers. Perhaps the most prominent religious scholars in the period after the discovery of the Salthows manuscript, they have done much to steer the course of Margery's modern reception. In the introduction to the first published edition of Margery's Book Chambers declares
that poor Margery is to be classed with those hotels which Baedeker describes as "variously judged". Knowles' comments follow in the same vein, declaring that Margery's mysticism has 'little of deep spiritual wisdom and nothing of true mystical experience', and demeaning her brand of piety:

The stream [of pure spirituality] continued to flow until the reign of Henry VIII, but there is some evidence that from the beginning of the fifteenth-century onwards it was contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic devotion, manifesting itself in visions, revelations and unusual behaviour deriving partly...from the influence of some of the women saints of the fourteenth-century, such as Angela of Foligno, Dorothea of Prussia and Bridget of Sweden. The most famous example of this type in England is Margery Kempe.

Margery's weeping is a major focus for this religious intolerance. E.I. Watkin claims the weeping is the result of 'morbid suggestibility' and W. Pantin adds the term
'hysterical', an accusation followed up by Hope Phyllis Weissmann who contends, 'Margery's story has been shown to resemble the case histories of hysterical women analysed by Freud in his early career.' The uncritical deployment of the term 'hysterical' characterises the anxiety behind the work of Chambers, Knowles and their brand of criticism. Fries states that Margery's weeping 'confirmed ancient fears of men about the feminine', and proceeds to suggest that her 'femininity was a crucial circumstance' in her contemporary reception - a claim able to be justifiably extended to present criticism as well.

Attacks have not been limited to the religious nature and literary worth of Margery's Book. In what amounts to unsubstantiated allegations, some critics have taken it upon themselves to offer a personal assessment of Margery, the woman and present it as a legitimate and objective evaluation of her Book!

The highly subjective and gendered nature of much of this commentary is nowhere more evident than in the response to Margery's rejection of the roles of wife and mother. Speaking of
her reluctant decision to nurse her husband after his accident, Knowles declares that Margery's behaviour 'must weigh heavily in her favour in the final reckoning.'\textsuperscript{121} Robert Stone and T. W. Coleman also praise this return to 'proper femaleness' as defined by patriarchal culture, and declare her care of John, 'a splendid act of self-sacrifice.'\textsuperscript{122}

Whilst such a response might be anticipated to some extent in male scholarship dating back to the nineteen sixties, it is harder to overlook in the comparatively recent essay of Anthony Goodman.\textsuperscript{123} In contrast to Delany and Aers, who highlight the horror of Margery's years of 'legalised rape', Goodman, in an intensely masculinist reading of the Book, speaks of Margery's 'long-suffering husband' being forced to tolerate, 'the habit of defiance [that] was deeply ingrained in Margery.'\textsuperscript{124} He attributes John's relative lack of business success to the fact that, 'he was distracted by his wife's problems', and describes how Margery 'ground her husband's authority to a shadow.' He concludes by stating that the only explanation for Margery's behaviour must be that she was emotionally and physically inadequate as a woman:
Therefore, at the root of Margery's conversion to a lonely and prickly way may have lain the reactions against her marriage role of a forceful and determined woman, whose emotional patterns and physical constitution inhibited her from fulfilling it satisfactorily.125

Those who do not actively disparage Margery tend to hold her in lower esteem. Despite her invaluable work examining the origins of Margery's mysticism, Hope Emily Allen concedes, "many factors forbid her idea of herself as a great mystic...I would call her a minor mystic."126 Louise Collis, E. I. Watkin and Elona Lucas all preface their defences of Margery with the concession that her form of piety does not equal that of her contemporaries, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich. Adopting a different approach, Roberta Bux Boss excuses Margery by exclaiming, 'she trusts too much in our faith in God', a well-intentioned statement, but one that portrays Margery as naive and in need of special indulgence on the part of the reader.127

Examining the positive reactions to Margery, Fries observes 'a
few critics have recognised Margery's virtues, though without any full agreement as to what they are. Those who do find praise for Margery's Book usually move the focus away from Margery's mysticism to peripheral areas of judgment. John O'Connell suggests the worth of Margery's text lies in its being the first conscious autobiography in English and not in its revelations and mysticism and Martin Thornton asserts that the mysticism has been given too much emphasis and points instead to the valuable contribution her Book makes to the English pastoral tradition.

New Readings of Margery

There are those who have begun to recuperate Margery's Book from its damaging textual history. As early as 1975, Sheila Delany wrote an essay placing Margery, 'in her social milieu', and presenting her as a woman whose life and work is of genuine significance and worth to the field of medieval studies. Her reading, all but ignored until Atkinson tackles the subject in 1983, has been more recently developed by David Aers. He utilises Delany's marxist analysis of the economic consequences for women of the rise of early capitalism in his examination of
the formation of female identity within medieval culture. The essay provides a detailed insight into the cultural forces and economic pressures that shape Margery's 'manner of living' and contributes to our understanding of the ways in which Margery threatens to destabilise patriarchal constructions of the female by rejecting the primary roles of wife and mother.

Sarah Beckwith, influenced by the work of Aers, explores the psycho-analytic aspects of Margery's mysticism, examining the distinctly female elements of medieval mysticism and its appeal to women like Margery. Using a rare combination of historical contextualisation and Lacanian psycho-analytic theory, Beckwith exposes the suppressed female desire manifested in the visions of Margery and other women mystics. Unlike Irigaray, whom Beckwith herself criticises for her a historicity, Beckwith supplements her theoretical analysis with solid historical research. Unfortunately her article is far too brief and leaves a great deal of room for further examination. For example, the graphic images of priest's genitals and demons copulating which torment Margery, the unconscious elements of wish fulfilment in many of her visions and her lifelong fear of
rape remain to be studied in detail. All point to Margery's anxiety and guilt about her sexuality which remains as yet unexplored. However, I would add a caution concerning the application of such postmodernist theories of self to earlier cultures. Psycho-analytic criticism within Medieval Studies must be accompanied by a methodology which places the individual in a social context and provides as extensive a definition of the economic, religious, political and social climate of the text as possible. Readings that fail to account for the cultural alterity of the medieval text risk becoming anachronistic and historically inaccurate.

In the humanist vein of criticism the work of Atkinson, Dickman and Lochrie has sought to reassess Margery and her brand of mysticism. The connection between Margery and the continental tradition of affective piety was first noted by Allen in 1940, but her problematic collaboration with Stanford Meech on the critical edition of Margery's Book prevented her much awaited notes detailing the history and origins of Margery's mysticism from ever being completed. However, in recent years the uniquely female aspects of Margery's piety and her association
with the continental movement of women's mysticism have begun to attract the attention of feminist historians.

The result has been a growing inclination to appropriate Margery as a 'proto-feminist', who belongs to, 'one of the most important feminist movements in history.' Articles by Fries, Lucas and Dickman all portray Margery as a controversial figure of early feminism. They insist on the religious and political radicalism of Margery's lifestyle by emphasising the ways in which Margery contravenes the social and religious mores of her day. The hostility and prejudice of contemporary and modern responses to Margery only serve to strengthen the image of her as a victim of social forces she sought to subvert.

Although it would be tempting to read Margery as a figure of female subversion, such a reading can only be maintained at the expense of Margery's own voice. She is constantly at pains to establish her orthodoxy, not only within the Church but within her own community. Her devotion to the Catholic Church is aptly documented through her heresy trials in which she presents herself as a faithful adherent to the Catholic ordinances. Within
her secular existence she is also remarkably conservative. She unquestioningly accepts both the economic and sexual values of her community. Aers points out that despite Margery's abstention from the hectic market economy thriving in Lynn she integrates the language and philosophy of the market place into her religious expression and lifestyle.\textsuperscript{135} Although her neighbours initially criticise Margery for her withdrawal from the market system and regard her new religious status as hypocritical, there is no indication that Margery ever openly condemns the economic activities of her companions.

In the area of gender relations Margery is also remarkably conventional. Her own lifestyle is certainly sufficiently radical in its defiance of established social conventions and gender roles to have sparked the great claims made for by some feminist readings. She seeks to live separately from her husband and withdraw from her obligations as mother by finding outside childcare and travelling alone for extensive periods. The extent of her personal autonomy is significant when compared to other women of the township whose lives were determined by one form of patriarchal authority, or another.\textsuperscript{136} It is consequently
hardly surprising that the men of Leicester and members of her local community feel threatened by her potential challenge to the socio-political stability of the town. Yet, this construction of Margery as a woman in social revolt cannot be sustained. At her trials Margery does not even answer the charges of 'social heresy' laid against her. It is not that she leaves a telling silence on the issue of her irregular lifestyle but rather, that she sweeps over the accusation to answer the, to her, more pressing and relevant charge of religious unorthodoxy. On no occasion does she denounce the sexual hierarchy which causes her so much suffering and pain for four years while she fights for the power to control her own body, and when John is injured she re-accepts the responsibility of her marital vows, despite the curtailment of her spiritual vocation involved. Like the neighbours who pressure her to care for him, Margery accepts her marital obligations at the cost of her autonomy.

Throughout her Book there is a strong case for seeing Margery as the reluctant convert to this lifestyle. Delany portrays Margery almost actively deciding to become a mystic in order to escape the servitude and sexual oppression of marriage: 'One could also
say that Margery discovered a way to use the system against the system - a way to leave home, travel, establish a name for herself, and meanwhile remain both chaste and respectable. She believes that Margery, despairing of the lack of warmth in any of her personal relationships (she wears a hairshirt next to her skin which goes unnoticed by her husband despite their sexual relations) turns to a spiritual family. Her conversion, viewed from this perspective becomes a self-conscious action of rebellion, a rejection of worldly, patriarchal relations for the more fulfilling, if intangible bonds of a spiritual family. This image is certainly appealing and even conceivable, given the strength and determination of Margery's character. It is, however an imposition of critical ideology which ignores Margery's own values and beliefs. Margery openly admits that she enjoyed her early married life with John. Up to the time of her second vision she appears content with her life at home. It is only with her conversion and resulting decision to become celibate that Margery sees the relationship as collapsing. The humiliation and pain of years of enforced sexuality and child-bearing are still vivid in Margery's account and it is clear that she was desperate to be rid of John. Nevertheless, she never
speaks out against him or the institution of marriage that left her so vulnerable to her husband. Even after her separation, Margery still refers to herself as the wife of John and the daughter of the mayor of Lynn, clinging to the now irrelevant titles in a way which does not suggest an active rejection of the gender roles they embody.

At no stage does Margery advocate her own lifestyle to other women. Like Christine de Pisan, she regards herself as an anomaly, not a model to be imitated. Neither will she address the wider political implications of her 'manner of living'. She adopts this lifestyle because it is the only way she can serve God in her chosen manner, not because she upholds it as a desirable escape from male authority and its constraints. The stress of her vocation leaves her exhausted, sick and depressed. She speaks of long periods of doubt and despair when she wishes for an easier existence.138 If she does turn to spiritual visions to compensate for her dissatisfaction with her earthly family, then, it must be on a much deeper sub-conscious level than Delany suggests.
Margery's lifestyle is certainly controversial in its renunciation of the established roles for women in both the religious and secular spheres but only in an unconscious political level. Neither she nor Christine seriously questions the patriarchal constructions of female identity or desire the dissolution of the existing model of gender relations, despite their individual resistance to the limited roles available to women. Margery's life is an inspiring example of a woman's ability to define her own sense of identity within certain parameters and achieve a degree of self-determination and social freedom almost unheard of in England at this time. To claim more is again to risk making Margery a victim of the gendered nature of the critical response to her life and text.
1. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 173. Due to the large number of quotations from Margery's Book contained within the body of this chapter I have used the modernised spelling of the text. I have ensured that the modern translation provided by Barry Windeatt coincides with my own understanding of the passage wherever it is used. I referred to the critical edition of the manuscript edited by Stanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. Stanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, E. E. T. S. O143, Original Series 143 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940).

2. The exact date of completion is not known. However Margery does state that the priest began to work on Book II on April 28th 1438. The last official reference to Margery is also made in 1438 when Margery is admitted into the Trinity Guild of Lynn. For a list of all official references to Margery in the local registers see Appendix III of the Meech and Allen's edition of Margery's text.


5. There is some debate about whether her son is the first scribe. His return to Lynn makes this possible but his death within a month of arriving reduces the possibility.


9. In Chapter Four of Book I, as the narrative declares its intention to sum up Margery's three years of temptation by describing her failed attempt to commit adultery, there is a slippage in the use of the third person pronoun, otherwise maintained throughout the Book: 'Our merciful Lord Christ Jesus...sent her three years of great temptations, one of which I intend to write...' (48) [emphasis mine] The separation of the scribe's voice from that of the narrative at this point can be read either as a deliberate attempt to distinguish himself from the somewhat controversial account of Margery's sexual temptation which takes place in his own church, or as an unconscious error, produced by the sensationalism of the story which he is recording. One can almost imagine the priest so absorbed in the explicit details of Margery's tale that his concentration momentarily elapses.

In Chapter Fifteen, the other point at which the two narrative voices separate, the change from third to first person pronouns appears to be the result of scribal error: 'And the Bishop did no more with us [Margery and her husband] on that day, except that he treated us very warmly and said we were most welcome' (70). [emphasis mine]


20. Minnis' full discussion of Chaucer's literary inheritance and his use of it is found in *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982).


> In antiquity the most literate cultures remained committed to the spoken word to a degree which appears to our more visually organised sensibilities somewhat incredible, or even perverse. Living more than a millennium after the invention of the alphabet and in a culture which had used the alphabet for some three hundred years, the philosopher Socrates left none of his philosophy in writing. Despite the fact that Plato's philosophy ...was the product of literacy Plato was deeply and explicitly committed to the spoken word. (p. 55)
23. The popularity of such compilations as the *Speculum Christiani* supports Ong's contention. An editor of this famous text, questions whether, 'among the many religious works composed in the fourteenth-century, there were any more popular than the treatise, or rather compilation, known under the name of *Speculum Christiani*.' Gustav Holmstedt ed., Introduction, *Speculum Christiani*, E. E. T. S. O113, Original Series 182 (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. xv. Clarissa Atkinson, in her invaluable study of Margery's life, adds: 'For the convenience of parish priests it [Speculum Christiani] brought together various authorities (the Bible and the Church Fathers) on all kinds of subjects from "conscience" to "tribulation".' Margery Kempe: Mystic and Pilgrim (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 92.


26. Several parties are sent to plead with the friar on Margery's behalf. On one occasion Margery describes how two respected church figures visited him:

   Afterwards, a worthy doctor of divinity, a White Friar...who had known the said creature many years of her life...took with him another worthy man, a bachelor of law...who was
confessor to the said creature, and went to this friar as the good priests did before, and sent for wine to cheer him with, praying him of his charity to look favourably on the works of our Lord in this said creature, and grant his benevolence in supporting her, if she happened to cry or sob while he was in the middle of his sermon. (p. 189)


31. The distinction between preaching and teaching is addressed
at the start of the *Speculum Christiani* (E. E. T. S. edition, p. 2) and was probably quite widely known.

32. This distinction is found in the introduction to the very popular compilation, *Speculum Christiani*, and it is possible that it was from this source that Margery learnt this clever manipulation of the text.

33. For a fuller discussion of Brute's use of this passage in his argument for women preachers see Lochrie, 44-46.


36. The comparison is first made by R. W. Chambers in his introduction to the first edition of Margery's text in 1936. Since then the parallels have persisted. Sheila Delany addressed the

37. Speculum Christiani, p. 216.

38. Speculum Christiani, p. 214.


40. Margery correctly names the Bishop as Philip Repyngdon, lending credibility to her account.

41. Lochrie, 39.


43. Walter Ong endorses this idea using a broader-based argument founded on the differing trends and differences in works from literate and non-literate cultures, including the Middle Ages. Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982), especially Chapter One.

44. For example, Antony Goodman describes Margery’s style as ‘random scribbled or verbal musings’ and accuses her of ‘mental banality’, p. 348 and p. 350.

45. For a useful analysis of the literary concept of an ‘ending’ see Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory

46. Lord Cobham was the title of Sir John Oldcastle, a famous proponent of Lollardy.

47. The Bishop's refusal to allow Margery to wear a white robe and ring is a clear example of the unwillingness of the Church to validate her vocation and lifestyle publically.

48. This probably refers to the closed cell of an anchorite; a place considered far more appropriate for pious women of the period than the worldly existence Margery chooses to adopt.


50. For more details of the Lollard movement see Atkinson, Mystic and Pilgrim, pp. 103-112 and pp. 151-154.

51. For a brief history of Sawtre's recantation and later execution see Allen, note 149/1-2, p. 322.

52. Allen, note 27/31, p. 270.

53. A short biography of Sir John Oldcastle can be found in Allen, note 132/12-14, p. 316.

54. Spearing, Medieval to Renaissance, p. 89.

55. Spearing, Medieval To Renaissance, p. 92.


59. A full list of the clergy who participated in this debate can be found in Allen, Preface, p. lviii.

60. For a fuller description of the political involvement of these and other religious women of this period see Michael Goodich, "The Contours of Female Piety in Later Medieval Hagiography," *Church History*, 50 (1981), 220-33, especially pp. 227-30.


63. A similar situation arises when Margery offends a 'respectable lady' in the town:

And then this lady sent her daughter, and others of her household with her, to the anchorite who was principal confessor to this creature, in order that he should give her up, or else he would lose her friendship (p. 82).
64. And then some envious persons complained to the Provincial of the White Friars that the said doctor was associating too much with the said creature, forasmuch as he supported her in her weeping and in her crying, and also informed her in questions of scripture...

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 207.

65. The parish priest of St Margaret's in Lynn not only pleads with the visiting friar to show tolerance toward Margery but admonishes the congregation to do the same. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 190.


70. The Dominicans of the Rhineland were called upon by Clement IV in 1267 and twice again thereafter to adopt an officiating role as directors of the large number of convents not under the direct rule of any of the established orders. As a consequence of these added duties they developed an important school of spiritual teaching. In the thirteenth-century several tracts came out of this school which explored the more practical side of the mystical tradition, ignored by the formal and abstract work of the Victorines.

72. There are numerous stories of female saints who achieved their martyrdom in the struggle to preserve their virginity, often against the wishes of parents and bridegroom alike, for example, St. Margaret, St. Cecily and St. Katherine of Alexandria, all of whom were virgin martyrs. Even as late as 1902 this image of the passive female martyr can be found. Mary Goretti who died rather than accept the sexual advances made at her was martyred and canonised in 1950. Dickman discusses the transformation of the roles available to women religious in the medieval period on pp.159-160.

73. The positive aspects of the cash nexus which developed with market trade are well depicted by David Aers, "The Making of Margery Kempe," *Community, Gender and Individual Identity* (London: Routledge, 1988). He agrees with Delany that the economics of Margery's agreement with her husband reflects the denigrated position of women but he argues that the fact that the market is cash-based permits Margery a degree of economic activity and grants her a comparatively large amount of economic self-determination.

74. Allen, Preface, p. lvii.

75. Allen, Preface, p. lvii.


77. Dickman, p. 165.


80. A large part of the reason for Mary d'Oignies' high profile must be attributed to her spiritual biographer, Jacques de Vitry, who became a powerful and much respected Church figure.

81. For a list of works which deal with the changes bought about by such canonists as Gratian and the reasons for this new approach see footnote 34, p.131.

82. Dickman, p. 156.

83. Bridget and her daughter, Catherine of Sweden, undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land together in 1370.

84. Lynn was the port by which the English traded with the Swedes and hence the popular Swedish saint must have been well-known there. For a fuller description of the town of Lynn see Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, pp. 67-101; D. Owen, *The Making of King's Lynn* (Oxford: British Academy, Oxford University Press, 1984).

85. In Chapter Twenty Margery does claim a more privileged spiritual status than Bridget. She has a vision of the sacrament and Christ tells her, 'My daughter Bridget never saw me in this way' (83). Her association with Bridget is further strengthened by her visit to Bridget's former residence in Rome on the feast
day of her canonisation, October 7th.


88. For a detailed comparison between Margery and these women mystics see Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, pp. 121-180 and Windeatt's introduction to his translation, pp. 15-22.

89. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim*, p. 13: '...received categories of social and religious history do not easily accommodate Margery Kempe.'

90. Dickman, p. 166.

91. Angela claims to have visions including drinking the blood from Christ's wound. She also wished to suffer a humiliating death for Christ's sake and would wear a garland of rotting meat to humble herself further. See Windeatt, Introduction, p. 21.


97. Delany also contends in "Sexual Economics" that Margery is only able to take John back when he loses his physical power and his authority over her ceases to be a threat. The accident which leaves him infantile, permits Margery to live with him without danger to her vocation.


105. The term 'autobiography' should not be completely dismissed despite this mis-use. Once distanced from its present critical context it can be employed to highlight the conflicting textual ambitions of the narrative. As we have seen, the Proem denies any act of self-interest on the part of the author. Margery acknowledges that her Book will 'show in part [her] life' but she attempts to suppress this element by representing her life story as a secondary, auxiliary aspect of her narrative:

And therefore, by the leave of our merciful Lord Christ Jesus...this little treatise shall treat in part His wonderful works, how mercifully, how benignly, and how charitably He moved and stirred a sinful wretch to His love. (p. 33)

Yet the intention of her treatise to reveal God's mercy through his intervention in her life is very much entangled in the act of self-narration. Despite her efforts Margery fails to successfully repress the urgent need for self-justification which accompanies, and is inseparable from, her religious motivation for writing.


109. Sidonie Smith's post-structuralist reading of Margery's Book is the notable exception, but in my opinion it offers little that is new or dramatically different to earlier autobiographical analyses.

110. Olney, p. 5.

111. Fries, p. 227.


114. Fries, p. 227.


120. Fries, p. 232 and p. 229.


128. Fries, p. 228.


132. Aers does provide a brief, but useful discussion of the ways in which her Book refuses to sublimate aspects of specifically feminine desire in *Community, Gender*, pp. 93-94.

133. For an account of the conflict which developed between Stanford Meech and Hope Emily Allen during their work on the manuscript see John C. Hirsh, "Michigan and The Book of Margery Kempe," *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1988), pp. 99-130.

134. Dickman, p. 166.

135. Aers examines the monetary conceptualisation of her relationship with God and her ability to incorporate this world of free trading and profiteering into her Christian world view,
Comunity, Gender, pp. 75-83.

136. The relative nature of Margery's autonomy must not be forgotten. She remains highly dependent on the clergy for support and continues to court local approval and recognition throughout her Book.


138. See especially Chapter Fifty-Six.
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