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Familial Discourses in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

“Blyssed be the wombe that the bar
and the tetys that yaf the sowkyn”

1 Proem

Thow schalt ben etyn and knawyn of the pepul of the world as any raton knawyth the stokfysch. Drede the nowt, dowtyr, for thow schalt have the victory of al thin enmys. I schal yeve the grace inow to answer every clerke in the love of God. I swer to the be my mageste that I schal nevyр forsakyn the in wel ne in wo. I schal helpyn the and kepyн the, that ther schal nevyр devil in helle parte the fro me, ne awngel in hevyn, ne man in erthe, for develys in helle mow not, ne awngelys in hevyn wyl not, ne man in erthe schal not. (MK 72)¹

Composed in all probability in the 1430ies, *The Book of Margery Kempe* has ever since the rediscovery of its full text in 1934 been sparking off fervent discussions. While early reviews of this work have been rather dismissive of the main protagonist's mystical authenticity, and Hope Emily Allen, who wrote the notes to *The Book's* first scholarly edition by Sanford Brown Meech, even referred to the visionary as "petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously over-strained" (Allen lxiv), positive characteristics were acknowledged, too, even at this early stage of criticism. Margery Kempe, despite the initial critic's recourse to physical and mental illness to describe her spirituality, is still considered as "devout, much-travelled, forceful and talented" (Allen lxiv). Nonetheless, subsequent critics' comparisons with the universally acclaimed late-medieval English anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich have usually been disadvantageous to the former.

In the course of the following years, the late-medieval visionary Margery Kempe aroused a myriad of critical responses by theologians, historians, literature scholars and doctors of medicine alike. Her universal appeal to scholars of historical fields is exemplified by the development of what has been dubbed "Margery-Kempe-studies" (Yoshikawa, *Meditations* book cover). While accusations of hysteria and an ensuing perceived inauthentic spiritual world of experience were laid at her charge by early commentators, the 1970ies and especially the feminist movement carried with it renewed interest in and approval of this exceptional medieval woman. It was especially Clarissa Atkinson's first book-length study *Mystic and Pilgrim. The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, which gave rise to favourable readings which interpreted Margery Kempe in the light of her religious, (socio)historical, urban, and economic surroundings. What is more, some of these studies understood the visionary as medieval underdog fighting against patriarchy who via her privileged spiritual input establishes a

1 All quotations from *The Book of Margery Kempe* (hereafter cited parenthetically as MK) are taken from Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Barry Windeatt. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004.

special kind of authority which puts her above medieval paternalistic systems and ensures her agency. On the other hand, there developed another branch of criticism which doubted whether a member of the wealthy urban elite could ever be adequately referred to as “outsider”, maintaining that because of her considerably exalted family background, she probably has a significantly higher standing from the outset in comparison to other spiritually minded women of her time.

In recent years, debates about the literary nature of *The Book* have surfaced. Issues of authorship and debates about who may be considered the executive author of *The Book* have directly led to deliberations about the literariness of the narrative and the extent to which *The Book* mirrors historical reality.

This review of criticism, while it is expedient, is highly abbreviated and aims at giving an overview only. I will discuss in detail the critics’ claims presented above in the chapters to come, naturally concentrating on those academic studies which engage with topics pertaining to Margery Kempe’s family and its various manifestations. However, while I have tried to include as many works of secondary literature centring on Margery Kempe as possible, and have incorporated next to all critical responses surrounding the concept of the family presented in *The Book* available at the time this study was written, any all-encompassing attempt at discussing the large bulk of Margery-Kempe-scholarship inevitably goes beyond the limitations of this paper. Marea Mitchell, however, has devoted an entire book to the history of Margery-Kempe-criticism.²

This study aims to pursue the question of how Margery Kempe practises and understands familial relations in both her mundane and spiritual experiences. There are essentially three categories which have to be considered in this respect; her earthly family to whom she is bound by consanguinity, the Holy Family and All Saints, to whom she attaches herself during her visions, and her spiritual family, consisting of her growing discipleship. Scholarship on various themes basically surrounding the visionary’s family, domestic arrangements, and spiritual visions is already vast; it is by way of an extensive re-evaluation, innovative analysis, critical response to academic predecessors, and a close reading of the text that I aim to yield new and original results to be added to the already ample literary canon.

While I do agree in principle with the legitimacy of using contemporary ideas and perceptions to interpret historical events (and, for that matter historical arts) to make meaning of them, my interpretation of *The Book of Margery Kempe* for the most part shall be based on the notion of how a medieval person

2 Mitchell (2005).

would have made sense of the events presented in this narrative. The methodology of this study is based on an interdisciplinary integration of social, religious, and legal history to my literary analysis. One of the things I am interested in most is the history of mentalities as represented in *The Book*, which I will try to uncover in the course of the following chapters. In addition to argumentation on a text-immanent basis, in order to attest my analysis' results, I shall revert to coeval sources – quotations are taken from social historical treatises, the Latin Church Fathers and various other highly esteemed classical³ and medieval writers, both secular and ecclesiastical.

The first part of this study is dedicated to a precise analysis of the spiritual and religious climate in late medieval Western Europe. The phenomenon of mysticism shall be discussed in great detail. In the course of this, I will touch upon various concepts of the spiritual ascent – mostly the *purgatio-illuminatio-unio*-trality - the image of the ladder symbolising the gradual ascent to the divine, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, as well as *theologia apophatike* and *theologia kataphatike*.

The specifically female manifestation of mysticism and late medieval female spirituality as a whole shall be the focus of the subsequent chapters. Affective piety, its dissemination by the mendicant orders and its spread in late medieval English mystagogical literature will lead to a discussion of asceticism and several ways to inflict pain on the individual, both mentally and physically. Sleep-deprivation, holy anorexia, fasting, self-flagellation and stigmatisation, the vilification of sexual intercourse and ensuing abstinence (often painfully enforced), the wearing of dolorgenic penitential robes, excessive squatting for religious purposes and, generally speaking, *imitatio sanctorum sanctarumque*, all exemplify a yearning for pain which permeates the Middle Ages.

The formation of spiritually likeminded female communities both monastic and laic, the so-called “feminisation of sainthood” as well as a discussion of resentful coeval assumptions about medieval women mystics and their wrongful association with hysteria conclude the first part of this study. Those opinions which characterise female mysticism by sublimation of sexual desires (and are condensed in Nancy Partner’s famous question “Did mystics have sex?”⁴) shall be contrasted with others who posit that because of the inevitable ineffability of experiences with the divine, mystical language has to recourse to (sexual) meta-

3 Classical authors were rediscovered in the course of the Middle Ages. Their works, which had been preserved via Arabic sources, were retranslated into Latin and Greek and exerted considerable influence on the medieval mindset.

4 Parter, *Sex* 296-311. For a critical response to this essay and a differing opinion, see Salih, *Bosom* 1-14.

phors pertaining to the body because there is simply no other way to express both bodily and spiritual feelings of such utter joy.

In the subsequent chapters, my literature analysis shall begin with a close examination of the primary text and its literariness. Debates surrounding the highly controversial matter of authorship and genre as well as style are followed by an extensive discussion about the role of the final scribe and his relationship to Margery Kempe.

How did the Middle Ages perceive of the family? Religious, historical and legal aspects will be illuminated and contrasted with contemporary ideas about the medieval family. This background discussion precedes chapter 3.3., entitled “The Representation of the Earthly Family in *The Book of Margery Kempe*” and the analysis of the Kempes’ marriage. The concepts of the marriage debt as well as spiritual marriage and chastity, sexual relations and abstinence, power relations within the Kempes’ marriage, intimacy and disgust of connubial sexuality on the visionary’s part shall be discussed in this chapter. John Kempe’s old age, *The Book’s* possible recourse to the coeval cult of St Joseph and of the “new man,” societal pressure and scapegoat ritual which are aimed at the visionary conclude the elucidation of the representation of Margery Kempe’s earthly marriage.

Margery Kempe’s children and childbirth are the focus of the succeeding chapter. In addition to textual evidence, her ideas surrounding physical motherhood are associated with medieval sources and thereby clarified.

Chapter 3.4., “The Representation of the Holy Family in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” shifts the attention from the visionary’s affinity by consanguinity to her newly acquired family she finds in the trinity, All Saints, but for the most part in Jesus. The common medieval practice of designating spiritual relationships with names pertaining to the earthly family shall give lead to a discussion of the multitude of familial roles appropriated by Jesus in his relationship with Margery Kempe, as well as her shifting identities. Topics of discourse will include mutual love and desire (for instance Jesus as languishing lover/ doting husband, Margery Kempe’s unquenchable spiritual thirst), the medieval woman’s soul as new home for the couple, and her dedication to bridal mysticism, as well as blood- and passion mysticism.

The tokens of divine love as effects of the intimate relationship with Jesus and the humanity of Christ on the visionary’s senses result in both joyful emotions and consequences like the restoration of Margery Kempe’s virginity and the extension of her faculties, while on the other hand constant slander, the *charisma lacrimarum*, the fervent desire for the *mors mystica* and divine withdrawal are ultimately experienced as wounding and joyful at the same time. *Imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae* (for instance as *mater dolorosa* and *Maria lactans*),

the cult of the Virgin and Christ-child, the visionary's conspicuous sartorial choices and her virginal dress as well as her doubts and the ensuing frequently performed *discretio spirituum* are all effects of her affiliation with Jesus. Food practices required by Jesus and the connection between mundane meat and spiritual flesh as well as his demand for the visionary to go on pilgrimages form the next part of this paper.

The spiritual climax of *The Book of Margery Kempe* is arguably her mystical marriage to the Godhead in Rome and I suggest she is married to both the first and the second person of the Trinity. The visionary's special devotion to Saint Mary and her inclusion into the family of All Saints concludes my comments about the various relationships resembling earthly familial ties she develops with heavenly and saintly creatures.

Lastly, attention will be directed to the visionary's ever growing spiritual family. Apart from the already discussed major role of the final scribe, her confessors, supporters and advisers who absolve her and perform the discernment of spirits are of utmost importance to this medieval woman's concept of herself as divinely ordained seeker of spiritual perfection. Her "ghostly modyr" (MK 43), the Church, and her "ghostly fadyrs" (MK 43) as well as her spiritual children who conceive of her as spiritual mother profit from this relationship in various ways, while the visionary herself in turn is edified by her spiritual family. Even though an enormous number of her contemporaries vilify her, Margery Kempe's suffering, service, nursing, teaching, correction, intercession and prophecy cause her spiritual children to revere her and offer physical and spiritual comfort as a *quid pro quo*. The heavenly community therefore finds its analogy in earthly togetherness which is directed towards a common spiritual goal.