

Chapter 6: Margery Kempe

She has the devil within her, and may God restore her to her right mind.

(Anon in Neaman, 1975: 31)

Summary of narrative

Margery Kempe was born in the Norfolk town of Lynn (now Kings Lynn) in around 1373, the daughter of a five times mayor, and the wife of John Kempe, also a prominent burgess, with whom she had fourteen children. Her narrative was dictated to at least two scribes over a period of at least four years. Dictation was not uncommon in the fifteenth century as many people, including, it is argued, Margery, were illiterate.

Whilst her noted illiteracy demanded Margery's account be dictated, this may have well served Kempe the author in other ways.¹ In medieval times, male ecclesiastical writers not only acted as narrators to women, but by doing so gave authority to women's texts and therefore their lives (Staley, 2001: ix). The scribe therefore becomes a powerful witness to Margery's life and holy status. Through the scribe, Kempe projects Margery as a figure of spiritual authority akin to sainthood, so it may also have benefited her to distance herself from the voice of the text, thereby acting as a defence against heresy. This said, it is important to note that the presence and actions of the scribe shifts the narrator's voice from the first to the third person and therefore any interpretation has to consider the dialogical and interactional positioning between scribe, narrator, subject and reader. As a reader and analyst I have to ask to whose voice am I listening to:

Margery's, Kempe's or the scribe's voice? Whilst the text is written in the third person,

¹ As the text is written in the third person, this analysis separates Margery the subject from Kempe the author. Separating subject from author enables the identification of the differing voices of Margery Kempe, as well as highlighting the rhetorical strategies used. In Bakhtinian terms, it separates the teller (the narrator) from the told of (the protagonist) (Bakhtin 1981).

it is generally acknowledged to be the first autobiography written in the English language. It is also recognised as being the first autobiographical account of madness (Peterson, 1982; Porter, 1987). *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Staley, 2001)² tells the story of one woman's spiritual journey in Medieval England over a twenty-five year period, describing her quest to establish spiritual authority as a result of her personal conversations with Jesus and God. The narrative begins with the self-acknowledged onset of madness, following the birth of her first child (in around 1393/4), which pre-empted for Margery a spiritual crisis. During this nine month episode she saw and heard flame-tongued devils, she slandered and rejected her family and friends, and was physically restrained to avoid self-injury. This period of madness ended with a vision of Christ, who came to Margery and restored her reason. However, Margery did not follow a faithful path. Following the failing of two of her businesses (brewing and milling) she turned to Jesus to save her from sins such as lust, pride, greed and envy, paying her penance by abstaining from meat, alcohol and, after a protracted negotiation with her husband over a number of years, sex. In her pursuit of a holy life, she went on Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome and other Holy sites in Germany and Spain. Throughout the Book, Kempe describes not only conversations with Jesus, Mary, God and other religious figures, but also visitations, with the aforementioned figures appearing to Margery and also Margery herself, participating in biblical scenes such as the birth and crucifixion of Christ. These visions were accompanied by hearing "such sounds and melodies that she might not well hear what a man said to her in that time unless he spoke the louder", smelling sweet smells and feeling within her body a flame that "is wonderfully hot and delectable and right comfortable" (Staley, 2001: 64-5). Her religious fervour leads to prolonged public demonstrations of loud wailing, sobbing and

² The primary source for this analysis is the Norton Critical Edition, translated and edited by Lynn Staley.

writhing, much to the irritation of both commoners and clerics. Kempe's story relates not only Margery's struggle to achieve some form of divine spirituality, but also her polarised reception within society. Many commoners rejected and slandered her as a devil worshiper. Clerics and prominent burgesses charged her with heresy, imprisoned her and threatened her with rape and death by burning. Others saw her as a holy mystic, a position Kempe reinforces with her descriptions of 'miracles' (avoiding injury when masonry fell upon her), prophecies (predicting storms, recoveries from illness and death) and the support of leading clerics and holy people (Bishop of Lincoln, Archbishop of Canterbury, Dame Julian of Norwich).

As detailed by the scribe, the book is not written in chronological order but "as the matter came to the creature in mind when it was written" (Staley, 2001: 5). Whilst the temporal construction of the book is cyclical and associational, for example different religious visitations are grouped together in the text, as are the trials and prophecies, there is an underlying forward movement in time. This is evident in the linguistic references to chronological time within the narrative. For example, the first sentence of her narrative tells us the age of Margery, her marriage and conception of her first child. The reader is given information on the length of Margery's madness and some of her journeys and the book ends with the death of Margery's husband and son, her final pilgrimage and her return to her home. Linguistic markers used throughout the book, such as "and then" and "and anon" serve to reinforce the forward progression of time. All of these factors emphasise the importance of linear, developmental time in Kempe's book. This said, the chronology of the book relates to Margery's inner, spiritual life as opposed to her external, social life. There is no mention of her parentage or childhood.

However, the Penguin Classics edition translated by Barry Windeatt (1985) was also consulted. A

Her marriage is referred to in relation to her quest for a higher spiritual status, for example her struggle for celibacy and the care of her husband during his final illness. Only one of her fourteen children is referred to, an adult son whom she saves from a sinful life prior to his premature death. As I shall go onto argue in the discussion chapter (chapter eight), the absence of such reflections on social relationships does not necessarily mean they were unimportant to Margery, rather such contemplations would have detracted from the main purpose of her narrative, which was to construct Margery as a holy figure. Moreover, reflections at the time focussed on spiritual rather than social relationships, indicating a different subjectivity in medieval times to that of today.

The notion of spiritual reflection is central to my main argument that Kempe's narrative is primarily a devotional text as opposed to a narrative of madness, which begs the question, why include it as part of research on firsthand accounts of madness? There are two reasons. First, Margery has a short episode of self-confessed madness, and I could have focussed on this brief account, disregarding the devotional aspects of her narrative. To do so though, would have taken Margery's madness out of the framework in which she understood it, namely religion. Second, within the fields of psychiatry and psychology there has been a struggle to engage with the religious imagination within this narrative. What is of interest from a historical and hermeneutic perspective is the way in which her story has been interpreted in modern times, as a story of madness as opposed to spiritual devotion. The aim of this analysis is not to arrive at a retrospective conclusion as to whether Margery was mad or sane. Rather I wish to highlight the tensions between madness and mysticism by exploring the ways in which religious,

comparative translation aided understanding of the text, thus enriching the analysis.

cultural and historical contexts influence both medieval and modern perspectives. This analysis explores two major themes of Kempe's book; the boundaries between madness and mysticism, and social belonging. Together they represent a specific literary genre Bakhtin describes as the "adventure novel of everyday life" (Bakhtin, 1981: 111). This is an ancient form of novel deriving from early Greek and Christian literature that has two defining characteristics: 1) that an individual's life is presented to the reader in the context of a metamorphosis or transformation and 2) that the course of this life corresponds to an actual course of travel (ibid.). These elements are clearly evident in Kempe's text, with my first identified theme (the boundaries between madness and mysticism) relating to the metamorphosis within the adventure chronotope, and the second theme (social belonging) relating to the everyday chronotope. These themes were identified after multiple readings, as being the most dominant, and together they signify the liminal position in which Margery was situated. In relation to the first theme, whilst some authors have construed Margery's religious visitations as part of her madness, I have decided to make a thematic distinction between these two experiences. This decision is based on Kempe's own distinction between Margery's self-confessed madness and the religious visions and other sensory occurrences she continues to experience in later years. Margery's narratives of madness and religious visitations shall be discussed in turn, whilst embedding them in the broader discussion around the contested boundaries between madness and spiritual passion. The central argument within this analysis is that Margery's visions and unusual sensory experiences took place in a different socio-cultural framework to that of modern times, making both the experience and the narrative of madness very different from those possible today. The second theme, social belonging, is intrinsically related to the first theme of contested psycho-spiritual boundaries, as Margery's social positioning is precariously balanced in

relation to others' responses to her behaviour and experiences. Prior to the conclusion, I will bring both themes together by discussing how they are embedded in Bakhtin's notion of the ancient adventure/everyday chronotope. I shall conclude the chapter by arguing that rather than this text being interpreted as an early narrative of madness, it is primarily an attempted hagiography, that is a narrative of a saint's life.

The Adventure Chronotope: Margery's mad timespace

There are two narrative episodes describing madness in Kempe's book, which take up just two pages of the two hundred page text. The first is the focus of the opening chapter and details Margery's madness. The second occurs in chapter 75 and is a description of Margery's involvement in another woman's madness, the circumstances of which closely echo Margery's own experience.

Kempe begins Margery's story with her as a young married woman of around twenty, experiencing an episode of self-confessed madness, what perhaps now would be classified as puerperal psychosis. During this episode Margery is assailed by physical illness and madness in the form of the voice of the devil and demonic visions, resulting in isolation from her community by physical restraint. In accordance with the heroic trajectory, Margery is saved by the vision and voice of Jesus, who restores her reason, allowing Margery to secure her freedom. There are three critical junctures within this narrative episode that impact on the story Kempe tells and reveal it as an example of Bakhtin's threshold chronotope, with Margery on the precipice between one state of being and another. First, the pregnancy and birth of Margery's first child precipitate a period of physical illness so that "she despaired of her life", during which time "she was ever hindered by her enemy, the devil" to do penance without confession, a heretical act

associated with Lollardy.³ Second, the reprimanding by her confessor (“her ghostly father”⁴) and the internalised struggle between this voice and the voice of the devil led her to go “out of her mind”. Third, the vision of Jesus leads to a restoration of reason. These critical junctures, which all relate to Margery’s mental state, are located within a linear temporal framework that elucidates the causal relationship between events (pregnancy and childbirth precipitate madness, failure at penance precipitates summoning of confessor, reprimand precipitates exacerbation of madness, leading to social isolation and self-harm, which precipitates vision of Jesus, leading to restoration and spiritual and physical freedom).⁵

Margery’s experience of madness is embedded within a religious paradigm, accounting for her experiences exclusively in moral terms. Health for Kempe, means purity, whereas sickness equates to sin:

For she was ever hindered by her enemy, the devil, evermore saying to her that, while she was in good health, she needed no confession but could do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enough. And therefore this creature oftentimes did great penance in fasting on bread and water and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, except she would not show this sin in confession. And, when she was at any time sick or

³ The Lollards being proto-Protestant followers of John Wyclif, were sceptical about the role of the priest, clerical celibacy, the ritual of confession and the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist (the physical transformation of bread and wine into flesh and blood during the Mass). Unauthorised preaching and interpretation of the scriptures that disputed the beliefs of the Catholic Church and factors such as literacy and knowledge of Latin (particularly for women) were deemed heretical and could be punished by death.

⁴ “Ghostly” in the medieval context means spiritual.

⁵ As the reader, I am assuming that the linear ordering of this narrative was Kempe’s as the narrator, rather than the scribe’s.

troubled, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned, for she was not shriven of that sin. (Staley, 2001: 7)

Margery's madness, when she went "out of her mind" (ibid.,: 7) is precipitated by her sickness following childbirth and her failure to confess a sin (unknown to the reader) to her reproving confessor. She is sick because she is sinful, yet she cannot confess these sins for fear of reprimand. Kempe describes Margery's madness and its effect upon her in the extract below:

And anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind and was wonderfully vexed and labored [sic] with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and some odd days. And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths, all inflamed with burning flames of fire as if they should have swallowed her in, sometimes menacing her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling and hailing her both night and day during the foresaid time. And also the devils cried upon her with great threats and bade her that she should forsake her Christianity, her faith, and deny her God, his mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all her good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self; she spoke many a reproving word and many a harsh word; she knew no virtues or goodness; she desired all wickedness; just as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have killed herself many a time because of her stirrings and have been damned with them in hell. And as a witness thereof she bit her own hand so violently that it

was seen all her life afterward. And also she tore the skin on her body against her heart grievously with her nails, for she had no other instruments, and worse she would have none, save she was bound and kept with strength both day and night so that she might not have her will. (ibid.,: 7)

This episode is harrowing for Margery. As Kempe the author, she is recalling it at a distance of some forty years, and indeed she informs the reader that she is writing from a different temporal and interior space (“And in this time she saw, *as she thought*, devils open their mouths”), thus distancing her present, narrating, reasoned self with her past unreasoned self. Indeed, the temporal distance may well have been a prerequisite for the telling; Kempe had to relate Margery’s story from a chronotope of reason, order and control. This said, the duration (Kempe is quite explicit on how long Margery’s madness lasts) and intensity of Margery’s experiences is described in such a way that makes it very present to the reader. Kempe uses metaphors of attack to describe her besiegement by the devils, which were “menacing ...threatening ... pulling her ...hailing her...cried upon her with great threats” so that later she describes that “men thought she should never have escaped or lived” (ibid.,: 8). This powerful use of metaphor illustrates how Margery felt attacked and under siege by demonic visions, to the point that her very being is threatened (“she would have killed herself many times”). She bites herself so hard that she leaves a permanent physical symbol, a stigmata almost, of her madness. The second metaphor Kempe uses in relation to her madness is spatial and is closely related to her dichotomous struggle between good and evil. Margery “had a thing *in her conscience*...which she so long *concealed*...the devil said *in her mind*... the dread she had of damnation *on the one side* and his sharp reproving *on that other side*, this creature went *out* of her mind”. These spatial metaphors locate the

devil/evil internal to Margery until she goes “out of her mind”;⁶ the voice of the Devil pushes Margery into madness. Interestingly, the devil itself remains internal to Margery, she never sees him as she sees Jesus, only the manifestations of demons (“she saw, as she thought, devils *open their mouths*, all *inflamed* with *burning* flames of fire as if they should have *swallowed her in*”). These manifestations have within them a physical/sexual metaphor of consumption (italicised). Margery is on the verge of being consumed, enclosed, related perhaps to the sexual origin of her madness (pregnancy).⁷

The manifestation of Margery’s madness was such that it necessitated intervention by others. She was physically restrained and bound “both day and night” by her keepers. Instruments that could be used to inflict injury were removed. Later in the book (chapter 75), Kempe describes a mother with post-natal madness being similarly restrained, with her hands and feet manacled with iron chains. This woman created such a disturbance that she was not kept at home like Margery, but removed to the “furthest end of the town, into a chamber, so that people should not hear her cry”. What Kempe’s narrative illustrates is that the mad were not always contained within the family home, but physically removed to remote locations away from the core community. This woman was placed in a symbolically marginal position, what Foucault refers to as a ‘liminal position’, kept at the threshold of the town, so that she is regarded as only partly belonging to society:

⁶ The Greek origins of the word ‘paranoia’ literally mean beside one’s self.

⁷ This said, it is important to emphasise that the primary metaphor Kempe uses to describe Margery’s madness is spatial and related to the in/out orientation. Johnson argues that this metaphor has its basis in our physical orientation in space, for example, being *in the womb*, getting *in to bed*, *stepping outside*. It is this physical experience of boundedness and containment that we draw upon to organise understanding and meaning of our abstract worlds, for example *entering into an agreement*. As Johnson describes, “our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movement, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interactions with objects” (Johnson, 1987: xix).

In a highly symbolic position he is placed on the inside of the outside, or vice versa. A posture that is still his today, if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness.

(Foucault, 2006a: 11)

The physical restraint and isolation of the mad has a historical provenance as a means of managing bizarre behaviour, albeit on a localised scale to what was seen in later centuries.

Returning to Kempe's narrative of Margery's madness, whilst her social positions are that of a wife and mother, it is her position as a religious subject that dominates both this narrative of madness and the overarching narrative of the book. She is subject to her confessor, the devil, and to Christ and, as such, Margery's voice is of the passive recipient. She was "labored with great attacks of illness", "she was hindered by her enemy"; when the devil demands she rejects her faith, family, friends and virtues "And so she did". She is also passive in her restoration of reason, which is attributed to Jesus. By describing Margery as the passive recipient, Kempe separates Margery from both thought and action. In contrast, the other voices in the text are active. The devil for example, hinders, menaces, threatens, pulls, hails, cries upon her. Her confessor has an active voice, he "was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her". The most powerful voice though, is the redeeming voice of Jesus. It is this voice that is given the only direct quotation in the narrative "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I forsook never you?", emphasising the significance of this encounter in the narrative.⁸

⁸ This quoted speech may have been at the direction of the scribe, but this does not I believe, detract from its discursive power within the narrative.

This direct quote, the first in the book, also highlights the voice of Christ as the ultimate authoritative voice, foregrounding the power this voice has throughout the book.

During Margery's madness Kempe projects Margery as the victim, whilst after her restoration she presents her as the passive victor, humble and meek as in the cultural tradition of Christianity. The restoration to reason also transforms Kempe's voice to that of spiritual authority, whereby Kempe anticipates future responses to her experience. The reader of the text becomes the subject of her spiritual authority, her congregation. This relationship between Kempe and the reader highlights the primary function of the narrative; it serves as a spiritual lesson, a sermon almost, that constructs Margery's madness as the first of her many tests of sainthood. When madness is perceived in this way, there is no medical cure, rather the cure is spiritual, with the soul and therefore reason being restored by a spiritual physician (Jesus). Towards the end of this narrative episode, Kempe shifts her dialogical position for the first time, from that of narrator to that of preacher; "When men think he is far from them, so he is full near by his grace" (Staley, 2001: 8).⁹ When Kempe speaks in the text through the voices of religion, she aligns herself through ventriloquation with this authoritative discourse, thus projecting Margery as a spiritual heroine. By using this narrative strategy, Kempe transforms Margery from both the victim of a demonic struggle and her ordinary existence as a medieval wife and mother.

Kempe's construction of Margery as a spiritual heroine is evident in her second description of madness, when, in a reflection of her own madness, she is called to attend a woman experiencing madness following childbirth:

As the said creature [Margery] was in the church of Saint Margaret to say her devotions, there came a man kneeling at the back, wringing his hands and showing tokens of great heaviness. She, perceiving his heaviness, asked what ailed him. He said it stood right hard with him, for his wife was newly delivered of a child and she was out of her mind. ‘And Dame’, he said, ‘she knows not me nor any of her neighbours. She roars and cries so that she makes folks terribly afraid. She will both smite and bite, and therefore she is manacled on her wrists’.

(ibid.,: 130)

Whereas Margery is passive in her own recovery, she is active in this woman’s recovery, attending her daily and praying for her restoration. Whilst this woman “cried and gaped as if she would have eaten [other people]” (ibid.) she is sober and comforted in Margery’s presence, “‘For you are,’ she said, ‘a right good woman, and I behold many fair angels about you’” (ibid.). Through the voice of this other mad woman, Kempe endorses Margery as a ‘right good woman’, but more than this she uses this woman’s experience and voice to promote Margery as a holy woman. The scene establishes Margery as a healer of both physical and mental afflictions and is a critical juncture in the book as a whole, acting as a symbolic reference point for her spiritual progress from madwoman to holy mystic.¹⁰

The spatial metaphor that Kempe uses to describe Margery’s madness continues in this description of another’s madness. Both women are described as being “out of her

⁹ It has to be acknowledged however, that this quote may have been the scribe’s voice interjecting in Kempe’s narrative.

¹⁰ This could be one of the earliest examples of peer supported recovery.

mind”, and in the instance of the second woman the voice of the scribe interjects in Kempe’s narrative:

It was, as they thought who knew it, a right great miracle, for he who wrote this book had never before that time seen man or woman, as he thought, *so far out of herself* as this woman was. (ibid.,: 135 emphasis added)

In these descriptions, whilst the manifestation of madness is embodied (crying, biting, smiting, roaring), it is also construed as a disembodied phenomenon, as someone can be so far out of themselves to be almost beyond reach. In contrast, non-madness is related internally to reason. For the second woman “God gave her her wit and her mind again”, and for Margery, “The creature was stabled in her wits and in her reason as ever she was before”. Later, during her mystical experiences, Jesus says to Margery, “God is in you and you within him” (ibid.,: 64). Whereas the devil was an internal phenomenon that pushed Margery out of her self and into madness, God, similarly internal, re-enters Margery and restores her reason. Three hundred years before the Enlightenment, lay people were constructing madness as distinct from reason and rationality. This was not the break from reason as witnessed in the Renaissance, rather madness was embedded in a dialectical relationship with reason as Foucault describes:

Madness becomes a form related to reason, or more precisely madness and reason enter into a perpetually reversible relationship which implies that all madness has its own reason by which it is judged and mastered, and all reason has its madness in which it finds its own derisory truth.

(Foucault, 2006a: 28-9)

The origins of this relationship between reason and unreason can be traced back to Plato, but it was St. Augustine in his *Confessions* who attempted to integrate Platonic thought with Christian doctrine by equating order with reason. However, in a development of Plato's ideas, St. Augustine took platonic oppositions such as spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal, immutable/changing and related them to the opposition of inner/outer. According to Augustine's writings, inwards lay truth, God and reason, all of which had superior status for:

without reason, we determine what of our sensible experience is really trustworthy. What judges must be higher, so reason is king. Nothing is superior to reason in human nature. (Taylor, 1989: 133)

Unlike Descartes centuries later, who equated reason with the mind, St. Augustine equated reason with spirituality, so that it was reason that made man divine, differentiating him from, and raising him above, the animal kingdom. Failure to recognise the ways in which both God and the Devil signified their presence and intervened in everyday life was, in medieval times, a means of defining madness (Hodgkin, 2007). To deny God was to lose one's soul, the mad were beside themselves as the soul migrated out of the body (Neaman, 1975). This relationship between reason, God and order, and its distinction from madness, evil and disorder is clearly evident in Kempe's writings, and, as I shall argue in the next section, Kempe makes it clear to the reader that true mystical experiences cannot take place without the exercise of reason.

The Adventure Chronotope: Margery's mystical timespace

Whilst Kempe acknowledges Margery's madness in the narrative discussed above, henceforth in the book any unusual spiritual experiences come to be understood within a spiritually orthodox paradigm. It is this boundary between madness and spiritual passion that is so poignantly reflected in Margery's story. Indeed, Kempe describes Margery's own struggle with this boundary. Early on in Margery's voice hearing and visionary experiences, she approached a Friar in Norwich and "showed him her meditations and such things as God wrought in her soul, to learn if she were deceived by delusions or not" (Staley, 2001: 31). Having some reassurance, Margery then discusses her experiences with Dame Julian of Norwich, an anchorite and mystic, "to learn if there were any deceit in them" (ibid.,: 32). The Book continues after this first chapter describing madness, with details of Margery's metaphorical and physical journey as a holy mystic. Kempe recalls for the reader Margery's conversations with Christ, God and Mary, her spiritual attendance at key Biblical scenes such as the birth and crucifixion of Christ, and the impact this religious fervour has on Margery's social position and her sense of belonging.

Some of the central academically contested scenes in the book in relation to the madness/mysticism polemic are Margery's sensory experiences and Kempe's description of her presence at Biblical events. They are contested as, from a modern perspective, they illustrate the boundary between spirituality and madness. Two extracts are analysed and discussed here in relation to this debate. The first extract is from one of three chapters that details Margery as a witness to a Biblical event. In the extract discussed here, Kempe describes Christ's crucifixion with Margery herself as a

witness. This narrative is full of rich detailed description and Kempe, through her writing, imaginatively transports the reader to a scene of violence, pain and sorrow:

And then she saw the Jews with great violence rend from our Lord's precious Body a cloth of silk, which had cleaved and hardened with his precious blood so completely and straightly to our Lord's body that it drew away all the hide and all the skin from his blessed body and renewed his precious wounds and made the blood to run down all about on every side. Then that precious body appeared to her sight as raw, as a thing that was newly flayed out of the skin, full piteous and rueful to behold....Then she saw with her ghostly eye how the Jews fastened ropes on the other hand, for the sinews and veins were so shrunken with pain that it might not come to the hole that they had marked for it, and drew thereon to make it meet with the hole. (ibid.,: 140)

From a modern perspective, these mystical and visionary descriptions are extraordinary in their detail. When Kempe describes how the sinews and veins in Christ's body shrunk from the pain, she is giving us an embodied description. When I read this, I can feel my own body recoil in anticipation of that pain. Kempe not only imaginatively transports the reader, she signifies to the reader how Margery uses her imagination and her religious zealousness to transport herself as a witness to the crucifixion. In chapter 78, Kempe makes clear to the reader that she understands these experiences as a consequence of Margery's spiritual devotion. For example:

For many years on Palm Sunday, as this creature was at the procession with other good people in the churchyard and beheld how the priests made their

observance, how they kneeled to the sacrament, and the people also, *it seemed to her ghostly sight* as though she had been that time in Jerusalem and seen our Lord in his manhood received by the people, as he was while he went here on earth. Then had she so much sweetness and devotion that she might not bear it, but cried, wept, and sobbed full violently. She had many a holy thought of our Lord's passion and *beheld him in her ghostly sight as verily as if he had been before her in her bodily sight*". (ibid.,: 135 emphasis added)

And sometimes while crying right fervently *she thought she saw our Lord Jesus Christ as verily in her soul with her ghostly eye as she had seen before the crucifix with her bodily eye*. (ibid.,: 137 emphasis added)

Here Kempe distinguishes between the bodily eye whose vision is in response to external stimulus, and her ghostly or spiritual eye whose vision is internally directed in response to her inner spirituality. Thus Kempe in the Augustinian tradition, locates God, truth and reason internally. In the extract detailing the crucifixion, Kempe begins by stating how she "saw in her contemplation our Lord Jesus Christ bound to a pillar" (ibid.,: 139). Later "she went forth in contemplation through the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to the place where he was nailed to the cross" (ibid.,: 140). Interspersed throughout the text are the phrases "and so she thought". Kempe uses these narrative devices to inform the reader that she understands Margery is not physically witnessing these biblical events, qualifying that she sees such images "with her ghostly eye" (her spiritual eye).¹¹ Kempe is not oblivious to how Margery's experiences and behaviour appear to both the reader and others present at Margery's imaginings. Halfway through

the crucifixion extract, Margery is transported back to her physical spatio-temporal context; “And then she wept and cried passingly sore so that many of the people in the church wondered on her body” (ibid.,: 141). She later shows Margery’s awareness thinking that she “ran all about the place as if she had been a mad woman, crying and roaring” (ibid). This distinction between spiritual passion and madness is reiterated later as “the said creature thought that she ran ever to and fro as if she had been a woman without reason” (ibid.,: 142). Kempe’s awareness of the similarities between spiritual ecstasy and madness is seen not only in the use of metaphors (*as if*), but also in the language (‘crying and roaring’), descriptive actions also used to describe the other woman’s madness Margery attended. These narrative linkages tell the reader that there is similarity in the two experiences, but crucially, Kempe uses metaphor as a linguistic device to distinguish them. Kempe describes Margery’s actions as if she were mad. What Kempe is clearly saying here is “I have reason, I am not mad, and I know that I am not mad because I acted as if I were mad”. Kempe knows the difference between religious fervour and madness and communicates this through metaphor. By distinguishing between her zealous behaviour and madness, Kempe informs the reader that she, as the narrator, is not insane and perhaps she knows this difference precisely because she has experienced madness. As William James echoed centuries later:

Mysticism...is essentially private and individualistic....It allows that its results are mysteries and enigmas, declines to justify them rationally, and on occasion is willing that they should even pass for paradoxical and absurd.

(James, 1982 [1902]: 430-2)

¹¹ This said, it is important to acknowledge that these narrative devices could have been inserted by the

It is a precarious position to take, but by using madness as a metaphor for her spiritual ecstasies, Kempe pre-empts any accusations of madness by others.

In the second extract, God speaks to Margery for the first time (previous dialogue has been with Christ), commanding her marriage to the Godhead. Such is her fear of God and her desire to maintain her relationship with Christ, that Margery finds it impossible to respond. After Christ excuses her silent behaviour to his Father, God takes her “by the hand in her soul”, presenting Margery before Christ, the Holy Ghost, Mary, the twelve disciples, and other saints, holy virgins and angels. In a recitation of the marriage vows that are still recognisable today, Margery marries God.¹² What follows is Kempe’s description of Margery’s response to this act. The extract below, whilst long, is important as it provides a rich, embodied, phenomenological account of what happened to Margery:

for she felt many great comforts, both ghostly comforts and bodily comforts. Sometimes she felt sweet smells with her nose; it was sweeter, she thought, than ever was any sweet earthly thing that she smelled before, not might she ever tell how sweet it was, for she thought she might have lived thereby if they would have lasted.

Sometimes she heard with her bodily ears such sounds and melodies that she might not well hear what a man said to her in that time unless he spoke the louder. These sounds and melodies had she heard nearly every day

scribe. In this regard (i.e. the dialogical relationship between the scribe, Kempe and reader), interpretation of Kempe’s narrative has to be proposed with a high degree of caution.

¹² Like other holy women who were brides of God, Kempe wore a wedding ring made at divine command inscribed with the words ‘Jesus est Amor Meus’, thus signifying her marriage to the Godhead. This ring, together with the white clothing Margery sometimes wore, was normally associated with pious widowhood.

for the term of twenty-five years when this book was written, and especially when she was in devout prayer, also many times whilst she was at Rome and in England both.

She saw with her bodily eye many white things flying all about her on every side, as thick in a manner as motes in the sun; they were right delicate and comfortable, and the brighter that the sun shone, the better she might see them. She saw them many different times and in many different places, both in church and in her chamber, at her meal and in her prayers, in field and in town, both going and sitting. And many times she was afraid what they might be, for she saw them as well in nights in darkness as in daylight. Then, when she was afraid of them, our Lord said unto her, ‘By this token, daughter, believe it is God that speaks in you, for whereso God is, heaven is, and where God is there are many angels, and God is in you and you are in him. And therefore be not afraid daughter, for this betokens you have many angels about you to keep you both day and night so that no devil shall have power over you nor no evil man harm you’.

Then from that time forward she used to say when she saw them come, ‘Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini’.¹³

Also our Lord gave her another token, which endured about sixteen years, and it increased ever more and more, and that was a flame of fire wonderfully hot and delectable and right comfortable, not wasting but ever increasing of flame, for, though the weather was never so cold, she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart, and verily as a man should feel the material fire if he put his hand or his finger therein.

¹³ Translates as “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”.

When she felt first the fire of love burning in her breast, she was afraid thereof, and then our Lord answered to her mind and said, ‘Daughter, be not afraid, for this heat is the heat of the Holy Ghost, which shall burn away all your sins, for the fire of love quenches all sins’. (Staley, 2001: 64-5)

What can we make of this experience? Some writers have interpreted Margery’s experience from a modern, psychiatric perspective. For example, Craun in a 2005 paper in the journal *Psychiatric Services* boldly claims on the basis of Kempe’s description of post childbirth madness and the sensory extract above that:

Kempe was psychotic for much of her adult life....Kempe continued to have psychotic symptoms throughout the remainder of her life...[her] account provides the modern reader with a unique opportunity to hear the voice of a woman with serious mental illness who lived 600 years ago.

(Craun, 2005)

Claridge, et al. (1990) in an analysis that focuses on Margery’s behaviour in relation to her rejection by others (a theme I shall go on to discuss in the next section of this chapter), place a scientific interpretation on the events of her life. Applying a psychiatric assessment tool that measures psychotic illness over a prolonged period of time to Kempe’s narrative (the Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia – Lifetime Version (SADS-L)), the authors conclude that:

Given this mixture of affective and schizophrenic features a modern psychiatric diagnosis for Margery Kempe would most likely be ‘schizoaffective psychosis’, precipitated in the first instance by childbirth. (Claridge et al., 1990: 69)

Other authors have interpreted Margery’s experiences in a more contextual framework, positioning them in the medieval cyclical construction of melancholia and mania (Freeman, Bogard and Sholomskas, 1990). Having read Margery’s story, I cannot deny that her experiences are comprehensible within this paradigm. Transferring her experience to modern times, if I, as a psychiatric nurse, saw someone stating that they had married God; that they saw other celestial beings; that their body was burning from an internal flame; that they could smell sweet heavenly scents; that they heard music without an external stimulus; that they saw angels; this person would most probably be within the psychiatric system. Less sympathetically, others have derided Kempe’s narrative as ‘terrible hysteria’, ‘neuroticism’, and Margery herself as ‘a hysteric, if not an epileptic’, ‘a sufferer from morbid self-engrossment’ and ‘quite mad – an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend’ (see Aers, 2001 for fuller discussion). In a damning modernist critique, Drucker, who describes Kempe as a ‘religious hysteric’, condemns her visions as ‘occasionally repellent and frequently silly’, invalidating both Margery’s experience and Kempe’s narrative (Drucker, 1972: 2916). When I initially read, re-read and read again this extract, I struggled to explain it. After a three hour struggle, I wrote one sentence; “Madness I understand, this I do not”.

Phenomenologically, I have no understanding of madness, but I have a position of understanding as the outsider, the psychiatric nurse taught to recognise signs and symptoms. Yet there is something very different about Kempe’s account that I struggle to understand and explain. Why do I struggle to understand this and similar episodes in

Margery's life? It is because my twentieth century psychiatry trained head tells me this should be madness, indeed others tell me this is madness. Kempe describes, in this extract and elsewhere, what could be construed as classic psychotic symptoms; visions, auditory, olfactory and tactile hallucinations, grandiose delusions, self-neglect (Margery's penances of fasting, being inadequately clothed), social withdrawal (from her family and friends), and feelings of passivity and control. However, to place such an interpretation as is seen in the work of Claridge and colleagues, dismisses the cultural meaning of Margery's behaviour and the possible theological interpretations of medieval society. More than this though, as the reader, when I engage with Margery's story it does not feel like madness. Why not? What Kempe describes to us is a truly embodied spiritual experience. Kempe has no doubt about this, and it is this unshakeable belief that communicates itself down the centuries through the text. To understand Margery's experiences, it is useful to return to Sarbin's argument that the communication of deep organismic involvement in an experience necessitates the use of metaphor, which can be misinterpreted as the real by the listener/reader (see Chapter 3, pp. 91-92):

when people claim that their imaginings are real, they are probably deeply involved in *as if* behaviour, behaviour that may be described as being lively, forceful and vivid – words that connote the bodily effects of emotional life.

(Sarbin, 1998: 26, emphasis in original)

The question remains, however, as to how Kempe manages to convey the phenomenological intensity of Margery's experience twenty or more years after the event? First, Kempe is an expert storyteller, and it is likely that she retold such

narratives as discussed here on many occasions to many people, clergy and fellow pilgrims, through oral testimony and public performance. However, more important to her developing expertise in storytelling would have been the private practice of reflection and meditation on her experiences; as Hodgkin argues, what is rehearsed in the mind, stays in the memory (Hodgkin, 2007: 32). Second, central to the orthodox liturgy is the conception that devotional words uttered are expressed through the senses (Good, 2001: 35). Kempe belongs to a strong tradition of mystics who represented their experiences in thick, detailed and highly naturalistic descriptions. Extreme emotion which, in modern times, is viewed as a sign of mental instability, was a fundamental feature of this spirituality, conveying both the seriousness and truth of the religious experience (Hodgkin, 2007: 90).¹⁴ This was exemplified in key Latin texts of the day, where prayer is transferred from an abstract, cognitive activity to an embodied phenomenon. Whilst Margery denies knowledge of Latin as a defence against accusations of heresy, thus saving her life, the book has a strong Latin provenance. The priests who conversed and read to Margery would most likely have read from contemporary Latin texts of the day, notably Saint Bridget,¹⁵ Marie D'Oignies,¹⁶ Walter Hilton,¹⁷ Nicholas Love¹⁸ and Richard Rolle.¹⁹ Love's *The Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf*

¹⁴ Such intense spirituality as described by Kempe, was not repositioned within a medical framework until the 1650's (see Hodgkin 2007: 95)

¹⁵ St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) was similar to Kempe in many respects. She was married with children before she became a visionary, pilgrim, prophet and founder of a religious order. Like Kempe, St. Bridget was chosen by God to be his bride. Kempe refers to St. Bridget during her visit to Rome (chapters 32-41), during which time she married God.

¹⁶ Marie D'Oignies was a pious woman renowned in medieval Europe for her married chastity, her service to others, her devotions and bouts of crying.

¹⁷ Walter Hilton was Canon of the Augustinian Priory of Thurgarton, near Nottingham. His most famous work, *Ladder of Perfection* (books one and two) is the first comprehensive work of ascetic and mystical theology to be written in the English language.

¹⁸ Nicholas Love was prior of the Carthusian House of Mount Grace in Ingleby in Yorkshire, which was, incidentally, also the place where Kempe's transcript was discovered in 1934, having been missing since the late middle ages. His major writing was *The Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* (1410), a fifteenth century English translation of the Latin *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. This devotional text was

of Jesu Christ (1410) has been cited as a primary source of inspiration for Margery's meditations and visions (Akel, 2001: 7). Kempe alludes to the life of St. Bridget and makes direct reference to the texts of both Hilton and Rolle. However, it is the stylistic influence of Rolle that is particularly prevalent in the extracts discussed above, both in the imagery used and the employment of mystical idioms (Lochrie, 2001). For example, in the sensory descriptions following her marriage to God, Kempe refers to the "fire of love", which, Lochrie argues, is a direct reference to Rolle's metaphorical use of the word *ignis* (fire) for ardour. Kempe's use of analogy to convey the reality of Margery's sensory experiences is again reflective of Rolle's writings. Moreover, the embodied, phenomenological way in which she describes Margery's mystical experiences is, Lochrie argues, clearly reflective of Rolle's three-fold distinction in the stages of mystical ascent; *calor*, *dulor* and *canor*, translated as fire, sweetness and song. Rolle in his writings refers to "sweet invisible melodies" overcoming him, transforming not only the voice of God, but also Rolle's own voice from speech to song. Lochrie contends that the strongest evidence of Rolle's influence on Kempe is her references to heavenly smells, a sensation that she could only have been familiar with through contact with Rolle's works. Such olfactory experiences or 'heavenly smells' were found more widely in medieval continental mysticism, but in England are exclusive to Kempe and Rolle.²⁰

intended to be used for meditation and, being translated into the vernacular, was immensely popular throughout Europe. Love's translation covers the events of the life of Christ in imaginative detail.

¹⁹ Richard Rolle (1300-1349) born in Thornton, North Yorkshire. Rolle was a religious hermit whose writings were extremely popular during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He was one of the first religious writers to use the vernacular and his work was selectively used by the Lollards to support their radical religious position.

²⁰ Again, it is important to draw attention to the role of the scribe. Whilst the experiences related are clearly Margery's, the style in which they are told may be heavily influenced by the scribe and his undoubted intimate knowledge of the key texts of the day.

Atkinson (2001) argues that there was a substantial increase in the numbers of holy women in late medieval Europe. These women characteristically had visions, direct communication with the Godhead and other holy figures and found scribes to publicise their experiences. Moreover, increasing numbers of these women, like Margery, were ‘honorary virgins’, married women and mothers who had transcended their married state through vows of chastity and holy endeavours. With this knowledge, when we return to Kempe’s text, we can listen to Margery’s voice within a framework more akin to medieval England than the twentieth century West. Margery’s sensory experiences are not without cultural and historical provenance, rather they are embodied in a chronotope that supports and justifies a mystical interpretation, as she draws upon a range of mystical sources grounded in religious and cultural traditions known throughout medieval Europe. Kempe’s embodied descriptions cease to be tactile or olfactory hallucinations or grandiose ideas (marriage to God), but become experiences that result from spiritual passion that were, in the culture in which they were recorded, regarded as normal. As Porter argues “it would serve no purpose to label such exercise of spiritual discipline as a psychiatric disorder” (Porter, 1988: 44). As argued earlier, religiosity was sanity, whereas madness amounted to a refusal to accept the truth that was God. Furthermore, Margery’s experiences are intelligible not only in terms of religious traditions, but also in terms of her career; Kempe construes Margery as a holy mystic, and the narration of her story is an attempt (albeit failed) to promote Margery to sainthood.

Kempe’s descriptions illustrate the contested boundaries between madness and spirituality. Kroll and Bachrach (1982) examined the fluidity of these boundaries in a study that compared medieval visions with contemporary hallucinations. They

identified two differences from their analysis of historical texts and case studies. First, medieval experiences described more visions and less auditory hallucinations than contemporary experiences; and second, contemporary accounts describe greater difficulty differentiating between the voices of angels and devils. Whilst both the contexts and the experiences clearly differ, Kroll and Bachrach conclude that contemporary patients diagnosed with schizophrenia would not be judged mentally ill in medieval times and vice versa; medieval experiences would be diagnosed as a form of psychotic behaviour. The medieval acceptance of the spiritual world was such that all hallucinatory phenomena was incorporated within a celestial/ demonic paradigm, thus two of the major features of schizophrenia (hallucinations and passivity/control) were constructed as transcendental mystical experiences. Indeed, visions and dreams continue to be highly valued by some religious groups in certain cultures. There is more to this though than medieval religious paradigms. Buckley (1981), whilst identifying that mystical experiences lack the thought disorder and auditory hallucinations of acute schizophrenia,²¹ argues that the two experiences have much in common; a powerful sense of noesis or consciousness, heightened perception/synesthesia, communion with the divine, exaltation/ecstasy, loss of self-object boundaries and distortion of time. These similarities are reflective of James's definition of the mystical experience; ineffability (defies expression), noetic qualities (states of insight), transience and passivity (James, 1982: 380-2). The characteristic features of mysticism described by both Buckley and James are evident in Kempe's narrative, including the quality of ineffability, as Kempe refers to her struggle to describe some of Margery's experiences:

²¹ Buckley differentiates between the clinical use of acute schizophrenia and schizophreniform psychosis, a latent condition characterised by introversion, withdrawal and flattened affect.

Neither could she herself ever tell the grace that she felt; it was so heavenly, so high above her reason and her bodily wits, and her body so feeble in the time of the presence of grace that she might never express it in her word as she felt it in her soul. (Staley, 2001: 4)

The boundaries between madness and mysticism and modernist interpretations of Margery's medieval experiences raise the question of the cultural context of insanity. What makes one person's experience mystical and another's schizophrenic? As outlined in Buckley's paper, the distinction between being identified as a religious mystic/prophet or a schizophrenic is dependent not only on cultural context, but also outcome and overall function (Buckley, 1981). Margery was seen in certain quarters as being a divine mystic, an inspiration to others; she was at worst judged a heretic and, whilst a few lay people deemed her possessed by wicked spirits, she was more commonly considered a nuisance and irritant. Rarely was she perceived as the mad woman who needed the isolation and restraint following the birth of her first child. Her visions were never described by others in medical terms, nor was her behaviour subjected to the medieval sciences of law, theology and medicine. Similarly, there are numerous twentieth century examples of individuals who had religious/spiritual visions and beliefs who were not diagnosed with schizophrenia: Doris Stokes and David Icke for example. These modern examples illustrate that public/societal function has some part in how an individual is constructed. William James states that the significance of spiritual visions/beliefs is based on religious/moral values rather than pathology, although for the majority of modern-day individuals this does not negate the pathologising and diagnosis of the visionary (James, 1982). Returning to Margery, if, as I argue, she was mystical rather than mad, why was she not conferred the status of

sainthood to which she aspired? The primary reason is that there has never been a serious movement or “cause” to get Margery declared a saint, and Maitland suggests that there was something about Margery or Kempe’s writing which sat uneasily with usual ideas about holiness, for example the accusations of Lollardy (Maitland, 2007). Any cause for canonization would begin with a local cult (usually lay led), before going up the ecclesiastical hierarchy for approval. As I shall now go on to discuss, Margery’s liminal social positioning and her controversial reception by lay people in particular perhaps negated her claim for sainthood.

The Everyday Chronotope: social belonging and liminality

Whilst I have argued that Margery’s experiences can be contextualised within the hegemonic religious paradigm of the day, these experiences were ambiguously received by her medieval contemporaries. Kempe’s text is populated with diverse voices; voices of official and civic discourse, religious discourse and voices of urban and religious conformity. I shall argue that Kempe the author uses these voices to deny madness, promote reason, thereby strengthening her holy position and claim to sanctity.

Before going onto discuss the voices within Kempe’s text and how these relate to Margery’s social positioning, I want to briefly reflect on the style of Kempe’s book as a reflection of medieval society. As a piece of autobiographical literature, it is resonant of what Bakhtin identifies as the Menippean satire (Bakhtin 1984a). This is an ancient form of literary genre stemming from the time of Socrates that is rich with comedy, fantasy and adventure. It is the very first form of the carnival literary genre, a genre characterised by grotesques, vulgarity, debasement, the inversion of social hierarchies

and elements of anarchy.²² The Menippean satire forms part of what Foucault describes as “a literature of stories and morality tales” (Foucault, 2006a: 13). When one reads Kempe’s text, one embarks upon a fantastic medieval adventure, an adventure that sees Margery’s mock crowning (her affirmed status by religious authorities) and decrowning (her public shame of being paraded as a fool by others). Kempe’s narrative also encompasses a central characteristic of the Menippean satire, that is the mystical set against “crude slum naturalism”, as Bakhtin describes:

the adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth. The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of life’s filth.

(Bakhtin, 1984a: 115)

Like other medieval genres (e.g. chivalric romances), key events take place on the road or along Kempe’s journey. Importantly, the spatial chronotope of the road is where all manner of people meet in Kempe’s narrative; high and low clergy, town officials, gaolers and the lay. Thus people who would ordinarily be kept separate by social and spatial distance collide at specific spatial and temporal junctures. Kempe’s story takes place in the raucous marketplaces, with the men who threaten to rape her, the pilgrims who walked scabbed and naked, and the neighbours who slander and bitch. Kempe positions herself above his, but crucially “the man of the idea – the wise man – collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness and vulgarity in their most extreme expression” (Bakhtin, 1984a: 115). In Kempe’s text this encompasses scandal scenes, eccentric behaviour, inappropriate speeches and performances, all of which I shall go on to argue

²² The carnival genre shall be discussed in detail in the next chapter in relation to my analysis of the

enable the construction of Margery as a holy fool. The Menippean satire also has a central concern with current and topical issues, which for Kempe is the state of the soul, and in this sense, Kempe's narrative is journalistic in that it:

acutely echo[es] the ideological issues of the day...[It is] a sort of *Diary of a Writer*, seeking to unravel and evaluate the general spirit and direction of evolving contemporary life. (Bakhtin, 1984a: 118 emphasis in original)

In the Menippean satire, therefore, Kempe uses the exaggerated characters, the women and men who verbally abuse and threaten her, to position her own morality and to highlight the importance of the virtuous, spiritual life.

Throughout her story, Kempe uses discursive strategies to outline Margery's struggle to establish and maintain her own voice and social position. In medieval England, Margery was a highly unusual phenomenon; a married mother who resisted conventional domestic and religious roles; a woman who sought to establish a mystical role at the expense of her earthly roles of wife and mother. She received a polarised reception, as Kempe the author describes; people either revered or resented Margery, with some lay people swinging between these two extremes. Kempe describes not a continuum of reaction, but a dichotomy; people either loved or hated Margery, no one was indifferent. Her husband's behaviour exemplifies this dichotomy. In Canterbury, where a hostile crowd threatens to burn Margery, "her husband went away from her as if he had not known her and left her alone among them" (Staley, 2001: 21). However, when a woman in the court of the palace of Lambeth states, "I would you were in

narrative of Mary Barnes.

Smithfield,²³ and I would bear a faggot to burn you with; it is a pity that you live” (ibid.: 28), Margery’s husband not only stands with her whilst she is verbally attacked but he “suffered with great pain and was full sorry to hear his wife so rebuked” (ibid.).

This dichotomy of acceptance/rejection is played out through both the official discourses of civic authority and religion, and the unofficial discourses and heteroglossia of everyday talk. The use of official discourse is best exemplified when Margery is imprisoned on formal charges of heresy, which she has to defend. Kempe describes three main trials, the first occurring in Leicester, the second in York and the third in Beverley, with the latter two being under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of York. This analysis shall focus on the first of these trials in Leicester, but shall refer to the other trials in places. The chapters describing all three trials are narrated consecutively (chapters 46-54) and punctuate her pilgrimage from Lynn to East Yorkshire.

Shortly after arriving in Leicester, Margery and two of her fellow pilgrims are imprisoned by the civic authorities. Whilst in prison, the Steward of Leicester threatens to rape her, until she admits that her speech comes from the Holy Ghost, to which the Steward replies “either you are a right good woman or else a right wicked woman”, a statement that signifies to the reader the dichotomous reaction to Margery.

The trial itself takes place in a church. In attendance are the abbot of Leicester, some of his canons, the dean of Leicester, clerks, friars, priests, the mayor (on whose directive the trial is taking place) and lay people. Kempe recalls, “there were so many people that they stood upon stools in order to behold and wonder upon her”. Margery herself:

²³ Smithfield was the location where the first two Lollards were burnt in 1401 and 1410.

lay on her knees, making her prayers to almighty God that she might have grace, wit and wisdom to answer that day as might be most pleasant and worshipful to him, the most profit to her soul, and the best example to the people.

(ibid.,: 84)

By this description of Margery's physical performance, Kempe embodies her religiosity, signifying this to both her immediate audience and the reader. Kempe communicates this intent to the reader in the telling words that Margery be "the best example to the people". Setting out this scene for the reader, Kempe portrays Margery as a figure of not only local notoriety, but of religious importance. In this packed judicial setting, Margery is formally tried on grounds of heresy. What follows is an official inquiry into the religiosity of her beliefs, in particular beliefs regarding the Eucharist and transubstantiation (see footnote three). When Margery responds to these charges, her words are carefully chosen in line with the orthodox Catholic faith:

Sirs, I believe in the sacrament of the altar in this manner, that whatever man has taken the order of priesthood, be he never so vicious a man in his living, if he say duly those words over the bread that our Lord Jesus Christ said when he made the Last Supper among his disciples where he sat at the supper, I believe that it is his very flesh and his blood and no material bread nor ever may be unsaid be it once said.

(ibid.,: 85).

Margery accomplishes three actions within this speech. First, she defends the key charge against her by stating her faith in that bread and wine are physically changed,

and not merely spiritually changed as the Lollards believed, thus aligning herself with religious orthodoxy. Second, she upholds the role of the priest as the sole administer of the Eucharist and, third, by inserting the aside ‘be he never so vicious a man in his living’, Margery reminds the clerics in her audience of the benevolence embedded in their role. Whilst her answers appease the clerics, the mayor remains unmoved and accuses Margery of sinful acts (adultery). Perhaps building on the reassurances of the clerics, Margery not only defends herself through the voice of religion, but she uses the voice of God to attack her accuser:

Sir, you are not worthy to be a mayor, and that I shall prove by Holy Writ, for our Lord God said himself before he would take vengeance on the cities, ‘I shall come down and see.’ And yet he knew all things. And that was nothing else, sir, but for to show men as you are that that you should make no execution in punishing unless you know before that it were worthy to be done.

(ibid.,: 85).

In a final attempt to prove her heretical stance, the mayor demands she justify her white clothes, accusing her of trying to lead other wives astray. Kempe refuses to speak to him directly on this matter, and insists on telling the clerks, who will then decide whether they shall tell the mayor:

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘you shall not learn from my mouth why I go in white clothes; you are not worthy to learn it. But, sir, I will tell to these worthy clerks with good will in the manner of confession. Let them consider if they will tell it to you’.

(ibid.)

Again, Margery dismisses her accuser with the putdown ‘you are not worthy to learn it’, contrasting the mayor with the ‘worthy clerks’. This is more than a social rebuke or denial of the mayor and his status; it is a clever ploy on the part of Margery. She knows that if she admits that God demanded she wore white, she will be judged a heretic. What she tells the clerks is that whilst God demanded this action, it was her confessors who authorised it. Therefore, Kempe argues, the clerks would not be lying if they told the mayor Margery wore white on her confessor’s advice. This rhetorical manoeuvre could be deemed risky by her immediate audience and by the reader, but Margery had nothing to lose; she was defending her life. Margery’s confidence in the clerks is not misplaced. The mayor is furious, refusing her release unless he receives a letter from the Bishop of Lincoln, who, unbeknownst to him, is an ally of Margery’s. The episode ends with her acquiescing to the request to pray with the mayor, after which “he gave her goodly words for a while so that she thought all had been well and he had been her good friend, but afterward she knew well it was not so” (ibid.: 86).

The Margery Kempe described in Leicester, is different to the one that stood before the hostile crown in Canterbury, silent and shaking with fear. This is a woman not afraid to go to prison, and whilst she fears rape and death, she does not show this to her enemies. In York for example, “her flesh trembled and quaked wonderfully so that she was fain to put her hands under her clothes so that it should not be espied” (ibid.: 91). This is a woman confident, articulate and intelligent enough to defend herself without compromising her own beliefs, and she resists the monological discourse of the mayor, who attempts to undermine her position and her voice by imposing limits upon her language, asking her to defend herself using the language of religious orthodoxy.

Margery successfully resists being overcome by this authoritative discourse by exploiting the official discourse of religion and by invoking divine will to override male authority. It is important to note that the existence of these two forms of discourse (the official religious discourse and Kempe's unofficial religious discourse) does not construe polyphony. Polyphony encourages constructive dialogue, whereas what the reader witnesses in these trials are examples of competitive discourse, which is focussed on winning arguments, as opposed to opening up dialogue, as Good describes:

Competitive argument is characterised not only by its determination to explain events in its own unitary language but also in its attempts to isolate or exclude otherness in order to demonstrate a triumphant clarity of analysis.

(Good, 2001: 17)

Margery gains discursive momentum by her continual public resistance against the two hegemonic discourses of established religion and gender. A further important feature of all of these trials is the way in which Margery is displayed, as her life becomes dissected in the very public arena of a civic ceremony. She stands open to accusation, inspection and ridicule in the same way as asylum inmates were. Margery uses this carnival however, to confirm her religious status, as the trials provide a platform for Kempe the author to identify Margery the protagonist with Christ as an object of persecution, thus forming a central part of her claim for sainthood.

Of course it is not only Margery who saves herself from charges of heresy. The ecclesiastical support she has engineered is pivotal in saving Margery's life on these occasions. Margery actively seeks out this ecclesiastical endorsement from the highest

authorities. The Bishop of Lincoln commends her contemplations as “full devout matters and inspired by the Holy Ghost” (Staley, 2001: 26), giving Margery not only spiritual, but financial support as well. She approaches the Archbishop of Canterbury to ascertain “if he found any default either in her contemplation or in her weeping...And he found no default therein but approved her manner of living” (ibid.: 28). Seeking similar reassurances “to learn if she were deceived by any illusions or not” she gains the approval of a well known Carmelite friar and Dame Julian of Norwich, an anchorite, mystic and author of *The Shewings*, a popular religious text of the day, who states “that she should not be afraid; there was no deceit in her manner of living” (ibid.: 33). Margery also receives grudging support from the Archbishop of York, who, in response to his household demanding she be burnt, states, “ ‘I am badly informed of you; I hear said you are a right wicked woman’”, to which Margery replies “ ‘Sir, so I hear said you are a right wicked man. And, if you are as wicked as men say, you shall never come into heaven unless you amend yourself while you are here’”(ibid.: 92). Again, Kempe the author illustrates to the reader Margery’s mastery of rhetoric. She condemns the Archbishop’s behaviour not with her own words, but through the gossip of others and the discourse of the Scriptures. By doing this Margery signifies to the Archbishop, her immediate audience and the reader that what is heard of her is not necessarily true. The Archbishop’s endorsement is vital as he saves her from heresy charges in York, Beverley and Hull. He despairs not only of the treatment Margery receives, but also despairs of Margery herself:

‘I believe there was never a woman in England so treated as she is and has been’’. Then he said to the creature, ‘ I know not what I shall do with you’.

(ibid.,: 99)

This acceptance of Margery by religious figures is not unequivocal however. Kempe devotes a whole chapter outlining the polarised response to her behaviour (chapter 61). When a well renowned friar comes to minister at Lynn, he is forewarned by others of Kempe's behaviour, and advised to "suffer it patiently and be not abashed thereof" (ibid.: 110). During his sermon, Kempe's crying begins and the friar states, " " I would this woman were out of the church; she annoys the people"" (ibid.). This is the first time a religious man of power has spoken against Kempe's behaviour, and his rhetoric and position is enough to sway the opinion of the immediate audience against her. In a remarkable gesture, other prominent holy men persuade and bribe the friar to tolerate Kempe. The friar agrees only if Kempe admits her behaviour results from sickness. When she refuses, Kempe is banished from the church whilst he is preaching in it. In a final vindication of both her behaviour and her holy status, Kempe declares; "When she was alone by herself in one church and he preaching to the people in another, she had as loud and as marvellous cries as when she was among people" (ibid.: 111).

Of interest is the way in which Kempe describes religious figures in this vignette. The men who attempt to persuade the friar of Kempe's holiness and non-malevolence are described as:

a worshipful doctor of divinity, A White Friar, a solemn clerk and old doctor, and well approved, who had known the said creature many years of her life and believed the grace God wrought in her, took with him a worthy man, a bachelor of law, a well grounded man in scripture and long exercised.

(ibid.,: 110-111)

In contrast, she begins the following chapter with these words about the 'good friar' who rejects her:

After on Saint James' Day the good friar preached in Saint James chapel yard at Lynn – he was at that time neither bachelor not doctor of divinity – where were many people and a great audience. (ibid.,: 112)

The dismissive putdown is almost parenthesised as an aside to the reader, and highlights how Kempe uses the official discourses of religion and academia alongside positive evaluative indexicals to connect these male figures with the dichotomous opinions held of her. Using these discursive devices, Kempe foregrounds the ecclesiastical support she receives.

Lay people are equally ambivalent towards Margery. As already indicated in Canterbury and elsewhere, people called for her burning. Much of this hostility is in response to Margery's behaviour, her donning of white clothes, her fasting and in particular her outbursts of crying. Her first public outpouring of spiritual emotion occurs in Jerusalem:

And when they came up onto the Mount of Calvary, she fell down so that she might not stand or kneel but wallowed and twisted with her body, spreading her arms abroad, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart should have burst asunder. (ibid.: 50)

Margery was aware of how others perceived these outbursts of spiritual emotion and attempted to control them:

And, as soon as she perceived that she should cry, she would keep it in as much as she might, so that the people should not have heard it, for it annoyed them. For some said it was a wicked spirit vexed her; some said it was a sickness; some said she had drunk too much wine; some banned her, some wished she had been in the harbour; some would she had been in the sea in a bottomless boat; and so each man as he thought. Some great clerks said our Lady cried never so, nor no saint in heaven, but they knew full little what she felt nor would they not believe that she might have abstained from crying if she wished. And therefore, when she knew that she should cry, she kept it in as long as she might and did all that she could to withstand it or else to put it away until she waxed as blueish grey as any lead, and ever it should labour her mind more and more, unto the time that it broke out. And, when her body might no longer endure the ghostly labour but was overcome with unspeakable love that wrought so fervently in the soul, then fell she down and cried wonder loud. And the more that she would labour to keep it in or to put it away, much the more should she cry and the louder. (ibid.,: 51)

In response to the “falling evil” as some described her behaviour:

folk spitted at her for horror of the sickness, and some scorned her and said she howled like a dog and banned her and cursed her and said she did much harm among the people. And then those who beforetime had given her both food and

drink for God's love now put her away and bade her that she should not come in their places because of the sharp tales that they heard of her. (ibid.,: 77)

As Kempe describes, her fits of crying arouse an extreme response from lay people. In these passages, the voice of the lay people is articulated through Kempe the author and the reader gains some insight into how these fits of crying were construed. These lay constructions pivot around medieval concepts of madness; wicked spirits, sickness and drunkenness were all associated with madness (Harper 1997). Moreover, these passages indicate the liminal position Margery has between different communities, lay, pilgrim and religious, as in contrast to the scorn, holy individuals revere Margery and her behaviour as being a symbol of devout passion and holiness. These public outcries have a twofold benefit for Kempe in relation to both her social position and her claims to sanctity. The more intense the outpouring, the greater the scorn and rejection from her immediate audience, reinforcing her position as the persecuted martyr. Second, the greater the intensity of crying, the firmer the belief of the non-secular that Kempe is truly a holy mystic. This fits with the established Christian tradition that a true believer is in some way out of control, helpless to restrain their emotions and body at the hands of supernatural forces (Hodgkin 2007: 91). Kempe the author is skilful in her depictions of Margery's outbursts of crying, as she manages to invoke from the reader a reflection of her immediate audience's dichotomous response; feelings of sympathy, amusement and understanding of the immediate audience's irritation. One way in which Kempe achieves this is by separating the narratives of the contemplative visions from the narratives of fits of crying. By doing this the reader witnesses the fit without any idea of the vision that may have pre-empted it. As such, Kempe positions the reader as part of the immediate audience.

On her pilgrimages, Kempe describes the precarious and controversial position Margery has in the social space. For the most part, she is a woman on her own seeking out fellow pilgrims to travel with. Her first pilgrimage across Europe to Jerusalem is characteristic of the hostile way she was received and treated by some of her fellow pilgrims. They resent both her abstention from eating meat, her weeping and her constant talk of God, with one pilgrim stating; “ ‘I pray God that the devil’s death may overcome you soon and quickly’ ” (Staley, 2001: 45). In the extract below, Kempe describes the extent of her humiliation:

[she] went forth with them until she came to Constance with great distress and great trouble, for they caused her much shame and reproof as they went in divers [sic] places. They cut her gown so short that it came but a little beneath her knee and made her put on a white canvas in the manner of a sackcloth garment, for she would be taken as a fool and the people should not make much of her nor hold her in reputation. They made her sit at the table’s end, beneath all the others so that she dared hardly to speak a word. And notwithstanding all their malice, she was held in more worship than they wherever they went. And the good man of the house where they were hostled, though she sat lowest at the table’s end, would always take care before all of them if he could and might, and sent her from his own meal such service as he had, and that grieved her fellowship badly. (ibid.,: 46)

Her fellow pilgrims physically parade her ‘as a fool’, so that none will take her seriously, and they do this by attacking her physical appearance, something that is of

great importance to Margery. Before her conversion, Kempe describes Margery as wearing gowns slashed with many colours, high fashion of the day, in order to outdo the other women in her community. Later Margery dons white to signify her status as a honorary virgin. Thus her apparel reflects her spiritual condition. To have her gown cut so that it bares her legs is an act of shame for Margery. Margery's perceived inferiority and provisional status in the pilgrim community is reinforced by her positioning at the meal table by others. And yet as Kempe describes, others' actions resist this positioning. In the following chapter, Margery locates an ally, and Kempe chooses a particular descriptive discourse to inform us about the worthiness of this man's social status, positioning him as a man of religiosity, knowledge and power. He is an English friar, a master of divinity, the Pope's legate and a worshipful man. Thus Kempe legitimises his actions of endorsing Margery's experiences and supporting her against her fellow pilgrims. Defending Margery to the others he states:

‘Nay, sirs, I will not make her eat meat while she may abstain herself and be the better disposed to love our Lord. If one of you all made a vow to go to Rome barefoot, I would not absolve him of his vow while he might fulfill it; neither will I bid her eat meat while our Lord gives her strength to abstain. As for her weeping, it is not in my power to restrain it, for it is the gift of the Holy Ghost. As for her speaking, I will ask her to cease until she comes where men will hear her with a better will then you do’.

The company was wroth and in great anger. They gave her over to the legate and utterly they would no more meddle with her. He full benignly and goodly received her as though she had been his mother”. (Staley, 2001: 47)

Through the voice of this powerful, religious man, Kempe confirms Margery's religious autonomy (to choose to abstain from meat) and her holy status as one possessed by divine spirits. The legate agrees to stop her speaking, but not because Margery has nothing worth hearing, but because her pilgrim company is not worthy of hearing it. Kempe describes other occasions of humiliation, when her fellow travellers mislead her, trying to purposefully avoid her. They order ships, placing bedding and wine on for themselves, but none for her. They tell her they are sailing on one ship, then sail on another. Like Christ to Peter, she is welcomed as a fellow pilgrim and then denied, as one woman who had befriended Margery later says " ' What think you to go with me? Nay I do you well to know I will not meddle with you'" (ibid.,: 75). On her last pilgrimage, she is left behind, too old and weak to keep pace, and on more than one occasion, left alone to find shelter and food in a strange land.

However, even in those that hold against Margery there is ambiguity in feeling, as superstition and fear override their irritation and hostility. Before sailing from Bristol on her pilgrimage to Rome, she prays for good weather, "for it was told her, if they had any tempest, they would cast her into the sea, for they said it was for her, and they said the ship was the worse because she was therein" (ibid.,: 81). After a smooth passage, "then those who were against her when they were at Bristol, now they made her good welcome" (ibid). Similarly, sailing to Jerusalem, God warns her not to sail in the pilgrim ship, but to sail in another. When she told her fellow pilgrims (the ones who had so viciously humiliated her before), they moved their belongings and sailed with Margery, "though it was against their will, she went forth with them in their company, for they dared not otherwise do" (ibid.,: 49). In Leicester, when she and two other pilgrims were imprisoned, "our Lord sent such weather of lightnings, thunders, and

rains continuing that all the people in the town were so afraid they knew not what to do. They feared it was because they had put the pilgrims in prison” (ibid.,: 84). In these descriptions, Kempe imbues Margery with a degree of mystical power, power that is endorsed by some lay people, as they call on her to attend the sick and dying. For others, her mystical position is revered as if she was holy icon. For example, Thomas Marchale was so affected by Kempe’s speech “that he was all moved, as if he had been a new man, with tears of contrition and compunction, both days and nights” (ibid.,: 79). He confesses his sins to Margery and refers to her as ‘mother’. By such discursive devices as using the voice of others, Kempe positions herself to her audience as a holy figure.

The lay reaction plays an important role in the way Kempe constructs Margery. As I shall shortly go on to argue, Kempe constructs Margery as a martyred object, but more significantly in relation to the boundary between madness and mysticism, she constructs her as a Pauline or Fool for Christ. This character stems from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (chapter 11, verse 22) where he states “I am speaking as a fool” (Biblegateway, 2008). Within the ordered world, this holy fool attempts to break free from earthly bonds, and by doing so is perceived as mad. The Pauline fool was an important Christ-like figure in the middle ages, but crucially, this type of fool was not a genuine madman subjected to medical scrutiny, but someone who was held mad by others in order to be wise for God (Harper, 1997; Hodgkin, 2007: 91):

Marching towards God, man is more open than ever to madness, and that haven of truth towards which grace will give him the final push, what else could it be for him than an abyss of unreason? (Foucault, 2006a: 31)

The Pauline fool is eccentric, nomadic, socially disruptive, controversial and feigns madness. They disrupt church services, make a spectacle of themselves, confront authorities and transgress social norms. They also possess mystical abilities such as being a clairvoyant, prophet and performing miracles (Kobets, 2008). Kempe presents Margery as being a typical fool for Christ, accepting this role with meekness and humility. The holy fool aspires to be lowly, to be mocked, despised and shamed, this is an essential part of their martyrdom, and through this lowly status they achieve their holiness. As Kobets describes “Madness was regarded the source of their power” (Kobets, 2008).²⁴ As a mystic therefore, it could be argued that Margery was positioned on the fringes of insanity as Neaman observes; “in the eyes of the medieval church, the mystic was divinely sane despite and even because of the fact that ordinary sinners considered him irrational” (Neaman, 1975: 61).

The notion of the holy fool is intrinsically related to the concept of martyrdom and Kempe firmly establishes both of these positions to the reader. As indicated earlier, Margery accepts resistance and scorn as a religious martyr. In the scene at the Canterbury monastery, she gives a sermon about the spiritual comfort derived from others’ scorn and derision, ending on a sarcastic and sanctimonious note stating, “I thank you all, sirs, highly, for what in the morning and the afternoon I have had reasonably this day, blessed be God thereof” (Staley, 2001: 22). Dame Julian endorses Margery’s position of martyr stating; “ ‘the more despite, shame and reproof that you have in the world, the greater is your merit in the sight of God’ ” (ibid.: 33). Margery’s

²⁴ There are clearly links between the Pauline fool and the Ship of Fools as described by Foucault (see Chapter two, pp. 22-23). Reading about Margery and some of the other pilgrims Kempe describes walking scabbed, naked, their hair shorn from infestation, one can imagine how these travellers may have been perceived as they arrived ashore in foreign lands.

behaviour and apparel contribute to the derision she receives. When she wears white “she suffered much despite and much shame in many divers (sic) countries, cities and towns, thanked be the God of all” (ibid.: 76). Wearing white for Margery is an embodiment of holiness, whereas for others it is the embodiment of heresy, evil and rebellion. For example, the mayor in Leicester perceives Margery’s white apparel as a sign of not only heresy, but of resistance against the medieval hegemony of matrimony. Through the embodiment of her religious beliefs, Margery therefore welcomes and helps to construct this pattern of martyrdom as part of her quest for sainthood. This martyrdom is also seen in the action of forgiving she magnanimously bestows on those who slander her:

‘Lord, as you said hanging from the cross for your crucifiers, ‘Father, forgive them; they know not what they do,’ so I beseech you, forgive the people all scorn and slanders and all that they have trespassed, if it be your will, for I have deserved much more and of much more am I worthy’. (ibid.,: 78)

McMurray Gibson (2001) argues that martyrdom by death did not qualify Kempe for sainthood, so Kempe uses martyrdom by slander to validate her saintly status. Indeed, Kempe uses the ultimate authoritative voice (God) to reinforce this position of martyrdom:

‘Daughter, it is more pleasing unto me that you suffer despites and scorns, shames and reproofs, wrongs and troubles than if your head were smote off three times a day every day for seven years’. (Staley, 2001: 97)

So whilst Margery imagines ways in which she might die the death of a martyr, this act is not necessary, as Beckwith notes “she has successfully constructed herself as the object of scorn she craves to be” (Beckwith, 2001: 286). Margery’s spiritual status and Kempe’s authorial claim for sainthood is dependent on this central dichotomy of public rejection and religious acceptance.

Reviewing both official and lay receptions of Margery, there is no coherent single voice in response to her experiences in this text. Rather the text is populated with a diversity of voices that compete for positions regarding both her spiritual and social status. There is fragmentation and diverse opinion not only in the Church, but also amongst fellow pilgrims, local communities, lay people and even her husband. It seems that as Margery is admonished and rejected in one quarter, she is able to find acceptance and endorsement in another. This social positioning is precarious, as even though Margery is often centre stage in the public space, there is no security in this position, as she is dependent on authoritative sanction to maintain it. Moreover, her social position is controversial as she fits in with neither traditional religious roles for women (e.g. as an anchorite, enclosed in a religious space), nor does she comply with the traditional everyday roles of a wife and mother (enclosed in a domestic space), abandoning her husband and children to roam the landscape of medieval Europe. Ashley (2001) persuasively argues that Margery holds not a marginal, but a liminal position in society. Her argument is based on the premise that marginality signifies only negative exclusion from normative categories, much the same as the term ‘deviant’ does. Moreover, marginality de-emphasises the relationship that is still central from one figure or discourse to another. Liminality on the other hand is “the mediating state in customary categories in a transformative process” and Ashley contends that liminality is

characterised by paradox, ambiguity and possibility, allowing for new combinations and paradigms (Ashley, 2001: 269). The liminal spaces in which Margery is positioned are evident throughout Kempe's book; madness/spirituality, behaviour that is divinely/demonically inspired, heretic/holy, physical wife/spiritual wife, physical mother/spiritual mother. Encompassing all of these dichotomies is the overarching liminal position Margery exists in, between acceptance and rejection. From this position and through the embodiment of her beliefs, Margery participates in two worlds; one which confers spiritual authority and the other that rejects her based on the same embodied religious behaviours. Margery spends her adult life struggling with this fundamental dichotomy and what I, as the reader perceive, is a woman engaged in a cultural struggle across multiple identities, a struggle that is articulated through the voice of religion and gender. It is this inability to place Margery in defined roles that leads to her ambiguous reception.

Kempe and the Chronotope

This analysis chapter has attempted to reflect the structure of Kempe's book which presents the reader with two distinct worlds; the mystical world and the everyday social world, each representing two different chronotopes. The mystical world is defined by spatial and temporal distortions as Margery metaphorically traverses to religious scenes. For example, in chapter six Kempe describes Margery taking care of the Virgin Mary, from her birth until she was twelve years old, remaining at her service during her betrothal to Joseph and the birth of Christ. In a little over a page therefore, she describes events passing over many years, but with no reference to how this impacts on her everyday or real time. Margery's everyday world is also spatially and temporally defined, but unlike her mystical world, the everyday world makes reference to real time

and space, for example the duration of her madness, the time she spent travelling, the duration of her sickness. The reader also becomes familiarised with the geography of medieval England and Europe as Kempe details the locations of Margery's travels. Thus within the narrative there is a mixture of adventure (mystical) time and space and everyday time and space, a literary genre Bakhtin describes as the "'adventure novel of everyday life'" (Bakhtin, 1981: 111). To refer back to Bakhtin's definition, this ancient form of novel deriving from early Greek and Christian literature has two defining characteristics: 1) that an individual's life is presented to the reader in the context of a metamorphosis or transformation and 2) that the course of this life corresponds to an actual course of travel (ibid.). Both of these elements are clearly evident in Kempe's text. The theme of metamorphosis, in particular the human transformation in relation to identity is illustrated in Kempe's transformation from sinner to would-be saint. This is illustrated in the episode of madness where Kempe is miraculously transformed within the temporal sequence of guilt>punishment>redemption>blessedness (Bakhtin, 1981: 118). Bakhtin argues that metamorphosis provides the basis of portraying the individual's whole life in its critical moments in order to illustrate "how an individual becomes other than what he was" (Bakhtin, 1981: 115). Thus we witness Margery at key crisis points: the birth of her first child; her madness; the failure of her business; her first visions and falling fits; her key dialogues with influential clergy; her trials for heresy; her rejection by fellow pilgrims, and so on. As Bakhtin states, this is not a biographical life in its entirety, but a "crisis-type of portrayal", where different images of the hero are brought together through their crises and rebirths (ibid.). Adventure-everyday time as a chronotope is thus marked by exceptional and unusual events that coincide with fortuitous encounters that facilitate the metamorphosis of the hero's identity. Thus time is not used in a strict linear fashion, rather it is used to depict key

scenes that shaped Margery's life, scenes that Kempe uses to promote Margery to the status of sainthood. In this respect, Kempe's narrative is part of what Bakhtin describes as early Christian crisis hagiographies.

As an example of the hagiographic adventure-everyday chronotope, the metamorphosis takes precedent. Part of this process of transformation is that the hero must descend to low everyday life. Kempe by being constructed as a holy fool "descends to the very depths of common life" (Bakhtin, 1981: 121). Yet Margery also manages to remain somewhat apart from the baseness of everyday life. The reader perceives a sense of both humility and dignity as Bakhtin describes the hero as one who:

passes through such life as would a man from another world...Everyday life is that lowest sphere of existence from which the hero tries to liberate himself, and with which he will never internally fuse himself. The course of his life is uncommon, outside everyday life; one of its stages just happens to be a progression through the everyday sphere. (Bakhtin, 1981: 121-2)

The second defining feature of the adventure-everyday chronotope is that the course of the hero's life is reflected in his actual wanderings, which in Kempe's narrative are Margery's travels to converse with clergy and her pilgrimages to sacred sites.

Crucially, it is through the metaphor of 'the path of life' that time and space are fused together. Kempe's narrative presents the reader with two 'paths of life'; her spatial journey to sainthood is reflected in both real journeys through familiar, native territory and metaphorical journeys through unfamiliar, alien territory. Thus familiar everyday space is juxtaposed against the strange mystical space of the adventure chronotope. Yet

everyday space is just as critical as adventure space in the construction of Margery as a saint. As explored in detail earlier, everyday space is filled with living people and dialogue, filled with meaning and therefore it forms a pivotal relationship with the mystical space, the hero (Margery) and her fate. Thus everyday events such as the trials take on a specific chronotopic significance in the metamorphosis of Margery's identity and the purpose of her narrative.

One of the distinctive features of Kempe's narrative is the apparent disjuncture between mystical and everyday time. Whilst the reader can clearly define different timespaces, the mystical and the everyday chronotopes, there is no authorial reflection on the transition phases between the two. There are I believe three possible reasons for this. First, writing of Greek adventure time, Bakhtin argues that the temporal sequence has no impact on the surrounding world, so whilst the individual goes through a process of transformation, the external world is unchanged. This may account for the critical reception Margery received from some of her local community. People knew the vain-glorious, lustful, avaricious Margery, and were unable to comprehend the private, internal transformation. Second, is the shift in subjectivity from the medieval to the modern era. Reflection for Kempe was used almost exclusively for religious purposes rather than psychological as I shall go on to illustrate in my chapter on Mary Barnes. Third, is the difference in understandings of timespace between the medieval and the modern world; for example, time in the medieval world was predominantly ordered around nature (e.g. the seasons, dawn, dusk etc.), whilst time in the modern age relies less on nature and more on technology. The inter-related factors of the chronotope, subjectivity and Pre-Renaissance understandings of the world will be explored more

fully in the discussion chapter of this thesis, which aims to bring the analyses of Kempe and Barnes together.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be made concerning Kempe's book? It appears that Margery experienced an episode of madness in her early twenties following the birth of her first child. Beyond this, is what Kempe describes as a spiritual journey in which Margery embodies her religious passion externally through her controversial dress and public demonstrations of crying, and internally through her contemplations and visions.

Whilst there is evidence of the cultural and historical context of this behaviour, for example, through the writings of Richard Rolle, her behaviour was dichotomously received within different communities. What this analysis has outlined is the way in which Margery negotiated her private inner world of madness and religious experiences with her public outer world and the polarised reception she received. Whilst Kempe the author moves between these two worlds with ease, at the same time she elucidates Margery's complex negotiation between madness/spirituality and acceptance/rejection, placing Margery in a liminal position both psychologically and socially. From the reader's perspective, I too struggled with these boundaries, being both admiring and irritated, struggling with my modern day understanding of madness and my comparative ignorance of spiritual fervour. Through multiple readings and by contextualising Kempe's authorial voice and Margery's experiences, Kempe's account comes to read not like one of madness, but as a coherent record of a woman whose behaviour is consistent within a specific spiritual and social context.

Within the text we hear the voice of Margery, as Kempe voices her to the reader from the liminal positions of religion, gender and social roles. We hear her unorthodox religious voice, the religious, civic and lay response to this, through which the reader gains insights into medieval constructions of, and reactions to, unusual experiences. The reader also hears Kempe's own voice, which is not one of a detached and passive observer, but one who is conscious of Margery's position and constructs the narrative to reinforce her religious standing. Whilst there are multiple discourses in the book ventriloquated by Kempe through the voice of Margery, this does not equate to polyphony. As discussed in chapter four, Bakhtin argues that the biographical novel, and one assumes also the autobiographical text, negates polyphony (Bakhtin 1981). Texts such as Kempe's were written for a purpose, and the voices in the narrative are used to support Kempe's discursive position. Relationships, social status, class and so on define the hero (Margery) and enable the full embodiment of the hero in the narrative. One of the features of the hero in the adventure-everyday chronotope is their search for personal success, the achievement of glory and the building of a career. The plot therefore revolves around this central figure, and in Kempe's text we see the construction of Margery as both a visionary subject and martyred object, which, Akel argues, has a four-fold effect (Akel 2001). First, it legitimates and validates Margery's position in the community as a holy person. Second, her text provides a model to other married women of the day on how to progress to holiness. Third, it provides a record of Margery's mystical experiences for future readers. Finally, the narrative substantiates Margery's claim for sainthood. By writing Margery's life as a hagiography (a narrative of a saint's life), Kempe is directing her narrative to a specific addressee, one of high-ranking authority who can confer religious status on Margery's experiences and life. To the broader reading audience, Kempe is reliant on them to recognise this specific genre,

together with its purpose (ibid.). Whilst there is an implicit assumption that readers will be conversant with other spiritual texts, Kempe also directs the reader towards these through citing them (e.g. Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Saint Bridget, Marie D'Oignies). From a modern perspective, it is important to identify the literary roots of Kempe's book in order not to misconstrue the central religious scenes and the immediate audience's response to them.