School of Languages, Linguistics and Film Assessed Coursework Coversheet

For undergraduate (BA) modules coded:
CAT-, COM-, EAL-, FLM-, FRE-, GER-, HSP-, LAN-, LIN-, POR-, RUS-, SML-

Please read and note the following guidelines:

1. To assist with anonymous marking, please use your nine-digit student ID number only: do **NOT** use your name anywhere on your coursework.
2. Normally you will be required to submit one electronic copy of coursework via the module's QMplus area. Most deadlines in this School are set for a Sunday night (23:55). You will be informed by the module organiser of any exceptions to this procedure, either regarding the time or method of submission. It is your responsibility to ensure that you know and meet the submission requirements for each piece of coursework.
3. You must keep a copy of all coursework you have submitted.

4. Extensions to deadlines may ONLY be granted by Student Support Team in SLLF. In order to be granted an extension, you must submit a claim for Extenuating Circumstances BEFORE the coursework deadline. You can claim by using Queen Mary's online form in MySIS. Details can be found on QMplus School of Languages, Linguistics and Film Landing Page.

5. Late submission, without an agreed extension due to extenuating circumstances, will be penalised according to the Queen Mary regulations relevant to your level of study.
6. Work submitted within 7 DAYS of the deadline will be accepted but subject to a late submission penalty against the marks awarded. The work will be marked normally, and then a late submission penalty of five marks (or 5% of the marks if not marked out of 100) per 24 hour period will then be applied.
7. Work that is more than 7 DAYS late will not be accepted and will not be marked and will receive a mark of ZERO.

You are reminded that plagiarism, that is copying someone else's words or ideas without attributing them to that person, is cheating. This is a serious examination offence and at the very least will result in a mark of zero being awarded for this piece of work; it could result in your expulsion from Queen Mary.

By handing in this coursework you acknowledge that it represents your own, unaided work and that you have appropriately acknowledged all sources.

Please complete the following details:

Student ID Number:(9-digit number): 210696336
Module CODE and TITLE: Madness Past and Present: COM5207
Title of Coursework: Shorter Essay (1500 words)
Essay no: How does gender impact upon *The Book of Margery Kempe*'s depiction of madness?
Number of words written: 1440
Module Organiser: Annabel Cox
Seminar Tutor (if applicable):

Please continue your coursework on the next page

'I’m not like Other Female Mystics’: On Margery Kempe, Madness, and Identity

That Margery Kempe survived long enough to enlist multiple scribes to author her 1436 manuscript and autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe,* and narrowly avoided becoming lost to history[1] are in some ways testaments to her claims of female mysticism. Born in 1373 to the five-time mayor of Bishop’s Lynn[2] and six-time member of Parliament, John Brunham (Vitto, 1991), Kempe’s life was vastly different to that of the average woman living in provincial England, yet was also far from the expectations for a woman of her privileged socio-economic standing. Kempe proved an inflammatory social figure— her at times remorselessly extreme and erratic behavior in tandem with her outright rejection of typical gender-roles and assertion as a spiritual visionary caused social disturbances that invited wide-spread criticism to the extent that some wished her dead (Ibid). Although the specifics and intricacies of Margery Kempe’s madness are debated and thoroughly examined, her depiction of madness in her *Book* is inextricable from her experience and status as a woman living in the Late Medieval Period.

Kempe’s depiction of madness is perhaps most obvious following her first pregnancy. She recalls a variety of her symptoms in great detail at the beginning of the *Book* and "has been assigned a variety of diagnostic labels such as epilepsy, post-partum psychosis, hysteria, schizoaffective disorder and bipolar disorder"; yet as Alison Torn notes, "to apply modernist diagnostic labels to a medieval experience and to approach it within a positivist paradigm is extremely problematic" (Torn, 2011). In this instance, regardless of a specific diagnosis, Kempe’s initial experience of madness is a consequence of her pregnancy and the role of motherhood that has been assigned to her: her marriage and subsequent pregnancy is, as she states, "as nature wished" (Bale, 2015), though it is likely that she wished differently, or at least found herself at odds with multiple, conflicting aspirations. Above all, it seems, is Kempe’s aspiration to authority and credibility; she reflects in her *Book* that "her every desire was that she should be honoured by the people" (Ibid). Yet this would prove a difficult task, insofar as her struggles with mental distress; not only did Kempe have to come to terms with these struggles herself, but "finding a believable framework was of central concern to Kempe" (Torn, 2011). Therefore, "a culturally available mystical framework" was not only beneficial to Kempe because it helped provide structure, understanding, and comfort to her mental instability as opposed to alternate ideologies "which demonised her experiences and threatened her being" (Ibid), but this frame-

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[1] the manuscript was discovered in a cupboard of old books in the early 1930s by Colonel W. Butler Bowdon and would have been destroyed if not for a friend’s advice (Flood, 2014)

[2] now, King’s Lynn

work also aided her authority by easing her interactions with other individuals and allowing "her to remain within a social structure without actually abiding by its rules" (Vitto, 1991). In other words, in order to break the rules and conventions of womanhood but still remain socially relevant, Kempe ties much of her mystical, spiritual experiences as well as her accounts of mental distress to her experience as a woman: mysticism and (religious) authority are not in disharmony with womanhood or mental struggles, but can rather be an extension thereof.

This extension of Kempe's experience of gender to her status as a mystic is clearly exemplified in her sexual relationship with her husband, John Kempe. Towards the beginning of the *Book*, Margery discloses the sexual nature of her marriage to John, noting "their inordinate love and the great sensual pleasures that each had in using each other's bodies" (Bale, 2015), yet as her *Book* progresses, Margery strikes a deal with her husband in order to attain a chaste marriage in order to make "[her] body be as freely available to God as it has been to [John]" (Ibid). However, as Tara Williams notes, "Because Margery is crafting an authority based on her human roles as wife and mother, she cannot simply leave the physical behind; the physical—and the sexual— remain as the foundation of her relationship with Christ" (Williams 2007). Her chaste marriage with her husband therefore does not de-sex her— she remains a sexual being, albeit in a different sense— she does not attempt to erase her sexuality but rather extends it to her mystical visions and their consequences.

Tara Williams also debates the *Book*'s connection to *imitatio Christi*, instead favouring its connection *imitatio Mariae*, i.e. that Margery Kempe attempts to parallel the Virgin Mary as opposed to the more frequent interpretation that she imitates Christ. Naturally, this argument focuses on Kempe's identity as a mother, and the extension of this physical identity to her identity as a spiritual visionary. Although her *Book* conspicuously fails to mention Margery's fourteen children, apart from her first-born son, and thus fails to depict Margery as a woman who met the expectation "to be loving and nurturing figures who provided early religious and moral instruction for their children" (Ibid), Margery's identity as a mother is evident in other ways. Despite her failure to address her many offspring or depict herself as a nurturing parent in a literal sense, Kempe works hard to represent herself as overwhelmingly invested in the religious and moral instruction of the masses: her near-incessant weeping irritates many (and acts as evidence of her madness), but in many instances she weeps on behalf of the people, and prays for both their and her forgiveness and salvation, asking "for mercy and protection from everlasting damnation for me and for the whole world" (Bale, 2015). Thus in a spiritual sense, Margery's identity as a mother becomes more apparent. Yet the ostensive binary of *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae* is somewhat misleading. For example when Margery heals a mother of

her madness following childbirth (Ibid), it can be said that she has paralleled Christ, for "she can perform the same act for another that Christ performed for her" (Williams, 2007), yet this scene also makes itself available to the interpretation "that Kempe may have identified herself with Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth, and also the saint to whom Kempe's parish church was dedicated" (Vitto, 1991).[3] Yet even in the instance of *imitatio Christi*, Margery's mysticism would be further tied to her femininity as "Christ's body (like a woman's body) becomes an object, a token of submission, the site onto which desire can be projected" (Vitto, 1991)

Although "Margery's spiritual life begins too late for her to be a holy virgin and too early for her to be a chaste widow" (Williams 2007), the autobiography itself is written after John Kempe has died and thus Margery's spiritual life is recalled through the lens of her widowhood, which allows her to speak "with greater authority than she would as a wife: from a religious perspective, she is now fully within the model of chaste widowhood adopted by other female spiritual figures" (Williams, 2009). However, the recursive and chronologically non-linear structure of the narrative mean that there is no clear boundary separating Margery's wifehood from her widowhood, and thus "this process allows her identities as wife and widow to overlap rather than forcing a choice between them" (Ibid) and lets Kempe "move beyond the traditional roles of maiden, wife, and widow" (Ibid). In this fashion, Kempe attempts to keep the aspects of widowhood that lend credibility to her experiences of madness and mysticism, but also eschew any of its less desirable connotations by emphasising varying aspects and extremities of her marital status and sexuality at different points in her *Book*. Through the strategic usage of her different (gendered) identities as well as her narrative style, Kempe further qualifies her madness and "informs the reader that she, as the narrator, is not insane and perhaps she knows this difference precisely because she has experienced madness" (Torn, 2011).

While may be that "as the *Book* shows, [Kempe] aspires to chastity, independence, and increased spiritual standing" (Williams 2009), the *Book* also evidences Kempe's desire for credibility, legacy, and ultimately, control over her narrative. By invoking different aspects of her womanhood and sexuality in conjunction with her varying levels of mental distress and claimed mysticism, Kempe rejects a singular categorical identity and creates a unique niche for herself within the conventions and expectations of female mystics. By working within the structure of female mysticism, Kempe is able to access a framework to understand her mental distress, but also to achieve her other goals of social prominence but also of a self-actualisation that in her case would require the complete rejection of what society expected of her.

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[3] Cindy Vitto also notes that "Margery" is a variation of "Margaret" and thus may have aided in this potential identification.

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