

The Book of Margery Kempe: Religious Discourse and the Carnavalesque Woman

Kathryn Summers

University of North Carolina—Greensboro

Both during her lifetime and since the full manuscript of her forceful autobiography was discovered, no one has quite known what to do with Margery Kempe. Even her staunchest contemporary supporters occasionally lost patience with her or worried that they had inadvertently allied themselves with the wrong side in the divine conflict. Margery followed all the conventional Christian forms: she passed repeated ecclesiastical trials for orthodoxy with flying colors; she went on all the right pilgrimages; she said numberless prayers and took countless communions; even her crying fits and most of her visions have been shown to reflect the experiences of other European female mystics whose writings were available to her.¹ But somehow her life and words defied orthodoxy; as Mikhail Bakhtin says of Rabelais, her story retains “a certain un-destroyable nonofficial nature” (*Rabelais*, 3). Bakhtin ascribes this irrepressibly nonofficial element in Rabelais and other medieval authors to a pervasive and persistent conflict between what he calls the spirit of carnival and the “official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical

¹Margery tells us she is familiar with the writings of many other mystics, both male and female (143). She compares herself explicitly to Bridget of Sweden and her scribe compares her to Mary of Oignies and Elizabeth of Hungary (47, 153–54).

and feudal culture” (*Rabelais*, 4). In Margery’s autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the rhetoric of carnival, with its emphasis on the body and the grotesque, functions to disrupt official discourse and established hierarchies to make space for a new kind of female mysticism and piety.

The intelligibility of any action or utterance is determined by the matrix of interacting social, cultural, historical, political, economic, or religious discourses and the practices that surround it. Modern scholarly analysis has shown that Margery’s text can be seen productively through many different discursive lenses: scholars such as Clara Atkinson and Susan Dickman have analyzed Margery’s text in terms of the English and continental mystical traditions, and others have traced the complex relationship between Margery’s *Book* and Lollardy (Lynn Staley), or between bourgeois and clerical values (Sarah Beckwith), while still others have explored the text in terms of medieval traditions about the female body and the body of Christ (Beckwith, Karma Lochrie). In this essay, I examine the ways in which Margery’s *Book* participates in yet another discursive tradition—that of carnival as described by Mikhail Bakhtin—and how this carnival rhetoric contributes to the effectiveness of Margery’s discourse as well as to the opposition this rhetoric has historically provoked.

All of these readings increase the richness and complexity of our encounter with Margery’s text, with its vivid imagery and characteristic concerns, and help to explain the tremendous resistance that Margery provoked both during and after her life. Margery was by no means the only female mystic to face opposition: religious expression was problematic for any medieval woman because medieval theology and popular wisdom linked women inescapably to the body and then devalued the body in order to privilege other foundations for discourse.² Margery

²Like other medieval pious women, Margery responds by linking her female “physicality” with the body and humanity of Christ. Caroline Bynum’s work shows how frequently medieval women mystics used this rhetorical strategy, suggesting that women focused on Christ’s humanity—his corporality, his body and blood, his human existence as baby, as bridegroom, as crucified

also faced antagonism because she insisted on bringing her religious vocation into the world rather than confining herself to a cloister.³ Mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Margery were particularly unsettling for their contemporaries because they traveled freely and because Bridget and Margery claimed sanctity despite the fact that they were sexually experienced wives and mothers (Dickman, 156–57). However, even though many of Margery's visions and actions parallel the recorded lives of continental mystics such as Bridget and Catherine as well as Mary of Oignies, Dorothy of Montau, and others, Margery is still probably the most controversial female medieval mystic on record (Atkinson, 13; Fries, 217).

Examining the ways in which Margery disrupts traditional religious and social discourse through the carnivalesque helps to explain why Margery provokes even more resistance than these other female mystics. To begin with, Margery inhabits a carnivalesque body—an earthy, physical, concrete, open (female) carnival body that is directly opposed to the spiritualized, homogenous, closed (male) classical body privileged by the church. As described by Bakhtin, the discourse of carnival is marked by an extraordinary emphasis on the body and its functions: eating, drinking, elimination, and sex. In carnival discourse, the body's grotesque physicality becomes the link to life, energy, vitality

sufferer—because women were themselves defined as fleshly (183). In this kind of medieval theology, women “achieve a love of God not by overcoming desire but by transferring it to a more appropriate object” (Robertson, 192).

³One modern theologian, Drew Hinderer, tells us that Margery is not as successful a spiritual guide as Julian of Norwich (a contemporary with whom Margery is often unfavorably compared) because Margery's book doesn't provide a model for us to follow; he judges her experiences to be of little spiritual worth to others because her “preoccupation with herself and pervasive hysterical fear come close to insanity” and because despite the depth of her struggles “she was not entirely successful in overcoming them” (37). He goes on to tell us, however, that Margery might have succeeded spiritually if she had retired from the world; she could thus have found peace and escaped guilt and hysteria (41–42).

and renewal; the body—especially the woman’s body—becomes the source of both corruption and renewal, the quintessence of both death and life (*Rabelais*, 240). Thus, appropriating the discourse of carnival to express real devotion and piety allowed Margery to use the body’s potential to generate both life and death as sources of religious power while simultaneously stretching the boundaries of officially sanctioned religious discourse.⁴ Second, Margery represents carnival’s wholehearted reversal of hierarchy, its enthusiastic disregard and disruption of traditional social and religious hierarchies of power. Additional elements of carnival present in varying degrees in Margery’s text are rituals of transformation and liberation through the degradation of what is valued or powerful and an emphasis on masks, excess, laughter, and parody. We also see a recurring preoccupation with the destruction of boundaries—in Bakhtin’s terms, the creation of a world without footlights, a world made up of participants only, without spectators.

In this essay, I will focus on two main elements of the carnivalesque in Margery’s text: first, her use of the grotesque body to confront official discourse and to empower her own speech and participation in official culture; and second, her use of carnival privilege, frank speech, and temporary suspension of hierarchical norms and conventions to disrupt the established power relationships that exclude her.

⁴Both Karma Lochrie, in *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh*, and Laurie Finke, in “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision,” discuss Margery’s use of the grotesque body to challenge religious attempts to “close” women’s bodies, although Lochrie limits her discussion by explicitly rejecting the carnivalesque as a category of analysis for Margery’s text. Janet Wilson identifies Margery as a carnivalesque figure in her essay “Margery and Alison: Women on Top”; however, Wilson tends to equate the grotesque and the carnivalesque, and unlike Lochrie and Finke, Wilson sees Margery’s physicality very negatively. For a rich source of additional examples of grotesque bodily elements in female medieval mysticism, see Rudolph Bell’s *Holy Anorexia*.

THE CARNIVALESQUE BODY

One of the most salient features of the mystical experiences Margery records in her *Book* is their sheer physicality, even when her imagery is not overtly carnivalesque. Whereas mystics like Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle carefully distinguish between bodily and imaginative visions, Margery portrays her experiences in “real” terms more often than in symbolic ones. Julian (as well as other medieval theologians) maintains a disjunction between the physical and the spiritual that Margery often conflates. In the carnival world Margery creates, there are no spectators, only actors (an important aspect of carnival identified by Bakhtin), and Margery is always inside the world of her visions, taking an active part. She diapers the baby Jesus (promising not to wrap him too tightly), tells the child Mary she will be the mother of God, takes care of Mary’s white handkerchiefs, and brings the adult Mary a “good cawdel [gruel or spiced wine]” (195) to comfort her after the Crucifixion. As one critic charges, Margery’s text ignores “the distinction between mundane experience . . . and visions and revelations” (Pearson, 370).

Margery brings the same level of straightforward participation to her conversion of female sexuality into religious discourse. Carnival discourse often uses sexuality to link the profane with the sacred, and Margery’s relationship with God is astoundingly sexual. In one passage, God tells Margery that he accompanies her always: “whan þow gost to chyrch, I go wyth þe; whan þu syttest at þi mete, I sytte wyth þe; whan þow gost to þi bed, I go wyth þe . . .” (31) (“when you go to church, I go with you; when you sit at your meal, I sit with you; when you go to bed, I go with you”) (66). God weds Margery in a very non-mystical ceremony, making the traditional marriage pledge (“I take þe, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar”) (87), with the rest of the Godhead, the Virgin, and all the Saints as witnesses. (Even today, scholars criticize Margery’s description of her marriage to God as “too mundane, perhaps even too earthy” [Pearson, 371].) Later Christ reiterates the propriety of his accompanying Margery to bed:

For it is conuenyent þe wyf to be homly wyth hir husbond. Be he neuyr so gret a lorde & sche so powr a woman whan he weddyth hir, zet þei must ly to-gedir & rest to-gedir in joy & pes. Ryght so mot it be twyx þe & me, Perfore most I nedys be homly wyth þe & lyn in þi bed wyth þe. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, & þu mayst boldly, whan þu art in þi bed, take me to þe as for þi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, & as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be louyd as a sone schuld be louyd wyth þe modyr & wil þat þu loue me, dowtyr, as a good <wife> owyth to loue hir husbonde. & þerfor þu mayst boldly take me in þe armys of þi sowle & kyssen my mowth, myn hed, & my fete as swetly as thow wylt. (90)

(For it is appropriate for the wife to be on homely [familiar] terms with her husband. Be he ever so great a lord and she ever so poor a woman when he weds her, yet they must lie together and rest together in joy and peace. Just so must it be between you and me. . . . Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.) (126–27)

Margery has certainly not been the only female mystic to use erotic imagery to describe her relationship with deity—medieval theology seems to have been fairly comfortable with properly sublimated female sexuality. However, while Margery's imagery does seem intended to be allegorical, it surely reflects the same concrete, detailed experiences of conjugal felicity that led to Margery's fourteen children. Notice that in this passage, Margery is also filling simultaneously the roles of daughter, mother, and wife—embodying the carnival tradition of the eternal female who is the source of all life, just as in other places Margery's

body is linked to debasement and death. Margery is repeatedly assured through divine revelation that there is no incompatibility between the roles of wife and mother of fourteen and the role of a bride of Christ; she can express the desires of her body in religious discourse, while enjoying some relief from the strain of childbearing (Joensen, 174). Margery's discourse expresses both revulsion for and celebration of sexuality, resisting contemporary religious categories.⁵

Of course, carnival sexuality is also unruly and often grotesque. Margery's sexuality manifests itself in some ways she and others found uncomfortable. At one point, she is tempted to infidelity (and then rejected by her tempter when she actually tries to yield). Later, after years of chastity, Margery spends twelve days plagued by "horybyl syghtys & abhominabyll . . . of mennys membrys" (145) ("abominable visions. . . [of] men's genitals, and other such abominations") (184). In true carnival fashion these sexual images are linked to the church, for many of the men Margery imagines are priests, "comyn be-for hir syght . . . schewyng her bar membrys vn-to hir" (145) ("coming before her eyes and showing her their naked genitals") (184). Margery tells us she is extremely relieved when this trial passes, and she sees it as proof of her own disgrace and weakness, but the carnival reversals embodied in this vision make it powerfully subversive. Beckwith points out that this priestly display is also a blatant exposure of priestly claims to privileged (phallic) authority as carnal and "abhominabyll" ("Material," 211). Wendy Harding adds that these particular "horybyl syghtys" reverse two staples of misogynist medieval discourse about women—

⁵Although Wilson identifies Margery as a carnival figure, she does not address the fact that in carnival discourse the female body represents both death/decay and regeneration. Wilson claims that the sexual nature of Margery's relationship with Christ reflects Margery's inability to "achieve that transcendental union which would have released her from the corporeal" and calls Margery's physicality a simple reenactment of "the traditional patriarchal conception . . . which equates the female body with debasement, passivity, and victimization" (235). The vigor of Margery's use of the body belies this oversimplified view.

that women are carnal and that their carnality distracts men from God (177). Margery's vision forcibly reminds readers that priests have genitals too, that under the robes they are just as carnal as they define women to be, and that priestly carnality can also be a powerful threat to a woman's connection with God.

Carnival discourse uses the grotesque body as an affirmation of the link between decay and renewal, as a source of transformation through its emphasis on the connections between life and death. In addition to her complication of medieval ideas about female sexuality, Margery also incorporates the carnival imagery of eating, excrement, and decay into her religious discourse. For example, at the end of her life Margery converts excrement and lust into virtue by caring for her aged husband's helpless, incontinent body "as sche wolde a don Crist hym-self," nerving herself for the task by remembering their previous sexual life and the "many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, & inordinat louys to hys persone" that she had had years before (181). In another powerfully carnivalesque passage, the Lord tells Margery that "[y]ou shall be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world just as any rat gnaws the stockfish" (51). In this image, Margery's flesh will sustain others in a grotesque echo of Christ's similar sacrifice, but this self-sacrifice is raw and almost unclean—she will be gnawed at in the same way that a rat gnaws a piece of dried cod. Margery creates a fully carnival image of both death and renewal. And in what is perhaps the most powerful example, Margery uses carnivalesque imagery to rebuke a cleric, using a fable about a bear that converts flowers into excrement—the bear, or priest, converts virtue into filth through lust, gluttony, and excess (126–27). This story combines the carnival elements of eating, excrement, excess, and decay to accomplish two powerful reversals: the authorized "holy" man becomes a defiler, while the "carnal" woman becomes the authorized speaker, with power to rebuke clerics and to oppose archbishops.⁶

⁶Staley points to the ways in which this fable also participates in what she sees as Margery's attempt to negotiate the line between heresy and orthodoxy (10). Margery repeats this fable on command during a confrontation with the

Margery also uses the rhetoric of carnival to diminish the terrifying aspects of her culture's religious discourse by transforming them into the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the spirit of carnival "liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying" by transforming fear into laughter and death into renewal and rebirth (*Rabelais*, 47, 50). Because the grotesque is ludicrous as well as horrible, and because, as Bakhtin believes, laughter neutralizes fear, the resulting world of carnival is "completely gay and bright" (*Rabelais*, 47). Margery performs this neutralizing transformation with Christ's suffering, her own suffering, and with her fears of future suffering. For example, Margery describes Christ's bleeding body as "more ful of wowndys þan euyr was duffehows of holys" (70) ("more full of wounds than a dove-cote ever was of holes") (106).⁷ When Margery first began to imagine herself dying for God,

[h]yr þow[t] sche wold a be slayn for Goddys lofe, but dred for þe poynt of deth, & þerfor sche ymagyned hyr-self þe most soft deth, as hir thowt, for dred of inpacyens, þat was to be bowndyn hyr hed & hir fet to a stokke & hir hed to be smet of wyth a scharp ex for Goddys lofe. (30)

([s]he thought she would have liked to be slain for God's love but feared the point of death, and therefore she imagined for

archbishop of York, Henry Bowet, an active anti-Lollard. During this scene, Margery quotes scripture, teaches, rebukes swearing, and criticizes priestly corruption, like a Lollard, but her use of a fable to make this criticism signals her orthodoxy (Lollards disliked fables). She denies any desire to preach but insists on her right to "spekyn of God" (126).

Interestingly, Margery borrows this image from the writing of the hermit Richard Rolle. For Rolle, the comparison to the dove-cote is a meticulously worked-out allegory: the wounds are like the holes of a dove-cote, where the dove may flee from the hawk and find safety, just as we can flee from temptation and find refuge in the wounds of Christ's crucified body (113). Margery takes the image without the allegorical meaning and thus ends up with incongruity.

herself the most easy death, as she thought, because she feared her lack of fortitude—and that was to be tied at her head and her feet to a stake, and her head to be struck off with a sharp axe, for the love of God.) (65)

But the carnivalesque solution to fear is to transform the frightening into the grotesque, and Margery's images for her own death soon change. God promises that no actual harm will ever come to her ("schal no man sle the, ne fyer bren þe, ne watyr drynch þe, ne wynd deryn þe" (30); "no man shall slay you, nor fire burn you, nor water drown you, nor winds harm you") (65), so she is free to embroider her death until the fearfulness of martyrdom is swallowed up in the impossibility or ludicrousness of the punishments she imagines. For example, she records for us God's awareness that she would gladly have her head "smet of thre tymes on þe day euery day in sevyn zer" (131) ("struck off three times a day every day for seven years") (170). She also offers several times to "ben hewyn as smal as flesch to þe potte" (142) ("be chopped up as small as meat for the pot") (181) to demonstrate to God her love for him. In fact, this offer ends one of the most moving devotional passages in the book (a passage about charity and grace), as if to bring Margery's devotions back to the level of her everyday experience. At the same time, Margery's carnival images, whether incongruously pragmatic or overtly grotesque, help to bridge the gap between the earthy, carnivalesque culture of the common people and the official mysticism of the church.

However, the most important effect of Margery's use of the grotesque body is to guarantee her a voice. Margery's ability to channel the discourse of the body into her worship provides her with a great deal of discursive power. She describes the "fir of lofe clos wyth-inne hir brest" (185) as something that "wheþyr sche wolde er not, it wolde aperyng wyth-owte-forth" (185) ("whether she would or no, it would insist on appearing outwardly") (225). Her devotion takes the form of violent crying and "roaring" with the pity, grief, and love triggered in her "soul" by any reference to the Passion, the birth, or the manhood of Christ, whether verbal or visual.

Margery's "cryings," as she calls them, begin in Jerusalem, in response to her mental picture of the Crucifixion. When she and her fellow pilgrims came to Calvary,

sche fel down þat sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr. . . . sche had so gret compassyon & so gret peyn to se owyr Lordys peyn þat sche myt not kepe hir-self fro kryng & roryng þow sche xuld a be ded þerfor. (68)

(she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but writhed and wrestled with her body, spreading her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart. . . . [S]he had such great compassion and such great pain to see our Lord's pain, that she could not keep herself from crying and roaring though she should have died for it.) (104)

On several occasions, Margery describes herself as reeling about "as it had ben a dronkyn woman" (198), and the effort of crying leaves her "al on a watyr wyth þe labour" (185) ("all of a sweat") (225). One of these descriptions is a particularly good example of traditional devotional imagery combined with the carnivalesque:

þan was hir sowle so delectably fed wyth þe swet dalyawns of owr Lorde & so fulfilled of hys lofe þat as a drunkyn man sche turnyd hir fyrst on þe o syde & sithyn on þe oþer wyth gret wepyng & gret sobbyng, vn-mythy to kepyn hir-selfe in stabilnes. (98)

(her soul was so delectably fed with the sweet converse of our Lord, and so fulfilled with his love, that like a drunk she turned herself first on one side and then on the other, with great weeping and sobbing, powerless to keep herself steady.) (135)

The incongruity here between the traditional imagery of divine nourishment—delectable feeding, sweet converse—and the carnival imagery of a drunk rolling back and forth and roaring is typical of Margery’s visions.

These crying fits astonished bystanders, even in Jerusalem, where extreme demonstrations of grief and piety were almost expected. Her crying is rejected because it goes beyond established forms of discourse: “many seyð þer was neuyr seynt in Heuyn þat cryed so as sche dede, wherfor þei woldyn concludyn þat sche had a deuyl wythinne hir” (105) (“there was never a saint in heaven that cried as she did, and from that [the people] concluded that she had a devil within her”) (142). In fact, in one humorous passage, Christ’s Twelve Apostles themselves interrupt one of Margery’s visions to command her “to cesyn & be stille” (175). Margery answers them the same way she answers everyone else, claiming that her grief at what she sees is so overpowering that she cannot help her outcries.

However, the fact that Margery “cannot” refrain from crying guarantees her a voice within her culture. Her crying is a public, not a private act—a carnivalesque participation in the active, public realm of her society, and even more importantly, in its religious discourse and religious power structures.⁸ In Margery’s crying, her body provides both the force of her discourse and the means for its expression:

sche kept it in as long as sche mygth & dede al þat sche
cowde to withstond it er ellys to put it a-wey til sche wex as
blo as any leed, & euyr it xuld labowryn in hir mende mor and
mor in-to þe tyme þat it broke owte. &, whan þe body myth
ne lengar enduryñ þe gostly labowr but was ouyr-come wyth

⁸Mary Russo, in her discussion of the female grotesque, identifies two categories of the grotesque: the uncanny grotesque, associated with “an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection, with the attendant risk of social inertia,” and the carnival grotesque, a social body conceived in active, political, oppositional terms (8). Margery’s use of her body to participate forcibly in public discourse is consistent with the social nature of carnival.

þe vnspekabyl lofe þat wrowt so feruently in þe sowle, þan fel
sche down & cryed wondyr lowde. & þe mor þat sche wolde
labowryn to kepe it in er to put it a-wey, mech þe mor xulde
sche cryen & þe mor lowder. (69–70)

(she held it in as long as she could, and did all that she could
to withstand it or else to suppress it, until she turned the color
of lead, and all the time it would be seething more and more
in her mind until such time as it burst out. And when the
body might no longer endure the spiritual effort, but was
overcome with the unspeakable love that worked so fervently
in her soul, then she fell down and cried astonishingly loud.
And the more that she labored to keep it in or to suppress it,
so much the more would she cry, and the louder.) (105)

The form of Margery's expression, its violence and unconventionality, also guarantees her an audience. Margery's crying is powerful *because* it is grotesque—it acts to disrupt “discourse that excludes her.” Through crying her body is “forcibly inserted into Church ritual” (Joensen, 180). Describing one typical occasion, Margery tells us that as a priest

be-gan to prechyn ful holily & deuowtly of owr Ladijs
Assumpsyon, þe sayd creatur, lyftyd vp in hir mende be hy
swetnesse & deuocyon, brast owt wyth a lowde voys & cryid
ful lowde & wept ful sor. Þe worschepful doctowr stod stille
& suffyrd wol mekely tyl it was cesyd and sithyn seyde forth
hys sermowne to an ende. (166)

(began to preach most holily and devoutly of our Lady's
Assumption, and the said creature—lifted up in her mind by
high sweetness and devotion—burst out with a loud voice and
cried very loudly and wept very bitterly. The worthy doctor
stood still and bore with it meekly until it stopped, and after-
wards he preached his sermon through to the end.) (206)

As her silencing of the priest indicates, Margery's use of her body to “write” her participation in the service is demonstrably successful.

Margery's violent crying, then, provides her with a public role, and occasionally it provides her with the courage to speak in other ways. When facing her most dangerous trial for heresy, Margery's "flesch tremelyd & whakyd wondirly" with alarm (124) ("trembled and quaked amazingly") (162). However, she prayed until she made herself cry and then was able to speak to the archbishop of York without fear. When she is told not to preach, Margery openly affirms her right to a voice, answering: "I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I vse but comownycacyon & good wordys, & þat wil I do whil I leue" (126) ("I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live") (164).

Margery finally achieves enough acceptance in her community for her disruptive discourse that even visiting preachers are warned of her crying and requested to accept it; Margery tells us that *many* priests "suffyrd wol mekely" ("bore with it meekly"), and she recounts a long feud with the only preacher who resented her interruptions. For this priest, the issue is specifically Margery's attempt to claim holy authority, or to characterize her loud crying as holy discourse; he explicitly agrees to tolerate her interruptions if she will define them as sickness rather than as divine manifestations (151), but when she refuses to deny her claims to divine authority, he silences her by evicting her from the church during his sermons. Characteristically, Margery refuses to be beaten, and she simply listens from outside the church, still wailing loudly enough to be heard from within; moreover, the Lord promises Margery that their situations will someday be reversed:

As hys name is now, it xal ben throwyn down & þin schal ben reysed up. . . . þu xalt be in cherch whan he xal be wythowtyn. In þis chirche þu hast suffyrd meche schame & reprefe for þe zyftys þat I haue zouyn þe & for þe grace & goodnes þat I haue wrowt in þe, and þerfore in þis cherche & in þis place I xal ben worschepyd in þe. (156)

(As his name is now, it shall be thrown down, and yours shall be raised up. . . . you shall be in church when he shall be outside. In this church you have suffered much shame and rebuke

for the gifts that I have given you and for the grace and goodness that I have worked in you, and therefore in this church and in this place I will be worshiped in you.) (195)

CARNIVAL REVERSAL OF HIERARCHY

The potential of Margery's discourse to reverse normal social and religious hierarchies, as indicated in several of the examples already discussed, is particularly significant. Official medieval life was stringently governed by hierarchical forms governing actions, speech, even clothing. Above all, consideration of hierarchy regulated all interactions between classes. However, during carnival, hierarchical rank was temporarily suspended, allowing "a special type of communication impossible in everyday life." Carnival communication, both in speech and gesture, was free from the "norms of etiquette and decency" so inescapable at other times. Bakhtin believes that this frankness adds a special intensity to carnival relationships; carnival relationships are "truly human relations" because they allow a union of "[t]he utopian ideal and the realistic" that is impossible in any other situation (*Rabelais*, 10). Bakhtin also points out that frankness doesn't simply mean sincerity or intimacy; it means "a completely loud, marketplace frankness that concerned everyone" (*Rabelais*, 271). This frankness is loud, uncultured, even earthy.

One of Margery's most endearing (and, for her contemporaries, most unsettling) characteristics is exactly this frank and free disregard for hierarchy. Time after time, she scolds her fellow townspeople, her fellow pilgrims, and the bishops and archbishops holding her on trial for heresy, with an absolute lack of self-consciousness or inhibition. Carnival discourse interrogates hierarchy, including gender hierarchy. Thus the "old woman" could challenge the bishop, normally considered her sexual, spiritual, and social "superior," and Margery made full use of this tradition. According to Dickman, Margery "was considerably freer and more outspoken in her criticism of the clergy than almost any earlier pious woman" (165). In one example, Margery rebukes Archbishop Arundel for allowing members of his household to swear:

My Lord, owyr alderes Lord al-myty God hath not 3on 3ow
 3owyr benefys & gret goodys of þe world to may[n]ten wyth
 hys tretowrys & hem þat slen hym euery day be gret othys
 sweryng. 3e schal answer for hem les þan 3e correctyn hem or
 ellys put hem owt of 3owr seruise. (37)

(My lord, our Lord of all, Almighty God, has not given you
 your benefice and great worldly wealth in order to maintain
 those who are traitors to him and those who slay him every
 day by the swearing of great oaths. You shall answer for them,
 unless you correct them or else put them out of your service.)
 (72)

To the surprise of his attendants, the archbishop listened “[f]ul
 benyngly & mekely” (37) (“[i]n the most meek and kindly way”
 (72)). Carnival participants know that the normal barriers are down
 (although not all of Margery’s listeners responded so meekly). When
 the bishop of Lincoln does not command Margery to wear white
 clothes⁹ as she requests him to do, she is divinely commanded to “sey
 þe Bysshop þat he dredyth mor þe schamys of þe world þan þe parfyt
 lofe of God” (35) (“say to the Bishop that he is more afraid of the
 shame of this world than the perfect love of God”) (70) and that he

⁹Margery’s insistence on white clothing, a medieval symbol of virginity,
 is resisted by many of her contemporaries as wrong and inappropriate, as
 even untruthful. While we can see the white clothing as yet another carni-
 valesque parody, a mask or disguise allowable as carnival license, we should also
 recognize that Margery does not seem to view the white of virginity as parody.
 But neither is it a simple reinscribing of the value assigned to virginity in
 medieval society nor a simple reinforcement of the link between virginity and
 holiness. For Margery, sexually experienced wife and prolific mother, to
 assert her purity, her virginity, is a useful reenvisioning of the concepts of vir-
 ginity, purity, and holiness, a public revision of both virginity and mother-
 hood, both purity and sexuality. The bishop of Lincoln, caught between
 a desire to keep this revision unofficial and unauthorized but fearful that
 Margery may really have God’s sanction, refuses to command her to wear
 white clothing but gives her money to buy it.

would have been blessed like the children of Israel if “he had fulfyllyd [hir] wyl” (35). When a rich man objects to her company on a voyage, she says “many scharp wordys on-to hym,” telling him that “yf ze put me owt of þe schip, my Lord Ihesu xal put zow owt of Heuyn, for I telle zow, ser, owr Lord Ihesu hath no deynte of a ryche man les þan he wil be a good man & a meke man” (108) (“if you put me out of the ship, my Lord Jesus shall put you out of heaven, for I tell you, sir, our Lord Jesus has no liking for a rich man unless he will be a good man and a meek man”) (146). Both these men are influenced by Margery’s rebukes and participate almost against their will in her reversal of normal hierarchical relationships.

God also seems to reverse the normal hierarchy of church obedience, authorizing Margery to transmit his messages to various church officials and telling her what her confessors should command her to do (“bydde thy gostly fadyrs þat þei latyn þe don aftyr my wyl” (161); “tell your confessors to let you act according to my will” (200). So Margery tells her confessors that God said she should eat meat, and her confessors dutifully command her to eat meat. The Virgin tells Margery to be released from an earlier vow to fast weekly, and Margery’s confessors obligingly command her to eat moderately rather than fast. When Margery plans to go to Belgium with her daughter-in-law, and her confessor is opposed, God tells her to “speke no word to hym of þis mater . . . for I am a-bouyn thy gostly fadyr & I xal excusyn þe & ledyn þe & bryngyn þe a-geyn in safte” (226–27) (“I am above your confessor, and I shall excuse you, and lead you, and bring you home again in safety”) (271). This hierarchical reversal extends occasionally even to Margery’s relationship with God. God addresses her as daughter, mother, and spouse—often within the same sentence. God promises that “þyf þu wilt be buxom to my wil I xal be buxom to þi wil, dowtyr, beleue it ryth wel” (218) (“if you will be obedient to my will, I shall be obedient to your will, daughter—believe it indeed”) (260). At one point, Margery is even discursively located as God’s father as well as his daughter, as he tells her, “Dowtyr, þer was neuyr chyld so buxom [meek] to þe fadyr as I wyl be to þe” (31). God tells Margery that he really doesn’t want her to say so many prayers but then promises

that “I wyl not be displeyd wyth þe whedir þu thynke, sey, or speke, for I am al-wey plesyd wyth þe” (90) (“I will not be displeased with you whether you think, say, or speak, for I am always pleased with you”) (126).

In fact, Margery feels free to rebuke everybody, secular or religious. “Sche spak boldly & mytily wher-so sche cam in London a-geyn swerars, bannars, lyars & swech oþer viciows pepil, a-geyn þe pompows aray boþin of men & of women. Sche sparyd hem not, sche flateryd hem not” (245) (“She spoke boldly and strongly wherever she went in London against swearers, cursers, liars and other such vicious people, and against the pompous fashions of both men and women. She did not spare them, she did not flatter them”) (289). Her fellow townspeople and chance companions found this disregard for society’s normative constraints even more threatening than the clergy did. Elona Lucas points out that, surprisingly, most of Margery’s support came from the clergy, not from her secular associates. Only about one-fourth of the priests in Margery’s narrative oppose or rebuke her, while many of the common people reject her religious discourse as nonstandard (297). Margery’s life did in fact challenge “the popular notions of what constituted holiness in women” (Lucas, 302), and the people ultimately felt more threatened by revisionary or transformative forms of orthodoxy than did the priests. Margery’s town labelled her a hypocrite, others labelled her a heretic, and all feared that her innovative ideas would threaten the social order. The mayor of Leicester, whom Margery rebukes as “not worthy to ben a meyr [mayor]” after he judges her harshly, is aware and frightened of the danger to social hierarchies that she poses, saying “I trowe þow art comyn hedyr to han a-wey owr wyuys fro us & ledyn hem wyth þe” (116) (“I believe you have come here to lure away our wives from us and lead them off with you”) (153). The mayor recognizes and fears the potential her unconventional discourse has to unsettle the social as well as the religious order.

The themes of temporal, hierarchical, or spatial reversal integral to carnival discourse do, in fact, have tremendous power to disrupt normative, hegemonic social conventions, and these themes of reversal are

pervasive in Margery's text. Throughout her autobiography, Margery recounts alternations between health and sickness, prosperity and poverty, public favor and mocking rejection, holy visions and abominable ones. Timea Szell notes that these patterns of reversal are apparent at both the sentence and narrative level, as Christ commands Margery first to abstain from meat, then to partake again, to wear white clothing, then black, then white again. Margery's audience perceives her in terms of the same unsettling potential for reversal: they ask whether she is "a Cristen woman er a Iewe; sum seyde sche was a good woman, & sum seyde nay" (124) ("a Christian woman or a Jew; some said she was a good woman, and some said not") (163). Her opponents usually end up acknowledging their bafflement: "Eyþyr þu art a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman" (113). Margery uses stories of reversal to challenge her opponents and to establish her own holiness.

IMPLICATIONS

It is precisely the space created by "alle þis thyngys turnyng vp-so-down" (1) that allows Margery to create a new identity and a new, carnivalized religious discourse. The *Book* begins with Margery's identity in flux, at the mercy of the social influences around her: she is a "reed-spyr which boweth wyth euery wynd & neuyr is stable les þan no wynd bloweth" (1) (a "reed which bows with every wind and is never still unless no wind blows") (33). Her conversion into a holy woman with a powerful voice and a story to tell begins, the *Book* tells us, when "ower mercyfulle Lord Cryst Ihesu . . . turnyd helth in-to sekenesse, prosperyte in-to aduersyte, worshep in-to repref, & love in-to hatered" (1) ("our merciful Lord Christ Jesus . . . turned health into sickness, prosperity into adversity, respectability into reproof, and love into hatred") (33).

In his essay on Marxism and language, Bakhtin argues that consciousness and discourse can exist only in dialogue; every change in consciousness or ideology must be negotiated through language, and no experience is fully existent, even to ourselves, until it has been communicated or at least experienced in terms that can be shared

("Marxism," 932–36). Thus, for Margery to change her concept of her self or of society she must embody this change in discourse.¹⁰ She creates her new self by telling her story again and again, and she creates her story in a form acceptable to clerics by telling it in confession to priest after priest throughout her life, ostensibly to root out any diabolical "deception" in her experiences. She seems to have constructed her story through these confessions long before she actually started dictating it, learning to reconcile her experiences with church expectations and using her audience to shape her own view of those experiences. Her primary confessor charges Margery to receive her thoughts and then tell them to him, so that he could "telle [hir] wheþyr þei ben of þe Holy Gost or ellys of [hir] enmy þe Deuyll" (18); and she frequently seeks out clerics to whom she could recount her entire history (from childhood), "to wetyn [know] yf any dysseyt [deceit] were in hir felyngys" (25). Actions and utterances are intelligible only through the matrix of interacting social, cultural, historical, political, economic, or religious discourses and the practices of a society; and we can see that Margery shapes herself and her experience in terms of these discourses, as do her neighbors and priestly supporters.¹¹ These preparations later enable her to withstand repeated trials for heresy—her prior clerical audiences had taught her to eliminate all ideas considered "false" within church discourse.¹²

¹⁰For Mueller, the structure of the *Book* itself is defined by Margery's attempt to negotiate acceptance of her new identity with her husband, the church, and her society. The first chapters are dominated by her struggle to persuade her husband to accept a vow of chastity; the next part of her narrative can be seen as culminating with her successive trials for heresy after her pilgrimage; the last part of *Book 1* recounts her struggles with public opinion in her hometown of Lynne.

¹¹For example, Margery's second scribe needed to find authority in the records of the church for Margery's crying (i.e., the records of the continental female mystics) before he could understand her experience as legitimate and before her desire for a textual record seemed fully appropriate.

¹²Atkinson suggests that Margery's careful orthodoxy during her trials for heresy may simply reflect her priestly scribe's deliberate use of his own

The acceptance of her clerical listeners also strengthened Margery's belief in her visions; her listeners often encouraged her not to be afraid of her own claims to revelation, and each successful verbalization made her "mech comfortyd boþe in body & in sowle . . . & gretly strengthyd in hir feyth" (42) ("much comforted both in body and in soul . . . and greatly strengthened in her faith") (77). In fact, all responses, even negative ones, served to define her experiences more firmly: "þe mor slawnder & repref þat sche sufferyd, þe mor sche incresyd in grace & in deuocyon of holy medytacyon of hy contemplacyon & of wonderful spechys & dalyawns which owr Lord spak and dalyid to hyr sowle" (2) ("the more slander and reproof that she suffered, the more she increased in grace and in devotion of holy meditation, of high contemplation, and of wonderful speeches and conversation which our Lord spoke and conveyed to her soul") (34).¹³

We can see that once Margery has begun to articulate her experience, in Bakhtin's terms this "[r]ealized expression, in its turn, exerts a powerful, reverse influence on experience: it begins to tie inner life together giving it more definite and lasting expression" ("Marxism," 936). In other words, her experience becomes more real and more definitely shaped through the process of negotiating its verbal expression. Her final text, as available to us, represents "words, intonations, and inner-word gestures that have undergone the experience of outward expression on a more or less ample social scale and have

learning to portray her *ort hodoxy* as beyond question (36), but I disagree. Her early efforts to tell her story to eminent church officials, and to solicit their advice and responses, are too marked. Aron Gurevich suggests that this kind of preliminary, almost inadvertent, clerical shaping was a necessary precondition for almost all popular medieval religious expression (38).

¹³In her rhetorical analysis of Margery's text, Cheryl Glenn suggests that Margery also uses the negative responses of her original audience to help shape our response to the text as well, deliberately creating a dialogic relationship between the narrative audience of her text, which sees and shares the exasperation of many of her contemporaries, and the authorial audience, which "delights" in Margery's "antics" and "applauds her decisions" (65).

acquired, as it were, a high social polish and lustre by the effect of reactions and responses, resistance or support, on the part of the social audience" ("Marxism," 938).

Of course, in the process of articulation, new ideas and experiences are inevitably influenced by previous ideologies and forms. Dhira Mahoney points out that Margery's final prayer echoes the formality and rhetorical structures of official priestly language (47-49), evidence that her own discourse has been influenced by this process of negotiation and reconciliation. Margery tells us that she acquired the ability to talk about scripture, which she "lernyd in sermownys & be comownyng wyth clerkys" (29) ("learned in sermons and by talking with clerks") (65), and she spent as much time as she could "heryng of holy bokys & . . . holy sermownys" (144). But her text and story must also be seen as affecting her interlocutors as well. The generation of new "forms" of speech on the individual level must be reflected to some extent in the change of "language forms" at a collective level ("Marxism," 940). In other words, individual experimentation can expand the range of forms of expression available to society at large. Margery's carnivalized discourse and the unconventionality of her religious imagery are important precisely because they are disruptive; they stretched the boundaries of allowable religious expression.

The very incongruity of Margery's imagery allows for both laughter and renewed attention to the religious doctrines involved; her text functions as a dialogue between the language of meditation and divine love and the earthy realities of stockfish and diapers. This kind of dialogue is essential, Bakhtin tells us, because the poetics of the medieval church acted as a "centripetal force" toward a unified language (and thus a unified worldview) by absorbing or obscuring other languages, including the language of carnival. Creating a dialogue with this official language resists this centralizing tendency. As Margery translates Christian doctrine into imagery she finds more accessible, her text becomes, in Bakhtin's terms, a "reprocessing of almost all the levels of [contemporary] literary language, both conversational and written" ("Discourse," 301). Her transformation of the divine into the familiar, her crying and forthright opinions in life, and above all, her success in

embodying these subversive elements in a written text allow Margery to challenge the established social and religious order. On a personal level, she succeeds in using religious discourse as a form of liberation, freeing her to move beyond the constraints associated with her socially defined role as wife and mother. As a noncloistered “holy woman,” Margery escapes most of her household duties, achieves a public voice, and acquires the freedom to travel. Furthermore, by speaking as the unruly woman rather than as the idealized woman that Julian and other mystics represented, Margery also succeeds in creating a space within official discourse (albeit a small one) for the discourse of carnival and of women.¹⁴

Margery struggled all her life to maintain her right to a voice of her own, and she would surely have “roared” with grief and frustration when Wynkyn de Worde later made her *Book* palatable for his audience by eliminating most of the original text. His gutted version established Margery as a recognized mystic, but only because he presented her as a reclusive anchoress preaching the tender love and condescension of God. To do this, the most human quality of her *Book*—its uncomfortable, carnival elements—was simply erased. However, Margery’s

¹⁴Staley argues that the *Book* is a narrative of Margery’s increasing individuation, her alienation from her community rather than her integration with it, her “growing disengagement from the control of husbands, confessors, and all other figures of authority” and concludes that we should see Margery’s final position at the end of each part of the *Book* (in her room, and the intercessory prayers that finish the text) as a symbolic disengagement from her community (4, 178). However, the impressive autonomy Margery achieves is only part of her goal—she works hard to achieve this autonomy *within* the framework of her society; she works hard to get priestly authorization and recognition; she takes an active part in her community; she makes prophecies, visits the sick, prays for and with people, is involved in powerful controversies such as the rivalry between St. Margaret’s (the parish church) and St. Nicholas’s (a chapel-of-ease). She seeks to expand her power and autonomy and influence within the community; she most explicitly refuses to take her eccentricity into isolation, the way that some of her contemporaries wished her to do.

incredible determination to get her text on paper ultimately triumphed over all attempts to silence her: the *Book* survives—complex, challenging, stubbornly devout—as a standing testament to what she saw as the reality and importance of her special relationship with God and continuing to insist that we make space for discourse that is “undestroyably unofficial” in nature.

WORKS CITED

- Atkinson, Clarissa W. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Discourse in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- . “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.” In *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 928–44. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1990.
- . *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968.
- Beckwith, Sarah. *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . “A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe.” In *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance, 195–215. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.
- Bell, Rudolph. *Holy Anorexia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century.” *Women’s Studies* 11 (1984): 179–214.
- Dickman, Susan. “Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman.” In *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe. Dartington Hall, Exeter: Short Run Press, 1984.
- Finke, Laurie A. “Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision.” In *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus, 28–44. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993.
- Fries, Maureen. “Margery Kempe.” In *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach, 217–35. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.

- Glenn, Cheryl. "Reexamining *The Book of Margery Kempe*: A Rhetoric of Autobiography." In *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, ed. Andrea A. Lunsford, 53–71. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.
- Gurevich, Aron. *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János Bak and Paul Hollingsworth. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Harding, Wendy. "Body into Text: *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, 168–87. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Hinderer, Drew E. "On Rehabilitating Margery Kempe." *Studia Mystica* 5.3 (1982): 27–43.
- Joensen, Leyvoy. "The Flesh Made Word: Allegory in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.2 (Fall 1991): 169–82.
- Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen. London: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- . *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- Lucas, Elona. "The Enigmatic, Threatening Margery Kempe." *Downside Review* 105.361 (1987): 294–305.
- McEntire, Sandra J., ed. *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland Press, 1992.
- Mahoney, Dhira B. "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language." In McEntire, 37–50.
- Mueller, Janel. "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in the *Book of Margery Kempe*." *New York Literary Forum* 12–13 (1984): 63–75.
- Pearson, Jr., Samuel C. "Margery Kempe: Her *Book*, Her Faith, Her World." *American Benedictine Review* 23.4 (1981): 365–77.
- Robertson, Elizabeth. *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- Rolle, Richard. *The English Writings*, trans. Rosamund S. Allen; intro. Valerie M. Lagorio. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Staley, Lynn. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fiction*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Szell, Timea K. "From Woe to Weal and Weal to Woe: Notes on the Structure of *The Book of Margery Kempe*." In McEntire, 73–91.

Wilson, Janet. "Margery and Alison: Women on Top." In McEntire, 223–37.