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AFFLICTION AND PIETY IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

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ABSTRACT

AFFLICTION AND PIETY IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

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The Book of Margery Kempe is an early fifteenth-century spiritual autobiography of a lay woman that offers a Christian solution to the problem of human suffering, dramatically illustrating that a proper understanding of affliction, both spiritual and physical, can only be attained through a commitment to Christ and an awareness of His suffering. In this essay, I examine the presentation of illness within the narrative. All of the depictions of affliction revolve around the idea that illness is a just punishment for original as well as personal sin. The text emphasizes that God is always gentler in dispensing illness than fallen individuals deserve. From this perspective, there is no use for physicians. Instead, Kempe emphasizes endurance in the face of her own suffering and compassion for the sickness of others. Ultimately, disease, in all of its manifestations, is a way to bring the individual closer to God.

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I shall discuss the conception of illness presented in The Book of Margery Kempe, an early fifteenth-century spiritual autobiography of a lay woman that offers a religious solution to the problem of human suffering. The text dramatically illustrates that a true understanding of afflictions, both spiritual and physical, can only be attained through a commitment to Christ and an awareness of His suffering. Kempe's autobiography is an exemplum of the pious life that presents piety and submission as the only appropriate responses to affliction.

In the narrative, Margery Kempe traces her spiritual development from her early life as a worldly merchant's wife through her spiritual awakening and subsequent experiences as a pious mystic. Kempe's first spiritual experience occurs after the birth of her first child and is characterized by painful awareness of her own sinfulness. After her recovery and several subsequent failed business ventures and their ensuing public censure, Kempe devotes herself completely to Christ. During the remainder of her life, she is afflicted with ostracism, physical pain and emotional anguish, all of which recapitulate Christ's suffering for the sins of humanity. Kempe's life, as she describes it, provides a model of human suffering. Ultimately, the text points the audience toward the

realization that their own sufferings are minor compared to those of Christ and suggests that spiritual and corporal suffering are central to Christian piety.

At the time of the narrative, society in England was undergoing relatively rapid change in the face of recurrent plague, famine, and war. Social upheaval offered some hope of economic prosperity to individuals outside the noble and clerical estates. Margery Kempe was born into this new commercial environment in the thriving seaport town of Lynn. Her father was a prosperous merchant, several times mayor of the city of Lynn and alderman of the Guild of the Trinity (9).[1] Kempe's marriage to a man of modest prosperity assured her a relatively secure economic position. Still, as a typical woman of her age, Kempe would have led a relatively disempowered existence, with no opportunity for formal or religious education.

The narrative offers relatively sparse details about Kempe's life before her spiritual awakening. She mentions fourteen children, several failed business ventures, and a few personal traits, such as her stylish manner of dressing,

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[1] Throughout the essay, I rely upon the Meech and Allen edition of the Butler-Bowdon manuscript of The Book of Margery Kempe. All parenthetical references refer to this volume unless otherwise specified.

for which "men seyden hir ful mech velany" (9).[2] Kempe's pride and covetousness before her conversion are also described:

> And, whan hir husbond wold speke to hir for to leuyn hir pride, sche answeryd schrewydly & schortly & seyd that sche was comyn of worthy kenred, hym semyd neuyr for to a weddyd hir, for hir fadyr was sum-tyme meyr of the town N. and sythyn he was alderman of the hey Gylde of the Trinyte in N. And therfor sche wold sauyn the worschyp of hir kynred what-so-euyr ony man seyd. Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybowrs that thei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche. Alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of the pepul. Sche wold not be war be onys chastysyng ne be content wyth the goodys that God had sent hire, as hir husband was, but euyr desyryd mor & mor. (9)

This rather unflattering self-portrait places Kempe firmly in the grip of worldly desires before her awakening, a time when she presumably enjoyed good physical health having survived the ordeal of her first pregnancy. But despite all of her worldly aspirations, Kempe was ultimately a failure in both her social relations as well as her business ventures. It was through these social misfortunes, rather

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[2] The quotations from The Book of Margery Kempe are taken from the Meech and Allen edition. I have modernized Middle English letters which are no longer in use for ease of transcription.

than the "thynge in conscyens" (6), that she finally turned to Christ:

> And than this creatur, seyng alle this aduersytes comyng on euery syde, thowt it weryn the skowrges of owyr Lord that wold chastyse hir for hir synne. Than sche askyd God mercy & forsoke hir pride, hir coueytyse, & desyr that sche had of the worshepys of the world, & dede grett bodyly penawnce, & gan to entyr the wey of euyr-lestyng lyfe. (11)

Certainly, there were important models of pious women known to Kempe, such as Julian of Norwich and Saint Bridget of Sweden (liii). In whatever circumstances Margery Kempe's awakening was precipitated and no matter what, if any, social factors influenced her subsequent behavior, her story is a tale of the difficult life of a Christian mystic whose life is filled with revelation and visionary drama. Her narrative describes lengthy journeys to Jerusalem, Spain, and Germany, public scorn and ostracism, and the constant threat of imprisonment. The narrative has all the elements of later, novelistic writing; adventure, fear, love, friendship, abandonment, illness, and ultimately, triumph and spiritual transcendence. For the audience the plausibility of the narrative is predicated upon Kempe's spiritual conversion. Without strong evidence of divine intercession, her story would not have been noteworthy or even conceivable for her clerical scribes. Interaction with

Christ is present from the beginning of the narrative when the fear of post-partum death prompts Kempe to confess a horrible sin. Terrified of damnation, Kempe requests a priest who will hear her confession, only to experience his somewhat callous failure to listen at the crucial moment of her confession:

> whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing whech sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye & gan scharply to vndyrnemyn hir er than sche had fully seyd hir entent, & so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he myght do. And a-noon, for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde & hys scharp repreuyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende. (7)

This inability to confess results in a madness which cannot be explained or controlled by those around her. Ultimately, Christ himself appears to Kempe to absolve her sin and assure her of His love, "most bewtyuows, & most amyable that evyr myght be seen wyth mannys eye" (8). The circumstances of this event are important for two reasons. First, Kempe's inability to maintain the priest's attention during her confession reflects her relatively disempowered state. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, Kempe's awareness of sinfulness is prompted by a post-partum affliction which in turn leads to a state of psychological turmoil. A cure for Margery's disordered mental state is

not achieved until Christ visits her in a vision and assures her of his love. This pivotal event suggests that Christ is the only source of resolution to the problem of human illness. Unrepented sin leads to illness which can only be ameliorated by divine intervention and forgiveness.

Kempe's spiritual conversion ultimately leads her into entirely new realms of experience. On a spiritual level, it allows dramatic visionary interaction with many holy figures. Socially, the recognition of her inspiration by others allows her to have a larger degree of control over her own life, reflected in her ability to obtain a vow of chastity from her husband, journey to the Holy Land, and discuss doctrinal issues with high-ranking clerics, all of which would have been unlikely to occur within the confines of a typical medieval marriage.

While her spiritual conversion offers a tremendous amount of freedom, there are also burdens associated with it. Kempe suffers in some form, either physically or psychologically, throughout the narrative. Her willingness to endure pain and even her frequent requests for it, as reflected in her daily prayers when she says, "Heily I thank the that thu woldist letyn me suffryn any pane in this world in remissyon of my synnys" (251), show that one should not be overly concerned with the comforts of this world. Whatever pain comes to an individual should be welcomed, since it is only a very small portion of what one truly

deserves for both personal and original sin.

In The Book of Margery Kempe, physical illness, like all forms of suffering, is posited within the schema of Christian piety. There is a dual emphasis on her culpability and deservingness of pain on one hand and her compassion for the afflicted on the other. In addition, there is a complete absence of physicians in the narrative. This is not completely unprecedented in medieval narratives. For example, there is no mention of physicians in Geoffrey le Baker's Chronicle. He describes how the injured James Audley was attended to by Prince Edward after the battle of Poitiers:

> Among those half dead and scarcely breathing was found Sir James Audley; placed on a broad shield, and carried reverently by his companions in arms, he was borne to the prince's lodgings. His whole household were thankful that he had been found, and the prince left his seat next to the king, with whom he was about to dine, he brought him back to life by his praiseworthy attention, and almost in tears kissed the cold lips, stained with blood, of his scarcely breathing friend. (Barber 81)

In this description, physicians are absent and the injured Audley is treated by friends. The Prince attends to his wounded friend in much the same way as Kempe cares for numerous sick people in her narrative.

One possibility for the striking absence of secular healers in the face of illness and suffering is the spiritual aspect of healing within the medieval conception of Christianity in which Christ is viewed as the only true physician (Ferngren 12). However, there are two other possibilities worth mentioning. First of all, in one review of medical records during the early fifteenth century, there were no physicians living in Lynn (Gottfried, Doctors 255). Instead, the vast majority of healers in Lynn were barber-tonsors.[3] If this conclusion is correct, it would have been impossible for a physician to appear in the passages about illness that occur in Lynn. A second possibility, also offered by Gottfried, is that women rarely consulted physicians in the late-medieval period. Rather, they were often treated by lay women healers, particularly in the smaller towns and villages.

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[3] Gottfried's data base includes 2,282 medical practitioners from all over England who practiced between 1350 and 1430. It includes all of the practitioners listed by Talbot in Medical Practitioners in England during this period. Only 16 care-givers are identified in Lynn: 12 barber-tonsors, 2 apothecaries, 1 barber-surgeon, and 1 surgeon. No physicians are identified. There are at least three limitations to this data. First, none of the practitioners listed are clerics. Given the relative size of the clerical population in Lynn, it seems unlikely that some clerics did not also provide medical care, at least to others within the Church. Second, Gottfried himself acknowledges that records outside large urban areas are somewhat suspect and may be inaccurate ("English Medical Practitioners" 167). Finally, midwives are not included within the data base.

It is also worth noting that Talbot lists two physicians in Lynn during the fourteenth century prior to the time of the study: Edmund le leche, c. 1300 and Richard de Bilney, c. 1316 (Med. Pract. 40, 275).

Clearly, the most important of these possible explanations is that within Kempe's Christian spirituality, medical rationalism and medical treatment have no value in understanding or treating illness. Alford describes this desire for unity, present even within the medical profession, "Adam and Eve were created immune to disease. When they broke the law, they lost that immunity, not only for themselves, but also for all their descendants. ... Disease was nature's response not only to individual sins but also to the collective wrongs of a people" (389). Kempe's post-partum illness is directly attributable to unconfessed sin. The idea that illness is a just punishment for sin is frequently reinforced in the narrative, particularly with respect to Kempe's afflictions. God alone gives illness and chooses when to relieve it. Despite the discomfort it causes, disease is paradoxically a way to bring the individual closer to God. In the throes of illness, individuals are forced to recognize their own sinfulness and are pointed toward salvation. For the afflicted, acceptance and piety are the only appropriate responses.

Conversely, when caring for the afflicted, compassion is the overriding concern. Kempe exhibits the appropriate response to the illness of others, such as her husband and the woman with post-partum madness, by offering prayers and companionship. She does not attempt to intervene in the

course of the illness nor does she provide miraculous cures. This compassionate response to the illness of others is a model for the audience that is firmly grounded within Christian doctrine and obviates the notion that physicians offer any substantial benefits in the face of affliction.

The Book of Margery Kempe begins with a description of illness as the means by which Christ awakens Kempe's piety:

> And, whan sche was any tym seke or dysesyd, the Devyl seyd in her mende that sche schuld be dampnyd, for sche was not schreuyn of that defawt. Wherfor, aftyr that hir chyld was born, sche, not trostyng hir lyfe, sent for hir gostly fadyr. (7)

Throughout the narrative, Kempe views her afflictions as unequivocally positive, believing that "Lord Cryst Ihesu having pety and compassyon of hys handwerke and hys creatur turnyd helth in-to sekenesse, prosperyte in-to adversyte, worshep in-to repref, and love in-to hatered" (1). This opening paradox immediately challenges the audience to adopt a different point of view in the consideration of worldly things. In place of the secular understanding of illness as misfortune, Kempe offers a spiritual alternative in which adversity is a gift from God intended to direct the recipient toward salvation.

The first scribe reinforces the difference between the worldly and spiritual significance of disease with a personal illustration.[4] When the priest first begins to

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[4] The text of the narrative was written by two different scribes. The first scribe died sometime around 1432. The second scribe began revising the first scribe's work in 1436 and resumed transcribing additional events in Kempe's life in 1438 (Brown and Allen, vii-li).

transcribe Kempe's story, "his eyen myssyd" (5) so that he could not work on the treatise. In an attempt to improve his ailing vision, he acquires a pair of spectacles. But, rather than helping him in the work of transcription, the glasses actually make his vision "wers than it was be-for" (5). Margery Kempe encourages him to rely on God and urges him to "do as wel as God wold geve hym grace" (5). Miraculously, "Whan he cam a-geyn to hys booke, he myth se as wel, hym thoght, as evyr he dede be-for" (5). This early anecdote is crucial for two reasons. First, it establishes God's support for the treatise. Not only does Christ provide Kempe with insight through adversity, God sanctions the writing of the work by divinely providing the priest with adequate vision, an act that legitimizes such an ambitious and arguably proud undertaking by a secular, non-noble woman. The second important aspect of this story from the standpoint of illness is the localization of true healing power within the divine sphere. Man's feeble contrivances, the spectacles, not only fail to help the priest, they actually make things worse. At this early point in the narrative, the healing abilities of humans are rejected in favor of a reliance on divine intervention. This denial of contemporary medical arts is implicit in the remainder of the narrative.

The unmistakable implication is that Christ has dominion in the realm of human suffering. Not only does

Christ allow illness, as when Kempe experiences intense erotic desire and explicit sexual visions as a consequence of questioning divine intentions (144-45), Christ is also the only agent who can mitigate suffering. For Kempe, illness is welcome because it stimulates her awakening and enhances her spiritual insight. Suffering is a manifestation of Christ's pity and compassion and should be endured willingly rather than treated medically.

The proem has further importance because it demonstrates that no one is immune from bodily suffering. Kempe's afflictions can easily be understood as remedial measures for her acknowledged, if exaggerated, sense of sinfulness, but the narrative does not explain the priest's visual difficulties. One might assume that he would be protected from disease as a member of the religious community devoted to Christ who was performing an act of piety and faith. Kempe's story demonstrates that even holy men can be spurred on to further goodness through the figurative salvation offered by the imposition and subsequent removal of bodily illness by God.

Further, the entire narrative presents a democratic picture of sickness. There are numerous descriptions of illness in the narrative. At some point in the story, illness affects individuals at every level of society; priests, the rich, the poor, women, and men. Kempe also suffers from many additional afflictions after her first

awakening. The experience of disease for Kempe is even extended to providing care for her husband after the accident which leaves him an invalid. But the intensity and extent of human suffering pales in comparison to Kempe's visions of the physical suffering of Christ. Kempe's herculean efforts to experience and describe Christ's suffering are undoubtedly a reflection of her position within the tradition of medieval affective piety. As Susan Dickman points out, a distinctly female form of piety had existed since the thirteenth century that emphasized identification with Christ's life, especially during the Passion (58-59). This imaginative experience of Christ's life was associated with an intense Eucharistic devotion. Dickman argues that such women had increasing political, social, and religious power in the fourteenth century and that a growing number were, like Kempe, wives and mothers.

Kempe's affective piety places Christ's Passion at the center of her devotion. There are many descriptions of Christ's torment in the text. These are anticipated even at the moment of Christ's birth when Kempe imagines that she "swathyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassyon, havyng mend of the scharp deth that he schuld suffyr for the lofe of synful men" (19). Kempe visualizes these sufferings vividly later in the narrative, "And ther thei bowndyn hym to the peler of ston as streyt as thei cowde and beeten hym on hys fyar white body wyth baleys, wyth whippis and wyth scorgys"

(190). In the next chapter, Kempe gives an even more poignant description of the scourging and subsequent crucifixion of Christ (191-92) at which she herself is present, speaking both to Mary and Jesus.

During the late medieval period, representations of the physical suffering of Christ were common in the visual as well as the dramatic arts. The Corpus Christi plays prominently display Christ's trial, torture, and crucifixion (Bevington 476-595). The following scene from the York "Crucifixion of Christ" in which the soldiers nail Christ to the Cross provides one example:

> 1 Miles: Strike on than, harde, for Him the boght!
> 2 Miles: Yis, here is a stubbe [nail] will stiffely stande!
> Thurgh bones and senous it schall be soght
> This werke is wele, I will warande....
> 1 Miles: Ther cordis have evill encressed his paines,
> Or he wer tille the booringis brought.
> 2 Miles: Yaa, assoundir are bothe sinous and veinis
> On ilke a side, so have we soughte.
> 3 Miles: Nowe all his gaudis nothing him gaines.
> His sauntering schall with bale be bought.
> (Bevington 573-74)

There is a difference, however, between the often comic elements of the crucifixion scene in the Corpus Christi plays and Kempe's profoundly serious, mystical visions.

Kempe is moved intensely during her experience of the suffering Christ and Mary. During her imagined Passion, which Hirsh describes as an "affective prayer" (9), her emotional sensitivity intensifies, as evidenced by her behavior in Jerusalem, "Than the said creatur, desiryng to a-byden stille be the grave of owr Lord, mornyd, wept and sorwyd wyth lowde crying for tendyrnes and compassyon" (194).

Compared to the suffering of Christ, the travails of fallen humans are of little significance. Moreover, human trials and tribulations are seen as just punishment for Christ's suffering, particularly since all human illness seems to remind Kempe of the suffering of Christ. Further, the experience of affliction recapitulates Christ's torment allowing an individual to share in the redemptive value of the Passion. The verbal descriptions of the painful scenes in Christ's life show how graphic conceptions of Christ's torment were internalized and experienced by pious individuals. Such descriptions also demonstrate the degree to which Christ suffered because of man's wickedness, and, for this suffering, divine retribution is certainly warranted. Undoubtedly, Christ suffers more than anyone else in the narrative. As a divine being who also knows the torments of the body, Christ is the true healer on whom everyone should rely in the face of illness. In his bodily manifestation, he suffered like humans. As God, he

understands the cosmic significance of redemption through pain. Christ's healing presence in the narrative is a central feature that explains the absence of worldly physicians.

Illness and suffering also extend to Christ's representatives on earth. As I have mentioned, pious individuals are susceptible to illness from the outset of the narrative. When attempting to write Kempe's story, the first priest experiences poor eyesight which is cured miraculously by reliance on God. Later, another cleric, the "good preste" who supported Kempe, falls ill. Despite her understanding of sickness as given by God, she is distressed at the prospect of losing an important friend and ally. After exhausting her abilities to care for him, she goes to other good men and women to obtain "swech thyng" necessary for his care (147). All of her efforts are unsuccessful and the priest's condition worsens. He becomes "so seke that men trustyd no-thyng to hys lyfe" (147). The illness continues in this way until the Lord reveals to Kempe that the priest will get well through her prayers for him, rather than any corporal intervention. At this point, assured of his eventual cure, she departs for Norwich in response to additional stirrings to pray for a dead vicar.

This episode serves to reinforce the notion that all suffering is within God's control. Kempe's attempts to help the priest (unfortunately, she never specifically states

what is done for him) are fruitless. During her attendance, his condition deteriorates. Further, man's knowledge is again shown to be imperfect. Like the therapeutic failure of the spectacles in the introduction, men cannot accurately predict the eventual outcome of a serious illness. Although Kempe does not suggest a particular purpose for the priest's suffering, she makes it quite clear that God does have a plan. Reassured of this fundamental spiritual truth, she is able to leave the afflicted priest and proceed to Norwich to mourn a vicar.

Later in the narrative, Master Aleyn, one of Kempe's confessors in Lynn, becomes very sick (169). Earlier, Kempe had been forbidden to speak with him as an act of obedience, despite a revelation that she would indeed speak with him again before his death. The severity of Master Aleyn's illness and the continued prohibition against speaking with him make Kempe doubt the truth of her revelations. For this reason, she prays to Mary for intercession and is answered in her soul that Aleyn shall not die (170). This, indeed, turns out to be the case and the episode concludes with Kempe and Aleyn sharing a meal and conversation together. Like the previous episode involving the priest, this story shows that illness is in the hands of God. No cause is suggested for Aleyn's sickness, nor is there any suggestion that Margery Kempe's prayers were a direct cause of his recovery. Rather, the episode reinforces the true locus of

power in the divine and the absence of any search for the purpose of the sickness suggests the ultimate futility of meaningful human knowledge about disease.

The sicknesses endured by these good clergymen are a manifestation of the uncertainty and finiteness of human existence. As mortals, they must suffer, despite their avowed holiness and good nature. Their closeness to God and privileged position in the Church afford neither worldly security nor true insight into the nature of their afflictions. Like all people in Margery Kempe's narrative, the priests are afflicted and some ultimately die, as does the first transcriber at the end of Book One (220). In the two cases described above, prayer is the only meaningful response to illness. Although revelation provides understanding for Kempe and, thus, a form of mental relief, there is no suggestion that it is helpful in the physical course of illness. The clerical sufferers themselves show complete acceptance of their afflictions. Kempe offers no evidence that they resist illness in any way. This enhances suffering as part of service to God. Good clerics recognize this essential element of human service and do not seem to struggle against it. Kempe's text presents a consistent image of patient suffering by clerics. It seems, then, that they are presented as a model for the audience to emulate during periods of sickness. Similarly, Kempe's devout prayers provide a model for care-giver behavior.

There are also many descriptions of illnesses suffered by lay people in the narrative. To some extent, these appear less important. Kempe first describes the suffering of lay people within the context of revelation. She discusses the feelings she had at Saint Margaret's church as a funeral procession passed by outside (53). She was told by the Lord that the soul of the corpse was in purgatory and the mourning husband, then in full health, would soon become ill and die. She asserts that his death indeed occurred a short time afterward. The remainder of the chapter contains many similar episodes in which Margery is informed through revelation of impending death or the state of individual souls. In some instances, she is exhorted by God to pray for these people. In an important example, a priest asks Kempe to pray for a dying woman. God too encourages her prayers, saying, "Dowtyr, it is gret nede to prey for hir, for sche hath ben a wykkyd woman and sche xal be ded" (53). Upon hearing this, Kempe begs that the woman's soul be saved from damnation. Remarkably, the Lord accepts her request and "grantyd hir mercy for the sowle" (54). This clearly establishes the value of Kempe's intercessional prayers for the eternal soul, though not the restoration of the earthly body.

In addition to mortality and spiritual corruption, Margery also describes chronic illness and poverty among the laity. In an act of atonement for Christ's wounds, Kempe

visits a hospital of women lepers (177). Kempe describes kissing the sick women. She makes no comment on how the women became afflicted this state, avoiding the issue of the moral cause of leprosy, which was ambivalently viewed in the medieval period as both punishment and a form of grace and earthly punishment (Brody 1-24). She also fails to comment on the social role of any of the women. But it is clear from this description that such communities of chronically-ill people did exist and were regarded as "lothful" and "abhomynabl" (176) by most people.

Sickness equally strikes the wealthy in the narrative. In the return from Aachen, the "worschepful woman of London" (242), who had rebuked Kempe earlier, becomes seasick during the voyage to Dover, "voydyng and castyng ful boistowsly and unclenly" (242). This episode again shows that no one is immune from the vicissitudes of illness. Despite her privileged social status, the woman of London must abandon pride in the face of bodily infirmity, even in a less than life-threatening illness.

While all of these descriptions of sickness affect Kempe in some way, the most significant are those which occur in her husband and the woman who, like Kempe, suffers from post-partum sickness. This woman develops an episode resembling psychosis during which she can no longer trust her friends, seeing "develys a-bowtyn hem" (178). Kempe comes to the woman to comfort her and describes how she was

treated by her family. Because of her roaring and crying, no one could tolerate the woman's presence. She was sent to another part of the town to a room where no one would hear her. Further, she was "bowndyn handys and feet wyth chenys of yron that sche xulde smytyn no-body" (178). With Kempe in attendance, praying for divine intercession, the woman recovers, is released from confinement, and is purified by the Church.

The accident of John Kempe makes illness even more immediate to Kempe. After his fall down the stairs, her husband is no longer able to care for himself. Kempe reluctantly agrees to nurse him, not wishing to leave her complete service of God. She is also ashamed of her previous enjoyment of "fleschly lustys" (181), but rationalizes caring for her husband as the price she must pay for the former pleasure taken in his body. Kempe's egocentric concerns in this passage overshadow any discussion of the importance of the illness to John. Rather, his illness is discussed exclusively within the context of Margery's salvation, an approach that is less than charitable for a husband who has given her every opportunity to practice piety. The modern reader of this episode is left uncertain of how the accident can be justified in terms of John's own life and behavior. Perhaps this is expecting too much from a narrative that is intended to describe and relate Margery Kempe's personal experience.

However, the incident stands out as an example of someone else's illness that still seems to have elements of retribution for Margery's sin.

In summary, the prominence of sickness in the narrative speaks for its significance within the daily life of the late medieval period as well as the centrality of illness within the context of Kempe's religious experience. Illness is a manifestation of inevitable human physical decay. Kempe's narrative focuses exclusively on the spiritual aspects of illness, giving only cursory mention to actual medical treatments. In this way, she reflects the polarization of religious and medical spheres of knowledge at this point in history. Kempe wholly adopts the Church view that emphasizes the divine origin of illness and the role that it plays within the frame of divine determinism. This accords well with beliefs that had been common since the eleventh century as described by Ottosson:

> Quite different attitudes towards health and disease are held within the Church, and by certain religious individuals. In these attitudes health has no intrinsic value for man who lives just a short time on earth, where he should prepare himself for eternal life....Appropriate medical care has, however, above all a moral value, and is a means for the believer to demonstrate his love of God. (127-28)

Despite its prominence in the narrative, human suffering in

itself is of less concern to Kempe than the fact that it represents only a small fraction of the physical suffering of Christ.

Illness and suffering are ubiquitous in the narrative. Disease attacks people at all levels of society. Affliction is central to all human experience. Many times during the narrative Kempe tries to convince the reader that illness is morally just and even desirable, that it is appropriate punishment for a sinful world populated with fallen beings, who are indirectly responsible for the most lamentable suffering of all, Christ's execution. Kempe places high emotional value on the Passion and translates this into caring for afflicted individuals. Afflicted individuals described in the narrative have many qualitatively different relationships to Kempe. Her husband and son both become ill and ultimately die. Likewise her religious advisors are stricken on several occasions. Poor strangers, a snobbish wealthy woman, pilgrims, and a post-partum woman are all encountered and cared for by Margery. The democratization of illness both in its incidence and its treatment is a central feature of Kempe's conception of the human condition and Christian spirituality.

As I have already noted, despite all of this sickness, there are no physicians present. A midwife and a surgeon are mentioned cursorily, but they do not attempt any sustained treatment in the text. From the very outset, the

contrivances of contemporary medicine are demonstrably ineffective. This legitimizes Kempe's emphasis on the spiritual response to illness as the only appropriate one. While the absence of physicians and other medical practitioners from the text may reflect the limited extent of medical sophistication during the late medieval period as well as the expense involved in medical treatment, it seems plausible that Kempe's neglect of the medieval medical establishment is also a conscious rhetorical strategy that emphasizes the distinction between religious and secular approaches to illness during her lifetime. From Kempe's point of view, illness is invariably a deliberate attempt by God to create human awareness of sinfulness and encourage proper piety and behavior among humans. Only through adversity can people recognize their fallen, wicked nature and move toward redemption. This form of religious determinism precludes any meaningful response to illness other than prayer and spiritual comforting.

MARGERY KEMPE AS PATIENT

In the preceding section, I discussed the ubiquity of illness and suffering in The Book of Margery Kempe. Sickness and death afflict Kempe's family members, friends, and spiritual advisers. Kempe herself is frequently stricken with illness as well, as in the opening pages of the narrative when she was "towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly sekeness, wher-thorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace restoryd her a-geyn" (2). For purposes of discussion, Kempe's afflictions can be divided into three categories: physical, affective, and neurological. Each of the categories has distinguishing features which separate it from other types of sickness experienced by Kempe. Physical afflictions refer to illnesses in the modern sense, that is, disorders of physiological function. All such afflictions result in some form of physical pain or discomfort. In addition, they are all transient in nature. In contrast, affective states are those which have primarily emotional or psychological features. These are internal states. While they do not give rise to corporal pain, they all result in extreme psychological alteration. Visions, revelations, and auditory hallucinations fall into this category. The third category of illness, the "neurological," is somewhat less easy to define. I place in this class Kempe's weeping and

crying-out behaviors. These neurological afflictions have two main features. First, they result in external, observable behaviors which, consequently, cause tremendous psychological discomfort for Kempe and are totally inexplicable to her peers. Second, the physical behaviors accompanying these complex emotional states are involuntarily initiated and are not subject to volitional control. In this context, "neurological" is not meant to imply organic pathology, but rather a characteristic, externally-verifiable behavior which accompanies a complex and powerful emotional state. From the narrative, it is clear that these kinds of afflictions are the most trying for Kempe and result in skepticism and scorn by those around her.

All three types of affliction result in some form of pain. While Kempe's visions are generally positive in nature, they are invariably accompanied by anguish over Christ's torment. They also occasionally take a painful form, as when she is being tempted by scenes of fornication as punishment for doubting Christ (144-45). Despite the characteristic presence of pain, Kempe's perception of all affliction is unequivocally positive. For her it provides an opportunity for spiritual and moral growth. At several points in the narrative, Kempe begs for illness and even death. Indeed, the desire for fleshly mortification through illness is part of her daily prayers (249). Affliction is

central to Kempe's self-perception as well as her understanding of life in a post-lapsarian world. Morris's comments about the relationship between the modern perception of pain and earlier approaches can be applied to Kempe:

> The secular, scientific spirit of modern medicine has so eclipsed other systems of thought as almost to erase the memory that pain - far from registering its presence mostly in meaningless neural circuits or in the sterile, living-death of hysterical numbness - once possessed redemptive and visionary powers. (125)

Examples of traditional, physical illness occur frequently in the narrative. The first chapter of the narrative describes Kempe's complicated first pregnancy. She indicates that because of the difficulty of her labor and her sickness during pregnancy, she developed fears for her life (6). These fears lead her to feel remorse over a "defawt" (7) for which the devil tells her she will be damned. Unfortunately, the confessor who comes to listen is "a lytyl to hastye" (7) and does not hear her confession for this sin. As a result, Kempe goes "owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyrits" (7). At this point her physical affliction has transformed into a psychological phase which causes her to slander herself as well as her husband and friends. Her abnormal state of consciousness persists until Christ comes to her in a

vision, reminding her of her religious duty and His care for her. Subsequently, her health is completely restored.

This episode is an essential model for illness in general in the remainder of the narrative. It begins with a physical illness which in turn leads to an awareness of sinfulness. At this stage Kempe does not explicitly state that the illness is intended to remind her of her sin, but this reasoning will become prominent in later descriptions. After becoming aware of her terrible "defawt," Kempe is moved to confession, or open acknowledgment and atonement. When her impulse to confess is thwarted by the hasty confessor, she consequently develops a psychological illness. Kempe does not recover from this illness until she is assured of Christ's love for her. When she acknowledges this, her health is completely restored. Although it is not until some ten years later that she fully devotes her life to Christ, this illness is particularly important in the narrative because it demonstrates that physical illness is a salutary warning to the eternal soul and that healing can only occur through Christ.

Another physical affliction occurs when Kempe is praying for chastity at Saint Margaret's church. She describes the following event:

> Sodeynly fel down fro the heyest party of the cherch-vowte fro undyr the fote of the sparre on hir hed and on hir bakke a ston which weyd iii pownd and a

> schort ende of a tre weyng vi pownd that hir thowt hir bakke brakke a-sundyr, and sche ferd as sche had be deed a lytyl while. Soon aftyr sche cryd "Ihesu mercy," and a-noon her peyn was gon. (21-22)

Kempe marvels at her unscathed survival from this accident until she is informed by Christ twelve weeks later that it should be considered a miracle, "Helde this for a gret myracle, &, yf the pepyl wyl not levyn this, I schal werkyn mech mor" (22). The cause of the falling stone is left ambiguous. The reader is uncertain whether the entire event was caused by God to demonstrate devotion to Kempe or that God controlled only the physical consequences of the accidental falling. Either way, God intervenes on behalf of Kempe and a physician's services are unnecessary.

In the two previous examples, affliction serves as a means for God to express his love for Kempe. By returning her sanity and preventing injury after the church accident, Christ confirms his concern for Kempe's physical well-being and, by extension, her spiritual condition. However, God also uses illness in an additional way as a means of testing Kempe's worth, as Christ suggests during a revelation, "I have preuyd the be many tribulacyons, many gret hevynes, and many grevows sekenes" (51).

God's motives are especially hazy in Kempe's description of her long illnesses in the middle of the narrative. She begins her description by saying that "God

ponyschyd hir wyth many gret & divers sekenes" (137) and goes on to describe a flux which lasts a long time. This is followed by intermittent pain in her right side for eight years. During this time, the only thing that Christ tells her is that she will not die. This provides her with a reassurance that the pain is not a sign of imminent death, a fact which helps her endure this relatively prolonged period of physical suffering. Curiously, this series of illnesses is not justified through revelation. Nor is the suffering miraculously relieved by God as a manifestation of love for Kempe. Indeed, there is a suggestion that these illnesses are a form of punishment for unspecified sins. While one might assume that she is describing a vengeful God, Kempe does not respond to this perceived divine retribution with hostility or disbelief. Instead, as with all of her other adversities, she turns the illness into an opportunity for spiritual growth by imagining that her sufferings are minuscule compared to those of Christ.

At the end of the first book, there are allusions to several other illnesses. The text states that there were "dyvers tymys, whan the creatur was so seke that sche wend to a ben ded & other folk wende the same, it was answeryd in her sowle that sche xulde not deyin but sche xulde levyn & far wel" (215). There is no suggestion about God's intent in these instances, but Kempe does indicate that she was attended by the saints in her suffering, including Peter,

Paul, Mary, Catherine, Margaret, and Mary Magdalene (215). Whatever the reason for these additional sicknesses, it is certainly clear that Kempe believes that she is being cared for by representatives of Christ, legitimizing her affliction as a direct manifestation of divine will.

The circumstances of Kempe's death are not mentioned by the narrator of the second book. The second priestly scribe makes no mention of an illness or the circumstances which precede her death. Instead, Kempe's daily prayers are transcribed for the perpetual guidance of the reader. This form of closing the narrative shifts the emphasis away from the themes of bodily illness and emphatically suggests that the enhancement of Kempe's spirituality through suffering was the most meaningful aspect of her life and is worthy of emulation by the reader.

The second category of affliction is affective in nature. These illnesses, or more properly psychological states, are completely subjective, sensory, and emotional manifestations of divine inspiration. Visions, auditory hallucinations, and Kempe's identification with the extreme anguish of the Passion preceding her episodes of weeping are all included in this category. These occurrences are repeatedly described by Kempe and constitute an essential component of her piety. Early critics of The Book of Margery Kempe, like Martin Thornton, often saw an "over-sensitivity of emotion" in Kempe's life largely because they

sought to interpret Kempe's behavior from the standpoint of ascetic devotion rather than mysticism (3-4). It seems likely that many of her descriptions conform to similar events in the lives of other mystics and would have been expected of someone claiming divine inspiration. More recently, Clarissa Atkinson has suggested that a tradition of "affective piety" had existed for four centuries before Kempe's life. The goal of writers in this tradition was to move the heart of the believer, directing them toward conversion and salvation (129-44). Julian of Norwich was a prominent anchoress following this tradition with whom Kempe discusses her own religious experiences (Meech and Allen, 42).

Whatever the etiology, these affective afflictions have a profound impact on Kempe's overall state of awareness. Many scenes in the text depict Kempe's conversations with God or Christ and her participation in the significant events of Christ's life. Kempe looks upon these revelations as a blessing and a sure sign of divine favor. Invariably, she experiences the events as if she were actually present, speaking freely with holy participants, as in the following example:

> An-other day this creatur schuld geve hir to medytacyon, as sche was bodyn be-for, & sche lay stylle, nowt knowyng what sche myght best thynke. Than sche seyd to wer Lord Ihesu Crist, "Ihesu, what schal I

> thynke?" Ower Lord Ihesu answeryd to hir mende, "Dowtyr thynke on my Modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that thow haste." And than a-noon sche saw Seynt Anne gret wyth chylde, and than sche preyd Seynt Anne to be hir mayden & hir seruawnt. & anon ower Lady was born, & than sche besyde hir to take the chyld to hir & kepe it tyl it wer twelve yer of age wyth good mete & drynke, wyth fayr whyte clothys & whyte kerchys. And than sche seyd to the blyssed chyld, "Lady, ye schall be the modyr of God." (18)

On one level, this episode can be viewed as intentional fabrication or imaginative reconstruction. From this point of view, Kempe can be seen as volitionally creating these images in an attempt to generate internal, religious fervor. However, it is also possible that such dream-like experiences occurred as the natural consequence of the religious milieu of the age during praying or meditative states. The essential aspect of these affective visions is that they are unavailable to other people. As a manifestation of divine favor, they distinguish Kempe from her peers. As a result of these experiences, Kempe's life becomes sanctified for her. Unfortunately, these unverifiable experiences are frequently questioned by lay people and clerics as false and hypocritical, just as they might be declared psychotic today. Instead of being accepted as a saint, Kempe is often vilified as a hypocrite

by members of the lay community, particularly during her journeys abroad, causing her additional emotional anguish.

A second kind of affective affliction is auditory in nature. Kempe hears beautiful sounds at various points in the narrative. The narrator describes one such episode that occurs while she is thinking of the Passion:

> Whyl sche dalyed in the Passyon of owyr Lord Ihesu Crist, sche herd so hedows a melodye that sche myght not ber it. Than this creatur fel down as yf she had lost hir bodyly strength & lay stylle a gret whyle, desyring to put it away, & sche myght not. Than knew sche wel be hir feyth that ther was gret joye in Hevyn. (39)

Earlier in the story, Kempe had a similar experience while lying in bed with her husband. On that occasion, as well, the sound reminded her of "Paradyse" (11). As in the case of her visions, these sounds are not audible to anyone else and often result in scorn by her companions. After the episode when the sound reminded her of the joy of heaven, Kempe could not help discussing this at the dinner table with the other pilgrims whom she was accompanying to the Holy Land. Appalled by her presumptuousness and inability to discuss non-holy things, her companions exiled her from the table, unable or unwilling to empathize with her affective state (63-65).

Kempe's weeping is another type of affective

affliction.[5] Many times during the narrative, she is suddenly stricken with extreme anguish in sympathy for Christ's pain during his torture and crucifixion. This results in uncontrollable weeping, a behavior which also serves to separate her from her peers and leads to her exclusion from communal activities during pilgrimage. The idea of weeping had a long history within the Church dating back to the Church Fathers. McEntire describes four different reasons for compunction through tears including weeping for one's own sins, for the sins of others, from an awareness of God's justice and from a desire for the eternal glory of God (81-83). Kempe's tears seem to serve all of these purposes at some point in the narrative.

Ultimately, all of these affective afflictions are manifestations of Kempe's piety. Whether or not one believes that they were caused by extreme devotion or unsought inspiration, they still serve to separate Kempe from her peers. In this sense, these afflictions constitute a form of dysfunctional behavior. It is tempting to regard these behaviors from a modern vantage point as pathological delusions of a psychotic state. However, it must be remembered that Kempe's affective behaviors separate her only from her secular peers. Within the context of late

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[5] This type of response might also be included with the "neurological" category. I discuss it in terms of affective behavior because it is a "normal" behavior brought on by intense emotional states.

medieval spirituality, such inspiration was desirable and afforded her a place within the religious community. For this reason, it is not particularly desirable to consider these experiences from the standpoint of modern psychological theory. As far as Kempe and most of her clerical advisers are concerned, the affective states come directly from God and are a reflection of His love and concern for her eternal soul. As such, the separation from the secular community that results from these experiences is of little importance. Since each instance is a holy visitation, it is both futile and sinful to attempt to prevent them. Rather, they, too, are to be welcomed and sought out. The social scorn which accompanies the affective behaviors make the afflictions even more valuable from the standpoint of sanctity.

The final class of afflictions is neurological in nature. As I have indicated, this is a rather inadequate term for describing those uncontrollable behaviors that have overt, externally-observable components. In this context, Kempe's crying-out episodes are of primary concern. Her uncontrollable shrieking begins when she visits Calvary on her pilgrimage: "On-to the Mownt Calvarye, sche fel down that sche myght not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wretyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr" (68). Similar episodes continue for ten years, occurring whenever

she thinks of Christ's Passion or hears an especially pious sermon (140). This involuntary behavior is the most visibly distressing aspect of Kempe's piety. The frequency and intensity of her cries also lead virtually everyone to question her religious sincerity. Many explanations are offered for Kempe's behavior in this regard. She herself accepts Christ's explanation that it is a blessing and a manifestation of love. Other members of the community, including clergymen, suggest the possibilities of demonic possession, hypocrisy, or epilepsy. At one point, Kempe is excluded from the church during a particular priest's sermons unless she admits that her crying out is due to a heart condition (150-51).

Despite the questioning of others, Kempe never doubts the divine origin of these spells. As her most burdensome affliction, the crying-out episodes are also the most holy manifestation of divine favor. Remarkably, Kempe always endures them patiently. She does not succumb to the priest's request to attribute the crying out to a physical illness nor does she herself believe that they are caused by epilepsy, "the fallyng evyl" (105; cf. Temkin, 85-117). Kempe shows complete acceptance of her condition and never mentions ways to actively remedy her situation through physicians. Ultimately, Christ takes away the crying-out spells, saying, "thu xalt no mor cryin so lowde" (155).

Thus, just as illness and affliction affects many

individuals in the narrative, Kempe herself is frequently stricken. Her physical ailments are frequent and severe. In addition, she suffers from affective anguish and abnormal neurological states. It seems fair to conclude that Kempe's life is characterized by affliction. Ironically, she believes that these illnesses are persuasive evidence of divine favor. As a reminder of the imminence of death, they serve as a stimulus for Kempe to reflect upon the state of her soul and her relationship to God. Ultimately, illness and suffering are essential elements in Christ's plan for her redemption. Kempe's endurance through physical and emotional difficulties encourages readers to view their own afflictions from the same perspective and behave accordingly, with prayer and faith.

While the ubiquity of illness in the narrative reflects the imperfect, corruptible state of man caused by original sin, I also suspect that Kempe's descriptions reflect the realities of life in the late Middle Ages. However, it is important to recognize that her view is an exclusively religious one. Although she describes illness, Kempe does not mention physicians or specific kinds of physical treatment. By emphasizing suffering and omitting any reference to temporal, secular remedies, Kempe forces the reader to consider Christ as both the source of suffering and the only true physician. In doing so, she vests all illness with metaphysical significance and obviates the need

for humoral explanations.

MARGERY KEMPE AS HEALER

Margery Kempe is a model of endurance. With the help of her clerical advisors and the revelatory encouragements of Christ she achieves spiritual prosperity in a life characterized by physical and emotional pain. In the mere act of dictating the story of her life, Kempe presents herself as a role model for others and demonstrates the proper way to cope with life's uncertainties and injustices. From this standpoint, Kempe, like Christ, is a spiritual healer. She often provides comfort for people suffering from a variety of disorders, emulating Christ's role as a physician by ministering to her friends and enemies with physical comforting, encouragement, and prayer. While there are no true physicians in the narrative except Christ, one can view Kempe herself as the proper kind of earthly healer. She does not administer medicine or prescribe dietary regimens. Instead, she offers spiritual insight and compassion to the afflicted with a fatalistic acceptance of human frailty that is predicated on faith and prayer.

Throughout the narrative, Kempe recognizes that Christ is the only true healer. He is also the ultimate cause of all disease and suffering, saying to Kempe in a vision, "I have preuyd the be many tribulacyons, many gret heuynes, & many grevows sekenes in so mech that thu hast ben a-noynted for deed, & al thorw my grace hast thu skapyd" (51).

Because of Christ's omnipotence and infallibility and the inscrutability of his plans, illness should be welcomed since it fulfills Christ's wishes and turns the attention of afflicted people toward the state of their eternal souls.

Although treatment is never described in the text or performed by Kempe, she always exhibits the only appropriate response to illness, compassion and prayer. She extends this to everyone in her community. In many instances, she also ministers to the needs of strangers, some of whom exhibit great hostility toward her. She treats seasick passengers during the return to Dover (242), allays the fears of the pilgrims returning to Venice (75) and kisses the lips of lepers as if she were kissing Christ (177). Kempe identifies with a woman suffering from post-partum psychosis and attends her frequently until recovery occurs (178). Finally, she provides a spiritual form of comfort by sharing her revelations and prayers with various afflicted individuals.

Both comforting and prayer are traditional Christian ideals that Kempe goes to great length to actualize. Her services are of a routine nature. In keeping with her concern for the next world, she does not perform miraculous cures in this one. Her practice constitutes the embodiment of Christ's healing methods that are available to all mortals, prayer and comfort, not miraculous intervention. But Kempe is not wholly altruistic in her care for the ill.

This kind of activity is crucial to her conception of Christian behavior and, thus, is necessary to improve the state of the individual soul. Clearly, she assumes that there will be a reward for this activity in the form of personal salvation in Heaven.

In addition to caring for strangers, Kempe also attends clergy and family members during their illnesses. The care she provides to them, however, is not qualitatively different from that which she provides to strangers. The only significant difference is when she takes care of her husband, which she somewhat egocentrically views as an act of atonement rather than charity, believing it is just punishment for her former enjoyment of her husband's body, particularly after he becomes senile and incontinent:

> And therfor was hir labowr mech the mor in waschyng & wryngyng & hir costage in fyring & lettyd hir ful meche fro hir contemplacyon that many tymys sche xuld an yrkyd hir labowr saf sche bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and therfor sche was glad to be ponischyd wyth the same persone. (181)

Kempe also cares for the saints and Christ during her revelations. She acquires lodging for the laboring Mary (18), consoles her at the Passion (195) and helps her prepare Christ's body after His death (196). This extends her charity into the divine sphere. Kempe's behavior is

ostensibly based on her compassion for Christ's suffering. However, the way that she approaches her husband's care as a form of penance suggests that attendance upon Christ and Mary may serve a similar religious function. The distinguishing feature is that in her revelations she atones for original sin and the torture of Christ, rather than any personal sin which she has committed. In addition, one should not overlook the maternal aspects of Kempe's behavior. Caring for the infant Christ could also represent an enactment of the ideal of providing for the weak and helpless. In this way, Kempe might actually be both imitating and modelling altruistic, Christ-like behaviors rather than merely atoning for sin.

All of the descriptions of caring for suffering strangers, clergy, family members, and saints lack any reference to medieval medical theory. Kempe never suggests humoral imbalance as the cause of illness. In addition, she offers only prayer and comfort rather purging or dietary advice. This is completely in accordance with her deterministic view of illness. Since Christ is the cause of all human illness, mortals can not know this information and, even if they could, it would be inappropriate to meddle in the course of illness since it is grounded in divine will. Certainly, Kempe would have had experience with midwives in the context of childbirth. This might have provided some exposure to medical ideas. Coming from a

prosperous merchant family, she might also have indirectly encountered household remedy books that could have provided her with some exposure to therapeutic ideas. One might conclude that Kempe intentionally omitted descriptions of such treatments from her narrative to emphasize the absolute sovereignty of Christ over human affairs.

This exclusion of the physical treatment of illness emphasizes the spiritual aspects of affliction. By eliminating the need to consider appropriate medical therapies, Kempe is free to act in the true healing spirit of Christ, providing comfort and prayer for the afflicted. This is the only way humans can respond to sickness in Kempe's view. Her response to illness is a moral imperative to fulfill the Christian goal of compassion while also serving as a form of atonement. Thus, in acting like Christ in the care of the infirm, Kempe devalues physical concerns and emphasizes the spiritual. At a time of intellectual change and increasing medical sophistication, she offers a conservative vision that returns the focus of human life toward Christ and God.

CONCLUSIONS

The Book Of Margery Kempe is an autobiographical account of the author's emerging spirituality and her relationship with Christ. The narrative relates Kempe's spiritual and secular adventures after her conversion, illustrating the difficulties of a pious, Christian life. Kempe's worldly adventures provide excitement and drama. The audience is encouraged to identify with her aspirations and share in her humiliation and suffering. While the narrative is framed by actual experiences, the most important events in the text occur on an entirely different level. Kempe places all of her experiences within the context of Christ's life. Her spiritual visions are located within Biblical settings. The secular and spiritual realms are ultimately unified through themes of affliction and adversity. At the outset, a post-partum illness provides the setting for Kempe's first religious vision. Throughout the remainder of the text there are many stories of affliction involving Kempe herself as well as members of her community. Also, and perhaps more importantly, there is a tremendous amount of pain in Kempe's visionary experience of Christ's life and death. Ultimately, the spiritual and worldly occurrences of illness are linked within a Christian conception of God's purpose.

Undoubtedly, the purpose of this dual narrative is to

encourage the audience to actively pursue the religious life. This entails devaluing temporal experiences and reinterpreting them within the context of Christ's suffering and human salvation. This quality of the text conditions the representation of illness. Individual suffering is unavoidable. Rather than attempting to relieve it, Kempe suggests that it should be accepted. Viewed within the context of Christ's crucifixion, disease is a small recapitulation of the process that is properly exacted upon the source of His suffering, namely humanity. Individual suffering is trivial compared to Christ's leaving Heaven, entering a fallen world and lovingly bearing unspeakable human suffering. For Kempe, this realization is central to her understanding of illness. Indeed, the desire to suffer for personal and original sin is explicitly stated in her daily prayers at the end of the narrative:

> Good Lord, spar no mor the eyne in myn hed than thu dedist the blood in thi body whech scheddist plenteuowsly for synful mannys sowle, and grawnt me so meche peyne & sorwe in this world that I be not lettyd fro thi blisse. (249)

Importantly, Kempe remains within her community and acknowledges the official representatives of the Church, instead of withdrawing into isolation as other mystics did. For this reason, her narrative provides unique insight into late medieval culture from the standpoint of a lay woman who

turns toward Christ relatively late in life.

The Book of Margery Kempe offers important evidence about the nature of late-medieval society, the universal nature of suffering and the role of the pious individual. A central issue in Kempe's narrative is how illness and death should be understood. In the tradition of the Church, she unequivocally presents affliction as a blessing, given to individuals intentionally by God. The ultimate purpose of disease is two-fold. First, as it destroys the body, illness threatens the individual soul, with the possibility of eternal damnation. As a result, the sufferer is forcibly reminded of his or her sins and the perpetual need for repentance. Second, all human life, which tends unremittingly toward illness, is a small-scale recapitulation of the bodily torture endured by Christ. It is the result of original sin. Corporal suffering serves as atonement. For Kempe, awareness of these truths leads to a correct understanding of disease and the inevitable conclusion that it should be welcomed rather than abhorred.

Further, illness is the means by which Margery Kempe turns her thoughts toward Christ. Without the threat of death after her first delivery, she might never have been forced to confess her unspecified sin. Although many years pass between her first vision of Christ and her active conversion, Margery Kempe's initial sickness prepares her for the eventual renunciation of worldly things. As Kempe

progresses through her life, she suffers many additional afflictions which are of a physical, affective, and neurological nature. With every illness, her faith is enhanced. A further desire for bodily illness and death characterize her new insight. Kempe is assured of her own divine acceptance through revelation that in turn helps her endure illness and minister to the needs of others during sickness.

Margery Kempe's narrative presents a religious understanding of illness in which human helplessness is axiomatic. Not only do the priest's spectacles fail to improve his vision, they actually make it worse. This is a subtle, yet damaging indictment of human ingenuity. Man's efforts to control or cure illness are doomed to failure, since all disease is grounded in divine will and is justifiable recompense for original sin. Kempe offers a vision of human suffering that gives little credence to human efforts to intervene. For Margery Kempe, the only valid response to illness is faith and prayer. The entire narrative is a rejection of the scientific and medical paradigms becoming increasingly prominent during her lifetime and a reaffirmation of the transcendent nature of illness and suffering.

APPENDIX

Appendix: Instances of Affliction in the Narrative

What follows is a sequential list of afflictions in The Book of Margery Kempe. Exhaustive compilation is complicated by the many different forms of disese, both psychological and physical, in the narrative. I have focused primarily upon physical illnesses. Pregnancy and childbirth have been included. Page and line references are from the Meech and Allen edition.

Margery Kempe's Afflictions

page/line	
2.6-10	"grett bodyly sekenesse...lost reson & her wyttes"
6.28-8.26	"labowr sche had in chyldyng....went owt of hir mende"
11.13-15	"herd a sownd of melodye so swet"
12.30-31	"Than sche gat hir an hayr"
21.25-22.25	"Sodeynly fel down...on hir hed & on hir bakke a ston"
29.14-20	"many swet terys of hy deuocyon"
29.31-30.20	"sche ymagyned...what deth sche mygth deyn"
34.33-35	"plentyuouws wepyng"
38.06-12	"newly delyueryd of a chyld"
39.7-9	"fel down as yf she had lost hir bodyly strength"

40.1-8	"Her dalyawns was so swet...[she] fel down"
48.26	"[Christ says] 'Dowtyr, thow art wyth childe'"
50.2-4	"lay stylle al in wepyng & sobbyng"
51.6-52.1	"[Christ says] 'Thow thart drede no grevows peynes in thi deyng"
61.6-8	"gret wepyngys & boystows sobbyngys"
66.12-17	"owyr Lord mad hir so seke"
67.24-30	"in the dalyawnce of owyr Lord, sche was in poynt to a fallyn of hir asse"
68.12-70.21	"sche fel down...& cryde wyth a lowde voys"[6]
71.18-75.30	"sche fel down...as sche xuld a deyd for sorwe"
78.1-3	"had hy meditacyons in the byrth & the childhode of Crist"
81.4-82.5	"herd [St. John] in hire gostly vndirstondyng"
83.14-20	"sche fel down therwyth"
84.14-16	"cryed neuyr so lowde"
86.2-4	"ful of vermyn & suffyrd gret peyn therwyth"
87.29-31	"felt many gret comfortys"
87.35-88.7	"herd...sweche sowndys & melodijs"
88.26-89.25	"flawme of fyer...in hir brest"
90.34-91.10	"had diuers tokenys in hir bodily heryng"

[6] This section describes the onset of Kempe's "crying-out" affliction. It takes place on Mount Calvary during her pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

98.27-37	"gret wepyng & gret sobbyng"
104.29-37	"fel in gret sekenes in so mech that sche was anoyntyd for dowt of deth"
105.7-25	"sche cryed so wondyr lowde"
111.10-15	"the fyer of lofe kyndelyd so yern in hir hert"
117.18-26	"sche myth not stondyn...for plente of deuocyon"
119.35-120.9	"'make me mythy & strong for to suffyr'"
124.35-125.7	"wyth hy deuocyon...sche cryed lowde"
131.11-23	"herd wyth hir bodily erys a lowde voys"
137.11-139,2	"Afftyrward God ponyschyd hir wyth many gret & diuers sekenes"
139.20-140.25	"cryed so lowde that it myth ben herd al a-bowte"[7]
142.11-13	"'I wolde for thi lofe...ben hewyn as smal as flesch to the pott'"
145.8-146.34	"had sche now horybyl syghtys & abhominabyl"
147.16-32	"sche cryed, sche roryd, sche wept, sche fel down to the grownd"
148.5-27	"sey a fayr ymage of owr Lady"

[7] This passage describes various responses associated with confession and repentance.

149.14-152.6 "at the last sche brast owte"[8]

155.28-37 "[Christ says] 'I xal takyn a-wey fro the thy criyng'"

164.16-27 "mende of the Passyon...sche cryed & roryd"

165.6-10 "brast owt wyth a crye"

167.6-7 "fel sche down wepyng & cryng"

167.21-25 "cryid & wept"

171.19 "felt a wondyr swet sauowr"

172.35-173.14 "the sayd creatur was desiryd of mech pepil to be wyth hem at her deying"

174.12-176.5 "sche fel down in the feld"

181.16-184.25 "'Lord, why wilt thu gyf me swech crying?'"

184.26-202.5 "on Palme Sonday...[she]cryid, wept & sobbyd ful boistowsly"[9]

206.27-207.14 "sche fel in a lityl slomeryng & a-non aperyd verily to hir syght an awngel"

207.14-208.15 "saw owr Lord...wyth hys wowndys bledyng"

209.8-14 "the fyr of loue encresyd"

215.6-216.3 "Dyuers tymys, whan the creatur was so seke"

219.1-220.24 "a flawme of fyer a-bowte hir brest"

234.13-235.3 "sche labowryd [on her journey home] tyl that

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[8] In this section, the narrator describes several crying-out episodes that occur during religious services. These result in one priest barring Kempe from attending his sermons.

[9] In this long section that encompasses multiple chapters, the narrator describes Kempe's response to visions of Christ's torture and crucifixion. Many different forms of affective response are discernible.

	sche fel in sekenes"
235.29-35	"sche wept & sobbyd"
237.19-30	"sche thorw hir comownyng had part of her vermyn"
241.17-25	"sche was so wery"
242.15-27	"Preyid...[God would] preseruyn hir fro voidyng of vnclene mater"
245.35-246.32	"Plentivows teerys of compunccyon"
249.10	"grawnt me so meche peyne"[10]
251.36-39	"Heily I thank the that thu woldist letyn me suffryn"

Afflictions of Others

5.18-32	First Priest	"hys eyn myssyd"
18.15-20	Saint Anne	"gret wyth chylde"
19.1-4	Elizabeth	"Seynt Iohn was bor"
19.15-23	Mary	"whan Ihesu was born"
30.13-21	Jesus Christ	"peynes...sufferyd"
44.15, 60.30, 76.23-30, 106.31	Escort	"brokyn-bak man"
51.29-31	Jesus Christ	"handys...nayled to the Crosse"
53.21-22	Woman	"a cors was present"
53.25-28	Woman's Husband	"he xal ben ded"

[10] This passage and the following one are part of Kempe's daily prayers which are included by the second scribe at the end of the narrative.

53.31-54.4	Wicked Woman	"at poynt of deth"
54.4-7	Woman	"lay in poynt of deth"
54.7-15	Good Man	"strongly seke"
54.15-20	Another Good Man	"xuld ben ded...wyth that same sekenesse"
54.20-27	Worshipful Woman	"ryte seke"
56.10-12	Worshipful Burgess	"gret seknes"
69.1-8	Any Man	"had a wownde"
73.15-18	Jesus Christ	"hangyn on the Cros"
74.18	Jesus Christ	"fastyd fowrty days"
75.29-33	Companions	"hir felaschep was ryth seke"
92.33-35	Jesus Christ	"whan I heng nakyd on the Cros"
94.1-3	A Wife	"gret wyth childe"
95.23-29	Saint Bridget	"in the chawmbre that [she] deyd"
99.13-15	Saint Jerome	"where the body...lyth birijd"
110.1-5	Bishop	"xulde be ded"
118.16	Blind Woman	"in a blynd womanys hows"
139.33-140.12	Jesus Christ	"preystys...representyng the lamentabyl deth and doolful berying"
147.1-11, 148.23-27	Good Priest	"fel in gret sekenes"

147.11-15	Good Vicar	"deyd but lityl befor"
154.13-14	Elizabeth of Hungary	"cryed wyth lowde voys"
159.35-160.9	Lepers	"whan thu seest any lazerys"
164.20-22	Jesus Christ	"ben scorgyd & hangyd"
169.18-170.9	Master Aleyn	"wyth gret sekenes"
171.4-20	Prior of Lynn	"tyl he deyd"
172.2-3	King	"in the mene-tyme...deyid"
172.4-7	Bishop of Winchester	"was ded"
173.3-14	Jesus and Mary	"in hir deying"
175.5-176.5	Mary	"in deying"
177.18-28	One Woman	"labowryd wyth hir gostly enmy"
177.33-179.5	Wife	"newly delyueryd...owt hir mende"
179.6-181.15	John Kempe	"fel down to the grownd"
186.23-25	Some People	"in...deth xal han grace"
187.28-189.14	Mary	"fallyng down in swownyng"
188.3	Jesus Christ	"I must nedys suffyr deth"
191.13-193.30	Jesus Christ	"al-to betyn & scorgyd"
193.18-194.24	Mary	"swownyn and fallyn down"
202.21-36	Burgess	"lay in gret sekenes"
204.5	Lepers	"alle lazerys"

207.16-18	Jesus Christ	"with hys wowndys bledyng"
208.5-10	Jesus Christ	"[his] body lying be-forn hir"
214.31	Sick Folks	"sche wer ocupijd wyth seke folke"
220.17-18	First Scribe	"God toke hym to hys mercy"
222.10-223.10	Kempe's Son	"hys face wex ful of whelys"
223.9	Kempe's Son	"had a wife and a childe"
225.8-14	Kempe's Son	"fel in gret sekenes...he passyd"
225.17	John Kempe	"folwyd the sone"
242.21-24	Travelers	"other in the schip voydyng"
251.16-17	Prayer for Sick	"for alle that arn seke"
253.25-29	Lazarus	"was reisyd fro deth to lyfe"

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