

6-30-2016

## **Textile As Intercessor: Understanding Margery Kempe's Sartorial Body**

Hannah Lynn Davis  
*University of South Carolina*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Davis, H. L. (2016). *Textile As Intercessor: Understanding Margery Kempe's Sartorial Body*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3513>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

TEXTILE AS INTERCESSOR: UNDERSTANDING MARGERY KEMPE'S  
SARTORIAL BODY

By

Hannah Lynn Davis

Bachelor of Arts  
University of South Carolina, 2013

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2016

Accepted by:

Holly Crocker, Director of Thesis

Esther Richey, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will explore Margery Kempe's late fourteenth, early fifteenth century mystical text. Previously, Margery Kempe has been discussed in reference to her highly erotized language with Christ and her maternal themes that appear throughout her *Book*. However, I urge other medieval scholars to also look at her usage of textiles and clothing as a means of gaining authority with both Christ and the medieval church. First, I discuss Margery's gendered situation within the male-centered church and community. Margery uses her position as a woman to build her agency and, as such, uses gendered specific clothing to introduce and forward her ecclesial agency. Margery's clothing changes radically throughout her text and reveals the arc of her spiritual journey, starting from lavish, showy clothing to simple, white clothing. Margery, through textiles, wishes to transform an intangible, ephemeral relationship with Christ to a very real, material relationship with Christ to visually display to the medieval community her desired religious authority.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ABSTRACT .....  | ii |
| TEXTILE AS INTERCESSOR: UNDERSTANDING MARGERY KEMPE'S<br>SARTORIAL BODY ..... | 1  |
| BIBILOGPRHY .....   | 40 |

TEXTILE AS INTERCESSOR: UNDERSTANDING MARGERY KEMPE'S  
SARTORIAL BODY

*The Book of Margery Kempe* details a woman's journey toward becoming a renowned spiritual mystic. Margery Kempe narrated her story to two male scribes who wrote down her words and composed a book of her middle and later life and her growing relationship with Christ. Margery was known for her sexual imagery and erotic language, which she uses to introduce and cement her relationship with Christ within the medieval community. Some scholars argue that Margery uses motherhood to start her journey with Christ and to, in turn, imitate Christ to reach the pinnacle of religious mysticism. Margery starts her story with childbirth and her call to Christ. Her *Book* is filled with anecdotal evidence, which characterizes those who slander her, those who support her, or those who are skeptical of her relationship with Christ. However, what is most compelling about Margery Kempe's story and *Book* is her gendered experience with Christ and the church. In order to work within the male-centered church, I will argue that Margery uses clothing and textiles to create and, later, buttress her physical and spiritual authority with God.

As I shall detail, textiles and clothing become Margery's main intercessor with Christ. Although it is true that Margery uses motherhood to navigate her gendered experience with Christ and the Church, an often-overlooked aspect of her journey is her use of textiles: from her deployment of chaste, white clothing to her discussion of Christ's clothing during the Passion. Margery's scrupulous usage of textiles and clothing becomes a more effective means of understanding her relationship with Christ, as it

physically displays her desired religious authority and becomes a visual example of her means to communicate with Christ.

My discussion is not confined to Margery's use of textiles with a religious meaning; it also extends to her use of everyday clothing. As I observe, there has been very little scholarship on Margery's clothing and fashion choices. Some have simply dismissed medieval fashion completely, while others have simply dismissed medieval fashion's significance in the greater medieval religious narrative. However, I focus on fashion in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, because I argue that her role as woman wishing to be a Christian mystic is actually best explored by observing the way her spiritual transformation is wrought through her changing use of clothing. As scholars agree, Margery begins her *Book* in a compromised position simply because she is a woman who wishes to warrant authority in a male dominated religious tradition. However, in order for Margery to command said gendered authority, she must show that she was well ensconced in the male dominated religious tradition. Margery uses clothing to signal her dedication to a religious life. From there, Margery uses textiles and clothing to visually display her relationship with Christ.

Before fully exploring Margery's usage of textiles, it is important to understand the social and cultural situation in which Margery Kempe is telling her story. Therefore, as I unpack Margery's usage of textiles, it will become evident that textiles and her donning of certain fabrics are synonymous with the social and cultural situation Margery is in. In Lynn Staley's introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Staley addresses the authenticity of Margery's *Book*, tracking historically accurate events and people Margery

mentions<sup>1</sup>. Though there is not indisputable proof or evidence that Margery's *Book* was in fact "true," it is still "rooted in a social reality" that displays and explores late medieval society (Staley viii). However, Staley, like other scholars, knows that Margery did not pen the book herself as she tells the reader that scribes document her stories. This fact is considerable to note and, as a result, it should receive even more historical attention as Staley claims it was appropriate during the high and late Middle Ages for male ecclesial writers to record the lives and visions of female mystics, such as Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213) and St. Bridget (1303-1373). In keeping with this tradition, Margery did not write the book herself; instead, as she explains, she retrospectively dictated the book from memory at a much later date. However, Margery's ability to write her own book becomes irrelevant, as she does have the ability and initial agency to dress herself. Therefore, her ability to dress herself and use textiles gives Margery a greater kind of authorship, one that cannot have the same kind of agency that Staley traces as a book written by Margery's own hand. Margery's self-fashioning occurs before narrating even begins. Although Staley does not fixate on the supposed shortcomings of Margery's story, such as Margery's inability to write her own book, she does introduce the gendered hierarchy of male/female, cleric/mystic that was prominent in late Medieval Europe. Not only does Margery have the ability to dress herself, she is also aware of the gendered hierarchy and the religious gendered clothing that make up the hierarchy.

Recently, the study of *The Book of Margery Kempe* has revolved around the vulnerability of women and female anxiety within "a hegemonic society, where power

---

<sup>1</sup> Margery mentions events such as the Death of King Henry V in 1422 and the fire of the Guild Hall in Lynn in January 1420. She also mentions prominent religious figures that she either meets directly or simply refers to such as Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, Philip Repingdon, bishop of Lincoln, and William Alnwick, bishop of Norwich.

and authority were wielded by men whose positions in church and/or state allowed them to ignore or harass Margery for her passionate attachment to a Christ who bids her to dress in an unusual fashion, abstain from meat and wine, travel about Europe and England, and chastise others for swearing and lax living” (Staley ix-x). Specifically, I will focus on Christ’s instructions for Margery’s clothing because this is an area woman could control. As I said above, women had the ability to dress themselves. As minor as this might seem, the ability to dress oneself was very important. The dress one wore displayed anything from religious affinity to social status. As such, medieval communities were overly aware of what clothing signified. Therefore, Christ’s abnormal instructions for Margery often force her to the edges of communities and societies. These instructions and Margery’s performance of the instructions can translate much more broadly into a general feeling of ostracization women felt in the church. Margery’s ability to capitalize on the exclusion women felt in the church and in its religious communities--while veiling her behavior behind “approved” meditations and supposed censorship that the male scribes and male clerics thought they were causing Margery to follow<sup>2</sup>--allows her to fully explore this very gendered specific feeling and ultimately thrive. Margery not only shows women’s control over clothing and religious performance, she also displays her willingness to be comfortable with the community’s criticism. Even in the beginning of her *Book*, when she wears elaborate finery, the religious community criticizes her lack of humility and attacks her vain clothing. However, when she later switches to comely, chaste clothing, the community still criticizes the clothing’s inappropriateness since she is

---

<sup>2</sup> Here I am referring to the fact that the only way for Margery to share her spiritual journey was to tell her story to male scribes. The male scribes who wrote her *Book* and clerics who read her *Book* would have assumed they were “guiding” or censoring her stories and revelations to become clerically approved. However, as Staley argues, Margery was aware of this supposed guidance, and this knowledge allowed her to work within the approved structure to produce and distribute her story.



not a sanctified chaste virgin. Margery goes against norms and violates certain specifications for women's religious dress and ultimately proves that she has power to dress herself as an ostracized other while attributing her religious dress to Christ. Religious authorities only ever question her, but never is she found guilty of heresy or any wrong doings attributed to both her gendered specific dress and actions. Furthermore, this female-centered anxiety coupled with Margery's *Book*, penned by men, shows that she understands "gender and authority are inextricably entwined" and thus cannot be separated (Staley xi). Margery, throughout her *Book*, demonstrates that her gendered specific clothing correlates with her authority with Christ. Christ bids Margery wear white, not the male clerics of the Church. To this point, Staley clearly states that Margery was well-entrenched in the gender hierarchy of the church. She understands that she needs the church's approval; however, in order to build her agency she side steps the church and claims she receives Christ's approval. Margery's intimacy with Christ is privileged over institutional authority and therefore, shows how she cleverly takes advantage of this knowledge to benefit her religious status throughout her *Book*.

In conjunction with Margery's familiarity with the religious hierarchy and the religious community, Margery also needed to be familiar with her audience. Staley argues that Margery was overly aware of who would be reading her *Book* saying, Margery's actual *Book* "demands that we attempt to understand it as having purpose, an implied audience, as well as an author whose particular relationship to the political, social, and religious atmosphere of her world shaped her and was shaped by her into what is one of the most important of late-medieval prose works" (Staley xii). Margery's awareness of audience and the "political, social, and religious atmosphere" of late

medieval England gives her an elevated level of authority and purpose (Staley xii). It shows she was willing to work within the power structures of the church to produce a piece of writing that explores gender, mysticism, and social degradation through affective religious worship. As clothing and textiles were essential in displaying gender and exploring mysticism, Margery shows how writing and textiles are mutually constitutive<sup>3</sup>. To this point, Margery first uses textiles and fabric from her secular vocation as town brewer<sup>4</sup>. Before Margery fully commits to her spiritual journey, Margery shows that the usage of textiles transcends the religious sphere. Clothing and textiles were not only important in the church; they were also important and useful in everyday life. Later, Margery uses white clothing, again, which was only worn by virgins and chaste widows to fully exhibit her religious authority. Margery makes use of the white clothing as a woman who wishes to live the life of a chaste female mystic and devote her sole worship to Christ.

As mentioned above, the community's understanding of white clothing becomes increasingly important as Margery's journey continues simply because she was not allowed to wear the holy color and dress. In order for a married woman to wear white, she would have to undergo a vow of chaste widowhood. Therefore, to understand how Margery uses white clothing and how medieval communities viewed and understood white clothing, I argue that Margery shows careful attention to the appropriateness and significance with the vow of chaste widowhood. Michael Vandussen argues that when Margery dons particular types of clothing and publicly displays her "special status, a

---

<sup>3</sup> Just how writing and textiles are mutually constitutive, material (especially textiles) are linked to the Word of God and text of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I am referring to Margery's usage of the haircloth. The haircloth plays a huge role in Margery's spiritual journey and I will explore Margery's usage of the haircloth later in this paper.

status which, she [Margery] believes, was conferred upon her by an authority far superior to any bishop – Christ Himself” she is showing her direct connection to Christ (276).

Margery takes her religious authority in her own hands by going straight to the source of Christian spiritual power. Margery not only works her way into the hierarchical religious narrative, but she also sets her own terms by visibly displaying her desired status through clothing. Furthermore, Margery not only uses or adopts various clothing choices to “represent her special status,” one that was deemed credible by God, but she also uses the clothing to command female authority within the church. Margery uses white clothing in a way that men cannot use it<sup>5</sup>; thus she exploits white clothing’s gendered association and furthers her relationship with Christ.

However, unlike my exploration into Margery’s meticulous deployment of virginal clothing, Vandussen is more concerned with the appropriateness of her clothing and the physical ceremony that would ensue when a woman would take up the white clothing--the mantle, and the ring. He points out that the ceremony of chaste widowhood, first and foremost does not apply to Margery even at the most fundamental level; Margery is not a widow. The medieval community would have been all too aware of this crucial fact. Alas, Margery has taken a vow of chastity with her husband, John, who is still alive. Vandussen uses Edmund Lacy, the Bishop of Exeter’s (1420-55) extensive writings on the “custom” and process of said vow. Lacy’s writing is one of the few-recorded usages of the procedural ways of sanctifying chaste widowhood clothing. Yet, in order to preface the process, Vandussen points out that Margery does not officially receive sanctification from the church in her *Book*. Therefore, the only permission that

---

<sup>5</sup> Men cannot use white clothing to the degree that Margery uses it. If a man were to wear white clothing, it would hold little to no cultural significance.

Margery receives to wear the white clothing is from Christ himself<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, Vandussen sets out the procedural steps in the vow of chaste widowhood in a fashion that is valuable for thinking about Margery's use of textiles. Firstly, the vow was to be taken on a "solemn feast day, or at least a Sunday ('die solempni, vel saltem die dominica')"<sup>6</sup> and in a public place where the woman would "vow publically, in the vernacular, to maintain perpetual continence ('Ipsa vero puplice, in vulgari, se perpetuam continenciam servaturam profiteatur in minibus epicopi')"<sup>6</sup> (278). Vandussen says the ceremony can be performed in a private chapel; but he points out that this is not what Margery wanted. She wanted to display her "new" clothing and lifestyle publicly in order gain the most power in the sight of the church and the community. Therefore, Margery's awareness of audience and community were vital to her wielding power. If the community understands that one must receive official sanctification from the church to don certain modes of dress and Margery only receives sanctification from Christ, side stepping official procedures, the community will have cause to criticize and slander Margery. Margery warrants this discord, as it heightens her public awareness. Margery's willingness to face her own marginalization by the community further proves her commitment to Christ.

In reference to Margery's historical and gendered situation and her donning of chaste clothing, scholars have dismissed Margery's overall usage of textiles and have instead investigated how her gendered agency within the community is centered on her maternal imagery and how the church views female bodies and authority. However, her gendered agency is bound up with her use of textiles. As stated above, in order for her to imitate the Virgin Mary, she must first don white, virginal clothing; thus, actions and

---

<sup>6</sup> This also shows and proves how she wielded gendered agency within the church and takes advantage of the church's rules and procedures. She circumvents the Church's ordinance regulating white clothing and claims it was God who gave her sanctification.

textiles cannot be analyzed separately. In her introduction, Staley touches on Margery's reliance on motherhood but other scholars discuss Margery and her *Book* solely in reference to motherhood, bodily penance, and sexual imagery. Critics have either condemned Margery for her misuse of erotic imagery, relating her sexually longing with Christ as his lover, or praised her use of motherhood and maternal equation with the Virgin Mary. In an important argument, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that Margery uses her female body to imitate Christ<sup>7</sup> and the Virgin Mary. Margery, however, could not use her female body without the feminine clothing—secular and religious—that marks her conversion to a religious way of life. It is Margery's clothing that allows her to display her imitation of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

Not only are bodies -- sexual and maternal -- and clothing synonymous for Margery, Karma Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and the Translation of the Flesh*, attempts to re-evaluate and contextualize Margery Kempe and her body in reference to the medieval concept of female flesh. Lochrie's idea of the flesh works perfectly with Margery's usage of textiles. Since Lochrie focuses on the intersection between women's bodies and texts in late medieval religious studies, Margery's clothed body, which I will associate with the flesh, becomes the most important element in her *Book*. However, to first understand how medieval people viewed women, Lochrie discusses the Aristotelian move to align women with matter, which is inert and passive, and men with the spirit, which is active and dynamic (Lochrie 17-18). According to this tradition, women were associated more with

---

<sup>7</sup> Though I will not be discussion Margery's usage of *imitatio Christi*, I still wish to introduce the concept and its performative nature. Lochrie argues that women mystics, especially Margery, use religion and "bodily manifestations" of Christ such as envisioning and reacting to the Passion to gain power and sanctity (13). However, in order for one to perform *imitatio Christi*, the body of Christ must first undergo an ontological feminization<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, *imitatio Christi* and its bodily reactions is by definition feminine and extremely material.<sup>7</sup> In order to understand the feminization of Christ, Lochrie points out that women were not only seen as inferior to men intellectually but also bodily (Lochrie 17).

the body. Women's association with the body shifts the focus to her clothing and modes of dress. However, the medieval concept of a woman goes beyond the body and strongly associates women with flesh (Lochrie 16). Though the flesh is lexically similar to the body, it holds much more negative and precarious connotations, such as sinfulness and porosity. The flesh is something that is overly vulnerable to both the outside world and other bodies, as the internal body is what the flesh surrounds. Like flesh, clothing and textiles are overly vulnerable as well. Margery is constantly criticized for deploying and displaying different clothing. Thus, the female body becomes flesh and with this medieval transformation, her body becomes a symbol for the social construction of the time, calling attention to her intrinsic sin and her innate impurity (Lochrie 21). To a certain extent, clothing is the flesh. It is worn in close contact with the body and is visually displayed. If flesh and clothing are similar, as I suggest, then clothing has the ability to also become a symbol of the social construction that Lochrie discusses. The women's body and her flesh create a material mirror that absorbs the social and religious constructs and reflects the women's desires. As I will discuss later, clothing was an extension of the body and the flesh. Therefore, my inquiry is to what end does the individual place their desires, perceptions, and fantasies upon the fabric, especially the fabric that Margery claims Christ bid her wear? Is this simply an innate, predetermined makeup of the culturally malleable mind that is strongly related to Lochrie's idea of the flesh or is it a conscious desire, perception and fantasy that prompts the selection and donning of a particular textile? For Margery, clothing is very individual and very malleable. She consciously adopts certain styles of religious dress to manipulate male ecclesial power and draw attention to her desired agency within the church. Since

Margery's religiously charged clothing is a product of the medieval religious culture, she dons certain clothing to work within the religious tradition (i.e. chaste, white dress), whilst pushing boundaries and warranting attention (i.e. Margery was not a chaste virgin).

Furthermore, analyzing women's flesh and Margery's clothed body in connection to her desired religious authority, the religious tradition of affective spirituality and performing spiritual worship relied solely upon the body. Lochrie says that affective spirituality is dependent on "its corporeality and the imitation of Christ's suffering humanity" (14). This idea, she claims, is rarely disputed and allows for a material reading of religious bodies and, of course, Margery's body. Textiles and clothing were essential in understanding Christ's suffering. Later in Margery's *Book*, she gazes upon a cloth covering the crucifix during lent and when Christ's suffering body is revealed, she becomes filled with Christ's spirit and wails at the sight. Margery often looks upon textiles and feels the Holy Spirit flowing from the fabric into her body. Thus, returning to the re-association of female's bodies with the flesh, Lochrie argues that the difference between flesh and body is crucial when understanding Margery Kempe's power and authority within the church and in spirituality: "this distinction makes a difference in how the Middle Ages might have constructed women not as a passive, corruptible, physical body, but as the principle of disruption in the human psyche, the flesh" (4). Like the Bible's Eve, whom the religious Middle Ages claim caused the downfall of humanity, Margery becomes an "active" woman with immense agency being associated with the powerful, albeit destructive flesh and by being able to dress herself in her desired clothing of choice. Lochrie describes the flesh as "taboo-laden" and one that the "female

body becomes [as] the site of both the medieval Church's strategy of control and the modern mystical scholar's categories of legitimate mystical experience" (5). Margery Kempe capitalizes on her association with the flesh, as her clothing was the material representation of the flesh. Margery also encapsulates Lochrie's idea of the flesh being a powerful "taboo" by wearing unsanctified white clothing that dictated her spiritual journey; white clothing was "taboo" for married women. Margery's flesh is important to talk about not only in reference to the spiritual liminality that Lochrie discusses but also in reference to the very material textiles that Margery uses to fashion her authority on her body, visually displaying mystical agency.

Since the flesh is seen as a blank form that one can freely dress and project desires, the flesh creates an ill-defined space that can be thought of as fissured. Lochrie's idea of the "fissured" flesh is related to Margery's usage of textiles because of her position as women attempting to have agency in a liminal space of fissuring and flesh while using material that is defined by gender<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, I will use Lochrie's initial examination of the fissured flesh and woman's compromised position in society to introduce the need for a material intervention. Locating women at the site of fissuring allows for a transient space in which women can harbor and control power: after all it is *their* flesh that created the fissure. Fissured flesh is the liminal space in which women have agency. The fissure between the body and the soul allows women to take advantage of a space in which they did not normally have power, i.e., the religious sphere. Though Lochrie's first chapter focuses less on Margery and her *Book*, it lays the groundwork for the cultural and religious medieval setting and environment. Margery's gendered usage of

---

<sup>8</sup> The fissured flesh, taken from Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, puts the soul and body in conflict allowing Lochrie to argue, "woman, then, occupies the border between body and soul, the fissure through which a constant assault on the body may be conducted" (21).



textiles allows her to display an intangible relationship with Christ in a very tangible, palpable way. When Christ first commands Margery to wear white, she not only wears the sacred color, showing her connection with God, but she also proudly parades her dress so that everyone can see her claimed authority. Though she is working within this liminal space of fissured flesh, which allows her to wield agency in an ill-defined space, she uses clothing, like the white dress, to verify and prove her agency to both the church and the community who need a visual, material representation of feminine authority.

In combination with women's association with the flesh and Margery's relationship with the flesh, scholars have been more interested in her identification as mother and her treatment of maternal images when discussing and worshiping Christ. However, Margery's performance of the maternal and the sexual relies more on textiles than words and actions. While Lynn Staley goes into little detail about Margery's self-made erotic relationship with Christ, other scholars, such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Karma Lochrie have discussed her sexual longing at length. These scholars have argued that Margery's use of sexual imagery is a spiritual miscalculation and literary lapse on her part. They claim that Margery has an inability to read her audience and misuses the sexual images to display her vulnerability in a male centered church hierarchy; thus, critics claim this fact alone proves her inferiority to men. However, Tara Williams argues that Margery carefully uses sexual imagery to model herself after the Virgin Mary and prove her intimacy and authority with Christ. Though she does not talk about textiles in the way that I wish to, Williams points to Margery's reliance on performative material, such as Christ's crucified body and the Virgin Mary's nurturing of Christ. Textiles, especially when put in a religious context, work in a similar fashion as the images

Williams discusses. Textiles cause the viewer to place himself or herself at the birth of Christ or the Passion of Christ, which Margery does throughout her *Book*. Lay Christians constantly relied on material images and textiles to worship Christ, as most could not read the Bible. Therefore, Christian materials were vital in understanding medieval Christianity. Margery understands the need for Christian materiality by wanting to wear visual representations of Christ's commands to display to the community her relationship with Christ.

Though Margery's reliance on Christian materiality is not unique, her connection between female bodies and feminine textiles is unique. Female mystics are known for using sexual language and imagery when discussing their relationship with Christ<sup>9</sup>. Margery, however, takes this a step further by fusing the ephemeral sexual images with the physical images of the body. Margery is drawing attention to the physical dimensions of a spiritual relationship that relies heavily, if not solely on materiality. Specifically, Margery uses textiles as her material of choice because clothing is an extension of the body. Clothing shares an intimate relationship with the physical body, as it not only covers the naked body, but medieval clothing can also display one's social, religious, or marital status. The close connection between clothing and body speaks to ecclesiastical authorities' need to be intimately intertwined with Christ, especially when those authorities are women. In order to create this intimacy, religious figures would highly eroticize their interaction and worship with Christ to display sexual and spiritual longing

---

<sup>9</sup> Carolina Walker Bynum in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* specifically refers to Margery's sexual fantasy "cuddling with Christ in bed is simply a case of an uneducated woman taking literally metaphors from the Song of Songs" (44). Cuddling also brings out the notion of swaddling and caring for a child and loved one. In order to cuddle and swaddle, one must use textiles and fabrics to cover the body. Therefore, Bynum believes Margery missuses, or rather misinterprets biblical sexual images and does not use it as a tool to further her position in religion. Bynum argues that Margery is simply interested in the conventionalities of a relationship with Christ at the very basic, literal level.

(*Fragmentation and Redemption* 86-88)<sup>10</sup>. Not only does Margery use eroticism to show her desire for Christ, she also uses maternal imagery to cement the relationship. Margery describes herself as both the bride of Christ and the mother of Christ. Both images of bride and mother bring about specific modes of dress. While one represents a woman moving from chastity to marriage, the other represents new life and nurturing. For Margery however, it is not enough to be married to Christ. Williams argues that she must also be Christ's mother, allowing her to equate herself with the Virgin Mary, saying "Margery's transition from physical to spiritual motherhood mirrors Mary's transition from biological mother of Christ to spiritual mother of humanity" (531). Margery uses both modes of dress, bride and mother, to associate herself with the Virgin Mary, who is both virgin and mother.

For Williams, Margery's conflation of sexual and maternal imagery when describing her relationship with Christ allows her to display her level of intimacy. I argue, however, that Margery's sexual and maternal imagery is strongly related to her white dress and the religious significance that is attached to white, virginal clothing. Again, one cannot perform the maternal or the virginal without the appropriate dress. Though Margery clearly wishes to be a chaste virgin, she is married and has children over the course of her spiritual journey. Thus, Margery's yearning to wear white clothes is complicated by the fact that she is a mother. As Vandussen outlines, Margery technically could not wear white because she never participated in the official ceremony of chastity.

---

<sup>10</sup> In Carolina Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, she examines male and female religious figures different approaches to Christ's sexuality: "religious women were more likely than religious men to read encounters with God bodily occurrences that we would attribute to sexual arousal" (*Fragmentation and Redemption* 88). Though this is in reference to sexual arousal, Bynum nevertheless calls the readers attention to eroticizing relationships with Christ as a means of worship.

Nevertheless, Margery wears virginal clothing while still being a mother. Therefore, it is hard not to ignore the first chapter of Margery's *Book* when she begins her religious journey into female mysticism and opens her *Book* with motherhood. Williams argues that the maternal images are found in abundance in Margery's *Book* because motherhood played such an important role in her religious life. Margery is constantly referring to "labowryd," in reference to both child labor and daily life labor in combination with earthly relations and spiritual or "gostly" relations with Christ. Even if the maternal imagery is not explicitly linked to motherhood, there is still an implicit line of maternalism that is operating throughout Margery's *Book*. Following Margery's childbirth in the first chapter, Williams focuses on the precarity of her body. After Margery's first child, her body becomes very weak, and she slips into madness. From this weakness, Christ must appear to Margery and cure her of this maternal illness. In this scenario, Williams argues that Margery is in the position of power and authority; Christ sought her out. Here, Williams argues that Margery "becomes a mother and spiritual figure almost simultaneously," and that her earthly body, or as Williams says, her sexual body becomes intertwined with her spiritual "body" or rather her spiritual experience (533-534). Being a mother and spiritual figure places Margery in close contact with Christ, furthering the intimate connection she talks about throughout the *Book*. Margery's intimacy with Christ<sup>11</sup> allows him to infiltrate her personal life and ask her to use textiles—such as the haircloth--and to wear clothing—such as the white dress--in a way

---

<sup>11</sup> Though this is not crucial in understanding my material argument, I need to address Margery and Christ's spiritual intimacy. Christ first revealed himself to Margery in her bedroom; Williams argues that this bedroom scene in Margery's *Book* calls the reader to identify Christ as Margery's lover. Margery cannot have the spiritual relationship with Christ without the sexual. At this point, Christ is represented not only as a father and a savior, but also as a lover to Margery. By conflating the sexual and the maternal, Williams claims that Margery blurs the lines between earthly, fleshy desire and spiritual, holy desire.

that pleases him and forwards her agency. Margery's urge to please Christ and publicly display Christ's callings for her, allows for a crucial material intervention.

Furthermore, Margery's spiritual and intangible relationship with Christ and the church allows for a larger conversation surrounding secular textile interventions in greater Medieval Europe. E. Jane Burns in her collection of essays on medieval fabrication and styles of dress argues for the importance of reading garments on a body, which reveals the complex structure of a "highly charged and malleable culture" (2). Burns argues that fabric, textiles, and clothing "can be seen to participate in a complex system of fabrications that move constantly between individual bodies and the social sphere, between material objects and various cultural representations of them, creating a relational dynamic perhaps best exemplified by the concept of an *imaginaire vestimentaire* (sartorial imaginary)" (4). This term, used by Odile Blanc, deals with the transitional space, similar to Lochrie's fissured flesh, between the actual clothing and the cultural ramifications placed upon the choice of clothing "according to a range of imagined positions" (Burns 4). In other words, when selecting a garment there are not only systemic cultural corollaries but also an individual weight in reference to "desire, perception, and fantasy" coupled with "cultural demands and conventions" (Burns 4). Margery is all too aware of clothing's cultural importance, whether the clothing is secular or religious. She understands what certain types of dress and textiles represent. Specifically returning to the text, Margery's clothing and choice of textiles changes dramatically throughout her *Book*. Her transformation from ostentatious, upper class clothing to simple white garb embodies her spiritual transformation from lay medieval women to authoritative female mystic. As previously discussed, Staley argues that

Margery Kempe is coming from a compromised position for the simple fact that she is a woman. Margery acknowledges that textiles and clothing choice is itself a recognition of potential agency and therefore needs to be suppressed by a gendered hierarchy in religious authority. At this basic observation, textiles are starting at a heightened level of importance within the religious community. Margery uses this recognition to present, grow, and cement her religious authority via clothing and dress as a greater engagement in the social expectations of the religious community.

Not only does Margery use clothing and textiles as her main intercessor between herself and Christ, but I also wish to briefly explain Margery's various modes of dress in the way that Andre Denny-Brown references the importance of clothing's cultural significance within the high and late Middle Ages. As previously discussed, medieval scholars and literary critics have ignored and even, at times, rejected medieval clothing and fashion choice, claiming textiles hold no cultural or religious weight within the greater historical narrative. Denny-Brown, like Burns, argues that clothing has an extraordinary power, which influences culture and creates meaning. As such, Margery could not be a mother or mystic without using certain modes of dress. The eroticization however, of Christ and the sexual relationship that Margery wants to have with Christ complicates her opposing modes of dress. Her white, chaste clothing creates an opposition between her virginal persona and sexual longing for Christ. Clothing is a mediator between the personal and the cultural<sup>12</sup>. Fashion is no longer to be pushed aside

---

<sup>12</sup> In order to explore and prove clothing's significance, Denny-Brown specifically uses Tertullian's defense of the *pallium*, a man's large rectangular religious cloak replacing the toga. Formerly, Tertullian had spoken against the changing nature of clothing and promotes static clothing. However, he defends clothing's capacity to change and evolve, with Denny-Brown commenting on his sartorial defense saying, clothes ability to fluctuate is a "human practice and a historical process [that] lays the groundwork for later discussion about the importance of clothing as an interpretation lens understanding human self-knowledge

and regarded as a secondary research inquiry; but, as Denny-Brown shows, and as I suggest, textiles shape and control medieval bodies and texts.

In relation to Margery's prescribed importance on textiles and agency, equating ecclesiastical dress to religious authority, Denny-Brown addresses clothing's "law of metamorphosis" as seen in William Durand's *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*<sup>13</sup>. It is important to mention Durand here, especially when discussing Margery's usage of textiles, because he was one of the first medieval canonical and liturgical writers to theorize and put into words the importance clothing has on a cultural and historical level. Denny-Brown quotes Dyan Elliott's recent work on Durand's *Rational* saying that during the medieval time, "clothing was meant to mean"<sup>14</sup>(83). Moreover, Durand did more than simply equate clothing with cultural significance; he also addressed the slippery nature of clothing's meaning when he claims, and as Denny-Brown puts it, clothing "escapes the control of the institutions and individuals who attempt to regulate it" (84). Margery's usage of white clothing goes beyond the church, as she wishes to regulate its deployment in her life and in her spiritual journey. Clothing, especially clerical clothing, as Durand focuses on the ecclesial cape, has the ability to transcend not only what it is *supposed* to represent<sup>15</sup>, but can be taken up by the individual to fashion their own agenda (Denny-Brown 89). Margery Kempe's sartorial body, much like Durand's defense of medieval

---

and human history" (4). This ancient yet vital anecdote about the beginnings of clothing's importance gives way to the study of medieval fashion.

<sup>13</sup> *Rational for the Divine Offices*

<sup>14</sup> Even more, in Elliott's essay in E. Jane Burns's collection, he says that clothing would literally "make the man, or cleric"(58). Although he is more concerned with male usage of dress in the church, he proves that clothing was at the center of meaning in the church. He discusses the ceremonial act of dressing and undressing the clergy as a holy rite, preparing the men for a day filled with holy worship and work. Margery Kempe, I could argue, wishes to insert herself in such a tradition with her white clothing.

<sup>15</sup> Here both Denny-Brown and Elliott claim religious clothing represents what the medieval catholic church, at the time, thought to be the holiest representation of material Christianity. In other words, vestimentary symbolism reflects the medieval interpretation of the Bible. The bishop's cape, for example, is used to shed the physical body and hide it with a comely piece of fabric to show the world one's commitment to Christ.

clothing, is the ultimate mode of displaying her desired religious agenda. Margery knows what certain modes of dress represent, and as such, she exploits the religious significance surrounding clothing to escape “the material realm through the divine elements” religious garments represent (Denny-Brown 89). Margery works within the same religious tradition that Durand and other male clerics and writers are working within to manipulate the powerful nature of dress and command religious authority.

Keeping in mind both the religious and cultural purpose of clothing, as it was meant to mean and represent something, the first detailed description we get of Margery’s dress is in the second chapter. Margery’s fashion is not only important from the outset of her spiritual journey but shapes her journey and signifies her prescribed separation from previously ensconced spiritual ideals of religious women. In the text, she has just given birth to her first child and subsequently loses her mental faculties. Margery claims, during this time of vexation, that she saw daemons dancing about the room, and that the devil himself even came to her with great threats, asking Margery to give up her Christian faith. However, after a year of torment, God comes to her aid and lifts her mental ailment. She then decides to take up a life of piety and devotion, yet maintains, for now, her innate sinfulness and humanly aptitude for spiritual divergence. Despite the fact that she was now, as she describes it “bowndyn” or bound to God, she could not let go of her pride or her “pompows” lifestyle she lead before her spiritual awakening. She tells her reader that men spoke ill of her due to what she wore: “And yet sche wyst ful wel that men seyden hir ful mech velany, for sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd and hir hodys wyth the typettys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd and leyd wyth dyvers colowrs between the daggys that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sygth and himself the mor ben



worshepd” (Kempe 1.2, 192-196). In this rather detailed description of dress, Margery’s *Book* emphasizes the flashiness or worldly vanity that is tied into owning and wearing such material goods. To that fact, moral writers, such as medieval monk and poet John Lydgate, openly condemned women’s elaborate headdresses (Lydgate). Again, this awareness speaks to both to Denny-Brown’s importance of meaningful religious dress and to Burns’ idea of culturally malleable clothing as perceived and deemed appropriate by the medieval community. She wore gold pipes on her head, which was headdress ornamentation akin to the more privileged types of fashion that persons of higher social station would don. Parts of her cloak’s edge and hem were designed or pointed in interesting ways that displayed the level of embellishment. She wore tippetts, which is a thin piece of fabric usually worn over the shoulders and arms. During the fourteenth century, tippetts were considered a common upper-status textile trimming and clothing accompaniment. Again, this correlated with social station, and became a visual representation of wealth. Finally, Margery tells her audience that she wore this finery in order to show off her pride and display her social standing in the community.<sup>16</sup>

For Margery, clothing is an example of a social signifying system that takes on a greater spiritual meaning that is analogous to spiritual authority. According to Catherine Richardson, “clothing is tied up with identity and recognition because it is such a fundamental part of the visual image of the individual within the community” (214).

Taking Richardson’s connection between the individual and the community and putting it

---

<sup>16</sup> The idea of community plays a large role in Margery’s journey and how she perceives and gages her affective effectiveness with Christ and by extension how she exercises authority within the Church. The more people speak ill of her and seek to slander her name, the more Margery finds agency and feels she can speak for Christ. Lynn Staley refers to this idea of community and Margery’s ability to “rattle her countrymen and –women” as a means for identifying the fickleness or “flimsiness of the status quo the *Book* describes” (xiii).

in conversation with Margery's religiously charged clothing shows her awareness of others' perceptions and interpretations of such clothing. Richardson's connection also brings back the idea of Staley's analysis of the medieval community and Margery's reliance upon the community to react to her various and, at times, conflicting modes of dress.

Margery's wealthy-yet-not-elite clothing with gold trimmings and draped tippets sets up both her physical and spiritual baseline<sup>17</sup> that she builds upon for the remainder of her journey and her *Book*. In order for Margery to develop her relationship with Christ and gain agency within the church, she must start at low point of Christian values. Though her clothing is more akin to the upper class than the lower class, the ornamentation and vanity that supplemented her comportment represents sin in the church. Therefore, in order to begin her spiritual awakening and call for God's intervention, she displays a level of understanding in the second chapter that she must undergo a reversal of both behavior and fashion. However, behavior is almost synonymous with clothing for Margery. The community chastises Margery's proud dress, and as such, she behaves in a proud manner. Therefore, her clothing becomes her behavior. No other material good is referenced for her neighbor's covetousness, which, according to Staley, becomes increasingly important for Margery's recognition, except for her dress. Her clothing reveals her spiritual condition; thus she relies on clothing for the remainder of her *Book*. Margery then becomes aware of her sinful nature and asks God for his forgiveness through clothing.

---

<sup>17</sup> When I say baseline here, I am talking about Margery starting from both a low point and a high point. In order for Margery to build her spirituality and authority she must first start at a rather precarious religious moment. In the Christian faith, vanity and greed are, of course, viewed as vices. Therefore, she must start from this compromised moment within the community. Once she wants to begin her journal from laity to piety, Margery must undergo a literal and material fall from upper class to lower, comely position.

Margery's awareness of sin is followed by copious amounts of bodily penance and prayers. In Bynum's and Lochrie's previous arguments, Margery's actions alone would have been enough to discuss her authority; however, this myopic approach would leave out Margery's incredible reliance on textiles. Margery is turning her material woes into spiritual atonement<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, Margery's next significant physical intervention on her spiritual journey is through cloth once again. To become closer to Christ, Margery feels she must abandon her marriage and live a life of chastity. She takes haircloth used for brewing and hides it under her dress in secret: "Than sche gat hir an hayr of a kylne swech as men dryen on malt and leyd it in hir kyrtylle as sotylych and prevelylich as sche mygth that hir husband schuld not aspye it, ne no mor he dede, and yet sche lay be hym every nygth in his bedde, and weryd the hayr every day, and bar chylderyn in the tyme" (Kempe 1.3, 277-280). Not only does this passage show Margery's reliance on cloth to further her faith and spiritual relationship, it also shows her resourcefulness and clever manipulation of textiles. Earlier, in the previous chapter, Margery tells the reader that she brewed for her town but lost business after many failed brewing sessions<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, she makes use of the brewing materials she would have had access to such as the haircloth. The haircloth was used in brewing and was a coarse piece of fabric usually made from a horse's mane or tail. The haircloth was used to prevent grain from dropping into the furnace below the kiln floor (Martin 86). Margery is using her secular vocation to construct her spiritual life. The haircloth becomes a prominent and pervasive symbol in Margery's early spiritual journey. Thus, when she first employs the haircloth she is using

---

<sup>18</sup> Of course the bodily penance Margery preforms is material as she takes out her sins on her body; however, I am aligning this more with the spirit as Margery views bodily penance as otherworldly and outside the body.

<sup>19</sup> Despite having good servants and a natural ability to brew, Margery still could not produce ale and lost the business.

it to keep out unwanted, worldly pleasure. Just how the haircloth is used to separate the barley from the waste or impurities in brewing, Margery uses the haircloth to prevent sexual relations with her husband and attempt a life of chastity. Although the haircloth fails and Margery continues to have children with her husband, her usage of the cloth represents her sinful struggle to obtain purity and religious agency.

The next time the haircloth appears is in chapter 6; however, this time, God responds directly to Margery's usage of the haircloth<sup>20</sup>. God commands Margery to remove the haircloth from her person and to wear a spiritual haircloth upon her heart that will guard her from sin. Christ tells Margery, "dowtyr, thu hast an hayr upon thi bakke. I wyl thu do it away, and I schal give the an hayr in thin hert that schal lyke me mych bettyr than alle the hayres in the world" (Kempe 1.5, 376-378). Margery is instructed to abandon her physical haircloth and create a metaphorical haircloth on her heart to cement her love for Christ. This transferal from material haircloth to spiritual haircloth furthers the importance of textiles for Margery. Despite the textiles' reversal from material to spiritual, which would seem to unravel the cloths' importance, Margery commands Christ's attention in the first place by using it to express her desire for a chaste life. In the same way that Margery's rich clothing and vain behavior required Christ to seek her out earlier, so does the haircloth. Therefore, Margery is dictating her story via cloth. Without these early moments of clothing and Margery's recognition of the close connection between cloth and text, Christ would not have had a reason to seek Margery and spark her spiritual awakening.

---

<sup>20</sup> Christ coming to Margery correlates with Williams' assessment of Margery's agency in the beginning of her *Book*. Christ sought Margery out to begin her spiritual journey, not the other way around. Here Christ responds to Margery's usage of textiles, once again proving Margery's agency and tangible relationship with Christ.

As Margery's story progresses and her religious authority grows, so does her need for clothing. The first time Christ asks Margery to wear white<sup>21</sup> is in chapter 15. Up until this moment, Margery has either used cloth privately to show her commitment to God or publicly to display her vanity before her spiritual journey<sup>22</sup>. In order for her to gain agency outside her ghostly relationship with Christ, however, Margery realizes that she needs to display some level of religious authority. In order to do this and encourage the most discord from the community, she dons white clothing that is solely reserved for either virgins or chaste widows. Christ bids Margery wear "clothys of whyte and non other colour, for thu schal ben arayd aftyr my wyl" and to visit the holy places of his life, death, and resurrection in Compostella, Spain<sup>23</sup>, Rome, and Jerusalem (Kempe 1.15, 733). In addition to Margery's new religious clothing, she is concerned about her means of not only getting to these places but where she will stay and what she will eat when she arrives at these distinct locations. Margery's concerns are obviously very practical and very material. She is not concerned about her spiritual journey and how these places will heighten her faith. Instead, she is concerned with the "what" and the "how". Christ responds however that he will give her friends during her journey and that he will always be with her, ready to speak for her and keep her from harm. During this time, Margery is supposed to be wearing white. As I said earlier, white was to be donned only by virgins and chaste widows (Vandussen 280). For Margery, white clothing becomes her religious uniform for the remainder of her *Book* and spiritual journey.

---

<sup>21</sup> White becomes the desired color of clothing for Margery, as white represents purity within the Christian church. I will explore white clothing and its importance in detail later in this analysis.

<sup>22</sup> Her flashy clothing from the beginning, though outward and on display, was not used to further her spiritual relationship with God, it was only used to attract God and require his intervention.

<sup>23</sup> Compostella, Spain is where the remains of the apostle St. James was said to have been located. This common pilgrimage route was called the Way of Saint James.

In analyzing Margery's physical, material appearance, Vandussen also speaks to the uncanny nature of her verbal responses to the religious authorities' "demands, restrictions, and orthodox channels of the church" (282). Margery is able to respond successfully according to both scripture and doctrine. No matter the time, nor the person who inquires after Margery's religious authority and spiritual relevance, she is always able to please. Vandussen argues that Margery applies the same method to her clothing, which he says is a "recognizable and visible sign designating a defined spiritual *and* earthly status" (282). Margery's words and clothing combined create her holy persona and allow her to work within the church. Furthermore, Vandussen privileges Margery's clothing and textile choices, saying that her personal "reading" of clothing "lies in her expertise in interpreting scripture to suit herself" (283).

The scripture's sometimes liminal and transitory nature, as earlier described by Lochrie in relation to women's flesh, allows Margery to re-interpret and, in way, reinvent religious clothing to forward her agency. Margery works within a church structure that "neither promotes nor forbids," which creates and promotes a liminal space (Vandussen 282). This liminality both relates to Lochrie's notion of the fissured flesh and Margery's sartorial rhetoric, to the extent that Margery uses clothing as her primary intercessor with Christ. Thus, when Margery wears this sacred color not as a virgin or as a chaste widow but as a married woman, religious figures become greatly offended and question Margery's authority with Christ. This is also the first time that Christ explicitly tells Margery what to wear. Christ comes to Margery and commands her to wear white; this encounter is significant for her and her spiritual authority as clothing was the physical

affect of the body<sup>24</sup>. Désirée Koslin, when describing the simplistic dress of monastic clergy, claims that the visibility of clothing “embodied both inner and outer significance of perpetual renunciation and commitment to solemn vows” (256). Therefore, clothing and textiles are extensions of the body inasmuch as they allow one to perform a desired outcome, whether this be for displaying social standing or exhibiting religious relevance<sup>25</sup>.

Margery adopts Christ’s fashion request as her own and uses it as a physical provocation that encourages slander. Her clothing calls upon the community to confront her fashion choices and to acknowledge Christ’s spiritual calling for Margery. She responds to Christ saying, “A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on other maner than other chaste women don, I drede that the pepyl wyl slawndyr me<sup>26</sup>. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me” (Kempe 1.15, 733-735). Margery is aware that her physical appearance will spark discord within her community due to the cultural significance that white clothing carries. She is able to capitalize on the culturally significant clothing and provoke her desired outcome, thus allowing God to speak through her and gain religious authority.

Moreover, Margery goes forth wearing white, provoking slander and encouraging those around her to falsely accuse her of giving into various temptations. Margery’s controversial clothing seems to suggest that she does not desire the approval of the

---

<sup>24</sup> The Latin term *habitus* is important to mention here. *Habitus* refers to one’s comportment and body. In Katharine Breen’s essay, “Discipline and Doctrine: Including Moral Habits in *Le Livre de Éthiques D’Aristote*”, she mentions that *habitus* can represent monastic clothing as well as the “practices and mental dispositions that defined the religious way of life” (212). Margery is fashioning her material body to fit the practices of religious life.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Varnam calls Margery’s desired outcome “performative identity” (211). I wish to adopt this term but apply it to Margery’s choice of clothing, or rather God’s choice of clothing for Margery.

<sup>26</sup> Margery is mediating in two ways at once. Here, she is highlighting both her conversation with God and addressing the hostile reactions of the community and her audience.

church; however, by donning scandalous, unsanctified fashion she causes the community and the church to recognize her authority. Despite the attention, Margery is distraught and goes to Lincoln to seek out Philip Repingdon, the bishop of the town. While in Lincoln, she asks the bishop if she can take the vow of chaste widowhood and take up the mantle and the ring, both essential in displaying ones chastity and commitment to God: “My Lord, yf it lyke yow, I am comawndyd in my sowle that ye schal gyve me the mantyl and the ryng and clothyn me al in whygth clothys. And, yf ye clothyn me in erth, owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst schal clothyn yow in hevyn, as I undyrstond be revelacyon” (Kempe 1.15, 774-776). Here, Margery is referring to the actual ceremony, discussed earlier, in which women would take the vow of chastity. In order for the church to allow a chaste widow to wear white clothing, she first had to under go a public ceremony and announce, in the vernacular, her intentions and say the vows.

However, Margery does not announce publicly nor does she recite the vows, as Vandussen observes. The bishop simply asks if her husband consents to this life of married chastity, to which she replies, “I prey yow late myn husbond come to yowr presens, and ye schal heryn what he wyl sey” (Kempe 1.15 778-779). He comes at his own will and expresses to the bishop his desire to consent to a life of married chastity. Instead of answering for her husband, Margery allows him to answer the bishop in his own words. Once again, this is an example of Margery’s clever manipulation of the gendered hierarchy that orders both the laity and clerisy under the authority of the church. The vow of chastity, filtered though Christ’s command, was Margery’s idea; yet, she still needs her husband to agree to the new life she wishes to pursue. Therefore, in order for her husband to consent, she needed him to tell the Bishop himself.



However, to return to the clothing itself, Margery tells the bishop that if he allows her to be clothed in white, then God will clothe him in heaven. This transferal of material cloth to spiritual cloth exemplifies what Margery is doing not only with her religious authority, but it also illustrates how she is circumventing the gendered hierarchy and calling on God himself. The typical religious chain of command puts laity, especially female laity at the bottom and the furthest way from God. In order to “grow” spiritually, the laity must climb the hierarchical ladder. Thus, women’s need to climb and move up in a church hierarchy proves and purveys the need for church officials in the first place. It also proves that there is a need to maintain the church hierarchy. Margery is both evading the ladder by going straight to Christ and letting her husband think he has autonomy in the decision to live a life of chaste marriage. In addition, Margery never officially receives sanctification from the church in order for her to wear the white clothing; nevertheless, she continues to don the sacred color. The only confirmation that Margery receives to wear the white clothing is from Christ himself. Christ’s sanctification speaks to her ability to go beyond the church and speak directly to and for Christ. At this point in her journey, clothing becomes the ultimate way for her to take control of agency within the church; in fact, without clothing Margery would not have even had the ability to obtain any type of agency.

As Margery’s journey continues, her reliance on textiles and clothing become even more important as her religious agency goes grows. Thus, the next mention of Margery’s white clothing<sup>27</sup> is in chapter 26 when she is traveling to the holy sites of Christ and finds herself in Germany, faced with hate and slander. She has traveled from

---

<sup>27</sup> This is not the only mention of cloth or textiles between the time Christ asked Margery to wear white and the next mention of her white cloths; however, I skip this smaller references to focus on the linear progression of Margery’s textile choices.

England, again wearing white, going to various countries including the Netherlands where Christ visits her and asks her to eat meat and drink wine for the first time in four years. Staley's placed importance on community is important here, as white clothing is a universal symbol in Christian Europe, and therefore encourages controversy even outside of England and Margery's community back home. She arrives in the south of Germany where many religious men think her hysterical and fiendishly possessed. When Margery confronts one of the "good men", as she calls them, he tells her, "I prey God that the develys deth mote ovyrgo the sone and rathe" (Kempe 1.26, 1417-1418). Again, this man is insinuating the devil has possessed Margery and causes her inappropriate outbursts of passion. Furthermore, this man's words convince Margery's company, including her maiden that she no longer walks with Christ. They remain with her until they arrive at Lake Constance where they forsake her and force her to publicly display her "falsehood." Margery remarks on the shame that they made her feel and torment she received at her company's words; however, the words did not compare to their actions<sup>28</sup>. They defaced her clothing and replaced it with a white canvas sack: "They cuttyd hir gown so schort that it come but lytil benethyn hir kne and dedyn hir don on a whyte canwas in maner of a sekkyn gelle, for sche schuld ben holdyn a fool and the pepyl schuld not makyn of hir ne han hir in reputacyon" (Kempe 1.26, 1430-1432). Before Margery had been wearing the sacred clothes of a holy virgin and displaying her level of commitment to God. Therefore, in order for her company and those who seek her downfall to do the most damage to her religious influence and convey the strongest message of their disapproval in how she speaks for Christ, they attack the only visible, tangible representation of her authority,

---

<sup>28</sup> Clothing and shame can be synonymous; and they are for Margery. In order for the community to shame Margery, they need to "attack" something material. They speak slanderous words, but these pale in comparison to what they make Margery wear.

clothing.

Margery's company tries to attack her words and fail, but when they attack her clothing, Margery becomes horribly ashamed. The shame that is attributed to Margery's clothing proves her appropriate fixation on textiles and her understanding of their Christian symbolism. Shame also shows the power that clothing holds in the religious community as a whole. Earlier, Christ tells Margery that the more envy she produces the more he will love and support her ("the mor envye thei han to the for my grace, the bettyr schal I lofe the" [Kempe 1.20, 1092]). Up until now, the envy has been displayed through slanderous words and heretical accusations. These ephemeral and fleeting words do not violate Margery in the same way that this textile scene reads. In her mind, not only have they defaced what she stands for as a woman bound to Christ, but they have also defaced and degraded the color white and its symbolic weight in the Christian faith. They force Margery to remove her clothing and replace it with a white canvas as a means to disgrace and shame her physical presence to encourage her defeat. Of course, Margery does not give into their wish and continues to speak for Christ. She instead confides in the envy and says how God held her in worship for the shame she withstood<sup>29</sup>. Clothing representing and encouraging shame becomes an important tool for Margery to promote her communications with Christ and display the relationship to the community. Once again, the textiles that Margery dons are used as a more effective intercessor than her bodily penance. God speaks to Margery through her clothing to inspire envy and wield religious authority. Therefore, it is her clothing that has dictated her journey.

Continuing with the idea that clothing forms her journey and shapes her

---

<sup>29</sup> "And, notwythstondyng al her malyce, sche was had in mor worship than thei wherthatevyr thei comyn" (Kempe 1.26, 1434-1435).

interactions with the world, a priest asks her to abandon her white clothing and encourages her to take up the clothes a women befitting her situation while she remains in Rome on pilgrimage: “I charge yow than that ye leve yowr white clothys, and weryth ageyn yowr blak clothys” (Kempe 1.34, 1969-1970). Clothing was a sign of control in the religious medieval community. Not only did religious men have to wear certain clothing, nuns, especially, had to wear specific fabrics, veils, and dresses. As such, nuns faced harsh penalties if they disobeyed monastic dress (Effros 10). By ordering members of the diocese to wear approved clothing, the church is controlling lives at a very physical level. Margery tells her reader that she is aware the priest is her enemy; yet, when he asks her if she will obey his word she replies that she will. Following the priest’s command, she abides and is assured by God that her obedience pleased him<sup>30</sup>. She endures cruel words from women around Rome who ask after her change of clothing. They ask Margery if her clothes were stolen from her to which she replies, “Nay, madame” and continues on her way (Kempe 1.33, 1937).

Later the same priest, who she now identifies as her enemy, praises Margery for her change of clothing and her submission of will, telling her that he is “glad that ye gon in blak clothyng as ye wer wont to do” (Kempe 1.34, 1975). Margery rebukes his admiration and tells him that Christ was not unhappy that she wore white clothes for he had allowed her to wear the sacred color and take up the teachings of Christ. The priest now seems convinced that a devil resides in Margery to which she cleverly replies “Ser, I hope I have no devyl wythinne me, for, yyf I had a devyl wythin me, wetyth wel I schuld

---

<sup>30</sup> Margery does not wear white until God commands her later in chapter 37: “An other tyme whil sche was in Rome a lityl befor Cristemes, owr Lord Jhesu Criste comawndyd hir to gon to hir gostly fadyr, Wenslawe be name, and byddyn hym gevyn hir leve to weryn ageyn hir white clothys, for he had put hir therfro be vertu of obediens, as is wretyn befor” (Kempe 1.37, 2163-2139).

ben wroth wyth yow and, sir, me thynkyth that I am nothyng wroth wyth yow for no thyng that ye can don onto me” (Kempe 1.34, 1981-1983). Though it would seem this entire dialogue and exchange between priest and Margery relies on her claim that Christ speaks to her and through her, Margery’s usage of material is more important in displaying religious agency. The priest attacks her words and question Christ’s words through her, but he goes after her clothing because it is a public display of her claimed religious abilities. In order for the gendered hierarchy in the church to maintain the status quo and keep laywomen from gaining power, such as requiring widows to wear black or chaste virgins to wear white, they must control and dictate what women are allowed to display on their person. Once again, Margery shows her recognition of this ideal and demonstrates her ability to work within the hierarchy and use clothing to obtain her desire of religious agency.

Margery’s use of clothing persists throughout her journey, showing the integral importance of textiles to her material spirituality across different geographical locales. Thus, the next time Margery interacts with clothing is in chapter 44 when she returns to England. Clothing can now be understood as structuring and controlling every aspect of her physical journal and spiritual journey. She has come to Norwich and asks for God to send her a token, or a sign from Heaven that she should continue to wear white and worship Christ in this fashion. God sends lightening and rain that Margery wished for, and Christ tells her “I schal ordeyn for the” (Kempe 1.44, 2441-2442). Once again, having her sanctification from Christ himself she seeks out a “worshepful” man in Norwich and asks him for a loan of money (“two nobelys”) to buy her holy clothes. He gladly agrees and asks Margery what types of clothes she wishes to wear. Margery

replies with great authority and tells the man directly that she will wear “white clothis, wyth the leve of God” (Kempe 1.44, 2448). Again, no priest or religious cleric ordained her to wear these clothes, only God. The man then “bowt white cloth and dede makyn hir a gowne therof and an hood, a kyrtyl, and a cloke” (Kempe 1.44, 2448-2449). He seems to buy the clothing with no question and consents to Margery’s authority. This episode is a turning point in Margery’s struggle to gain agency. Though God has previously sanctified her white clothing, this is the first time that she dons the clothing and receives no rebuke from men. This leveling of authority dictates the way she interacts with religious officials and the lay community for the remainder of book one. After she wears the clothing the good man bought and goes to church the next Sunday, Margery receives the typical words of slander and hatred. However, she continues to be comforted by Christ, who reminds her that she is doing the right thing and doing God’s will.

At this point in her spiritual journey Margery receives one of the strongest affirmations from Christ via her clothing. She becomes so sick that she is given last rites and wishes to seek Saint James before she dies. Christ comes to Margery however, and tells her she will not die<sup>31</sup> and makes her “heyl and hoyl” (Kempe 1.44, 2462). Having her strength back, she endures a cold winter but continues to wear her white clothing and gladly continues to receive reproof. As a consequence, she cries so loudly, arguably louder than she has in the past, and God “gaf hyr mende of hys Passyon (Kempe 1.44, 2465-2466). By allowing Margery to feel the most compassion she has ever felt due to the shame she received for wearing white clothing and allowing her to receive the quintessential moment in Christianity, the Passion, proves not only the pervasiveness of

---

<sup>31</sup> As a secondary inquire, death rituals in the Middle Ages required a cloth, or pall, to lie over the casket to symbolize the piece of cloth that covered Christ (Piponnier and Mane 113)

textiles in Margery's life and in the life of Christians, but also proves the power that emanates from wearing such religiously charged clothing. This chapter, conveniently located in the middle of book one, exemplifies the peak of Margery's authority and religious influence in terms of textiles. From this moment, she takes on the voice of God when men slander her saying, "'Fadyr, forgeve hem; thei wite not what thei don,' so I beseche the, forgeve the pepyl al scorne and slawndrys and al that thei han trespasyd, yyf it be thy wille, for I have deservyd meche mor and meche more am I worthy" (Kempe 1.44, 2521-2523). By wearing the colors of the sacred virgin and having sanctification from Christ, she now has the authority to speak as Jesus did on the cross, forgiving all of humanity who seek to dismantle her words and dress.

I have recently discussed Margery's clothing as having mostly religious weight. However, Margery's clothing also has secular weight as well, causing her community to fear her influence on the other women in the town. While in Leicester, people come to view and marvel at Margery's level of piety. This is one of the few moments in Margery's larger narrative in which the laity seems to approve and wonder at her display of emotions for Christ. However, and as Margery would like, the religious officials of the town, especially the mayor, whom Margery calls her "dedly enmy" questions her level of sincerity and wishes to question her in the words and works of God. This shows her clothing's religious agency, and she answers every question with great religious authority and devout comportment. The clerics and priests of the town are pleased with her answers and become convinced that she is in fact from God. However, the mayor claims that Margery, "In fayth, sche menyth not wyth hir hert as sche seyth with hir mowthe" further questioning her words (Kempe 1.48, 2710-2711). Margery defends herself and her

love for God and all of his people. The mayor, growing desperate, attacks her choice of clothing and worries that her words and clothes will cause women in the community to leave their husband and follow in her false ways: “I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han away owr wyvys fro us and ledyn hem wyth the” (Kempe 1.48, 2727-2728). The mayor understands he can no longer question her religious usage of clothing, but he can attack her secular usage of clothing and her influence over the community. Margery, once again, with great confidence tells the mayor that she will not tell him why she wears white, for he is not worthy but that he should ask the other clerks. Moving beyond the religious sphere into the community, it is clear that her self-assurance is growing with every textile encounter.

Furthermore, in reviewing Margery’s past interactions with the community, it becomes clear that Margery’s clothing goes from being a source of shame to a source of power. The mayor finds he cannot prosecute Margery at her words but he can attack the only material thing he can think of, her white clothes. He is so afraid of what her white clothes represent and how much influential weight they hold, he thinks it will cause wives to leave husbands and abandon their domestic lives. Whether Margery’s clothes cause women to follow her or not, the most poignancy that can be extrapolated from the digression at Leicester is the mayor’s authoritative ascription of textiles. He feeds the growing narrative of textile power and continues its authority because he comes from a place of political and religious authority himself.

As Margery’s journey begins to settle down in England and her white clothing has become the staple of her religious persona, Margery calls the readers attention to other moments of textile interventions in the medieval world. I have already explored



Margery's clothed body as being a place where she can wield agency; however, I have not yet addressed how Christ's body prompts Margery's spirituality and community worship. Therefore, the next few textile interventions are in reference to fabric that is associated with Christ and his body during Lent. By knowing and understanding the power and influence of textiles, Margery can undergo meditations on the suffering of Christ. Clothing and textiles were exceedingly important aspect in Christ's Passion. Christ, nearly naked, with only small pieces of fabric to cover his body was a focal point when meditating on the Passion. Furthermore, during the Passion, the Roman soldiers divided and gambled for Christ's clothes during his crucifixion. The absence of clothing on Christ's suffering body represents the shame that one is supposed to feel during a death by crucifixion. Christ's human vulnerability is evident through his meager clothing. In order to mediate on Christ's Passion, Margery goes to church on Palm Sunday and marvels at a piece of cloth or painted veil that hangs in front of the Crucifix during the time of Lent. Whilst she is worshiping in the church, the priest raises the veil and Margery receives the sight and emotions of the Passion. She succumbs to a fit of sobbing and heavy bodily worship: "the preyste which executyd the servyse that day drew up a cloth befor the crucyfixe thre tymys, every tyme heyar than other, that the pepil schulde se the crucifixe, than was hir mende al holy takyn owt of al erdly thyngys and set al in gostly thyngys" (Kempe 1.78, 4432-4435).

The cloth that is covering the cross seems to be like how Christ wants Margery to be for the people. Margery is like the cloth that is seen as mediator between the people and Christ. The cloth is meant to cover in order to build spiritual anticipation and then lift and reveal Christ on the cross. At the moment of reveal, the Passion is to enter the

worshipper's body and display their level of spirituality. This is exactly what Margery does, and as such, is an example to the people. She is the vehicle through which others may see Christ. Though it is not the clothing that Margery is wearing that prompts her spiritual wailing and the people to think on Christ's Passion, it is through the cloth hovering over the crucifix that she sees herself as the veil over Christ. Once the veil is lifted, her mind is taken over and she is filled with the Passion.

After the crucifix has been revealed not only does Margery become filled with the Passion, she also physically places herself at the Passion. She sees Mary weep for her son on the cross and, intrinsically, follows suit, wailing and sobbing at the sight. Margery walks up to the cross and watches the Jews take a piece of silk cloth that had become harden with blood away from Christ, ripping his skin causing more wounds on his already damaged and broken body. Margery says it was like looking upon a freshly flayed body full of pain and earthly horror. Here, it seems that cloth and clothing becomes an extension of the skin and can be seen as both a protective covering but also one that, when taken away, reveals the precarity of bodies. Christ's body is at its most vulnerable moment. His insides are literally exposed to the world, and one is able to see what lies under the skin: "hys precyows body schrynkyd and drow togedyr wyth alle senwys and veynys in that precyows body for peyne that it suffyrd and felt" (Kempe 1.80, 4556-4558). Again, this is a moment when cloth is not necessarily related to Margery's specific usage of clothing but it shows her dependence upon the importance of cloth. Margery is aware that under the cloth and clothing reveals a vulnerable, suffering body.

For the remainder of book one, Margery comments little on her clothing or the

clothing of God, relying on her audience's remembrance of the importance of the white clothing and religious textiles. Therefore, after she has reached her height of religious influence and has come to wear her white clothes at all times, she concludes the first book, furthering the audiences' need to recall the importance of textiles. Margery confirms the words of her book and gives all credit to Christ who sought her out and prompted her to begin this spiritual journey. Margery's assessment of clothing reveals the redemptive quality of cloth as well as the power of cloth. Clothing can help one start a new life, simply by changing what one puts on her body. Clothing can cause shame and anger if deployed in a culturally or religiously unexpected way. Clothing can also produce immense power. Margery engages with the religious hierarchy and capitalizes on Christianity's placed relevance on textiles and fashion. As such, she displays a thorough understanding of clothing and utilizes various textiles' religious and cultural weight to her advantage, gaining religious authority and gendered agency. It is still important to analyze Margery's bodily penance and maternal performance; however, there must also be a discussion surrounding her clothing. One cannot talk about Margery's authority without addressing her usage of clothing and textiles. It is Margery's clothing that began her spiritual journey and it is Margery's clothing that fuels her spiritual journey. Without textiles, Margery Kempe would not have been able to fashion her body and forward her religious authority and cultural agency.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aers, David. "The Making of Margery Kempe: Individual and Community." 1988. *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. By Margery Kempe and Lynn Staley. New York: Norton, 2001. 256-63. Print.
- Ashley, Kathleen. "Historicizing Margery: The Book of Margery Kempe as Social Text." 1989. *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. By Margery Kempe and Lynn Staley. New York: Norton, 2001. 264-76. Print.
- Atkinson, Clarissa W. "A Haircloth in Thy Heart." *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983. 39-66. Print.
- Beckwith, Sarah. "Margery Kempe's Imitatio." 1993. *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. By Margery Kempe and Lynn Staley. New York: Norton, 2001. 284-87. Print.
- Brad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Material Feminisms*. By Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2008. 120-54. Print.
- Breen, Katharine. "Discipline and Doctrine: Including Moral Habits in Le Livre De Éthiques D'Aristote." *New Medieval Literatures*. By David Lawton, Wendy Scase, and Rita Copeland. Vol. 12. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010. 209-50. Print.

- Burns, E. Jane. "Why Textiles Make a Difference." *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imaginings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 1-18. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone, 1991. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing." *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: U of California, 1984. 110-69. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. "The Meaning of Food: Food as Physicality." *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: U of California, 1987. 245-59. Print.
- Denny-Brown, Andrea. "The Case of the Bishop's Capa." *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 82-113. Print.
- Effros, Bonnie. "Appearance and Ideology: Creating Distinctions between Clerics and Lay Persons in Early Medieval Gaul." *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*. By Désirée G. Koslin and Janet Ellen. Snyder. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 7-24. Print.
- Elliott, Dyan. "Dressing and Undressing the Clergy: Rites of Ordination and Degradation." *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imaginings*. By E. Jane Burns. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 55-69. Print.

- Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Lynn Staley. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996. *Middle English Text Series*. University of Rochester. Web.
- Kempe, Margery. Introduction. Ed. Lynn Staley. *The Book of Margery Kempe: A New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. Vii-Xix. Print.
- Koslin, Désirée. "The Robe of Simplicity: Initiation, Robing, and Veiling of Nuns in the Middle Ages." *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*. By Stewart Gordon. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 255-74. Print.
- Lochrie, Karma. "The Body as Text and the Semiotics of Suffering." *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 1991. 13-55. Print.
- Lydgate, John. "Horns Away." *Luminarium*. 2007. Web. 7 April 2016.
- Martin, Thomas. *The Circle of the Mechanical Arts; Containing Practical Treatises on the Various Manual Arts, Trades, and Manufactures*. London: Printed for R. Rees, 1813. Print.
- Piponnier, Françoise, and Perrine Mane. *Dress in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Caroline Beamish. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997. Print.
- Richardson, Catherine. "'Havying Nothing upon Hym Saving Onely His Sherte': Event, Narrative and Material Culture in Early Modern England." *Clothing Culture, 1350-1650*. By Catherine Richardson. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2004. 209-21. Print.
- "Routes of Santiago De Compostela: Camino Francés and Routes of Northern Spain." - *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.

Vandussen, Michael. "Betokening Chastity: Margery Kempe's Sartorial Crisis." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41.3 (2005): 275-88. Web.

Varnam, Laura. "The Crucifix, the Pietà, and the Female Mystic." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 41.2 (2015): 208-37. Web.

Williams, Tara. "Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe." *Modern Philology* 107.4 (2010): 528-55. Web.