

**AN INSIGHT INTO THE MIDDLE AGES THROUGH THE SINGULAR
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF MARGERY KEMPE, AND CHRIST
AS A “LOVER” IN KEMPE’S BOOK, AND OTHER RELIGIOUS
WORKS**

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ÖZET

**Margery Kempe’in Kendine Özgü Ruhsal Deneyimleriyle Ortaçağ’a
Bakış ve Kempe’in Kitabında ve Başka Dini Yapıtlarda İsa’nın
“Sevgili” Olarak Gösterilmesi**

Margery Kempe (c.1373-c.1439), bir otobiyografi yazarıdır ve onun ruhsal yaşamı The Book of Margery Kempe (Margery Kempe’in Kitabı) adlı eserinde kaleme alınmıştır. Kempe’in mistik bir yazar olduğu düşünülmesine rağmen, kitabı başka Ortaçağ mistik yazarlarının kullandığı içeriğe uymaz. Çünkü, o esas olarak kendi kişisel ve ruhsal deneyimleri üzerinde durur ve bir rahibe değildir. Kempe, duygusal bir kadındı ve onun için Hristiyanlığın mucizeleri, gerçek deneyimlerdi. Yaşamındaki gerçek olaylar veya kişiler ise, ona Hristiyan kavramlarını ya da kişiliklerini anımsatıyordu.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Margery Kempe, Ortaçağ Edebiyatı, Mistik Yapıtlar, Hristiyanlık.

SUMMARY

Margery Kempe (c.1373-c.1439) is an autobiographer, and her spritual life is recorded in her work entitled The Book of Margery Kempe. Though Kempe is thought of as a mystical author, her book does not conform to the contents of other medieval mystical writings, because she mainly dwells on her personal and spritual experiences, and she was not a nun. Kempe was an emotional woman, and for her the miracles in

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Christianity became real experiences. As for the real events or persons in her life, they reminded her of Christian concepts or personalities.

Key Words: *Margery Kempe, Medieval Literature, Mystical Works, Christianity.*

Margery Kempe (c.1373-c.1439) stands very much alone in the English mystical tradition. Indeed, she is thought by some to be outside this tradition because of the lack of depth in her revelations, the highly personal level of her visions, and the extremes of her behaviour (Anderson, 1938; p.63). If she is a mystic, it is certainly not in the same sense as her better known contemporaries such as Richard Rolle or Julian of Norwich. But if she is not to be called a mystic, what should she be called? In this article, the intention is to discuss the spiritual, specific and didactic approaches of Kempe.

Margery Kempe is different from traditional mystics in the sense that she portrays subjective, spontaneous, and perpetual experiences, impressions, emotions, and visions which will be discussed with examples in this article. Besides, she dwells on her own psychological insight in most of the cases (Underhill, 1913; pp. 43-72), and “she deals almost exclusively with herself” (Provost, 1984; p.297). *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a kind of autobiography, the first in the English language (Chambers, 1944; pp. XVI), and like most of her nonclerical contemporaries, she was illiterate and her book was the product of an amanuensis who was almost certainly a priest (Stone, 1970; pp. 19-21), but she was not a nun and was married with fourteen children. Her recollections and thoughts were expressed through dictation, and unlike the other mystics, Kempe did not begin recording her feelings and ideas until twenty-four years after they had begun to occur (Provost, 1984; p.297). Christ often speaks to Margery in her book, and “there is no suggestion that they [conversations] take place in a state of dreaming...” (Provost, 1984; p. 298), and she has “fits of uncontrollable weeping and shrieking... in response to religious experiences” (Provost, 1984; p.298), and this psychological state makes her different from the others. On the other hand, she appears to share the same tradition with mystical writers in the sense that they use the same elocutionary style in the scrutiny of homilies, psalms, hymns, canticles, and liturgical methods. For example, she anticipates the later more extensive cult of Virgin Mary, as the mother of God, who is venerated in the Roman Catholic church with hyperdulia, but when the native secular lyric and the courtly love conventions charged even the religious lyrics with their earthy qualities, then Virgin Mary was usually celebrated in the same fashion as a secular innamorata (Young, 1910; p.512). Although Latin devotional verse is behind

much of her material, amplified translations of some of them, canticles to Christ and Mary are depicted by her, and the conventional beratings of earthly joys and exaltation of heavenly bliss are important for her, and she urges maidens and unmarried men to abandon earthly love for spiritual love. However, due to her personal experiences, she did not appear to be a prominent mystic who apparently stimulated a school of religious writers that endured well through the following century (Atkinson, 1995; pp. 30-52). Margery Kempe does not focus on the Latin septenary of a seven stress line with a caesura after the fourth stress, and she surveys her own experiences, regrets the spiritual deficiencies, recommends holy living, paints a Doomsday and the terrors of Hell to conclude with a joyful picture of Heaven. In this sense, she is not chiefly commenting upon parts of Scripture and church litany, but her remarkable interest lies in the remorse of conscience, literally the backbiting of the inner spirit so that a person will be obsessed with the problem of sin and will not push from her or his mind the recurrent concept of sin (Cholmeley, 1947; pp. 32-73). Many mystical authors write traditional treatises or manuals on sin to depict the commandments, sins, sacraments and the requisites of a good confession, and the spiritual graces, and they deride women's coiffures, cosmetics, voluptuous and over-ornamented garments, and men's tight costumes (Ege, 1994; pp. 248-305), and they also disapprove of wrestling, dancing, pub-crawling, and gaming. They vigorously oppose popular amusements such as tournaments, songfests, and dramas outside of the church, diocese [the district of a cathedral] and the garth [the surroundings of the church courtyard] (Duffy, 1992; pp. 17-123), and appealing to common man, they attack unjust nobles, landlords, officials, and merchants and claim that the epithet of "specimen of justice" is accorded to them, and therefore they are just and religious. But Margery Kempe, who was an illiterate woman, and was not a nun, learnt the religious verdicts from the readings of others, and although she is considered to be an autobiographer, she dictated, her work and before her religious experience she made some mistakes, and later on, for example, she discovered the symbolic meaning of white garments that stand for purity, (Cleve, 1986; pp. 162-170). Corruption was present in medieval times, and the plague brought about two diametrically opposed reactions to the previously accepted moral and religious values because some people, dancing on the abyss of the black death, abandoned the pretext of piety and plunged into dissolute revelry and even some clergymen brazenly neglected their vows in favour of giddy tastes while others condemned these impenitent religious and secular men under the titles of pride, vain glory and envy (Underhill, 1930; p. 83-91). In her autobiography, Kempe recalls how she once loved to wear fashionably slashed hoods and mantles, gold ornamentations on her head, and other showy garments to be envied by people, and when her husband urged her to cease dressing

ostentatiously, she insisted on upholding her family's honour, and said that her husband was of a lower social status (Kempe, 1896; pp. 43-44). After the conversion of "conscience-stricken" Kempe, she is directed by Christ to wear a hair shirt as penance, and afterwards, she is ordered to wear a white dress as a sign of obedience. At this stage she is persecuted and ridiculed by the community and called before clergymen to explain why she as a married woman, is clad in the clothing usually reserved for consecrated virgins (Kempe, 1896; pp. 47-51, 67-83). She wants to be as spotless as a virgin girl and Margery Kempe's wish to become chaste and sever her physical relations with her husband takes place in Whitsunday when the newly-baptised babies wear white gowns (Young, 1910; p. 412), and associates her white dress with her own conversion, new life of chastity and religious verdicts. As Margery Kempe dwells on her personal experiences, medieval clichés are overridden by her forceful and independent mind. She is more concerned with creative thinking, commonsense, individual wholeness, and, inward godlines than she is with purely mystic convention because she is outspokenly honest, thoroughly good-natured and delightfully witty (Despres, 1988; pp. 253-263), and unlike the traditional mystics, she concentrates on her awakening period (Underhill, 1930; pp. 130) as a "religious enthusiast" (Provost, 1984; p. 297); an appropriate term to define her.

Her experiences as the products of a hysterical and impressionable mind should not be dismissed. As it will be discussed in this article, there is certainly plenty of evidence to suggest that she may have suffered from hysteria, (Underhill, 1913; pp. 80-90): "hir ... cryen and wepyn as much as sche wold" (Kempe, 1896; p.23), but if this is the case does it necessarily invalidate her experiences? Surely, a mind that is highly impressionable, as well as open to suggestion of its own, would be more open to God:

Christ speaks to her frequently and, though less frequently, so do God the Father, the Holy Spirit, various saints, and the devil. These conversations or "dalliances", as she likes to call those of divine origin especially, are direct—that is, there is normally no suggestion that they take place in a state of dreaming or that they have the form of anything but a literal conversation—and sometimes of extraordinary length and detail. Margery has fits of uncontrollable weeping and shrieking---what she calls her "cryings"—in response to religious experiences such as hearing a powerful sermon or seeing the consecrated Host elevated during the Mass, or on particular days such as Palm Sunday. On occasion she hears music (sometimes unbearably beautiful, sometimes unbearably terrifying) and smells odors of exceeding loveliness which others do not sense (Provost, 1984; p.298).

The fact that she remains a house-wife throughout her religious experiences also places Kempe outside the mainstream mysticism. The closest anyone else seems to have come to this is Bridget of Sweden (greatly admired by Kempe), but she became a nun when she was widowed (Kempe, 1896; p.6). All traditional contemplatives or mystics lived outside normal society, but Kempe remained within society and with her family for much of the time, and decided to be religious:

She had fourteen children, though the birth of the first caused her great physical, emotional, and spiritual distress. Shortly after her first child was born, she apparently passed through an extreme version of a state that will be recognizable to many who undertake seriously the attempt to live a life of the spirit, a state often referred to as the black night of the soul. In such a "night," which may be of a few moments' or many years' duration, chronic or acute, and of greatly varying intensity, one becomes deeply aware of one's own sinfulness and inability to rectify that sinfulness. This black night can eventuate in despair or in a final joyful acceptance of divine mercy and love as the unique and sufficient rectification of sinfulness; it rarely simply goes away, leaving the person untouched or unchanged. It clearly did not do so with Margery, and *The Book of Margery Kempe* must be read as the record of her life after her dark night (Provost, 1984; p.299).

Kempe was able to persuade her husband to permit her to live in a vow of chastity and to go to the towns in England, Europe, and the Holy Land on pilgrimages, and she had close contact with various people (Kempe, 1896; pp. 14-83):

The concept of pilgrimage also seems to have given a distinctive form to a species of mystical literature, concerned with the spiritual progress of the individual soul. Mystics are distinguished by their belief that it is possible for men in this life to attain some direct awareness of God. The means used commonly are dependent upon a disciplined life of prayer, upon ascetical exercises, and upon meditation (Ege, 1998; p.81).

After some years away from her husband Kempe was called back to nurse him after an accident. As earlier on in her life, when she had had to keep her hair cloth hidden under her skirt and bargain for her chastity, home life again restricted Margery's religious practices. The "Lord", as ever, was there to offer her comfort, saying: "thou shalt have as meche mede for to kepyn hym and helpyn/hym in hys nede at hom as gyf thou were in chirche to makyn thi prepays" (Kempe; 1896; p.17). In a period of largely contemplative religion the idea of merit through works was often thought less highly of than prayer

and meditation (Anderson, 1938; p.63). Perhaps this is the reason why Kempe seems to see her nursing more as a punishment for her youthful lust than as work as valuable in its own way as her prayers, even though God has assured her of its merit.

The content of Kempe's visions is often personal, and many of her visions do little more than communicate God's approval of her actions and his love for her. She does not have great revelations which can be written down for the serious study of others, but has an experience of encouragement in her personal devotion. Her experiences for the most part are relevant only to herself, unlike those of many of her contemporaries which were of a less personal nature.

It is still difficult to classify Margery Kempe. Opinion of her now seems to be as varied as it was in her own lifetime. Her religious experiences are obviously beyond those of the average lay person, but at the same time they are too personal to rank among the mystical revelations of the contemporary mystics (Goodman, 1978; pp.347-348). She also seems to be a contemplative, but is still within society, unlike the others. Kempe occupies the middle ground somewhere between a devout lay person and a mystic. She is unique and in a category of her own. When God tells her in a vision that she has a "syngular life" (Kempe, 1896; p.64), perhaps the only term which is safe to apply to her is singular.

The two most important aspects of Kempe's devotion are her emotional response and her sense of reality within visions. These two aspects are very closely linked as it is through her use of emotions in affective piety that Kempe is able to have such a real, almost physical sense of the Holy Family, and it is the strong sense of reality within visions that draws from her such a highly emotional response.

There are various reasons why Kempe should respond emotionally rather than intellectually to her experience. The one factor that links many of these reasons together is the fact that she is a woman. The whole of a woman's upbringing in the Middle Ages prepares her for life in the home. She does not need to be assertive as she is not going to enter the competitive male world and neither does she need to hide her emotions for fear of being thought weak. Women are encouraged to spend more of their childhood in the home than men, and if any of the children help with house-work or looking after younger brothers and sisters it is always the girls. Their upbringing prepares them for the job of wife and mother, their time and attention constantly being on people and their emotions. Women's emotions are thus more highly intensified than those of men, and frequently they have more emotions than it is considered acceptable to express. These superfluous emotions often get used up in daydreams and fantasies which are the mirrors of a soul (Jung, 1994; pp.153-155). This ability to conjure up scenes within

one's own mind and respond to them emotionally is ideal for affective piety, which uses emotional responses to biblical scenes to gain a better understanding of religion on a very basic level.

Women in the Middle Ages were associated with extra perception of the supernatural, ranging from women's instinct to psychic powers, but unfortunately these powers leading to "metacommentary" (Jameson, 1971; p.9) were also associated with witchcraft. In the Middle Ages, sorcery as practised by witches, who were believed to be in league with the Devil, from whom they attained supernatural traits, to be accused of the hideous vices, and to be responsible for the virulent strain of the dreaded bubonic plague, aptly called the black death, infanticide, murder, and charm against goodwill, and in 1484 Pope Innocent VII signed a bull against all this, and witch-hunting, and burning a witch at a stake became popular later (Knowles, 1970; pp. 50-67). In theory these powers should be applicable to Christianity as well, so it is surprising that there were so few woman mystics. It is probably the combination of domestic responsibility, and the biblical tradition of male superiority in religion that kept women out or on the edge of mysticism.

Kempe did not know Latin and she was illiterate, but fortunately for Kempe devotional books were increasingly being translated into or even written in the vernacular, and so she was able to have such books read to her instead of having to rely on sermons and the arts for all her religious teaching (Kempe, 1896; pp.23,27,29). She did not have access to as many devotional books as those in the orders because they were not all translated, and many of the books in the vernacular literature were written in the affective piety tradition as they were not intended primarily for religious scholars (Collis, 1983; p.12). Over the years that Kempe was having books read to her she probably came across quite a few encouraging the emotional response. Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, appears to be a book which Kempe knows of and this is a translation from St. Bonaventure's *Speculum Vitae Christi*.

Kempe was not an intellectual, but there was a whole body of literature serving for her in the affective piety tradition, such as Love's work, which recognised that complicated theology was beyond the scope of many ordinary people and that they could come to a better understanding of Christ if they were taught using an approach they could understand; an emotional approach based on the basic emotions felt by all human beings. In his *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, Love says that for a "symple soul":

comtemplacioun of the manhode of Criste is more lykynge / more
spedeful / ...And therefore to him is principally to be sette in mynde

the ymage of Cristes Incarnacioun / Passioun, and Resurreccioun (Love, 1908; p.67).

Kempe was a good example of the kind of person Love was writing for. For many years her sphere had been limited to the domestic, and not being an intellectual, an emotional approach to religion was best suited to her. Her visions and meditations were, as Love recommends, centred mostly around scenes of Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection, and have a very everyday quality about them. Until her mystical marriage, her experience of religion was very much of the manhood of Christ. In theory, mystical marriage signifies a move to a higher plane of communication with God (Barr, 1982; p.72), but with Kempe it results in increased intimacy on the same level.

The copious tears that Kempe was wont to shed every time that she was reminded of the Passion provoked various reactions. Some took them to be what Kempe claimed them to be, a gift from God, but for many others the novelty soon wore off and her crying became tedious to them (Collis, 1983; p.201). When on a pilgrimage her companions found that she would cry at any time, not only in holy places, but also while they were trying to enjoy a meal together. There were times, however, when people were glad of her tears, especially when people were ill or at funerals (Kempe, 1896; p.98).

The most notable case of a general opinion in favour of Kempe's tears is at the time of the great fire in St. Margaret's Church in Lynn that was in grave danger, and there was the possibility that the fire would spread throughout the town. Kempe was determined to get there even at the risk of her life and there she wept and prayed all day. When it was realised that the fire was beyond control some people thought of Kempe:

And not wythstondyng in other tymes hir myth not enduryn hir to cryen and wepyn as much as sche wold, and no man wolde byddyn hir cesyn but rather preyn hir of ful trustyng/Suddenly they are belevyng that thorw hir crying and wepyng owr Lord wolde takun hir to mercy (Kempe, 1896; p.23).

Suddenly, when there is no hope they believe in the efficiency of her tears. Soon after the sacrament is taken into the church on Kempe's advice, it begins to snow. Then "wyth a gret cry sche gaf presyng and thankyng to God for hys gret mercy and hys goodnes" (Kempe, 1896; p.23). For Kempe, it is a miracle that has happened, but once the danger is past, opinion reverted: "Not wythstondyng the grace that God schewyd for hir sum men condemnd hir for hir crying" (Kempe, 1896; p.24). Kempe was again out of favour, with only a few friends believing in the value of her tears. One solitary miracle was not enough for most people, and their reaction was important (Hussey, 1989; pp. 109-111) for Kempe.

Public opinion seems to have mattered to Kempe to a certain extent. When the people point out that Virgin Mary never cried, she worries that she grieves and cries too much and she makes a request: “Lord, I am not thi modyr. Take a-wey this peyn fro me” (Kempe, 1896; p.24), but she continues to weep at any mention of the Passion, and Virgin Mary tells Kempe not to be ashamed of crying for her Son, and that Mary Magdalene had not been ashamed of crying for her love for Christ (Kempe, 1896; p.25). Kempe makes her tears an unavoidable part of a full religious experience and she gives examples of other women who cried, and these examples help Kempe both to reassure herself, and to give the readers of her biography a sense of her orthodoxy. According to Kempe, Maria de Oegines, who was born in 1177, and Elizabeth of Hungary, who was born in 1207, behaved in a way similar to hers whenever they saw a cross or heard the Passion spoken of (Kempe, 1896; pp.26-27).

Kempe’s crying serves many purposes. First of all and perhaps least importantly, her crying serves as a visual indication to herself and others of her experiences. Secondly, her tears are also an indication of the emotions she feels during meditation or a vision, and are a form of participation. By crying she is becoming one of the mourners at the Passion. Tears are also used to express joy which cannot be expressed in words, as when she was approaching Jerusalem: “in exuberant spirites and tears” (Kempe, 1896; p.107), as an altruistic woman who was going there for the salvation of others.

It is difficult to separate Kempe’s meditations from her visions as the two can often overlap. What starts off as a meditation could well turn into a vision, and there is no clear dividing line. A vision is not necessarily something which appears to be external, but might instead be experienced within the soul. Kempe often says that she sees or hears things in her mind or soul or during her contemplation, but to her these experiences are often just as real as if she had physically seen or heard them. She tells of how “the Fadyr of Hevyn dalyd to hir sowle as pleyedly and as veryly as a frend spekuth to an-other be bodyly spech” (Kempe, 1896; p.52). It is this very real sense of the Holy Family, and the way in which her meditations take on a life of their own that makes the experiences of Kempe very different from those of her contemporary mystics.

Kempe’s meditations, although usually on biblical scenes, often include non-biblical details, such as the use of ropes in the crucifixion (Kempe, 1896; p.64). This was not frowned upon in affective piety as the addition of details helped make biblical narratives more suitable for meditation by giving a clearer picture for the mind to grasp and expand upon. Love even managed to find biblical warrant for this use of additional material:

Seint John seith/that alle the thinges that Jesu dide then not written in the gospels. Wherefore we mowen to sterynge of devocioun ymagine and thynke dyverse wordes and dedes of hym and othere that we fynde not writen (Kempe, 1896; p.76).

Kempe is within the affective piety tradition, and so for her the use of non-biblical material in meditation is quite normal and just a way of filling in the gaps left in the Gospels.

Kempe's strongly visual sense is reflected in her accounts of her visions. Similarly, Love's *Mirroure* is very visual in style because he needs to fit as much detail as possible into his meditations in order to make them easy to visualise. Kempe's vision of Christ appearing to his mother is obviously based on Love's version. Love's version contains more visual detail than that of Kempe, but this is because Love is supplying the visual material for a meditation, whereas Kempe is focusing on a spiritual autobiography and so does not need to record every little visual detail of her visions. Love's account is as follows:

Sodenly owre Lord Jesu came and aperde to hir/and in whitest clothes/with a glad and lovely chere/gretynge hir on side half in these wordes.../Haile holy moder./She seide then: Art thou Jesu/my blessed sone? And ther- with sche knelynge doun honourede hym and he also knelynge seide: "My dere moder I am", And after bothe risynge vp kisseden lovely other, Jesu was vprisen. Moder praied (Love, 1908; p. 87).

Love has obviously visualised this scene in detail before setting it down on paper so that the resulting passage could be, and in fact has been, transferred successfully to a description in a painting. The movement of mother and son has been recorded, almost in a mime-like fashion.

Kempe's account leaves out some of the visual details in Love, and her style is also rather more colloquial:

Owr Lady was in a chapel ther owr Lord Jhesu Crist aperyd vn-to hir and seyde, "Salute modyr." She asketh, "Art thou my swete sone Jhesu" and he seyde "I am yowr owyn sone. Owr Lady was in ful gret joye (Kempe, 1896; p.97).

The two accounts are so alike that Kempe's could almost be a paraphrase of Love's. Biblical tradition has Christ appear first to Mary Magdalene, not his mother (Matthew 28: 1-9; John 20: 11-31). This was probably changed because of the importance of the Virgin in affective piety.

It is Kempe's strong sense of the visual and the concrete that make her so fascinating. Sometimes she shows this in an attraction to beauty, as when Christ appears to her for the first time: "most seemly, most beutynous

and most amiable, clad in a mantyl of purply silk” (Kempe, 1896; p.21). Thinking of Christ as beautiful is her way of expressing his superiority, and also fits in with the affective piety image of Christ as a handsome young lover. Her faith is such that she needs some visual indication of his majesty. Kempe not only thinks of Christ and associates him with beauty, but also takes this one step further so that whenever she sees a handsome young man of about thirty she thinks of Christ.

Kempe’s relationship to God and Christ is represented in many ways. At various times, she is a lover, wife or, even daughter. The idea of spiritual marriage is usual-after all, nuns are called brides of Christ. In Kempe’s book, the spiritual marriage is depicted as a real marriage in a vision and, even within the marriage vows God refers to Kempe as “dowtyr” (Kempe, 1896; p.117) as well as wife. This indicates that although Kempe’s relationship to God has changed, His to her remains much the same. The usual images of the “beauty” of Christ, “Christ as a lover” and the “bridal perception” will be discussed from various works to show that Kempe follows the religious and mystical texts in this context.

Christ as a spiritual lover appears in the Bible in Jeremiah and as an open-minded lover in Song of Songs:

They say, if a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man’s, shall he run to her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers: yet return again to me, saith the Lord (Jeremiah 3: 1).

My beloved is mine, and I am his... (Song of Solomon 2:16). Thou art beautiful. O my love... (Song of Solomon 6: 4) His mouth is most sweet... he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved (Song of Solomon, 5: 16). I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled, for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night. I have put off my coat: how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet: how shall I defile them (Song of Solomon, 5:2, 3).

Revelation also develops the idea of love: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and I will sup, and he with me” (Revelation, 3:20).

Rosemary Woolf discusses the theme of “beautiful” Christ, the lover, in medieval lyrics on Christ and she says that:

They are in the form of love poems, in which the praises of the beloved are sung. They are not, however, religious love poems that fit into any well-established secular genre. It is of course the lover,

not his mistress, who complains of love in the medieval, lyric: poems which express the woman's point of view are usually either *Chansons de mal mariee* [songs of bad marriage(s)] or the love songs of young girls (Woolf, 1968; p.63).

Woolf calls this a "hybrid genre" and points out that the target of these lyrics is mainly the aristocratic ladies: "The identification of the individual Christian with a woman in love... reinforces the point... that these poems belong to the large body of vernacular devotional literature composed for pious women of noble birth" (Woolf, 1968; p. 63) or for dowerless aristocratic women who had to become nuns or those who took the veil in order not to marry in ecclesiastical orders. For example, she refers to Harley Lyrics: In G.L.Brook's edition of *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of Ms Harley 2253* (1968; p. 54), "A Spring Song on the Passion" displays the concept of love against the medium of the beauty and natural bliss of spring-time in terms of vegetation as in the songs of *trouvere* that was one of a class of poets living in Northern France in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries writing in the language of Old dialects, and was popular especially for their *chansons de geste* [epic poems on legendary or historical heroic deeds], and chivalric romances (Robbins, 1940; pp. 230-231):

When y se blosmes springe
 ant here foules song,
a suete loue-longynge
 myn herte thourhout stong
al for a loue newe,
that is so suete ant trewe,
 that gladieth al my song;
ich wot al myd iwisse
my ioie ant eke my blisse
 on him is al ylong...
Alas, that y ne con
 turne to him my thoht
ant cheosen him to lemmon;
... I eusu milde and suete
 (Brook (ed.), 1968; pp. 54-55).

As in "Alysoun", "Sumer is Icumen In", and "Lenten Is Come With Love to Town", which glory in the awakening of nature in a popular genre termed

reverdie, celebrating the re-greenment of springtime and early summer, “A Spring Song on the Passion” displays the freshness and delight of “Merrie England” that can be associated with Chaucer in his *General Prologue* (Chaucer, 1993; p. 21), and here this is reminiscent of the fairness of Jesus Christ, “just as in ‘Alyson’ it reminds the poet of his mistress” (Brook (ed.), 1968; p. 63). In this context, the sweet charms of nature, and even the sweeter charms of the beloved attach great importance to religious lyric poets as the word “lemmon” (lemman: lover from Old English, leof [beloved] + mann [man]) indicates, and the words “swete ant trewe” in “A Spring Song on the Passion” are reminiscent of “Love Ron” by Friar Thomas de Hales who employs the familiar *ubi sunt* (“Where are they?”) theme of medieval times to urge maidens to abandon earthly love for spiritual love:

The implication here [“A Spring Song on the Passion”] of the beauty of Christ (a theme that in other poems is explicit) does not reflect purely secular standards, but has authority in Latin meditations. In these the text from the Psalms... is often used with reference to Christ and gained additional evocative power as an epitome of the bridegroom’s beauty in the Songs of Songs. Christ’s beauty was held to be a sign of the perfection of His humanity. But in order to express in English, the idea of Christ’s beauty that characterized the Church’s nuptial tradition, the authors... had... to draw upon the phraseology... In this poem Christ is “swete and trewe”... and “milde and swete.” Memory of the Passion had been linked to the theme of Christ the lover... Hugh of St. Victor gives two supreme reasons why Christ deserves the soul’s entire love, the first that He created all the world for the soul, the second that He redeemed the soul by a most painful death... In “When y se Blosmes Springe” the poet’s musing on love in spring-time leads him to recollect his meditations on the Passion... In the descriptions of suffering there is an implicit contrast between Christ’s former beauty, symbolised by the fairness of spring and, and His disfigurement on the cross (Woolf, 1968; p. 64).

According to C. Chavasse, the Church Fathers had understood the Bride initially as a symbol of the Church, while secondarily the Bride had symbolised the individual Christian, but medieval commentators reversed this order (Chavasse, 1940; p. 30). Hugh of St. Victor also uses the bridegroom image (Revelation, 19: 7) in a conversation between man and his soul to depict the “supreme- love worthiness” (Woolf, 1968; p. 59) of Christ, and similarly, in Pearl, the beloved daughter of the father has matured into the lovely spouse of the Heavenly Bridegroom (Ege, 1994 b; pp. 36- 41):

“corounde[me] quene in blysse to brede” (*Pearl*, 1970; p. 415) and she wears the white garments of the hundred and forty- four thousand virgin brides of Christ (Revelation, 14: 3- 4). *Ancrene Riwe* (also called *Ancrene Wisse*, *The Guide for Anchoresses*), which is a book on the proper conduct of an anchoress and was composed at the request of three young nuns, quite literally sisters, develops the idea of Christ the wooer and, as it will be quoted for comparison later, here “Christ has been transformed into a courtly lover” (Woolf, 1968; p. 59), and the idea of the Christ- bridegroom in *Ancrene Riwe* is associated with a vow of virginity as in the “Love Ron” (Woolf, 1968; p. 60), and in the latter, Platonic concept, and the beauty of Christ are developed:

In the “Love Ron” Christ is also praised for his beauty, nobility, wisdom, and riches, but pre-eminently for His eternity. The poet is here following a tradition of spirituality – Platonic in its ancestry- which, unlike much medieval didactic literature, admitted the beauty of all created things, but held them less than perfect on account of their transitoriness (Woolf, 1968; p. 61).

In Walter Hilton’s *The Prickyng of Love*, Christ is depicted as a wooer, who chases the soul as a lover pursues his beloved, seeking to come together with her in a vow of marriage. Flesh, that is personified, says that Christ clothed himself in disguise of a human so that he can draw the soul to him in love:

For he came down fro thyn highe blisse and helde hym not paied ther- with, but yif he had more to & clothed hym & hid hym vndir flessch like to me. and wondir slygheli in ouerdoon loulynesse he entrid in-to hit and whanne he was ther – inne with al his wisdom that he hadde, he trauled hou he myghte drawe the loue of my soule to hym... (Hilton, 1983; p. 171).

When the flesh speaks as a scorned lover, he complains enviously that the soul has turned her affection towards Christ, and “is made so amerous & sofaste... knygt to him that sheo hath neer for- geten me” (Hilton, 1983; p. 172). Writing in the convention of medieval love literature, Hilton shows that the soul’s union with Christ is not attained through human effort only, but by divine initiation as well. According to Hilton, like a lover, Christ desires and woos the soul, and is willing to undergo suffering and death so as to bring his beloved into an intimate relationship with him. Hilton uses the image of knitting of Christ to the soul (Hilton, 1983; pp. 3- 4) and by becoming knit to Christ; human being’s real kinship with God is restored. In Psalm 103 and 104, God appears anthropomorphically as a powerful and attractive ruler, wearing majesty, honour and light as a person would wear

apparel. Hilton also employs the bridal imagery in his work to symbolise the soul's respond to Christ's love, and his passage echoes the style of the Songs of Songs (1:10- 12), and the commentaries of St. Bernard de Clairvaux and Gilbert of Hoyland. These writers explain that the bride's earrings symbolise obedience to hear the truth and see the beauty of Christ and the inlay of the earrings is Christ's wisdom, which can only be perceived by the contemplative soul (Saint Bernard de Clairvaux, 1952; pp. 119- 124/ Gilbert of Hoyland, 1979; pp. 127, 237, 527). In this sense, The Song of Songs (1: 10- 12) is an important mystical source of allegorical interperation, and Bernard of Clairvaux explains each small detail of spiritual espousal, and Gilbert of Hoyland refers to biblical sources: the bride's clothing stands for strength and beauty (Proverbs 31: 25), her mantle of strength is fasting, and she is "vested in the gay raiment of the word and virtue" (Gilbert of Hoyland, 1979; p. 422). Hilton uses these images, and the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22: 1- 46), and he refers to the following allegorical interperation:

A lord Ihesu... ther is no thyng that the is so leof to gyue vs as thi-
seelf and therfore certis hennegh- forward I wole no thyng haue
but the i shal araye me with rynges of thi vertues and I shal lede the
in-to the chaunber of my herte and there shal I reste with the. thou
coueites aftir noughte ellis in me. hit is ful longe sithe thou knockid
at the dore of my herte. but I late the not in and that me reweth
noughe (Hilton, 1983: p. 81).

In this sense, the image of the rings of Christ's virtues shows a level of contemplation that arises above livery and even wedding cloth as it offers the promise of mystical union with Christ in this life and in Heaven. Although the wedding cloth promises salvation, the ring that symbolises the marriage-bond displays the graceful gift of Christ's love.

In Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Christ is again depicted as a lover. He chases his lady, Soul, and gives her jewels as in earlier *Ancrene Riwe* which shows Christ as a courtier: "But a king of great power [Christ] loved her so much that he sent messengers to her one after another, and often several together with many fair jewels ..." (*Ancrene Riwe*; 1990; p.1972). J. Clark and R. Durward's translation of *The Scale of Perfection* echoes the same imagery of Christ and his lady:

For you must know that all the trouble Jesus takes about a soul is in
order to make it a true perfect spouse for himself in the height and
fullness of love. Because that cannot be done at one, Jesus, who is
love, and of all lovers the wisest, tries many ways and many
wonderful means before it can come about; and so that it can reach
the fulfilment of true marriage he therefore uses such gracious

speeches to a chosen soul in the guise of a suitor. He shows his jewels, giving many things and promising more, and offering courteous talk (Hilton, 1991; p.298).

As it is pointed out before, the familiar theme of spiritual marriage was inspired by the imagery of Song of Songs, and their Christian exegesis by St. Bernard who narrates the soul as a bride, adorned with golden jewels (Saint Bernard de Clairvaux, 1952; pp.122-124). In *The Scale of Perfection*, Hilton employs the apocalyptic tradition of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Ege, 1999; p.82): "... coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Revelation, 21:1), and the marriage of the Lamb is also taken from the Revelation: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory: For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19: 7-8).

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the "beaute" of Christ attracts the attention when the writer explains the meaning of Christ's shining garment at his ascension:

For bothe he assendid verrey God & verrey Man: to this will answer thee, that he had been deed, & was clad with undeedlines & so schul we be at the Day of Dome & than we schul be maad so sotyl in body & in where us liste bodely, as we ben now in oure thougte goostly (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 1982; p. 61).

Just as the writer of the *Ancrene Wisse* seems to have been the first to depict Christ the wooer, so also he seems to have been the first to portray Christ the lover knight (Woolf, 1968; p.59), and here the beauty of Christ is emphasised once more. M.B. Salu's translation of *Ancrene Wisse* (*Ancrene Riwe*) shows the courtly love tradition:

Now attend carefully, my dear sisters, to the reason why He should be loved. At first, like a man seeking love, like a king who loved a lady of a far country, who was noble and yet poor... There was once a lady who was completely surrounded by her enemies... and she herself destitute in an earthen castle. But a king of great power loved her so much that he sent messengers to her ... with many fair jewels, and with food to sustain her, and he sent his noble army to help in the holding of her castle ... At last he went himself. He let her see the beauty of his face, the face of one who of all men was fairest to behold. ..But love had so vanquished his tender heart, that at last he said, "Lady, thou art assailed, and thine enemies are so strong that thou canst by no means escape their hands with out my

help...” This king is Jesus, the Son of God, who in just this way sought our soul’s love when it was besieged by devils (*Ancrene Riwle*, 1990; pp.172-173).

The image of the lover-knight is intended to explain what Christ has accomplished for man in such a way that the believer cannot fail to give the proper response, whereas the image of Christ the lover is designed to “manipulate the emotion itself” (Woolf, 1968; p.60). The theme of Christ’s redemption of faithless Israel in Jeremiah 3:1 appears in *Ancrene Riwle* : “All this He says Himself through Jeremiah” (1990; p.174), but this theme was transformed from “the story of a husband reclaiming in his charity a lapsed and fickle wife to that of a king or knight fighting to save a lady and to win her love” (Woolf, 1968, p. 47) from the twelfth century onwards, and in the lover-knight lyrics, being unkind has additional overtones because it is the characteristic that replaces the faithlessness of the woman in earlier lyrics: “Un kyndely dose thou thare” (Woolf, 1968; p.49).

In some cases, Christ on the Cross resembles a knight in a battle or a tournament and this image develops into Christ the lover-knight. The “battle image was strikingly appropriate to the old doctrine of the Redemption partly so because the result of the Crucifixion was the result normally peculiar to battle, namely an enemy defeated” (Woolf, 1968; p.52). However, once Christ is “hung dead... the discrepancy between the humiliated and suffering figure and the victorious knight became clear” (Woolf, 1968; p.53). In Professor M.A. Twycross’ edition of medieval texts, *Towneley Play XXIII*, (14) shows the Crucifixion of Christ, and because he calls Himself a Lord, he must fight in a tournament and sit firmly on His Cross:

In fayth, syr, sen ye callyd you a kyng,
You must prufe a worthy thyng
That falles vnto the were;
Ye must Just in tornamente
Bot ye sytt fast els be ye shentt,
Els downe I shall you bare.

(Twycross (ed.), 1988; p.93).

and, in a religious lyric entitled “Beholde My Sone”, Christ is armed: “Beholde my sone on crosse displayed/With armes on broode the to embrace” (Twycross (ed.), 1988; p.91), and in “His Body is Bent”, the theme develops into Christ as a disarmed courtier-lover, and Christ is “upon the Roode Tree.../That herte cleft for treuthe of love/Therefore in him oon is

trewe love.../Love maketh, Christ thine herte mine” (Twycross (ed.), 1988; p.91), and Christ’s “herte is rent/His body is bent” (Twycross (ed.), 1998; p.91).

The explanation of this image as Christ the lover-knight before and after the Crucifixion goes back to *Ancrene Riwe*, and shows the shift from secular love to religious love:

This king is Jesus, the son of God, who in just this way sought our soul’s love when it was besieged by devils. And He, like a noble lover, after having sent many messengers and many good gifts, came to give proof of His love, and showed by knightly deeds that He was worthy of love, as knights at one time were accustomed to do. He entered the tournament, and like a brave knight had His shield pierced through and through for love of His lady. His shield concealing His Godhead, was His dear body, which was extended upon the cross, broad, as a shield above, where His arms were stretched out, and narrow below, where, as many think, one foot was set upon the other. That this shield had no sides signifies that His disciples, who should have stood by Him and should have been at hand, all fled from Him and abandoned Him as if He had been a stranger; as the Gospel says, *All leaving him, they fled* [Matthew, 26, 56]. This shield is given to us as protection against all temptations... After the death of a brave knight, his shield is hung high in the church in his memory. And so is this shield, the crucifix, set in the church, where it may be most easily seen, that it may remind us of Jesus Christ’s deed of knighthood on the cross. Let his beloved see by that how he bought her love, allowing His shield to be pierced, His side opened, to show her His heart, to show her how completely loved her, and win her own heart... The love which Jesus Christ has for His beloved goes beyond... [the kinds of love] and surpasses them all (*Ancrene Riwe*, 1990; pp.173-174).

In Chapter 24 of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*, entitled “The Tenth Revelation is Our Lord Jesus shewing in love his blessed heart cloven in two, rejoicings”, Christ is introduced as a pious lover-courtier who is said to be sweet:

And with his sweet looking He led forth the understanding of His creature through this same wound into His side. And there, within, He shewed a fair and delightful place, large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest there, in peace and in love. Therewith He brought to my mind the most dear blood and precious water which He let pour out of love. In his sweet beholding He shewed His

blessed heart cloven into two; and in His sweet enjoying he shewed to my understanding, in part, the blissful Godhead-as far forth as He would at that time, and strengthening the poor soul to understand, so to say, the endless love that was without beginning, is, and shall be ever. For with this Our good Lord said, most blissfully, "Lo how I love the." As if He had said: "My darling, behold and see thy God, that is thy Maker and thine endless Joy... and for love of Me, rejoice with Me." ... "Lo how I love thee." As if He had said: "Behold and see that I loved thee so much (before ever I died for thee) that I would die for thee. And now I have died for thee, and have suffered as willingly as I may..." (Twycross (ed.), 1988; pp. 91-92).

In spite of the fact that Kempe is often well within the traditions of affective piety, for example in portraying the "beauty" of Christ, in her line of thinking, her approach is unique. She is a "symple soule" and unlearned, and is usually attached to the manhood rather than the Godhead, but at the same time she has a special relationship with God that is beyond that of most lay people. For example, everyday sights often provoke in Kempe an emotional response, simply because of the way in which her religion is so concrete to her that an actual event will remind her strongly of a biblical scene. She says that whenever she saw people, or even animals beaten she thought of Christ's torture. Any male child brought to her mind, reminded her so strongly of the childhood of Christ that she always wanted to take him out of his mother's arms and kiss him in place of Christ (Kempe, 1896; pp.99-104). Therefore, she has a strong sense of association.

It is unusual for a contemplative to remain in secular society, but Kempe was prevented from entering a religious order by her domestic responsibilities and her lack of learning. However, these problems did not stop Kempe; she simply found a way to combine her religious and secular life, although not without problems at first.

Kempe's highly emotional response arises because of the affective piety tradition she was familiar with, because women were accepted to be more emotional than men, perhaps partly as a result of her hysteria and also because tears are a physical manifestation in which she can express her devotion. Kempe's visions seem as real to her as everyday people and events, and she often plays an active role in her visions. This strong sense of reality comes through in her book, even if slight lapses of accuracy of memory can be noticed over the twenty-four years before her visions were written down.

As a result, Kempe is a strange mixture of the conventional and the unconventional. Her experiences made her in some ways a privileged

person, but she was a simple, “religious enthusiast” who recounted how she gave up married life to devote herself to Christianity and to travel widely on pilgrimage to various holy places.

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