The Empowering Factor of Chastity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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Women who lived chaste lives during the Middle Ages maintained a position within society as being between the lowest and highest tiers established for women at the time. Though not as spiritually weightless as the virginal, chaste women were *also* further up the ladder than married women. Typically chastity was associated with widowed women, but Margery Kempe changed this expectation by achieving chastity as a married woman. A mother of apparently fourteen, Kempe eventually finds herself desiring a life of chastity with her husband. Her chastity encompasses a lack of sexuality, though not its removal. Kempe continues to exhibit sexual desires, including spiritual urges. As insinuated with the status of maidenhood, Kempe developed a relationship with Jesus and God, maintaining a passionate romance with both entities. With such an unabashed view on spiritual sexuality, Kempe eventually furthers the relationship, becoming enamored enough to engage herself spiritually, even though she remains in earthly marriage. Kempe's multiple marriages in her life, alongside her devotion to her earthly chastity, would continually come to haunt her in the social sphere. Social judgment would become Kempe's form of flagellation, with much of society turning its back on her due to her holy aspirations for chastity. Margery learns to endure the slanderous nature of society, becoming more involved in her personal sexuality and allowing herself to be in control of her body, likely for the first time in her entire life. With the assistance of the holy, Margery Kempe is able to achieve chastity and, subsequently, spiritual transcendence, giving her the opportunity to be more faithful to who she is, who *all* she is, and damn the social stigma.

The social stigma of the medieval age proposed that women of the time were sexually deviant beings. Karma Lochrine discussed the *fleshy* connotations of medieval womanhood. In referring to the overt sexualization of women in the Middle Ages, she states that women were characterized as "pervious, excessive, and susceptible" to sin (Lochrine 4). The model for chastity during the period reflected the convoluted depictions of femininity, which were based on male misgivings of what was displayed as the "natural grotesqueness of the woman's body" (Lochrine 4). The anchoritic rules of chastity prohibited "moral and physical" acts of sexuality, condemning those who acted on their desires as sinful and unworthy of heaven (Lochrine 4). Although viewed as a natural facility of life, sexuality—especially *female* sexuality—was considered abhorrent and dangerous. Yet, sexuality persisted, even concerning women who deemed themselves to be virginal or chaste. Kempe exhibited multiple events of burgeoning sexuality, including, at one

point, closeness to adultery. In expanding on her sexual nature, Kempe discloses information regarding a time when she attempted to commit adultery against her husband following several bouts of discontentment with her time spent being sexually involved with her husband. Kempe writes that "all the time she was tormented to sin with the other man because he had spoken to her," the sin being adultery (Kempe 19). She frames her approach to the man as being a moment of weakness on her behalf, implying that the Devil had turned her against God. Rampant sexuality of any sort would have been seen as unnatural and satanic by society, even though a fair bit of that society was plenty sexually active in their own right. Kempe insinuates that her "temptation" also happened to "lack discretion," leading her reader to infer that she was inevitably caught and likely experienced backlash for her actions (19). Her call for chastity with her husband preceded the event of her adulterous exploration of her sexuality; being turned down in her exploits might have increased her fervorous attempts to gain a hand on her sexual presentation, becoming more devoted to chastity after the event.

In attempts to quell any further existing sexual urges, Kempe turns further to self-flagellation. Kempe's physical penance is not immediately obvious, particularly towards the beginning of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Kempe's lavish lifestyle is the audience's first look into her characterization. She is adorned with expensive clothing, including a "headdress" with "gold piping," "hoods with the tippets […] fashionably slashed," and "cloaks" which were "modishly slashed and underlaid with various colours between the slashes, so that she would be all the more stared at, and all the more esteemed" (Kempe 13). Clothing has often been representative of the body, as it was for Kempe before she turned to religion. Her clothing stood as an example of her finery and wealth, maintaining an apparent distinction between herself and those around her. Lily Stewart further explained the significance of Kempe's initial dress, stating that she "lives a life of relative luxury, focused on material goods," which is only disrupted upon experiencing "conversion [which] causes her to give up her pursuit of worldly things and commit herself to chastity" (63). Kempe's flashy garments indicate her similarly ostentatious sexuality, which was unusual for the time. She does mention that, before her conversion to chastity, she found "great delight" in "using" her husband's "body," just as he did with hers (16). Kempe's eventual change to chastity also results in the removal of her adornments, allowing her to become aesthetically chaste. She clothes herself in white, fashioning her body as virginal in being, yet she is by no means *actually* virginal, nor does she necessarily imply that she *is*. Jeffery Stoyanoff commentated on Kempe's switch to a virginal white wardrobe, insisting that a "chaste body and a virgin body are not the same," though this thought technically ignores the divide between the earthly and spiritual body of Kempe. Although her earthly body lost its virginity and has been involved with sexual activity and pregnancy, the same cannot be said for her spiritual body, her soul. As further expanded by Stoyanoff, "the heavenly authority of Christ" supersedes the lower "earthly authority," assuring that Kempe's chasteness relies on spirituality (70).

Many scholars appear to be divided on the relationship between the color white and chastity, with many insisting that the concepts are not entirely related. Mary Erler is one such scholar who expressly defines chastity as being defined by darker shades. According to her,

contemporary sources "indicate that dark clothing would have been read by Margery's society as signalling the vow of chastity, taken usually by a wife or widow" (Erler 79). Chastity in and of itself is a considerable position to be held within medieval society; its inclusion entails a similar standing to that which is exhibited by the anchorites – a less aggressive closing off from the world. The implications of the color white are typically representative of virginity in both the traditional and modern sense. Erler expanded on the meanings of wearing white in the Middle Ages:

> What, then, were the public occasions on which women wore white? Two are significant here. When nuns vowed, some profession rubrics, though not all, specified that they should initially appear clothed in white, previous to donning the habit (which was generally not white). And of course women wore white at the marriage ceremony …In both these rituals, however, white garments have the same meaning: they assert the woman's virginity (79).

The color white and virginity have obvious connections to religious imagery with allusions to "martyrdom, of remission of sin, and of the clothing of heaven" (Erler 80). As an apparent claimant to holiness, Kempe's white clothing serves as a symbol of her spiritual virginity and devotion to God. Kempe's change of clothing coincided with a command bestowed upon her by Christ in one of her visions. He called on her, saying, " 'And, daughter, I say to you that I want you to wear white clothes and no other colour, for you shall dress according to my will' " with her response being, "'Ah, dear Lord, if I go around dressed differently from how other chaste women dress, I fear people will slander me. They will say I am a hypocrite and ridicule me'" (Kempe 36). By wearing white, Kempe subjects herself to a form or an alternative form of penance by accepting the judgment of society.

Kempe becomes a social pariah once she begins her journey of mysticism. Of course, she had endured some judgment *before* becoming a traveling mystic. During her time as a merchant woman, wearing her finery among the people, Kempe endured constant judgment, stating that she "knew full well that people made many adverse comments about her" (Kempe 13). Her reaction to judgment once she has taken her vows of chastity changes drastically. Kempe seems fairly unbothered by the judgment she faces when wearing her luxurious clothing, but she appears less so when commanded to wear all white. She now fears social ostracization, not wanting to be viewed as a "hypocrite" due to not being a virgin, yet Christ persists in their commands of her, telling her that "the more ridicule that [she has] for love of [them], the more [she pleases them]" (Kempe 36). Stewart contemplates Kempe's treatment by the public, stating that her "public shame becomes her personal form of flagellation"; Kempe's societal penance for her chastity is, as Stewart continues, the "performances of imitatio Christi" (64). The performance of *imitatio Christi* in regard to Kempe is related to the performance of penance held by the similarly chaste and virginal anchorites. Kempe virtually separates herself from society, experiencing a form of the hermit lifestyle though without completely removing herself from her community; comparable, yet different from the anchorites. Rather than sealing her body into the stone of a church, Kempe seals off her body, forming a barrier with her chastity. Laquita Higgs reflected on Kempe's chastity in relation to the adage of her "preoccupation" with her sexuality as it related to God (59). Higgs refers to Kempe's remaining sexuality and temptation as "her barley bread nature," which is a

reference to a similarly empowered character from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. As implied in Chaucer's characterization of the Wife of Bath, femininity during the Middle Ages was unfairly boiled down to scraps of sexual judgment, yet femininity endured past such expectations to become a concept of control over one's own life, as was seen with both the Wife of Bath *and* Margery Kempe. Even though Kempe undergoes social alienation and is treated as a deviation from what was considered 'normal' at the time, she is still her own woman, even if her courage of self-exploration came from religious visions.

Part of her self-exploration occurred within her relationship with her husband and God, who, at one point in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is married to both. As previously mentioned, the beginning of Kempe's relationship with her husband appears to have been amicable. Eventually, however, the sexual aspect of their relationship falters, with Margery taking less interest in the activity. Marriage was considered to be the only legal means by which two individuals could participate sexually; at least, from the perspective of the religious courts. Stewart evaluates Kempe's eventual plea for chastity under the guise of church regulations by analyzing Margery's plea to her husband for a "sexless marriage" (63). By going against the supposed "conjugal debt" implied by matrimony, Kempe essentially goes against the doctrine of the Christian Church, which argues that women are to be subjective to the male figures in their lives (Stewart 63). Kempe doubly abates the rules of the church by first having a sexual nature and then abandoning said sexual nature. The taboo of going against societal expectations was by no means foreign to Kempe, but by going against her husband, she could have genuinely undergone serious retribution had her husband been far more sadistic. The couple would eventually develop into a chaste marriage, traveling to holy locations together in harmony with one another. Intriguingly, Kempe would eventually receive a marriage proposal from God even though she feels are far deeper longing for Jesus. As stated in the text, "The Father also said to this creature, 'Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end.'" (Kempe 88). The entirety of Chapter Thirty-Five revolves around Kempe's spiritual marriage to God, followed by the celebrations of saints and angels alike. The spiritual nature of her marriage to God greatly contrasts the earthly chaste marriage she has with John Kempe; Margery's spiritual marriage is shown in a way that implies the superiority of spirituality. Kempe's chasteness exists purely in connection to her earthliness, while her sexuality lives on in her soul, as showcased in her continual and passionate relationship with God. It would seem then that earthly chastity is equally capable of allowing a person to achieve spiritual transcendence as virginity is, as Kempe's soul – which is implied to be unworthy – is cleansed by her abatement of earthly sex.

There is one point early on in *The Book of Margery Kempe* where it is implied that Margery's soul is weighed down by some unknown sin. Although the sin is never revealed to the reader, it obviously weighs heavily on Kempe, who believes herself tainted by it enough to visit confessionals an uncommon number of times. Perhaps Kempe's decision of chastity was due in some part to this unmentionable sin, a thought that is only apparent following the mentions of a particular night in which Margery hears something meant to be unheard:

> One night as this creature lay in bed with her husband, she heard a melodious sound so sweet and delectable that she thought she had been in paradise. And immediately she jumped out of bed and said, 'Alas that ever I sinned! It is full merry in heaven' (14).

On the surface, Kempe's hearing of such a sound seems off-hand. Yet, with further commentary provided by Lochrie, it would appear the melody that Kempe hears is significant. In reference to a text called the *Adversus Jovinianum,* Lochrie recognizes the inclusions by St. Jerome concerning the "distinctions between virgins and spouses" (62). According to St. Jerome, "only virgins may hear the divine Word in their souls" and that the "purification of the soul" would lead to the repairment of "the soul's unlikeliness caused by the fall and [. . .] attune the 'inner ear' of the soul" (Lochrie 62). As implied by the ruminations of St. Jerome in the *Adversus Jovinianum*, it would seem as though Kempe has achieved cleansing of her soul, likely gained by becoming chaste in her marriage.

Kempe's eventual chastity would come to define her as a person and as a writer, as she continually depicted herself as equal to the virginal state yet not *completely* in line with the virginal status. As insinuated in Kempe's visions, her chastity served as more than enough reason to allow her to achieve the role of the mystic. She redefines the concept of chastity by being squarely at the center of the concept of sexuality in the medieval age. Kempe is a wife and chaste, and despite the established rules of the church, surpasses the status held by the virginal being a wife of *God* rather than Christ, positing her as substantially more powerful in heaven. Her redefined existence takes on a mystical aspect, allowing her to *finally* exist for herself, likely for the first time in her entire life. Achieving personal sovereignty can be extremely empowering and must have been seen as impossible for women in the medieval age; yet. Margery *achieved* it. She became her own woman, even at the behest of two Christian deities. Margery Kempe, through earthly chastity and spiritual purpose, found herself and became who she wanted to be.

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