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Orthodoxy, Textuality, and the "Tretys" of Margery Kempe

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If we take the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe* at her word, then we can say that some time in the fall or summer of 1413 a rather extraordinary meeting took place between Margery Kempe, lay mystic and wife of a well-to-do burgher in the East Anglian town of Lynn, and Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury. Arundel was the highest-ranking cleric in the realm, deeply involved in national politics and the intrigues of court. He is — and was — best known for his decisive role in the heretication of the teachings of John Wyclif and the persecution of his lollard followers. When Kempe arrived in Lambeth, she had recently been accused of lollardy for the first time, by a group of Canterbury monks who cited her excessive weeping and her quoting a "story of Scriptur" as evidence of heresy and chased her out of the monastery, crying "Pow xalt be brent, fals lollare" [You shall be burnt, you false Lollard!] and pointing to a "cartful of thornys redy for Pe & a tonne to bren Pe wyth" [a cartful of thorns ready for you, and a barrel to burn you with] (27-8).¹ She faces similar "charges" on Arundel's very doorstep: when she reproves certain of the Archbishop's clerks for swearing "many gret oPis" [many great oaths] and speaking "many rekles wordys" [many thoughtless words], a lay woman declares she wishes Kempe were at Smithfield, the site of several notorious heresy trials, where she herself would gladly "beryn a fagot to bren [her] wyth" [bring a bundle of sticks to burn her with] (36). But once Kempe is closeted with Arundel himself, the question of heresy never arises. Quite the opposite, in fact: rather than questioning her on arti-

cles of faith, and before he has even had a chance to talk with her at length, Arundel grants her permission to choose her own confessor and to receive communion weekly, privileges reserved not only for the orthodox but for those deemed particularly holy. When he has heard her account of herself, he further commends her “maner of leuynyng” [manner of living], accepts her criticism of his clerks’ behavior “ful benyngly & mekely” [in the most meek and kindly way], and stays talking with her of God “tyl sterrys apperyd in Pe fyrmament” [until stars appeared in the firmament] (37).

The lollard teachings that Arundel and his colleagues sought to combat granted an unprecedented spiritual authority to the laity, questioning the need for ecclesiastical structures such as the sacraments to mediate between the layperson and God, and arguing (for example) that laypeople should be able to dismiss an ecclesiastic from a post for which they find him spiritually underqualified.² By 1413, any layperson who claimed that his or her spiritual welfare was independent from the institutional structures of the church, or whose theology seemed independent of its teachings, could be tried for heresy and persecuted for treason. The series of episodes described above acknowledges the possibility that certain aspects of Kempe’s behavior — her weeping, her command of the scriptures, her tendency to reprove others for their unholy living — could be read as signs of lollardy. The unquestioning support of Archbishop Arundel himself then establishes the correct reading: these manifestations are in fact signs of grace. Kempe’s grace derives from her special relationship with Christ, the “dalyawns Pat owyr Lord dalyid to hyr sowle” [the dalliance³ which our Lord conversed with her soul] (36) that she tells Arundel about once he has won her confidence by granting her petitions. By proclaiming this “dalyawns” to be genuine, evidence of the “grace” that “owyr mercyful Lord Crist Ihesu schewyd . . . in owyr days” [our merciful Lord Jesus Christ showed . . . in our time] (37), Arundel grants to Kempe a great deal of spiritual autonomy. Because Christ speaks directly to her, the Archbishop of Canterbury even cedes to her spiritual *authority*, meekly submitting to her criticism of his clerics. The rest of the chapter — a chapter which began with a laywoman threatening Kempe with the stake — continues in a quietly triumphant vein: Kempe meets with a very rare popular success in London, where “hir dalyawns & hir comunycacyon”⁴ are much sought-after and move many to tears that mirror her own, and back in Lynne she finds a confessor who proclaims her to be “hyly inspyred wyth Pe Holy Gost” and promises never to forsake her (37-8). Once Arundel has not only confirmed her orthodoxy but acknowledged her special grace and the spiritual authority deriving from her dalliance with Christ, both the laity and the clergy fall (for now) effortlessly into line.

Whether or not these events actually transpired as Kempe narrates them we can of course never know. Lynn Staley posits that many of the stories Kempe tells are fictional. Because they can be successfully read either of two ways, as confirmations of Kempe’s orthodoxy or as criticisms of the church, episodes such as the meeting with Arundel both “clear [Kempe] from charges of heresy” and “allow her to confront the issue of moral authority by dramatizing a fiction in which Margery’s accusers are confounded by her holiness and simplicity” (*Dissenting Fictions* 149). These “lollard episodes” thus reveal the *Book* to be a

carefully composed text, one that makes use of the kinds of strategies, ranging from the appropriation and manipulation of generic conventions to the deployment of deliberate ambiguity, familiar to modern students of literature. Staley continually draws parallels between Kempe (whom she identifies as the author of the *Book* and distinguishes from her "protagonist" Margery) and Chaucer, on the grounds that both "used the *literary* tradition to which [they] were heir as well as the world around [them] to compose a fiction . . . [They] understood the meaning of and thus the need to assert mastery over communal and literary codes" (xii-xiii; emphasis added). I hope to confirm both Staley's sense of the *Book* as a deliberately composed text and her claim that it raises the issue of spiritual authority in a carefully ambiguous way. But without undermining her claims for Kempe's authorship and textual savvy, I want to move away from Staley's tendency to categorize the *Book* as a specifically literary text, resisting her unspoken assumption that any text with a discernible structure relevant to its meaning, and self-conscious about its own textuality, must perforce be "literature." This conflation of the composed and the literary discourages the rigorous examination both of vernacular literature as a textual category and of the wide variety of non-literary ways in which vernacular textuality was used, quite self-consciously, in this period.

Margery Kempe was writing within a traditional medieval understanding of religious texts as sites of spiritual authority, but she was writing at a time when traditional conceptions of textual authority were everywhere and confusingly contested. For Kempe, "religious texts" were no longer restricted to the Latin theological treatises and biblical commentaries that constituted the privileged realm of the clergy and the source of ecclesiastical authority. They included as well the vast range of what Nicholas Watson has termed "vernacular theology," texts written for, and occasionally even by, laypeople, which ranged from manuals for devotional meditation on the life of Christ, through mystical texts designed to record and inspire bodily experiences of the divine, to the lollard translations of the biblical words that formed the basis for theological and doctrinal debate into the vernacular — just to name a few. Watson defines the term as follows:

To refer to the "Middle English mystics" as "vernacular theologians" is . . . to assert two different sets of connections, with other kinds of theology and with vernacular writing in general. . . . The fourteenth-century "mystics" are part of a huge cultural experiment involving the translation of both Latin and Anglo-French texts, images, conceptual structures — all the apparatus of *textual authority* — into what contemporary commentators termed the "barbarous" mother-tongue, English. . . . As such, [they] are involved in the same socio-political discussion as Chaucer, Langland, and the Lollards — and in the contentious part of that discussion that had to do with the articulation of theological ideas in English. ("Middle English Mystics" 8)

I hope to show that *The Book of Margery Kempe* participates in these efforts to think theologically in English, and in the broader "socio-political discussion" about the nature and status of vernacular textuality in which such efforts play a

crucial part; Kempe was, to put it differently, engaged in a redefinition of the nature of textual authority. Kempe dubbed her book a “tretys,” a word used in Middle English to describe all kinds of more or less didactic texts. Her project was to invent a kind of “tretys” whose spiritual authority derived not from its participation in any single discourse of traditional textual authorizing but rather from the spiritual experiences and “dalyawns” with Christ that formed the center of her lived life.

In order to understand the problems and potentials of thinking theologically in the vernacular in Margery Kempe’s England, I would like to begin with Arundel and the lollard controversy, and particularly with its consequences for writing in English.

Between 1407 and 1409, just a few years before he (allegedly) talked of God with Margery Kempe “tyl sterrys apperyd in Pe fyrmament,” Archbishop Arundel drafted and issued thirteen Constitutions regarding religious orthodoxy and its enforcement, the final word in the heretication of lollardy. The Lambeth Constitutions, as they are generally referred to, go about their work not by enumerating, refuting, and censoring individual heretical views but rather by seeking to control the (perceived) sources and means of transmission of heresy.⁵ Like lollardy itself, Arundel’s Constitutions have their origin in Oxford, as the culmination of long-standing debates about the intellectual autonomy of the university and the virtues and dangers of translating the Bible into English. More than a power struggle between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the university, however, they represent an attempt to pull heresy out by the roots: to control theological speculation at Oxford (and the Constitutions provide for the examination of the views of every student in an Oxford hall once a month) is to control the discourse out of which heresy is born, particularly if one is unable or unwilling to conceive of sophisticated and subversive theological arguments originating with uneducated laypeople. But despite their academic origins, and despite their concern to prevent heresies from developing in the universities which alone were thought capable of producing them, the Lambeth Constitutions direct the majority of their regulatory energy to preaching, teaching, and writing among the non-academic laity to which Margery Kempe belonged. For by 1409 lollard teachings had spread far beyond the walls of the burgeoning academy, muddying the increasingly vague line between cleric and lay by encouraging the latter to read and interpret the Bible for themselves and by undermining the right of the clergy to the final word on questions of theology and doctrine (not to mention undermining their right to secular authority and temporal possessions). Arundel’s Constitutions sought to re-clarify and re-fortify the cleric/lay divide by codifying the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy over any and all lay theological speculation.⁶

The spread of lollardy itself — both what Wyclif taught regarding the need for vernacular translations of the Bible, and the literacy of many lay lollards evident in surviving trial depositions⁷ — was testament to the fact that in order to control theological speculation in late-medieval England, one had to control writing in the vernacular, both what got written down and who had access to it. Archbishop Arundel clearly saw it that way: the “central” Lambeth Constitu-

tions (both in Anne Hudson's formulation and quite literally, as they are the sixth and seventh of thirteen) sought to control the spread of heresy by strictly controlling the production and circulation not just of the English Bible but of (potentially) all vernacular texts, allowing the church to censor *any* book or tract made in Wyclif's time or since (see Wilkins 317). After 1409, no English book could be read without the hierarchy's authorization, or so the letter of the law stipulated. And the possession of, or even exposure to, unauthorized Bible translations was declared a sign of heresy, making the church the effectual source of the authority of the scriptures. Finally, what these two Constitutions sought to do is to bring the spread of reading and writing among laypeople firmly under the control of Arundel and his church, thus preserving the clear distinctions between cleric and lay, *litteratus* and *illiteratus*, upon which rested so much of that institution's spiritual and temporal authority.

It was a goal that was already doomed to fail, not least because of the wide variety of "books and tracts" already abounding in Arundel's England. But it was not a simple dream, and it did not die easily.⁸ Nor did it lack support among many of those whose books and tracts were responsible for, and responsive to, the increase in lay literacy. In 1410, no doubt with the injunctions of the Lambeth Constitutions clearly in mind, Nicholas Love sought and obtained Arundel's authorization for his *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Crist*, a loose translation of the immensely popular pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. The *Mirroure* presents itself as a collection of "diuerse ymaginacions of cristes life," compiled for "symple creaturs þe whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with the mylke of lyzte doctryne & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemplacion" [various imaginings of Christ's life ... simple creatures which, like children, need to be fed with the milk of light doctrine and not with weighty meat of great clergy and of high contemplation] (Love 10).⁹ Love enjoins his readers to reimagine the individual events in the life of Christ in any way that makes them more vivid, to "sette in mynde þe image of crystes Incarnation passion & Resurrection" and "in þat manere make þe in þe soule present" to those events [set in mind the image of Christ's incarnation, passion, and resurrection . . . in that manner, make yourself present in your soul]. It is not even vital to know what the gospels themselves say but rather to meditate on what "we resonably mowe suppose" [what we reasonably might suppose] (168) in the most effective — which is to say the most *affective* — way possible. There is even a sense in Love's prologue that the life of Christ by nature cannot fully be told but can only be fruitfully imagined:

[C]ristes life . . . may worþily be cleped þe blessed life of Jesu Christ, þe which also because it may not be fully discriuede as þe lifes of oþer seyntes, bot in a maner of liknes as the ymage of a man's face is shewed in þe mirroure. (11)

[Christ's life . . . can worthily be called the blessed life of Jesus Christ, also because it can not be fully described as the lives of other saints can, except in a manner of likeness, as the image of a man's face is shown in the mirror.]

With this oblique reference to the title of his work, Love gives new life to the common medieval trope of the book as mirror, as *speculum*, by using it to articulate a very specific understanding of what it means to *read* the story of Jesus' life, to encounter it in a book and turn it to one's own use. For Love's orthodox lay reader, suited to imaginative engagement with the manhood of Christ rather than the puzzling out of doctrine, to read a book is create an image by meditating upon the events in a narrative.

Marginal notes identifying passages throughout the *Mirroure* as "contra lollardos" [against lollards], as well as clear statements by Love himself that his text stands "in confusion of alle fals lollardes" [to confound all false lollards] (154), echo Arundel's statement of authorization, copied diligently (in Latin) into nearly all of the existing manuscripts between an (English) table of contents and a (Latin) notice regarding Love's additions to the *Meditationes*: "ad fidelium edificacionem hereticorum siue lollardorum confutatcionem" [for the instruction of the faithful and the confutation of heretics and lollards] (Salter 1-2). There is a tantalizing irony, for the modern reader, in the fact that a church hierarch willing to burn heretics over seemingly fine semantic distinctions regarding the nature of transubstantiated bread would champion a gospel harmony presenting two competing versions of the crucifixion and inviting the reader to choose between them (see Love 176-7) — would authorize it, moreover, as a direct refutation of lollard teachings, a self-consciously orthodox alternative to lollard translations of the scriptures. While Arundel felt the social and spiritual autonomy of his church to be threatened by Wyclif's making a vernacular text claiming to present the actual words of the gospels available to the lay public, he saw a layperson's imaginative recreations of the story of the gospels as strengthening his or her orthodoxy. The laypeople could have the stories, but they could not have the words. Arundel was attempting to keep religion a matter of vision(s) and devotional meditation for an increasingly literate lay population, to channel their new facility with texts into an imaginative relationship with religious narratives rather than an intimate acquaintance with the words of the scriptures themselves.¹⁰ In doing so, he sought to establish and enforce an implicit dichotomy between two ways of reading the Bible as text: the laity were to read the Bible as a structure of narratives, narratives that do their work in the realm of the devotional imagination; the clergy were to read it as a structure of words, words that provided them with the basis for developing and defending orthodox theology and doctrine. It was, to risk a simplification, an attempt to enforce a strict division between propositional logic and emotional response, intellect and affect.

The two possible understandings of what it means to be a text implicit in Arundel's legislation suggest a new way to answer a perennial question about *The Book of Margery Kempe*: who is its "real" author, Kempe or her scribe? For Kempe, I would argue, the relevant question is not so much "Whose words?" as "Whose story?" Both prologues to the first Book repeatedly tell us that the work is "of Pis creature" [of this creature], and that it will "schewyn in party [her] leuyng" [shall show in part her life] (2). Even if we take many of the words of the prologues to be the work of Kempe's priest-scribe,¹¹ there is no question that the story of the *Book* is hers.¹²

The stories Kempe tells give us a glimpse into the wide variety of religious writing and thinking, especially rich and varied in her native East Anglia, out of which grew both the necessity for, and the terms of, Arundel's dichotomy. Lollardy flourished in Kempe's native region, as did official means of combating it: the Norwich heresy trials of the early fifteenth century, contemporaneous with the later events Kempe narrates and with the writing of the *Book* itself, are the best-documented instances of the anti-Wycliffite inquisition; they also provide us with our most intriguing records of who the lollards were, of how the teachings of an Oxford heretic were transmitted to and incorporated into the lives of laypeople. Gail Gibson demonstrates beautifully the strength and pervasiveness of what she terms the "incarnational aesthetic" in East Anglian worship, drama, art, and architecture of the period, a brand of lay devotional spirituality based on an intimate incorporation of the fact of Christ's manhood and the details of his life into the facts and details of East Anglian lives.¹³ Julian of Norwich (whom Kempe visited early on in her converted life) wrote a compelling and distinctly theologically-minded account of her own practice of imaginative meditation on the life of Christ, influenced, as Kempe was, by the mysticism of writers like Hilton and Rolle.

Kempe draws on these rich and varied vernacular theological traditions to challenge the assumption that late-medieval lay religious life and thought could be contained neatly within the terms of Arundel's dichotomy. Her *Book* ties together the whole mess of categories that Arundel sought to dichotomize neatly along lay/clerical lines into a narrative which is neither a traditional devotional manual nor a traditional theological text, exposing the ways in which Arundel's constitutions oversimplify the traditions of vernacular theology and the variety of lay religious experience that they seek to control. On the one hand, it is at least partly true, as Watson suggests, that Kempe's predilection for the concrete often allows her to remain "willingly contained within the world of images" ("Middle English Mystics" 37), as Love and Arundel would wish her to be. In fact, the *Book* reveals enough of the strong, direct influence of Love's *Mirroure* for Gibson to observe that "it is often when Margery Kempe sounds the most like her inimitable self that she is, in fact, the most Pseudo-Bonaventure" (49). But its technically illiterate author also demonstrates an intimate familiarity with the *words* of the Bible — and even, more extraordinary still, with "doctowrys Per-up-on," or exegetical commentaries (143).¹⁴ Again and again, she defends her orthodoxy in ways that work against the very heart of Arundel's project: attacked for living a life deemed inappropriate for a married woman (her detractors often mention her wearing white and traveling alone, and at least one fears she will persuade other women to follow in her footsteps),¹⁵ and accused by clerics of heresy due to her "preaching" and her knowledge of the scriptures, she successfully defends herself by *citing* the scriptures, once even in Latin,¹⁶ in the course of remarkably theological-sounding debates. And just as Kempe proves her orthodoxy by appropriating a discourse (theological debate) that could prove her heresy, so she uses her Nicolas Love-inspired meditations to legitimate exactly the behavior that calls her orthodoxy into question in the first place: "preaching," traveling alone, living chaste as a wife, and so forth.

The second prologue to Book One famously announces that Kempe's "tribulacyons . . . schal ben schewed aftyr, not in ordyr as it fellyn but as Pe creatur cown han mend of him whan it wer wretyn" [tribulations . . . [are] not written in order, every thing after another as it was done, but just as the matter came to this creature's mind when it was to be written down] (6). This statement has generally been read as proof that the *Book* as a whole has no premeditated structural principles but is simply a rambling account of various events that happened to occur to Kempe, told in the order in which they happened to occur to her.¹⁷ In fact, it indicates the structural principle that governs her transformation of her experiences into text: memory, not chronology, orders this *Book*, and it does so by association, arranging episodes by kind. The result is narrative — not in the most basic modern sense of narrative as a chronological relating of events, nor purely in Love's sense of a series of recorded and remembered events that one engages with imaginatively again and again in an ongoing process of spiritual growth, but rather narrative as a series of episodes linked in a progression of emotions and ideas that the reader is meant to follow, learning from his or her own affective *and* intellectual engagement.

The entire first book can be broken down fairly neatly into sections based less on the chronological development of Kempe's life story (though despite her caveat each section does confine itself primarily to the events in one period of her life) than on the kinds of vernacular theologizing she appropriates in each and the individual lessons in reading and appropriation that she learns. The sections I see are as follows:

1) the establishment of Kempe's relationship with Jesus and of the terms and consequences of that relationship (Capitula 1-24);

2) the pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where Kempe's tears are augmented by roarings and weepings at the actual sites of the passion and the crucifixion, and to Rome, where she is married to the Godhead of Christ in the capital city of his church (Capitula 25-45);

3) a series of episodes in which Kempe is persecuted as a lollard and successfully defends herself to various clerical authorities (Capitula 46-55);

4) Margery's life and tribulations in Lynn, including confrontations with various local laypeople and clerics and the illness and death of her husband, punctuated by long reassuring speeches by Christ and other confirming experiences (Capitula 56-78);

5) a series of participatory meditations on or visions of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, following Love's account in the vast majority of their details (Capitula 79-83); and

6) a concluding section of statements of authenticity and purpose, first in direct speeches from Christ to Kempe and finally from Kempe and her scribe directly to the reader. (Capitula 84-9)

Each section corresponds to a phase in the development of Kempe's project, both lived and written. Taken together, they are remarkable for the thoroughness with which they reflect the various ways people wrote about religion in Kempe's world. Read in sequence, they trace her appropriation of all those systems of religious thought into the intertwined narratives — spiritual and worldly, interior and exterior — of her life. By following the development of

her narrative from section to section, we as readers participate in her struggle to come to terms with an authoritative and potentially authoritarian way of thinking (Arundel's dichotomy) which sought radically to simplify and limit her experience of God and her ability to think and talk and write about that experience. In a parallel development, we learn with Kempe to grant her the spiritual authority bestowed upon her by the voice of Jesus speaking from within. Kempe thus redefines "tretys" by exploiting the potential inherent in the reader's participatory relationship to narrative.

The first section of Book One reads as a microcosm of the text as a whole, establishing the *Book's* two primary structural principles, narrative and episodic, as it establishes the source of its own authority: Kempe's relationship with Christ. On one level, this first section constitutes a narrative in and of itself: Kempe grows and develops in her relationship with Christ as we move from one episode to the next. But each of these initial episodes also serves retrospectively as a foil for a later section of the *Book*, allowing us to see how Kempe learns and develops with regard to each aspect of her relationship to Christ and her relationship to the world as she learns to read them both properly. I will take advantage of this structure in the reading that follows, progressing in order through the episodes of the first section, and jumping back and forth between the episodes of the first section and the corresponding later sections. I hope thus to demonstrate how — and why — the *Book* works both narratively and episodically.

At the heart both of Kempe's life and of her *Book* lies the voice of Jesus speaking from within, a relationship with the humanity of Christ that is both revelatory and deeply personal. Kempe's initial conversion directly juxtaposes a hostile clerical authority to the comforting authority of Christ as he appears and speaks to her. Seriously ill, Kempe confesses to a man who "gan sharply to vndernemy n hir er Pan sche had fully sey d hir entent" [began sharply to reprove her before she had fully said what she meant] (7). Feeling trapped between the threat of damnation and his "scharp repreuyng" [sharp reproving], Kempe goes mad. She is cured of both physical and mental illness when Christ appears to her "in lyknesse of a man" and addresses her directly as "Dowter" [Daughter] (8). The conversational voice and immediate presence of Christ are thus clearly established, by substituting at the moment of conversion for an individual cleric's failure, as the final source of authority in Kempe's life and her *Book*.

But Kempe is painfully aware of the fact that "sumtyme Po Pat men wenyn wer reuelacions it arn decytys & illusyons" [sometimes those that people think were revelations are deceits and illusions] (219), and much of the *Book* concerns itself with the validation of Kempe's spiritual experiences, for herself as well as for her readers, and with the justification of the spiritual authority conferred by her special "dalyawns" with Christ. In their introduction to the Middle English treatise *The Chastising of God's Children*, Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge note that experiences like Kempe's, which they term "enthusiasm" (54; and passim), were often seen as signs or harbingers of heresy. In a reading that parallels the Canterbury monks' interpretation of her excessive weeping as a sign of

heresy, Bazire and Colledge see Kempe herself as the quintessential example of this heterodox enthusiasm: “There is no [such] excess of conduct or belief which is not recorded for us in the spiritual autobiography of that queen among enthusiasts, Margery Kempe” (55). The *Chastising* itself (probably composed some time between 1382 and 1408), which instructed its readers on how to read adversity productively as a sign of God’s involvement in one’s life, warns that “many men and wymmen bien disceyued by reuelacions and visions” [many men and women are deceived by revelations and visions] (169) and carefully sets out “seuene special tokenes by Pe whiche a man shal knowe visions of a goode spirit fro illusions of the Pe deuel” [seven special tokens by which a man shall know visions of a good spirit from illusions of the devil] (171).¹⁸ Throughout the *Book*, Kempe combats the kind of reading Bazire and Colledge suggest by seeking to verify her experiences just as the *Chastising* would have her do, making it clear that she is (in the words of the author of the *Chastising*) “vndir obedience and techyng of [her] goostli fadir” [under obedience to and the teachings of her spiritual father], that she feels a “goostli swetnesse or sauour in Pe loue of god” [spiritual sweetness or savor in the love of God] and a “sodeyn comyng of a goostli heete” [sudden onset of a spiritual heat], that her visions (despite her detractors’ critiques) lead her to an “inward knowyng and goostli lizt of triewe shewing” [inward knowledge and spiritual light of true showing] and “to honeste and to uertuous lyueng” [to honest and virtuous living], and that her holiness is confirmed by the “shewyng of miraclis” [showing of miracles] (*Chastising* 177, 187, 181, 179, 181).¹⁹

Kempe’s anxieties about the authenticity of her spiritual experiences, like the various episodes in which she is accused of lollardy, represent a site at which subversive suggestions about her spiritual authority are both evoked and contained safely within an orthodox discourse. Such episodes are linked throughout the *Book* into a narrative that progresses from Kempe’s need for clerical confirmation of her “felyngys” in the first section, to her final assertion, at the end of the first book, that they are “very trewth schewyd in experiens” [very truth, shown in experience] (220), a narrative that ultimately makes those “felyngys” and her “dalyawns” with Christ the guarantors of their own authenticity. In the early chapters, Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln (the most spectacular instance of a recanted lollard making good in the ecclesiastical hierarchy), as well as various anchors, friars, and priests, and the celebrated “Dame Ielyan” of Norwich, all play an authenticating role similar to Arundel’s, reading Kempe’s potentially heterodox behavior correctly as an external manifestation of her spiritual gifts, and proclaiming those gifts to be genuine. But the unquestioning support of Arundel, the approbation of the Londoners on the way home from Canterbury, and the absolute trust of her new confessor in Lynn are soon replaced by the near-universal scorn of clerics and laypeople alike as Kempe’s spiritual experiences, and the outward signs that accompany them, intensify.

In order to read this scorn properly as itself a sign of grace, Kempe must learn to rely on the “internal” evidence of her spiritual experiences themselves and on the hermeneutic guidance of the voice of Jesus speaking from within, which tells her that “Pat thing Pat I lofe best Pei [that is, “religiows men” and

"prestys"] lofe not, & Pat is schamys, despitys, scornys, & repreuys of Pe pepil" [that thing which I love best they do not love — and that is shame, contempt, scorn and rebukes from people] (158). This shift from "external" to "internal" testing is dramatized in Capitulum 59, when Kempe refuses to believe that certain revelations she has had about who is to be saved and who damned have come from God. God responds by depriving her of her spiritual gifts, replacing them with "horybyl syghtys & abhominable . . . of beheldyng of mennys membrys & swech oPer abhominacyons" [horrible and abominable visions . . . of seeing men's genitals, and other such abominations] (145) — the polar opposite of her spiritual marriage to the Godhead, and a particularly appropriate punishment for betraying it. When she cries out to him for relief, accusing him of abandoning her, he returns, chastising her for failure to "beleuyn Pat it is God which spekyth to Pe & no deuel" [believe that it is the spirit of God that speaks to you, and no devil] (146) and meting out a specific period of twelve days' punishment. The authenticity of the voice of Jesus speaking from within is confirmed by that voice itself, and by the spiritual gifts it grants; Kempe's means of testing the authenticity of her experiences has become, as it were, self-referential, a closed circle operating increasingly in the realm of affect and interpretation. By Capitulum 64 the tables have turned completely, and the "felyngs" which began as the object of clerical examination have become standards for testing the holiness of clerics: "Per is no clerk can spekyn a-3ens Pe lyfe which I teche Pe, &, 3yf he do, he is not Goddys clerk; he is Pe Deuyls clerk" [There is no clerk who can speak against the life that I teach you, and, if he does so, he is not God's clerk, he is the devil's clerk] (158).

The second stage of Kempe's conversion, which turns her away from her failed worldly projects and from the desire for worldly acclaim, takes the form of an experience that is at once bodily and spiritual: she hears a "sownd of melodye so swet & delectable, hir pozt, as sche had ben in Paradyse," making her realize that "it is ful myry in Hevyn" [melodious sound so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in Paradise. . . . It is full merry in heaven] (11). This "melodye" causes her "to haue ful plentyuows & habundawnt teerys of hy deuocyon wyth greet sobbyngys & syhyngys aftyr Pe blysse of Heuen" [to shed very plentiful and abundant tears of high devotion, with great sobbings and sighings for the bliss of heaven] (11). Kempe's tears reappear in almost every episode of note in the first section, and are augmented by cryings and roarings during and after her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, just as her "melodye" and the "swet smellys" that often accompany it are augmented (in the second section) by two additional "tokyns" of grace upon her reluctant marriage to the Godhead in Rome: a vision of "many white thyngys flying a-bowte her" [many white things flying about her] and a "bodyly"-sensible "flawme of fyer [and] of love" [flame of fire and of love] (89). These bodily-spiritual experiences have led modern scholars to classify Kempe as one of the four or five Middle English mystics. As divinely-inspired experiences over which Kempe herself has no control (as she insists repeatedly), they serve as evidence for the authenticity of Kempe's relationship with Christ. As we have seen, they also participate in the orthodox means of testing spiritual experiences outlined in *The Chastising of God's Children*. And as Karma Lochrie has remarked, Kempe's account of her

experiences also echoes the *fervor*, *dulcor*, and *canor* that Richard Rolle describe in his *Incendium Amoris* — a highly influential mystical text, and one that we know Kempe knew, since she later cites it as one of the “boke[s] of contemplacyon” [books of high contemplation] she has read to her. Lochrie suggests that Kempe may in fact have known Rolle’s book in the Latin original, and that she uses these references to authorize her *Book* in the eyes of those who, like her scribe, cannot conceive of spiritual authority as located anywhere but in a Latin text.²⁰

Nicholas Watson has recently called into question the meaningfulness of “Middle English mystics” as a category, arguing that this label falsely distinguishes authors like Rolle and Kempe from other vernacular theologians, and that “only modern belief in [their] *usefulness* or *quality of experience* . . . serves to distinguish their writing from many others equally engaged with the interior life and with the attainment and analysis of states of soul” (“Middle English Mystics” 7). Texts like *The Chastising of God’s Children*, however, would seem to grant mystical experiences a certain amount of categorical autonomy, if only by counseling their readers to take these bodily-spiritual “tokens” as one among many kinds of signs of the authenticity of visions and revelations. And studies like Lochrie’s, by focusing both on the bodily nature of mystical experiences in order to understand how mystical texts claim spiritual authority and on the modes of “reader response” such texts demand, reveal a textual project specific to an identifiable “sub-category” of Middle English vernacular theology, one that seeks its authority not through its participation in an authorized textual tradition but rather in the bodily experiences of the mystics themselves and in the *imitatio* of those experiences constituted by the mystical text and practiced by its (ideal) readers.²¹ As vernacular theologizing, late-medieval English mysticism participated in a much broader tradition of affective spirituality, one which laicized the “three-stage program for spiritual growth progressing from compassion to contrition to contemplation” designed for Franciscan and Cistercian contemplatives in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Baker 27-8). In these programs, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, imaginative meditation on the events of Christ’s life was a “lower” stage that prepared the contemplative for the “higher” contemplative union with the divinity of Christ. Denise Baker notes that in the fourteenth century “meditation” on the humanity of Christ was increasingly isolated from the “contemplation” of his divinity and recommended as a lay devotional practice; the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, which Love translated into his *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, was the most popular of these lay devotional texts.²² Mystical experiences like Kempe’s tears and Rolle’s melody can be seen as side-effects — even side-steppings — of the program of prayer, meditation, and contemplation originally reserved for contemplatives in religious life, granting the mystic immediate bodily experience of the spiritual intimacy with Christ that was the goal of affective spirituality.

Love’s officially orthodox *Mirroure* seeks to contain the laicizing of affective spirituality safely within the categories of Arundel’s lay/cleric division. Citing Bernard, Love argues that “contemplacyon of þe monhede of cryste is more likyng more spedefull & more sykere þan is hyze contemplacion of the Godhede” [contemplation of the manhood of Christ is more pleasing and more suc-

cessful and more sure than high contemplation of the Godhead] for laypeople or "symple soules" (Love 10), and the exercises he recommends are imaginative and devotional rather than contemplative or mystical. Kempe's text is full of the terms in which contemplation was laicized in Love's and other lay devotional texts,²³ and her reluctance to marry the Godhead on the grounds that she "cowde no skylle of þe dalyawns of þe Godhede, for al hir lofe & al hir affecyon was set in þe manhode of Crist" [had no knowledge of the conversation of the Godhead, for all her love and affection were fixed on the manhood of Christ] (86), seems to confirm Bernard's and Love's claim that contemplation of the divinity of God is, and should remain, beyond the scope of laypeople. The internal voice of Jesus also seems to establish a hierarchy of spiritual experiences that echoes the contemplatives' three-fold process.²⁴ But Kempe's marriage to the Godhead does take place, accompanied by an increase in mystical "tokyns." Her use of the vocabulary of devotional meditation conflates "meditacyon" and "contemplacyon" into a collocation suggesting that if she needs both terms, they are more or less interchangeable (for example, Jesus promises her that if she puts aside her conventional prayers he will give her "hey medytacyon and very contemplacyon" [17]). And the hierarchy Christ establishes in his "dalyawns" with Kempe rewrites the ladder of devotion as it was conceived by orthodox thinkers in order to place Kempe's spiritual experiences at its apex, telling her that her "thynkyng, wepyng, & hy contemplacyon is þe best lyfe on erthe" [thinking, weeping, and high contemplation is the best life on earth] (89). Kempe's mystical experiences and her "dalyawns" with both the humanity and the divinity of Christ thus go beyond the program recommended by Love, using many of his own orthodox structures of thought to challenge his assumption that laypeople are by nature restricted to a lower echelon of spiritual experience.

The same kind of carefully veiled challenge governs Kempe's devotional meditations on the lives of Mary and Jesus. Kempe experiences the first of these long "meditacyons" in the chapter in the first section immediately following Christ's first long speech to her, in which he commands her to think "swech thowtys as I wyl putt in þi mend" [such thoughts as I will put in your mind] (17). This meditation concerns itself with the events surrounding the birth of Christ; those in the corresponding later section will focus on the passion, death and resurrection.²⁵ The details in of all of them are remarkably close to those in Love's gospel harmony.²⁶ Arundel would have sanctioned this move, in theory if not in Kempe's practice. It is as if Christ were saying that he, as her ultimate spiritual father, will guide her in matters of theology, and that she should spend her time and energy in the kind of devotional meditation appropriate for an orthodox laywoman. Christ apparently provides her as well with her text: while the details of the narrative follow those in the *Mirrore* with an accuracy that could only be deliberate, this episode takes place *before* Kempe is exposed to any "bokes of hy contemplacyon." And the meditation itself, divinely inspired and bodily in its intensity, has the flavor of a mystical gift rather than of an imaginative exercise. To use Love's text and follow his advice but to represent both as coming from Christ, and to transform a layperson's devotional exercise into a divinely instigated mystical experience, sends a wonderfully

mixed message, flying in the face of Love's assumptions about the spiritual limitations of laypeople and their need for clerical guidance. The whole episode is at once completely orthodox and completely destructive to the orthodox attempt to make spiritual authority the privileged domain of the clergy.

Kempe's own role in her meditations, moreover, diverges significantly from Love's recommendation: she transforms presence into active participation. As he begins his description of the Incarnation, Love enjoins his readers to "take hede, & haue in mynde as Pou were present in Pe pryue chaumbur of our lady where Pe holi trinyte is present with his angele Gabriele" [take heed, and visualize in your mind that you are present in the private chamber of Our Lady, where the Holy Trinity is present with his angel Gabriel] (Love 22). Kempe not only imagines herself in Mary's "private chamber," she becomes the handmaiden of the Virgin, an intimate of the Holy Family, conversing directly with Mary and Elizabeth and begging for the Holy Family's food, lodging, and clothing in Bethlehem. David Aers suggests that Kempe's participation in the "imaginary realm" of the Holy Family, after her definitive break with her earthly, nuclear family in the "real realm," enables "both an affirmation of her community's conventional stereotypes and their negation" (108), as Kempe works to carve out her own, relatively autonomous identity.²⁷ But if her active participation in these "imaginary" meditations works on one level as a substitute for participation in a "real" family, it also serves to link that imaginary realm with the real one, suggesting that they aren't such different places after all. In both of Aers's "realms," Kempe insists on living an *active* life: her active role and domestic duties as Mary's handmaiden parallel, not so much her abandonment of domestic duties in the realm of the real, as her refusal to abandon the active, secular life altogether for life in an anchorage or a cloister.

The link between Kempe's spiritual and worldly lives is made visible and concrete by her weeping. The details and motivations of Kempe's tears are first given in the context of this initial meditation, in a passage whose individual elements and turns of phrase will sound throughout the text:

Pan went Pis cretur forth wyth owyr Lady, day be day purueyng hir herborw wyth gret reuerens wyth many swet thowtys & hy medytacyons & also hy contemplacyons, sumtyme duryng in wepyng ij owyres & oftyng lengar in Pe mend of owyr Lordys Passyon wyth-ouren sesyng, sumtyme for hir owyn synne, sumtyme for Pe synnes of Pe pepyl, sumtyme for Pe sowlys in Purgatory, sumtyme for hem Pat arn in pouerte er in any dysesse, for sche desyred to comfort hem alle. Sumtyme sche wept ful plentevowsly & ful boystowsly for desyr of Pe blys of Heuyn & for sche was so long dyfferryd Perfro. (19-20)

[Then this creature went forth with our Lady, finding her lodging day by day with great reverence, with many sweet thoughts and high meditations, and also high contemplations, sometimes continuing weeping for two hours and often longer without ceasing when in mind of our Lord's passion, sometimes for her own sin, sometimes for the sin of the people, sometimes for the souls in purgatory, sometimes for those that are in poverty or any

distress, for she wanted to comfort them all. Sometimes she wept very abundantly and violently out of desire for the bliss of heaven, and because she was being kept from it for so long.]

At some unidentified point in this fit of weeping, Kempe passes out of the vision and into direct communication with Christ, who tells her that he has "ordeyned" her to "prey for all þe world" (20). Thence she moves directly back into the world in which she must now learn to make her way in the context of her new spiritual life. It is a perfectly composed episode, and it fits perfectly into the larger structures of the *Book*. The wide range of motives that Kempe gives for her weeping directly engages both Christ and the world, both Kempe as sinner and Kempe as mystic. And at the (vague, unspecified) moment of transition between devotional, even visionary, experience and the experience of external reality, Christ's voice intervenes, giving Kempe a mission — to pray for all the world — that is at once both internal and external, and that will serve as the single purpose running through both of Aers's realms. Kempe's tears will stand throughout the text as a double sign of the authenticity of her spiritual experiences: she weeps because her "felyngys" and "deuocyons" are genuine, and the act of weeping becomes a sign to others not only of the authenticity but also of the moral and spiritual content of those experiences. And in a final twist, the scorn and danger that weeping brings her will become both sign and instrument of grace.

Unfortunately, those around her often do not see it that way. No sooner has Kempe negotiated the terms of her new secular or active life by bargaining with her husband to allow her to live chaste, than she finds herself defending her orthodoxy to the first in a long line of clerics — the Canterbury monks who are suspicious of her weeping and of her knowledge of scripture. The proximity of the two episodes suggests causality: she is accused of heresy *because* of how she has chosen to live in the world. Aers points out the faulty logic inherent in this and many of the other accusations: because Kempe is persecuted for posing a threat to the "sexual, religious, and social order," she cannot be convicted legitimately of heresy on theological grounds (Aers 100). Eventually, Kempe will learn to see this logical gap as dependent on Arundel's dichotomy, and to exploit it accordingly. At this point in the narrative, however, she can only iterate that she is "neyþyr erylke ne lollar" [neither heretic nor lollard] (29), and she is rescued by two young men who simply believe her. She is dependent, as she will be at Lambeth, on the accurate readings of others.²⁸

On one level, this episode participates in the larger narrative pattern of learning to read scorn and persecution as signs of grace: after she is rescued, Kempe is rewarded by a "great reste of sowle" [she was very much at rest in her soul] and a particularly intense period of "hy contemplacyon," "many swet terys of deuocyon" [many sweet tears of devotions], and "many holy spech & dalyawns of owyr Lord Ihesu Cryst" [many a holy speech and confabulation with our Lord Jesus Christ] (29), confirming the holiness of her life and teaching her — and us — to read the whole episode as a sign of that holiness. But the content of her interchange with the monks sets another pattern as well, one that challenges the gap between lay life and theological discourse that the Lam-

both Constitutions seek to enforce. When Kempe responds to the first monk's inquiry with a "story of Scriptur," the monk asserts famously, "I wold Pow wer cloyd in an hows of ston Pat Per schold no man speke wyth Pe" [I wish you were enclosed in a house of stone, so that no one should speak with you] (27). Her knowledge of the Scriptures allows him to articulate his sense that she is dangerous, a sense inspired by her weeping and her "maner of leuyng," through an image that evokes both the imprisonment of a heretic and the cloistering of a religious recluse; one could not ask for a nicer demonstration of the fine line between orthodox lay devotional practice and heresy, especially for a woman, nor of the ways in which Kempe's living and thinking conflated and confused the categories.

The second monk cuts straight to the heart of the matter, raising the question of spiritual authenticity which lies at the heart of the *Book's* project by invoking the terms of Arundel's dichotomy. "EyPyr Pow has Pe Holy Gost or ellys Pow hast a devyl wyth-in Pe," he tells her, "for Pat Pu spekyst her to vs is Holy Wrytte, and Pat hast Pu not of Piself" [Either you have the Holy Ghost or else you have a devil within you, for what you are speaking here to us is Holy Writ, and that you do not have of yourself] (28). In fact, Kempe tells us that she has it from "sermonys & be commownyng wyth clerkys" [in sermons and by talking with clerks] (29), an orthodox possibility which the second monk does not seem even to consider. The challenge Kempe faces is to turn her interest in theology and her knowledge of the scriptures to her own advantage in debates with clerics whose new standards of orthodoxy could easily have cited that knowledge alone to condemn her — clerics naive (or perhaps brazen) enough about the newness of those standards to claim that a laywoman could only have read the scriptures with diabolical assistance. Kempe succeeds, eventually, by exploiting the sheer absurdity of the second monk's implication about laypeople's textual innocence, as she learns to turn the oversimplifying tendencies of Arundel's dichotomy against it.

This particular narrative development reaches its peak in Kempe's interview with the Archbishop of York in Capitulum 52, in the middle of the third section. The Archbishop begins by ordering Kempe fettered when she tells him that, though she is wearing white, she is a wife. Her transgression of the social codes that reserved white clothes for virgins is clearly legible to him as a sign that she is a "fals heretyke." But when he examines her on her faith he can find nothing to condemn her for: "Sche knowith her Feyth wel a-now. What xal I don with hir?" [She knows her faith well enough. What shall I do with her?] (124). As soon as he makes this concession (as Aers might predict), the power dynamics in the interview shift dramatically. For by stating that Kempe's faith is orthodox, the Archbishop has relinquished the better part of his authority to judge her. The reader is stunned by the equal footing on which Kempe now bargains with and challenges the Archbishop, telling him that she hears "Pat ze arn a wikkyd man" [that you are a wicked man] (125) and refusing his offer to release her on the condition that she leave his diocese. And he seems powerless to do anything about it; she has driven a wedge into his authority by recognizing the confusion between articles of faith and "maners of leuyng" that formed the basis for his original challenge.

When the Archbishop allows Kempe to stay and conclude her business if she swears that she “ne xa[1] techyn ne challengyn Pe pepil in my diocyse” [will not teach people or call them to account in my diocese] (125-6) he is on stabler ground, as there were in fact strict regulations under the Lambeth Constitutions regarding who could teach and what could be taught. Kempe responds, in blatant violation of the Constitutions, by engaging the Archbishop in a specifically theological debate, citing the authority of the scriptures for her actions:

“And also Pe Gospel makyth mencion Pat, whan Pe woman had herd our Lord prechyd, sche cam be-forn hym wyth a lowde voys & seyde, ‘Blyssed be Pe wombe Pat Pe bar & Pe tetys Pat 3af Pe sowkyn.’ Pan our Lord seyde a-zen to hir, ‘Forso Pe so ar Pei blissed Pat heryn Pe word of God and kepyn it.’ And Perfor, sir, me thynkyth Pat Pe Gospel 3euyth me leue to spekyng of God.” (126)

[“And also the Gospel mentions that, when the woman had heard our Lord preach, she came before him and said in a loud voice, ‘Blessed be the womb that bore you, and the teats that gave you suck.’ Then our Lord replied to her, ‘In truth, so are they blessed who hear the word of God and keep it.’ And therefore, sir, I think that the Gospel gives me leave to speak of God.”]

The exact relevance of the passages she cites has been a topic of some debate, but it is clear that she sees them as authorizing her right to speak, and none of the clerics who respond to her challenge that reading. Instead they challenge (at least at first) her knowledge of the passage in the first place, exactly as a student of Arundel’s Constitutions might expect them to: “her wot we wel Pat sche hath a deuyll wyth-inne hir, for sche spekyth of Pe Gospel” [here we know that she has a devil in her, for she speaks of the Gospel] (126). But instead of simply resting their case here, the clerics slip back into the discourse of theological debate that Kempe herself had initiated, presenting Kempe with a passage from Paul forbidding women to preach. It is a move diametrically opposed to the second monk’s “naive” adherence to the new standards of orthodoxy, a move that exposes the artificiality of Arundel’s dichotomy between theology and lay thinking: confronted with an actual lay woman arguing theology and citing scripture, the Archbishop and his clerks are betrayed, so to speak, into abandoning their own artificial categories.

Given her voice, Kempe defeats her opponents with a seemingly simple semantic distinction between preaching and other kinds of speech: “I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I vse but comownycacion & good wordys, & Pat wil I so whil I leue” [I do not preach, sir; I do not go in any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live] (126). “Comownycacion” is a word that Kempe uses to link any number of officially distinct modes of thinking throughout her *Book*, ranging from her “dalyawns” with Christ to her reproving of wayward clerks.²⁹ Here she uses it to claim the right to communicate her experiences and what she has learned from them — the project of the *Book* itself. Where the Lambeth Constitutions sought to

bring all textuality under the vigilant control of Arundel and his church in a gesture protective of the clergy's spiritual authority, Kempe's gestures here relegate clerical authority to certain very specific rhetorical situations (such as "coming" in "pulpits"), claiming as the site of her own spiritual authority all the various realms of lay religious communication. The Archbishop's clerk's final attempt to condemn her by accusing her of telling "Pe werst talys of prestys Pat euyr I herde" [the worst tale about priests that I ever heard] (126) only serves to allow Kempe to ring one more series of changes on Arundel's dichotomy: in a context that should have been dominated by the accurate performance of a catechism, and in which Kempe has instead usurped the clerical prerogative for theological debate, she now asserts the overwhelming power of narrative. The story she tells moves even her most hostile accusers and assures the sanction of the Archbishop once and for all:

Pan Pe Erchebisshop likyd wel Pe tale & comendyd it, seying it was a good tale. & Pe clerk which had examynd hir be-for-tyme in Pe absens of Pe Erchebisshop, seyde, "Ser, Pis tale smytyth me to Pe hert." (127)

[Then the Archbishop liked the tale a lot and commended it, saying it was a good tale. And the cleric who had examined her before in the absence of the Archbishop said, "Sir, this tale cuts me to the heart."]

The Archbishop releases her unconditionally and provides her with a personal guide, and "Pe Erchebisshop likyd wel Pe tale" becomes a kind of litany in her further examinations.³⁰ Kempe's self-presentation as an orthodox teller of tales has brought her examination by the Archbishop of York to a successful conclusion; and it has done so, moreover, by establishing the narrative exemplar — one way of describing the generic status of the *Book* — as quite literally the last and unanswerable word on religious authority. She has thus constructed her stories as *both* spiritually affective *and* theologically effective.

In its opening sentence, *The Book of Margery Kempe* announces that it is a "schort tretys and a comfortable for synful wrecches" [a short treatise and a comfortable one for sinful wretches] (1). In order to live up to this goal — not of instructing, or even of inspiring, but of comforting — the *Book* must redefine not only what it means to be a "tretys" but the status and purpose of textuality itself as a site of spiritual authority. The word "tretys" is used twice more in the first two pages: once we are told that "Pis lytyl tretys schal tretyn sumdeel in parcel of hys [Christ's] wonderful werkys" [this little treatise shall treat in part of his wonderful works]; and once the text refers (as we have seen) to "Pis creature, of whom Pys tretys . . . schal schewen in party Pe leuyng" [this creature — of whom this treatise . . . shall show in part the life].³¹ In order to lead us to or through or by means of God's works (for "tretyn" derives from the Latin "tractatus," from "tractare," to lead or drag), the *Book* will "schewen" us Kempe's life.³² The textual status of Kempe's book cannot be fit neatly into Arundel's dichotomy, because it refuses to recognize the finality of his (implied) definition of texts as *either* stories in the service of devotion *or* words in the ser-

vice of theology. The *Book* was written neither to argue theology nor to inspire Nicholas Love's brand of devotional meditation but rather to show a life, to record a project of appropriation and individuation. For Kempe, a "tretys" is a narrative of a life. We as readers are meant to follow in the various processes of development her narrative traces, and hence to receive comfort and grace ourselves as we increase our faith in the authenticity of Kempe's experiences and witness her struggles for confirmation.

Writing the *Book* represents both the culmination of those struggles and the final authentication of Kempe's experiences. Books in general play an authenticating role throughout *The Book of Margery Kempe* not unlike that of Kempe's meeting with Archbishop Arundel or her mystical "tokens"; if anything, they are more reliable, less prone to betray her, than any other figure or vehicle of authority. Kempe desires greatly to be read to (see, for example, Capitulum 58), and she seems to have gained a great deal of her familiarity both with affective spirituality and with biblical exegesis through books. Karma Lochrie even finds this self-proclaimed illiterate laywoman citing Latin texts as an authorizing technique (see note 20). But from their first appearance, books, like the authority of individual clerics, are clearly subordinated to the "deuocions" and "reuelacions" Kempe will have within the context of her relationship with Christ. Their limitations are linked, furthermore, to the mystical inexpressibility of those experiences.³³ Books primarily serve, like the miracles and verified predictions through which Kempe occasionally (and reluctantly) proves herself, to convince *others* of her authenticity, most notably the priest/scribe who "writes" the *Book*: he himself is given a gift of tears "whan he xulde redyn Pe Holy Gospel," a gift which causes him to "drow a-geyn & inclin[e] more sadly to Pe sayd creatur, whom he had fled & enchewed thorw Pe frerys prechyng" [draw towards and incline more steadfastly to the said creature, whom he had fled and avoided because of the friar's preaching] (153). A book remedies the effects of a bad preacher and restores the reader's faith in the authenticity of Kempe's experience so that that experience, too, can be written in a book.

The actual process of writing the *Book* is attended by many of the difficulties, outward signs, devotional tears, and inward reassurances that have marked the narrative of her life from the very beginning. As Holbrook and others have remarked, Kempe has a great deal of trouble getting the thing written down at all: she goes through three scribes, the last of whom needs several miracles or signs before he can seriously settle down to work (Kempe records this process in some detail, both in the prologues and at the end of the first *Book*; most famously, a miracle reverses the priest's inability, presumably at least partly diabolical in origin, to read the text of the previous scribe).³⁴ While the *Book* is being written she has "many holy teerys & wepingys, & certeyn-tymes Per cam a flawme of fyer a-bowte hir brest ful hoot & delectabyl, and also he Pat was hir writer cowde not sumtyme kepyn hym-self fro wepyng" [many holy tears and much weeping, and often there came a flame of fire about her breast, very hot and delectable; and also he that was writing for her could sometimes not keep himself from weeping] (219). The power that Kempe experiences through her relationship with Christ is transferred, like the authenticity of that experience, to the text itself. And finally, Christ reassures Kempe that she is doing the right thing, even though the work causes her to neglect her usual prayers.

“Be Pis boke,” he tells her, “many a man xal be turnyd to me & beleuyn Perin” [by this book many a man shall be turned to me and believe] (216). Writing the narrative of her life has moved into the step on the spiritual ladder occupied in Rome by “thinkyng, wepyng, & hy contemplacyon”; at the same time, it has made Kempe’s spirituality visible and accessible to others.

Right before her series of participatory visions of the passion, death, and resurrection, Christ gives Kempe her clearest and most eloquent statement of his purpose in giving her these experiences: “I haue ordeyned Pe to be a merowr amongys hem for to han gret sorwe Pat Pei xulde takyn exampil by Pe to haue sum litil sorwe in her hertys for her synnys Pat Pei myth Perthorw be sauyd” [I have ordained you to be a mirror amongst them, to have great sorrow, so that they should take example from you to have some little sorrow in their hearts for their sins, so that they might through that be saved] (186). Whether or not Kempe had Love’s *Mirroure* in mind with these lines, they suggest, through their invocation of the trope of book as mirror, a textual status for Kempe’s life. Just as the “imaginary” and “real” realms of her life are linked by her active — and potentially heterodox — participation in both, so Jesus’ final injunction and all of his reassurances about writing the *Book* link those intertwined realms of living to the textual realm of the *Book* itself. The text is not unlike Kempe’s tears, in that both authenticate her experiences and make them public, linking her interior and exterior, her spiritual and worldly lives and serving as a publicly visible conduit between them. In the pages of the *Book*, Aers’s two “realms” and Kempe’s two lives are intertwined, as the narrative flows seamlessly back and forth between them, challenging our instinct to think of them as distinct. In a way that tears are not, however, this text also *is* Kempe’s life, a narrative of her living, carefully composed to realize the intertwining of the religious and the secular. Life and text are virtually indistinguishable — Kempe employs the deliberate compositional strategies that mark her *Book* as textual to efface the distinction between them, linking both inextricably into a single site of spiritual authority. Instead of buying Alison of Bath’s much-quoted dichotomy between experience and authority, the one lived and the other textual, Margery Kempe has transformed her lived experiences, through the power of narrative, into a spiritually authoritative vernacular theological text.

Notes

1. Page numbers refer to Kempe’s text and will be given parenthetically after Windeatt’s translation.

2. Anne Hudson remains the predominant authority on lollardy; I refer the reader to her *Premature Reformation*.

3. Windeatt simply has “the manner in which” where I give “dalliance,” eliminating Kempe’s redundancy, but “dalyawns” is a key word in Kempe’s text and merits its own modern English equivalent, and her repetition seems to me to be deliberate; see n. 4 below.

4. Windeatt translates this collocation as “conversation.” Kempe generally uses “dalyawns” to refer to her “internal” communication with Christ and “comunycacyon” to refer to her “external” communications with others, but as

this usage attests, she occasionally interchanges them — reinforcing the reader's sense that Kempe's "internal" and "external" lives were deeply intertwined (see below).

5. For the Latin text of the Lambeth Constitutions, see Wilkins III.314-9. For a sixteenth-century Modern English translation, see Foxe iii.242-9. Anne Hudson paraphrases them and discusses their significance, particularly as regards writing in English, in *Lollards and their Books* (146-9).

We do not have a clear date for the Constitutions: according to Hudson, "Arundel appears to have drafted the Constitutions in 1407 and issued them in 1409" (*Lollards* 146 n. 2); the text printed by Wilkins is dated in Oxford, "Anno Christ 1408."

6. The Constitutions are particularly concerned to control preaching, but no situation that could remotely be construed as instructional was exempt: "The [fifth Constitution] went beyond the preacher to forbid anyone teaching others from concerning himself in his instruction from any matter of theology." And Arundel provides ample means within the Constitutions for their own enforcement, devoting the final two to "the penalties for infringing the Constitutions and the method of procedure against such infringements" (Hudson, *Lollards* 147). The dictates — indeed the dictations — and the censorings of the church regarding questions of theology and doctrine were to be always and everywhere absolute.

7. For a study of the implications of one such deposition for the relationship between lay literacy and heresy, and the confusion between the much-debated terms of *laicus* and *litteratus* which it implies, see Hudson, "*Laicus litteratus*."

8. Watson, in "Censorship and Cultural Change," ascribes the dramatic decline he traces in the production of vernacular theology after 1409 to the effects of the Lambeth Constitutions.

9. Modern English translations of Love are mine.

10. It has been suggested more than once that Arundel may have had a hand in the production of Love's *Mirroure*, intending it as a kind of layperson's substitute for the gospel translations banned by the Lambeth Constitutions. See, for example, Watson, "Middle English Mystics" 35. Certainly Love played beautifully into Arundel's hand by giving laypeople their own non-theological way to read the scriptures.

11. See Hirsh, for example.

12. In fact, the prologues often seem to go out of their way to attribute the words of the *Book* to Kempe as well: we are told that the priest "red it ouyr beforn Pis creatur eury word, sche sum-tym helpyng where ony difficulte was" [read every word of it in this creature's presence, she sometimes helping where there was any difficulty] that it was written "lych as Pi mater cam to Pe creatur in mend" [just as this matter came to the creature's mind], and that "sche dede no Ping wryten but Pat sche knew rygth wel for very trewth" [she had nothing written but what she well knew to be indeed the truth] (5); and in the first chapter of the *Secundus liber*, we are told directly that the book was written "aftyre her owyn tunge" [as she told him with her own tongue] (221).

Sue Ellen Holbrook provides the most sensible account of the *Book's* authorship that I have seen, arguing that as it is Kempe who "selected the expe-

riences to include and the order for them,” as she “helps with the revision by correcting against her knowledge of what the text should say,” as it is she “who decides to write the book,” and as she “organized the book’s production,” she is “the chief maker of the book: she is its writer in the essential modern sense of the word” (271-3). Lynn Staley takes this position one step further, reading the scribe as a trope that Kempe manipulates to her own authorizing ends — though even Staley cedes that we cannot assume him to be fictional (see “The Trope of the Scribe”).

13. “It is the truth of the imagination,” Gibson believes, “which is the fundamental truth behind late medieval lay spirituality and is the shaping aesthetic for the religious drama and the lyric . . . What fired the popular imagination about late medieval religion was religion’s focus on just these human rites of passage [birth, marriage, and death] in the lives of Christ and his mother and his saints, events whose less holy but still recognizable patterns were revered and celebrated in their own lives” (Gibson 10, 41).

14. The status of Kempe’s literacy remains a topic of much debate; see, for instance, Lochrie, *Translations* 101-4.

15. The “Meyr” (presumably of Lincoln?) says to her, “I wil wetyn why Pow gost in white clothys, for I trowe Pow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & ledyn hem wyth Pe” [I want to know why you go about in white clothes, for I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us, and lead them off with you] (116).

16. “Crescite et multiplicamini” (121) — which, Watson points out, Kempe interprets correctly, “avoiding a charge of antinomianism” (“Middle English Mystics” 37).

17. Watson, for example, cites this passage as evidence that the *Book* “not only does not represent [Kempe’s] career as having an abstract structure . . . but is . . . explicit in insisting on the associative nature of its own composition,” arguing that Kempe’s “auto-hagiography . . . resists speculation and intellection in all their forms, insisting on a communion with the incarnate Jesus which signifies only itself” — though “[h]er very refusal to think in fixed theological terms carries . . . its own theological implications” (“Middle English Mystics” 36, 38). Hirsh, on the other hand, argues that “[t]he work falls into two sections, bisected by Margery’s pilgrimage and Rome. . . . Up to this point, Margery may even be said to develop. . . . [S]he emerges as wise in God’s ways, not man’s, and her *Book* contains a lesson not less than a biography” (Hirsh 148).

18. Translations from the *Chastising* are my own.

19. Kempe accedes to the authority of such “good” confessors as the anchor of the Friar Preachers in Lynn whom she meets on returning from her visit to Arundel; the plethora of clerics she visits for confirmation of her experiences also fill this first requirement. Tears are her most abundant “mystical” token, but, as we shall see, they are accompanied by many others. Kempe reluctantly prophesies on several occasions, generally as a means of proving her spiritual authenticity to others; once she is miraculously saved from death (21), and once her prayers bring snow to save a burning church (Capitulum 67). And Arundel’s commendation of her “maner of leunyng” is one example among many of

Kempe's justifications, often in the face of direct clerical challenges, of her manner of life as "honeste and uertuous."

20. Lochrie bases her claim primarily on close readings of the passages of the *Book* that echo Rolle, stating that they are closer to the Latin original than to any known Middle English translations. She argues that "[t]he Latin traces of Rolle's work are not the result of scribal mediation, nor do they reflect the efforts of Kempe to authorize her own discourse. Rather, they represent Kempe's own inscription of the Latin culture which excludes her into her text by way of translation. At the same time that her own text echoes Rolle, it rejects Latinity and authorization of Latin discourse altogether" in favor of the spiritual authorization of the mystic's bodily experiences of God and the necessarily imperfect rendering of those experiences in the body of the mystical text (*Translations* 119). In Lochrie's reading, "[d]alliance replaces *auctoritas* as the foundation of authorship and textual authority" (113).

21. See especially Lochrie, *Translations* 56-7, 63-4, 69.

22. For a clear explanation and history of late-medieval affective spirituality, see Baker 15-33.

23. Kempe uses "meditacyon" and "contemplacyon" more or less synonymously, a practice not uncommon in Middle English lay devotional texts. To describe her divinely-initiated spiritual experiences themselves, Kempe uses the words "felyngys" and, less frequently, "meuynggs" and "stringgys" (see, for instance, 3); her direct communications with Christ are termed "reuelacyons." "Deuocyon" appears alongside all these words, comprising all of these practices and experiences and the grace that pervades them.

24. Fasting, praying "bedys" [beads; that is, the rosary] and "discrete penawns" [discrete penances; that is, acts of penance assigned by the confessor in expiation of individual sins], he tells her, are "good for 3ong be-gynnars" [good for young beginners] and "good to hem Pat can no bettyr do . . . a good way to-perfeccyon-ward" [good for them that can do no better . . . a good way towards perfection] (89).

25. Lochrie sees a crucial distinction between the earlier and later visions, arguing that the former "make up a pretext for her vision on Calvary. . . . In this way the narrative prepares for her readings of Christ's body by first authorizing her ability to receive the divine Word" (*Translations* 169).

26. See, for instance, Love 18-21, 30-3, 36-40, 51-5.

27. See especially Aers 99, 103-8.

28. Aers's gap also suggests an attempt on Kempe's part to point out the ecclesiastical hierarchy's theologically shaky tendency to conflate spiritual and temporal authority: if Kempe's spiritual and secular *lives* are deeply intertwined, and if she rejects Arundel's artificial dichotomy between lay/affective/devotional and clerical/intellectual/theological, she calls into question the intertwining of spiritual and secular *power*.

29. See note 4 above for one instance of this word's ability to link Kempe's "external" and "internal" communications.

30. See, for instance, 130 and 134.

31. Beckwith argues that "the dual desire [of the *Book*] — to celebrate the glory of God through his workings in one of his creatures — is split, and

revealed in the repetitive partiality of its language. For the book will deal 'sumdeel in parcel' of God's wonders, and 'in party' it will deal with the 'leuyng' of Margery Kempe. But these parts will not necessarily cohere, they will not necessarily add up" (173).

32. "Schewen," a word which takes up almost twelve full pages in the Middle English Dictionary, had meanings ranging from the mundane to the profoundly spiritual and mystical; Julian of Norwich, to take the most famous example, referred to her "mystical" experiences as "xvi shewings or revelations particular" (Julian 1).

33. She relates to the Vicar of St. Stephen's, for example, that Christ told her that "sche xuld lofe hym, worshepyn hym, and dredyn hym, so excellently Pat sche herd neuyr boke, ne Stimulus Amoris, ne Incendium Amoris, ne non oPer Pat euer sche her redyn Pat spak so hyly of lofe of God but Pat sche fels as hyly in werkyng in hir sowle yf sche cowd or ellys mygth a schewyn as sche felt" [how she should love him, worship him, and dread him — so excellently that she never heard any book, neither Hilton's Book, nor Bride's book, nor *Stimulus Amoris*, nor *Incendium Amoris*, nor any other book that she ever heard read, that spoke so exaltedly of the love of God as she felt highly working in her soul, if she could have communicated what she felt] (39).

34. See Holbrook 276-8 and *passim*.

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