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Virginity, Identity, and Margery Kempe

THESIS

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MASTER OF ARTS

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by

Tram Vu

Thesis Committee:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Virginity, Identity, and Margery Kempe

by

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Master of Arts in History

University of California, Irvine, 2023

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Margery Kempe was an English medieval woman from the fifteenth century whose auto-hagiography *The Book of Margery Kempe* detailed her struggle to pursue her religious goals of living the life of a saintly virgin as well as her personal goal to avoid sexual relations with her husband. By reading *The Book of Margery Kempe* in dialogue with contemporary accounts of *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, we can see how Margery Kempe utilized existing hagiographical treatments of virginal sanctity to provide a basis of authority for her actions. Although Margery Kempe was not physically a virgin she used the idealization of virginal sanctity and hagiography as a means to form her own identity. By juxtaposing present-day understandings of asexuality with Margery's understanding of virginal sanctity, this work explores the connection between virginity, chastity, hagiography, and sexual identity in the Middle Ages.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of virginity played a large part in the creation of hagiographic narratives of medieval saints' lives. These hagiographies feature the common trope of virgin saints who avoided sexual relations with others often against the will of authority figures, including their families. Margery Kempe (ca.1373-ca.1440) in her autobiography provides an example of how a woman who was not physically a virgin still drew inspiration from these widely circulating celebrations of virginity in hagiographical accounts well known in her time, such as the *Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, to form her own religious identity and to navigate her avoidance of sexual relations within her marriage.

Margery Kempe was an English woman from Lynn and a Christian visionary. In her autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she described her struggle to fulfill her religious goal of living the life of a saintly virgin.<sup>1</sup> The most important challenge she faced was that she was a married woman who had already given birth to multiple children when she decided to imitate saintly virgins and to reject all future sexual relations with her husband. Her rejection of her husband's advances was significant because medieval European Christian society required women to maintain sexual relations with their husbands unless both parties agreed to renounce sex completely for the rest of their lives. According to this medieval concept of the "conjugal debt" each spouse had to fulfill the sexual desires of the other or incur blame for the rejected spouse's subsequent adultery.<sup>2</sup> Not only did Margery work toward ending sexual relations with

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<sup>1</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe : a New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe : Doing Unto Others*, 3rd ed.(Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge,, 2017). 60. In her chapter "The Sexuality of Chastity" Karras describes the conjugal debt in marriage and how "According to the teachings of the church, neither spouse was allowed to deny the other sexual intercourse. If someone did deny it, he or she, and not the erring spouse, was responsible for any sin of extramarital sex or

her husband, but she notably chose to wear the white clothing that was reserved for virgins and chaste widows while pursuing her goals without joining a convent or convincing her husband to do so.<sup>3</sup>

How did Margery justify the challenge her way of life posed to well-established norms pertaining to gender and sexuality? *The Book of Margery Kempe* models itself on hagiographic accounts of saints' lives. In her auto-hagiography, Margery made direct references to well-known established saints, especially in modeling herself after virgin martyr saints. Although Margery was not physically a virgin, she used concepts of virginal sanctity in her account as a way to shape her own identity. She also used existing saints' *Lives* to provide authority for her actions and claims. This thesis will focus on Margery's use of Saint Katherine of Alexandria's *Life* as a means of negotiating her own goals.

Though scholars have investigated the celebration of virginity in hagiography, this work explores how hagiographical concepts of virginity might have inspired or informed medieval orientations similar to present-day asexuality. Viewing Margery's navigation of her sexuality alongside present-day concepts of asexuality as an orientation can expand our understanding of how medieval figures potentially navigated their sexuality and religion concurrently. Though this work acknowledges that sexualities experienced by individuals in premodern history are not the same as sexualities experienced in the present, it aims to highlight the possible parallels of experience between medieval individuals pursuing virginal identities and present-day asexual

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masturbation that the spouse committed." Margery's navigation of avoidance of sexual relations within her marriage would therefore be within the context that to outright refuse her husband would be impossible based only on her lack of desire to have intercourse with her husband.

<sup>3</sup> For further insight on the complexities and significance of white clothing refer to Salih's exploration into the multiple meanings attached to white clothing including the way others projected their perceptions of what it signified, see Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 217-224.

people. Viewing these medieval figures' lives through a new lens opens up new possibilities for understanding not only medieval hagiography but also medieval sexuality. Margery's struggle to justify her attempt to extricate herself from her marital obligations even opens the possibility of exploring asexuality as an orientation existing in a premodern form, different from today but indicative of similar experiences.

## CHAPTER ONE: VIRGINITY AND ASEXUALITY

Margery Kempe's actions reflected not only her understanding of how virginity was valued in her time, but also her understanding of how it could be navigated in relation to her own goal of avoiding sexual relations with her husband. In Margery's time, virginity took on many forms, as scholars such as Sarah Salih, Ruth Karras, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Jonathan Hsy have shown. These scholars demonstrate how virginity influenced medieval understandings of sexuality and how these understandings were complex and fluid.

Salih's *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* grapples with how the expectations regarding the performance of virginity moved to separate virgins from the traditional role of the majority of medieval women. Salih then delves into the degrees to which the pursuit of virginal sanctity by actual women, as seen within the Katherine Group and Margery Kempe, challenged traditional roles for all women while simultaneously complicating our understanding of medieval virginity.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Margery conforms to the behavioral expectations for a virgin despite being a married woman who has birthed several children.

Salih significantly expands on scholars' understandings of medieval virginity by first exploring the possibility of seeing virginity as a distinct gender category. She concludes that although "virginity [as] a self-identical gender has turned out to be an overstatement... there is nevertheless often a sense that it could be; it is a hinge, a channel of communication between the divine and the human, and so a site at which disruptions of various kinds are likely to occur."<sup>5</sup> Salih in this statement illuminates the way understandings of medieval virginity were convoluted due to the complex relationship between the way virginity was pursued by women in actuality

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<sup>4</sup> For a full description of the Katherine group, see below.

<sup>5</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 242-243.

and the way virginity was idealized in prescriptive literature. The pursuit of a medieval virginity rooted in its idealized form requires expectations that often were impossible to meet in a human medieval society that had differing expectations for the majority of women who were married or were expected to be wed. The praise of the pursuit of the divine perfection of medieval virginity in contrast to the reality of the expectations that the majority of women navigated created a gray area of possibility. The upholding of two sets of incongruent expectations simultaneously bred a site of uncertainty where actions that might disrupt the status quo became more feasible to enact.

Salih's statement about virginity being where the human and divine interacted to create a site of disruption contributes to our understanding of the way Margery's actions straddled the line between acceptable and unacceptable. She often risked rebuke but simultaneously experienced success in her goals. Salih illustrated how virginity allowed for disruptions in varying ways by examining how Margery Kempe was able to use virginity's nearly impossible expectations as a basis of a settled state of being on earth.<sup>6</sup> As opposed to the perfect version of virginity theology strived for, virginity practiced in reality did not always measure up to the ideal. Virginity therefore was not static and instead opened up areas of possibility and uncertainty.

Virginity then became not an intrinsic or inborn quality of a person, but a socially constructed yet unstable practice. Margery's understanding of virginity in her society allowed her to navigate her pursuit of virginity and chastity by utilizing this disruption. The church itself did not necessarily want wives to abandon their husbands en masse, but the hagiographies of European Christians contained precedents of women leaving behind their children and husbands

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<sup>6</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 241.

in the name of God.<sup>7</sup> Therefore even if medieval European women like Margery received rebuke for their actions which put God ahead of their families it was not an action that could be completely outlawed as Christian doctrine and hagiographies contained praise for such actions. Though the clergy who wrote many of these hagiographies were not intending to send the message encouraging women to abandon their husbands for God, nonetheless the presence of such actions within the narrative itself existed. Rejecting conjugal relations purely out of a lack of personal desire was easily determined as unacceptable by both Margery's society and the church. In their eyes it was equal to a sin. However, to reject conjugal relations based on a religious commitment to put God before all else and strive to emulate the footsteps of virgin martyr saints lauded for their actions was not so easily dismissed. It was not a clear cut case to say Margery's actions were unacceptable on moral grounds in the eyes of medieval European Christians if she was doing them in the model of virgin martyr saints compared to if she had done it solely based on the terms of a personal lack of desire to engage in sexual relations with her spouse. Though her emulation of virgin martyr saints gave Margery room to pursue her goals, it was also not free of criticism from others of what was expected of the average medieval married woman. The site of disruption to the status quo while simultaneously working within it by rejecting sex on the basis of faith allowed Margery to enter a gray area that allowed for the possibility of rejecting sex as a married woman. The instability and amorphous nature of virginity in practice consequently informed the way Margery could navigate both her religion and sexuality as their entanglement with one another were closely tied together. In understanding

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Newman, "'Cruel Corage': Child Sacrifice and the Maternal Martyr in Hagiography and Romance", *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*. 1st ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 76-107.

Margery's navigation of religion and sexuality in her time, threads of similarities to today's navigation of sexuality can be observed though they are not completely the same.

Although medieval individuals held very different viewpoints and navigated a different social and cultural environment than people today, they were not so different and 'other' that certain similarities could not exist. Sarah Salih's work in *Medieval Virginites* highlighted these similarities and differences through her exploration of erotic mysticism. She used the lives of St. Gilbert of Sempringham and St. Christina of Markyate as examples to highlight the role eroticism played in medieval mysticism and the presence it had in the narratives of virgin saints. Salih points out the way eroticism within mysticism in medieval texts was not always meant to be read as inherently sexual. Rather eroticism in the text was often meant by the medieval author to be read as a religious metaphor, as shown when St. Gilbert had an erotic dream that troubled him, but concluded that it was meant to be understood in a metaphorical way.

In St. Gilbert's dream he sees himself touching a girl's bosom and unable to pull his hand away. Upon awakening St. Gilbert fears that the dream speaks of future sexual temptation. As a result St. Gilbert confides in his friend, a priest who is also suffering from the same dream. After moving away from the source of what he believes is his temptation, he further reflects on the events and comes to the realization that the dream aligned more with the foundation of the founding of his Order. The girl's bosom in his dream, he concludes, represents the bosom of the Church's foundation and was not meant to be understood as a temptation of the flesh.<sup>8</sup>

As Salih pointed out, this did not mean that all instances of erotic language within the text were intended by the medieval authors to be without sexual implications. Salih instead argued that these instances of erotic language were not meant to only be seen as metaphorical

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<sup>8</sup> Raymonde Foreville and Gillian Keir, eds., *The Book of St. Gilbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 128-9, cited in Salih, *Medieval Virginites*, 22-23.

and in reverse were also not always meant to be seen as sexual. Rather the focus should be on thinking of how medieval thinkers of their own times were frequently uncertain in the debate and role of eroticism themselves.

Salih's research on erotic mysticism demonstrated how medieval understandings of erotic language were distinct to their time because they could often be metaphorical, but also the similarities in the reactions towards these concepts between present-day scholars and medieval scholars could exist. In a similar vein, by looking at virginity and how it was understood by medieval thinkers such as Margery Kempe it is possible to explore parallels between the actions and experiences of medieval individuals and the experiences of asexual people today even if they are not completely the same.

## CHAPTER TWO: MEDIEVAL SEXUALITIES

Asexuality is being embraced by a growing number of people without a consensus on one formal definition. Scientific studies and the largest online community centers for asexuality, AVEN, defines asexuals as individuals who do not experience any sexual attraction:

an asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sexual activity, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who [a person is], just like other sexual orientations.<sup>9</sup>

However, not all people identifying as asexuals accept this definition.<sup>10</sup>

Asexuality as a sexual orientation today is also used as an umbrella term to represent a spectrum of people who fall under this term. Understanding asexuality as a spectrum means understanding that asexual people include those who experience sexual attraction very little, not at all, or in some cases only in very specific circumstances such as those who are demisexual who will not experience sexual attraction until after a deep bond has formed. Those who are asexual can still have sex and may choose to have sex, which is different from not feeling sexual attraction. It is important to note that the act of sex and the ability to feel sexual attraction are not the same thing.

Additionally, some queer and feminist scholars have brought attention to the need to reflect on how we define the term asexual and in the process highlight the multiplicity of

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<sup>9</sup>“Overview,” *AVEN: Asexual Visibility and Education Network*, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://www.asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Karli June Cerankowski, and Megan Milks, “New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice,” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 658. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27919126>. Cerankowski and Milks note that there is no fixed definition that is universally agreed upon by all self-identified asexuals.

experiences the term may contain.<sup>11</sup> The need to complicate and expand our definition of asexuality is necessary to avoid essentialist definitions of sexuality that limit and exclude. Not only does a rigid definition of asexuality limit who may fall under the umbrella term of asexuality, it also limits our ability to see historical resonances with modern asexuality, and ignores the influence of sociocultural environments on the formation or expression of sexuality.<sup>12</sup>

While essentialist understanding of asexuality aligns with some asexual people's experience and identification, this study applies an asexual lens to Margery Kempe's pursuit of married virginity to find historical resonances with a more expansive definition. It does so carefully. When discussing asexuality as a present-day sexual identity, it is important to note that asexuality, chastity, and abstinence are not the same thing. To equate them as the same thing could potentially be harmful to the portrayal and understanding of asexual people and the asexual community.

The potential harm is three-fold. First, abstinent and chaste individuals are perceived to be choosing to live in opposition to their natural desires, whereas the opposite is true for asexuals, who lack desire. Second, in addition to reinforcing the idea that sexual desire is natural and a lack of it pathological, normative narratives about abstinence and chastity suggest that asexuality is a choice. The danger in seeing asexuality as a choice on the same level as abstinence or chastity results in the potential perpetuation of the idea that asexuality can be changed with enough effort. The third harm comes from celebrating historical instances when individuals chose to repress their own sexualities because circumstances worked against their full expression.

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<sup>11</sup> Ela Przybylo, and Danielle Cooper, "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," *GLQ* 20, no. 3 (June 2014): 297–318, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2422683>

<sup>12</sup> Przybylo, and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," 301.

Roland Betancourt warns of the danger posed by an uncritical celebration of medieval virginities. He warns:

of course, if, as modern scholars, we overemphasize these chaste intimacies, we run the risk of perpetuating the toxic respectability politics found in our primary sources by presenting a form of queer atonement through celibacy and negation. That is, we must be careful not to praise a person for having same-gender desires but never acting on them in order to conform to prescribed social norms.<sup>13</sup>

His message sets forth an important warning against glorifying within our scholarship the idea that queer existence and desire is only acceptable if these sexual desires are never acted upon.

Although Margery did not explicitly express same sex desire, her rejection of sex with her husband must be treated with equal care.

Indeed, to state that Margery does not express same sex desire at all may be an overreach. Recent scholarship on *The Book of Margery Kempe* touches on the potential of viewing same sex desire within the text. Jonathan Hsy, professor at George Washington University, probes the potential of seeing same sex desire in “‘Be More Strange and Bold’: Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in ‘The Book of Margery Kempe’”. In his analysis of the text he purports “I would like to pursue the *possibility* that Margery elicits (unspecified) erotic desires in the leper in this moment, and this woman's unarticulated desire—like leprosy—might be conceived as contagious”<sup>14</sup> Hsy does not state that this reading of Margery is the only valid interpretation but argues for the possibility of opening the scope of how Margery can be read. In understanding how both the possibility of Margery experiencing and eliciting same sex desire and also

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<sup>13</sup>Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Hsy, “‘Be More Strange and Bold’: Kissing Lepers and Female Same-Sex Desire in ‘The Book of Margery Kempe.’” *Early modern women* 5, no. 1 (2010): 192.

entertaining the possibility that she could have no sexual desire for others at all can coexist, the idea of “medieval indeterminism” is paramount.

Carolyn Dinshaw emphasizes the importance of what she calls “medieval indeterminism”. Dinshaw applies this indeterminism to sex including in her umbrella definition sex acts, sexual desire, sexual identity, sexual subjectivity, and sexuality. She claims to lump these topics together for the sake of emphasizing how these aspects of sex are tied together.<sup>15</sup> She asserts that she uses indeterminism not simply to indicate that “we can never know what really happened sexually in past cultures because their immediacy is lost, but rather that sex in all its definitions is in part contingent on systems of representation and is therefore fissured and contradictory.”<sup>16</sup> There is essentially no one size fits all. The meaning and significance of sex, according to Dinshaw, cannot be pinned down to one definition without being reductive or exclusionary because sex by her definition is always shifting with context and location.<sup>17</sup> Dinshaw makes the claim that what makes this queer history is its views that “sex” is heterogeneous and indeterminate as well as multiple. Medieval indeterminism has already been demonstrated by Salih and others with respect to the study of virginity .<sup>18</sup> This concept of indeterminism opens up the possibility of reading Margery’s positive choice to pursue virginity as an identity as an expression of an asexual orientation in a liberatory manner.

Despite the difficulties inherent in comparing medieval and modern sexualities, attempting to do so is important. In his work *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and*

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<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval : Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* , 12.

<sup>17</sup> Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* , 12.

<sup>18</sup> Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans, eds., “Introduction: Virginites and Virgin Studies”, *Medieval Virginites* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 1-10. Bernau, Salih, and Evans assert that virginity is multiple in that there is not one singular form or function that defines virginity. For instance, they state that secular virginity and religious virginity are not the same nor is the application of virginity the same for all people.

*Race in the Middle Ages*, Betancourt discusses a wide variety of subjects from the slut-shaming of Empress Theodora to queer desire in monasticism as well as many other subjects that explore sexuality and gender within Byzantine society. He states that:

drawing on the notion of queer intimacy, we can perceive relations beyond “straight” between nonbinary, transgender, and cisgender persons, while understanding that queer desire and intimacy need not always be affirmed or confirmed by sexual intercourse. In this way, we can also count demisexual, asexual, aromantic, and even antisexual subjectivities among queer subjectivities, as we conceive of them today. Medieval history not only has done far too little to grapple with same-gender desire in a way inclusive of a variety of gender identities as well as intimate practices but also has all but erased and ignored asexual subjectivities. With these shifts in terminology, deployed in accordance with an approach that matches modern rubrics, we begin to recognize that the very institution of monasticism—with its selfarticulated antisexual, aromantic, and asexual drives—is a fundamentally and inexorably queer practice.<sup>19</sup>

This passage by Betancourt points out not only that queer desire and intimacy does not always need to be affirmed by sexual intercourse, but also that asexual subjectivities have been largely absent from scholarly treatments of medieval history. The lack of study of asexual subjectivities within the scholarship is one of the issues this project aims to address. Betancourt’s work on Byzantine society provides a framework for how religious goals in a premodern context can intertwine and coexist in premodern individuals’ navigation of both their religion and sexuality. In addition, it also provides a model in which queer practices can be investigated in a premodern religious context. This research aims to build on works by previous scholars to explore how looking at asexuality in conjunction with virginity in the lives of medieval saints and figures such as Margery Kempe can expand our understanding of medieval sexuality and hagiography.

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<sup>19</sup>Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 130.

### CHAPTER THREE: MARGERY KEMPE'S HAGIOGRAPHICAL MODEL

Hagiography is the writing of a saint's life that recounts the story in a way that is meant to idealize or glorify them. Hagiographies were written by clergy often as a way to convey messages and ideals that the writer wanted to propagate. Hagiographies promoted church doctrine and political goals through the narrative of a saint's life. They also inspired devotion, imitation, and innovation among the laity.<sup>20</sup>

This thesis explores how Margery Kempe interacted with the hagiographies of the famous virgin saints, such as St. Katherine of Alexandria, as a means of constructing her own identity. It examines St. Katherine's hagiography for the purpose of understanding how virginity and sexuality were understood in medieval England, how Margery used that understanding for her own purposes, and how Margery's use of Katherine may have influenced her contemporary author, John Capgrave.

Although St. Katherine was most likely not a real person, her life as a hagiographic figure did provide a real model that many medieval people admired and emulated in relation to their own lives. St. Katherine of Alexandria was celebrated as a fourth century saint who existed centuries before Margery Kempe. St. Katherine's narrative was well known and widely circulated. In fact St. Katherine's earliest mentions appeared in the seventh century but the first extant account of her martyrdom did not appear until the tenth century. As this diffuse circulation history suggests and Margery's text confirms, Katherine's story was familiar to many medieval people, including Margery Kempe, whose autobiography and descriptions made many intentional parallels to the life of St. Katherine.

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Newman. "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash Between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." *Speculum* 80, no. 1 (2005): 42-43.

Katherine's widespread appeal was further confirmed when her *Life* was translated into the vernacular by an exact contemporary of Margery, John Capgrave, who also resided in Lynn. This discussion will treat three versions of St. Katherine's *Life* which would have influenced Margery and her contemporaries: *The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine* (found in the early thirteenth century manuscript MS Bodley 34. MS Bodley 34 was a manuscript containing the Katherine Group, a collection of the lives of multiple female saints, a treatise on virginity, and a sermon on the soul), the *Stanzaic Life of Katherine* (found in the Gonville and Caius MS 175/96,c. 1400), and Capgrave's *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*.<sup>21</sup>

The story of Saint Katherine often begins with a brief mention of her noble birth. The account then continues with her denunciation of paganism before Emperor Maxentius, her debate with fifty pagan scholars hired by Emperor Maxentius that concluded with the conversion of all the scholars to Christianity, her imprisonment and miracles during her torture, the martyrdom of those she converted including Maxentius's wife, and finally her own martyrdom. Two significant variations occur. The first regards how Katherine's execution is described and the second relates to how her life prior to her arrest is treated.

One of the commonalities found in each version of St. Katherine's *Life* is martyrdom through beheading. What is most notable about this beheading is that when Katherine is beheaded instead of blood pouring out it is milk that runs from her body signifying a miracle

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<sup>21</sup> For the Katherine Group, see Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson, *The Katherine Group MS Bodley 34* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2016). For *The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine*, see Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson, "The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine," in *The Katherine Group MS Bodley 34* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2016). For the *Stanzaic Life of Katherine*, see Sherry L. Reames, "The Stanzaic Life of Katherine," in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003). For Capgrave, see John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, trans. Karen A. Winstead (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

from God. According to all three lives, prior to St. Katherine's own martyrdom, Maxentius' wife, whom St. Katherine converted, has her breasts torn with irons, is beheaded, and her body is left out for dogs and birds to consume.<sup>22</sup> This tradition is so consistent, that when Margery Kempe states that she is willing to have her head cut off by an axe for God, she likely refers to the martyrdom of both St. Katherine and Maxentius' wife.

It may be that Margery's reference to these saintly beheadings actually contributed to the evolution of medieval understandings of Saint Katherine *Life*. Karen Winstead has argued that Margery influenced John Capgrave's description of the execution of Maxentius' wife. Capgrave reports that in retaliation for her conversion to Christianity, Maxentius sentenced his wife to death, specifying that after her breast were torn, "...he wanted them to take her and lead her to the fields where traitors get their desserts, tie her to a stake, strike off her head, and let it fall down and lie there for hungry dogs to devour."<sup>23</sup> Winstead notes in her translation that she knows of 'no analogues, in saints' legends or in other documents, for tying somebody to a pole and striking off their head — except in the Book of Margery Kempe (chap. 43), where Kempe says that it is the kind of martyrdom that she, being something of a coward, would be willing to suffer for Christ's sake."<sup>24</sup> Margery herself states "She thought she would have been slain for God's love, but dreaded the point of death, and therefore she imagined for herself the softest death, as she thought, for dread of her lack of endurance — that was to be bound by her head and feet to a stock and her head to be smote off with a sharp axe for God's love."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sherry L. Reames, "Stanzaic Life of Katherine," 553-554. Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson, "The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine," 52. Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 167-168.

<sup>23</sup> John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 167.

<sup>24</sup> John Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 194, Note 22.

<sup>25</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: a New Translation, Contexts, Criticism*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 23.

In comparing works such as *The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine* and the *Stanzaic Life of Katherine* in contrast with the works of Capgrave, Capgrave's elaboration upon episodes in St. Katherine's life before her confrontation with the emperor is starkly visible. Whereas the earlier lives are not interested in Katherine's activities prior to her arrest, Capgrave elaborates upon episodes from Katherine's early life, such as her birth, education, childhood, ascendance to her throne, and mystical marriage to Christ. These additions to St. Katherine's life, especially as shown in Capgrave's version, likely reflected the views of the audience he was writing this account for and provide indications of what standards were expected of people who lived in Lynn at this time.

By observing these differences and similarities, the common threads found throughout all versions set the foundation for understanding the themes and tropes of Katherine's *Life* that Margery would have to be familiar with. Furthermore, in looking at these works in conjunction, the influence of Margery's own work demonstrates how she potentially influenced Capgrave. These threads of connection and influence highlight the way Margery intertwines herself with St. Katherine in a way that her contemporary readers would recognize the resonances of the saint in her own life in an intentional parallel.

Capgrave's version of St. Katherine currently exists in four fifteenth-century manuscripts and shows how late medieval people used saints' lives to understand and navigate their world. Margery's contemporary John Capgrave modified *The Life of Saint Katherine* to address fifteenth-century readers. John Capgrave's account of St. Katherine plays an important role in understanding the values and outlooks circulating in medieval Lynn. Capgrave was born in 1393 and lived until 1464. Not only were John Capgrave and Margery Kempe contemporaries, but also from the same city. John Capgrave was an Augustinian friar and scholar from the city of

Lynn, one of the nine largest cities in England at the time. He was a prolific writer whose work included not only *The Life of Saint Katherine*, but also writing on saints such as “Norbert, Augustine, and Gilbert; a chronicle of England; a collection of historical biographies about people named Henry; a guide to Rome; several theological treatises; and numerous commentaries on the Bible.”<sup>26</sup> As Karen Winstead notes, Capgrave was well trained in logic, grammar, and theology at local Augustinian institutions, in London, and at Cambridge University.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to his prolific writing, Capgrave was the head of the friary of Lynn and was later the head of all English Augustinians. His promotion to head of his religious order suggests that his ideas were acceptable to his contemporaries. He was also well traveled and interacted frequently with elite members of society such as kings and bishops. Capgrave was well known and respected in his community and his version of St. Katherine showcases not only his education, but also, as Karen Winstead observes, “reads as if it were written by someone who had read Chaucer, was conversant with the works of Lydgate and Bokenham and with biblical drama, and knew of Margery Kempe's Book.”<sup>28</sup> Capgrave’s version of St. Katherine included stylistic choices that display his familiarity with the literature of his peers and predecessors and demonstrated a culmination of influences from a variety of different sources. This culmination of influences prevalent in his work reflected the society and literature that Margery and Capgrave both navigated.

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<sup>26</sup> John Capgrave, “The Life of Saint Katherine: Introduction,” in *The Life of Saint Katherine*, ed. Karen A. Winstead (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Capgrave, “The Life of Saint Katherine: Introduction,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> Capgrave, “The Life of Saint Katherine: Introduction,” 6.

According to Karen Winstead, John Capgrave's writing of *The Life of Saint Katherine* was in part a reflection of his own stances on current politics of his time. His political stances were evident in the way that he used St. Katherine's life to make commentary on his views of monarchy and rulership. Capgrave affirms how, for St. Katherine, "study was her only joy, her only pursuit, for her heart at that time was set on nothing else."<sup>29</sup> This line suggests that St. Katherine's passion for study persisted as she grew older. That her heart was "set on nothing else" suggests that she did not have other desires, including any desires for sex or marriage. This is emphasized in the following section of the text, which describes the people's complaints about her exclusive focus on her studies and lack of a husband.

Katherine's refusal to marry and her negligence of the throne in favor of study became a considerable point of contention among her subjects in Capgrave's version. The purported negligence of her duty to rule reflected Capgrave's own society and many English people's displeasure with their own ruler. As Winstead argues, Capgrave's focus on St. Katherine's love of study and education allowed him to develop a political critique of King Henry VI, who was similarly well known for his overabundant piety and his studious nature. In fact, according to Winstead, Capgrave purposely framed St. Katherine in ways that made direct parallels to King Henry VI. Capgrave commented on how St. Katherine, in her love of study, neglected the rule of her people by isolating herself and delegating affairs of state to powerful members of her council and not taking more of an interest in affairs of state herself. As Winstead highlights, this portrayal of Katherine reflected the way Henry VI was seen as self-isolating and neglectful of his own state affairs. For instance, during his reign Henry VI was criticized for his inattentiveness

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<sup>29</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 40.

and for choosing not to “assert his royal authority by visiting the various regions of his realm- a common practice among medieval monarchs and one that Katherine’s lords insist is essential to effective governance,” as the historian Karen Winstead observed.<sup>30</sup> By making this direct comparison and portraying St. Katherine in a way that paralleled King Henry VI, Capgrave provided an avenue through the use of hagiography to craft opinions of England’s political affairs and share them with others. Though *The Life of Saint Katherine* was crafted in a way that ultimately portrayed Katherine in a positive light in terms of religious devotion and sanctity, Capgrave’s version did not shy away from also highlighting the earthly costs of Katherine’s decisions. He made a point in his portrayal of showing the readers that isolating oneself in studies and piety did not necessarily result in good monarchical leadership and ruling.

In fact, Capgrave seemed to stress the importance of balance in governance as displayed by his portrayal of both St. Katherine and the Emperor Maxentius. Though Emperor Maxentius was portrayed as the antagonist and villain in the narrative, Capgrave made a point of highlighting the good aspects of some of his actions in regards to leadership. However, he also highlighted where he fell short. In some ways, Capgrave used Emperor Maxentius as a foil to St. Katherine as a way to juxtapose their individual shortcomings as leaders. As Winstead stated, “Katherine, as we have seen, possesses the proper *character* but lacks the inclination to act, telling her lords that they are wholly responsible for dealing with any lawlessness that might break out in their lands. Maxentius, by contrast, is properly active, but lacks sound character.”<sup>31</sup> Capgrave’s portrayal of both Maxentius and Katherine reflected not only his personal views of the general dissatisfaction with the rulership of the current king, but also suggests the way

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<sup>30</sup> Karen A. Winstead, *John Capgrave’s Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 153.

<sup>31</sup> Winstead, *John Capgrave’s Fifteenth Century*, 148.

hagiography could be used by a fifteenth century person in England to pursue goals beyond the theological. This was not to say that Capgrave did not have any religious motivations in his crafting of St. Katherine's narrative, but rather that his use of hagiography was deeply tied to his personal perceptions of the world. In other words, he used hagiography as a way to pursue both his religious and social goals.

Capgrave prefaced his work by claiming that he was simply translating a prior account of St. Katherine's life. By claiming that he was simply translating a previously written document, Capgrave gave himself a certain safety net in his criticism of figures in high positions of power. This was not only relevant to his critique of the king, but it also pertained to some of his stances that could have received pushback from the Church itself. As Winstead notes, although Capgrave remained fairly orthodox in regards to most Church stances he did not wholeheartedly agree with the increase in Church censorship at the time as reflected in certain parts of his writing in his *Life of St. Katherine* showed a fluctuating sympathy towards the stance against church censorship such as using Katherine's debate with scholars to spread the church's tenets in the vernacular.<sup>32</sup> Winstead argues that Capgrave seemed to advocate a stance that knowledge would lead to faith and that intellectual pursuits in regards to understanding Church teachings in English were not necessarily harmful.<sup>33</sup>

The major danger in such stances was from suspicions that an individual was a Lollard. The Lollard Movement in England could be considered almost a precursor of Protestant thoughts

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<sup>32</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 6.

and ideals. It began in the mid-fourteenth century and continued into the early sixteenth century.

The Lollard Movement followed many of John Wycliffe's ideals. As John H. Arnold describes:

in the 1370s, at Oxford, the theologian John Wyclif had developed a number of controversial positions: an emphasis upon the 'literal sense' of scripture and the desirability of making it accessible to the laity through vernacular translation; calls for disendowment of the church; criticism of the cult of saints and the mechanism of salvation; and worst of all, doubt that the Eucharist truly involved the sacramental transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Some versions of Lollardism included the belief that scripture by itself was the only doctrine needed and that church doctrine was unnecessary. Lollards rejected the idea of transubstantiation, that the Eucharist becomes the body and blood of Christ, and were more open to the idea of spreading scripture to others through the vernacular as they believed that scripture, not the Church, should be the decider of religious authority and tenets. During Capgrave's time in the fifteenth century, Lollardism was considered a heresy in England that could be punishable by death. The Church in response started to enact harsher restrictions and censorship.

Furthermore, the Church grew more suspicious of those preaching outside of Church authority and stricter on the types of work circulating in the vernacular. Though John Capgrave was not a Lollard and did not consider himself to be one, there was still the possibility that his words could cause him to be suspected of being part of their movement.<sup>35</sup> One of the reasons Capgrave's translation could be suspected of Lollardism was that he was writing the *Life* of St. Katherine in the vernacular.

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<sup>34</sup> John H. Arnold, "Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy and Dissent," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004), 77.

<sup>35</sup> Winstead, *John Capgrave's Fifteenth Century*, 78.

In understanding the society Capgrave was navigating, we can better understand Capgrave's motivations for claiming that his version of St. Katherine's life was a translation, rather than an original work. Although the hagiography clearly made allusions to the contemporary issues of his time, Capgrave made space to critique the Church and those in higher positions of power. By giving himself a shield to fall back on, Capgrave was preemptively protecting himself from backlash. In addition, this framing also gave him more freedom as to the content of his writings. In a similar vein, Margery's use of Saint Katherine as a model of emulation provided a shield to protect herself from criticism akin to Capgrave by rooting her actions within religious figures that were highly esteemed in the eyes of her peers.

Considering the context of the church's persecution of Lollardy in England in the fifteenth century, Capgrave's decision to choose St. Katherine as the subject of his writing and also the decision to write in English rather than Latin make sense for the messages he was trying to convey. As a scholar whose pursuit of knowledge was well known, and a saint beloved by both laypeople and clergy alike, St. Katherine was a popular figure to write about and a clever choice for his message pushing back against church censorship. As Winstead highlights, Capgrave could use this foundation to push his ideas that knowledge could create faith within people, such as how it led to St. Katherine's conversion and discovery of Christ. By showcasing how knowledge led St. Katherine to God as opposed to away from him, Capgrave implied that intellectualism in regard to scripture would not lead to heresy but to God instead.<sup>36</sup>

One of the ways Capgrave does this is through his portrayal of St. Katherine and her victorious debate against fifty pagan scholars. As historian Karen Winstead remarks, one of the

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<sup>36</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 6.

unique aspects of Capgrave's version of St. Katherine's debate is the depth to which Capgrave expands on religious doctrine during this scene. Winstead explains:

such long doctrinal disquisitions were in fact rare in saints' lives. By including them, Capgrave is using the genre of the saints' life to teach ordinary men and women some of the nuances of their faith, thus flouting the restrictions on vernacular theologizing favored by many within the Church hierarchy.<sup>37</sup>

From his depiction of this event, Capgrave is shown to oppose church censorship. His expansion of the use of the scholarly debate also reflects his position in society and his education. As a prominent member of the clergy, Capgrave held a position in which he would be less likely vilified for contemplating theological doctrine in his texts in comparison to someone of the laity. In addition, his thorough inclusion of displaying church doctrine through St. Katherine's debate against the fifty pagan scholars reflects his extensive education and knowledge collected throughout his travels. In the event that those of higher authority deemed that his work overstepped the bounds of what was acceptable, "he could protest that he was merely translating the life of a time-honored saint, using a source composed by none other than the venerable church father Saint Athanasius, whose orthodoxy nobody would dream of questioning."<sup>38</sup> By tying his arguments to the lives of St. Katherine, and further claiming that the source for her life was from Saint Athanasius, Capgrave not only uses hagiography to spread his ideals, but also creates a narrative that reflects his perception of his audience of fifteenth century readers. Capgrave's life of St. Katherine highlights his own political, religious, and social motivations and opinions through his work and demonstrates how hagiography could be used as an instrument to achieve these goals.

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<sup>37</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Capgrave, *The Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 7.



## CHAPTER FOUR: MARGERY KEMPE'S AUTO-HAGIOGRAPHY

Although Margery Kempe may not have read John Capgrave's version of Saint Katherine, as he seems to have written it after she wrote her book, she would have been familiar with a general shared understanding of Katherine's *Life* that had similar themes and tropes. By looking at Margery Kempe's use of saints' lives to pursue her religious goals, my argument also illuminates how Margery used these same hagiographies to escape sexual relations with her husband. In this way Margery conforms to her society's standards by emulating well known saints, while in some ways also pushing against them by using them to form her own identity and to work toward her own goals. Actions deemed appropriate to saints were not always acceptable for everyday people in practice as shown by the backlash that Margery Kempe often received from others. However, using hagiographic figures, such as St. Katherine, as a model of emulation provided limited credibility for Margery's actions and gave her examples to use in defense of her behavior.

Considered one of the first autobiographies in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* was most likely written around the 1430s. Although Margery was unable to read and write on her own, she dictated her work to a scribe as a way to record her story. Margery was most likely writing for her peers in Lynn. Though known now mostly for her role as a Christian visionary, Margery was also the daughter of the mayor of Lynn. Her father held the office five times. She was born into a wealthy and prominent merchant class family and was used to navigating amongst elite members of society. Although technically illiterate, she was well versed in religious texts, having had access to other people reading to her and being born into a position of privilege that made resources more readily available to her. Although her religious actions sometimes inspired ire, she still maintained her social status as a member of the merchant elite.

Moreover, although her full manuscript was not rediscovered until the 1930s, previous appearances of excerpts from her book, which had had been published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 and later reprinted in 1521 by Henry Pepwell, suggest that her way of life and writings were valued by some of her contemporaries.<sup>39</sup>

In understanding what kind of knowledge that was available to her as well as the social class in which she was situated, we can have a better comprehension of Margery's choices and why she chose to pursue her goals using the methods and frameworks presented to us in her book. As historian Kate Parker asserted in her research into Lynn's role in shaping Margery Kempe, in her own way Margery could be considered 'well read' as "Margery herself mentions the books which she knew well and says that a particular priest read to her for seven years."<sup>40</sup> Parker also indicates that "Margery was surrounded by a society accustomed to reading, writing, and books, and that she had access locally to better informed mentors and a more varied religious literature than might be supposed."<sup>41</sup> Parker notes the evidence of this in the well established hagiographic influences found in Margery's text.

Understanding Margery's social position also helps to elucidate the factors that made her actions possible. Although she was closer to ordinary people in comparison to other medieval individuals such as ruling kings, nobles, or popes, her status was also a lot more privileged than many everyday women in late medieval England. Margery's encounter with Bishop Peverell of Worcester, which occurred when she was delayed from sailing from Bristol during her journey to

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<sup>39</sup>Barry Windeatt, "Introduction: Reading and Re-reading The Book of Margery Kempe," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Kate Parker, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004), 66.

<sup>41</sup> Parker, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic," 66.

the shrine of St. John at Compostela, exemplifies her privileged status. In response to local suspicions, she was summoned to appear in front of Peverell and was initially given cold treatment. However the bishop made a complete shift in his demeanor when he realized that she was John Brunham's daughter, even going so far as to invite her and her companion to dine with him.<sup>42</sup> Bishop Peverell's changed attitude demonstrates the ways in which Margery's social status allowed her certain privileges. In addition, since Margery was raised in a wealthy merchant family she would not only have access to more resources, but she also would not have needed to leave home at a young age to find work and would remain at her father's home until she was married at the age of twenty.<sup>43</sup>

Just as Capgrave, a member of the clergy, used the *Life of Katherine of Alexandria* to pursue his own goals, Margery Kempe explicitly mentioned St. Katherine, and used her saintly model to provide credibility for her own actions and goals. It is also plausible that in choosing St. Katherine as a model to emulate in her own autobiography and life, Margery found aspects of St. Katherine's story resonated with her on a personal level. Moreover, just as Capgrave used Katherine to protect himself when espousing his political views, Margery Kempe's use of a saint to shape her narrative and frame her actions through direct references to Katherine served in some ways as her safety net from backlash. Both used Katherine for their own goals and exhibited how these motivations could be different.

Margery use of saints' lives as models to craft her own narratives is particularly apparent in her accounts of the miracles she referenced in her own life. A primary marker of sanctity was the presence of miracles in an individual's life, especially when these indicated an individual's

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<sup>42</sup> Parker, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic," 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> Parker, "Lynn and the Making of a Mystic," 66-67.

ability to act as an intercessor between God and people. One of the instances Margery described as a miracle occurred when she was in the church of Saint Margaret during mass. She recounts how:

There fell down from the highest part of the church vault, from under the foot of the rafter, on her head and on her back, a stone which weighed three pounds and a short end of a beam weighing six pounds, so that she thought her back broke asunder, and she fared as if she had been dead for a little while. Soon after she cried, 'Jesus, mercy,' and anon her pain was gone.<sup>44</sup>

Margery Kempe used this event in her life as proof that God showed his favor toward her through miracles occurring in her life.

It is important to note that the way Margery framed her narrative reflects the established way miracles were often written in hagiographic accounts, suggesting that Margery was consciously comparing herself to established saints in her description of this experience. This parallel was starkly shown when she referenced eye witnesses to this event by name. As historian Katherine Lewis states;

such miraculous events in saints' lives needed the eye-witness of a third party to be verified and thus it is significant that this is one of the rare occasions in the book when an attendant layman is identified by name 'Ione of Wyreham', a Lynn mercer, is cited as an onlooker to "þiswondyr".<sup>45</sup>

The explicit naming of an eyewitness demonstrates Margery's familiarity with how saints' narratives were written and how the validity of miracles was typically confirmed.

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<sup>44</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Katherine Lewis, "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe* (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004), 201.

Margery also used miracles in the framework of her autobiography to show that she had the ability to act as an intercessor between people and God. This can be seen when St. Margaret's church was in danger of burning in a fire that had broken out in Lynn and in response to this crisis Margery spent the day in public, crying, weeping loudly, and asking for God's grace and mercy to stop the fire.<sup>46</sup> Following her cries, she recounted that three men with snow on their clothes announced that God had graced them by sending a snowstorm that would put out the fire. The narrative of Margery's book attributed the snow to her prayers and cries to God. By using this event as proof of a miracle and an example of her ability to intercede on people's behalf with God, Margery was presenting herself as a person whose behavior and role can be considered analogous to saints. However, not all of her peers found her actions and behavior acceptable. When the fire in this event occurred, some who had previously criticized Margery Kempe's loud weeping encouraged her to continue her actions, but once the fire was put out some returned to criticizing her for her crying. As Lewis states, many people were "only prepared to believe in Margery's holiness when they [found] themselves in dire straits."<sup>47</sup> Incidences of her purported miracles are shown to have received mixed reactions: for example, some believed that the story of the falling stone did not show God's favor by healing her pain, but was a sign of God's wrath against her.

In her auto-hagiography, Margery Kempe uses saint narratives to frame such negative reactions in a positive and sympathetic light toward herself. For example, she makes direct parallels to St. Katherine of Alexandria when she was arrested and interrogated by the mayor of Leicester. Margery portrayed the interrogation into the accusations that she was a heretic and a

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<sup>46</sup>Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 119-120.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, "Margery Kempe and Saint Making in Later Medieval England," 203.

Lollard by placing the mayor of Leicester who interrogated her in a role paralleling the emperor Maxentius, who interrogated St. Katherine when she was being persecuted.<sup>48</sup> During this exchange the mayor of Leicester is described in her account as telling Margery, “Saint Katherine told what kindred she came of and yet you are not like her, for you are a false strumpet, a false Lollard, and a false deceiver of the people, and therefore I shall have you in prison.”<sup>49</sup> By offering a direct parallel with St. Katherine, Margery depicted her actions and religious efforts as just. Not only is she depicting herself as just, but the comparison between herself and St. Katherine comes from the mouth of her enemy. If someone who holds contempt for her can see parallels between herself and St. Katherine, Margery leads the readers of her book to conclude that even someone who hates her can see the signs of sanctity that she possesses. In addition, Margery’s reaction in the text made allusions to St. Katherine by positioning her circumstance with the mayor as a trial of her endurance against hardship in the name of God’s love, just as martyr saints often went through trials and tribulations within their own hagiographic accounts. This example not only shows a direct correlation between St. Katherine and Margery Kempe, but also how Margery shielded herself from criticism by tying her public pursuit of saintly virginity to the actions done by other saints.

Margery also used saints’ *Lives* to frame her own narrative and relationship with God when she voiced her concerns about no longer being a virgin and what that meant for her in terms of her religious and personal goals. This was shown when she prayed to God about her worries, saying, “A, Lord, maidens dance now merrily in heaven. Shall not I do so? For, because I am no maiden, lack of maidenhood is to me now great sorrow.”<sup>50</sup> Margery’s worries about not

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<sup>48</sup> Arnold, “Margery’s Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent,” 83.

<sup>49</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 38.

being a virgin displayed the pushback that she expected to receive from her peers regarding her actions. Her words also demonstrate a certain awareness that her desire to be like virgin martyr saints might be hindered by her lack of maidenhood in the eyes of God. In response to her concerns, Margery said that God reassured her by saying to Margery:

“I promise you I shall come to your end at your dying with my blessed mother and my holy angels and twelve apostles, Saint Katherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Mary Magdalene, and many other saints who are in heaven, who give great worship to me for the grace that I give to you, God, your Lord Jesus.”<sup>51</sup>

Margery framed her conversation with God in a way that put her on par with other saints. In addition, this interaction with God not only portrayed moments of Margery’s initial self doubt, but also the way she reconciled those doubts in a manner that demonstrated God’s approval of her actions and confirmed her belief that her pursuits were just.

One of the noteworthy things about Margery’s placement of herself in relation to other saints and especially St. Katherine was that she placed herself in the role of Katherine within her narrative as opposed to simply asking for St. Katherine’s intercession. This placement showed that Margery viewed herself as a holy woman who had God’s favor and approval. Her description of God’s response to her remorse about her past lost virginity asserted that God would essentially give her a position on par with the saints at the time of her death and in heaven.

Margery Kempe’s reference to death by beheading in conjunction with her other references to Katherine in her book show the way she further equates herself with virgin martyrs.

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<sup>51</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 38.

Her stated willingness to be beheaded in God's name connects her willingness to die to a desire to enjoy a similar position with God in heaven as other martyrs. Her use of Katherine's *Life* is also noteworthy in that it features two women, St. Katherine and Maxentius' wife, who are willing to abandon their families to suffer beheading for God in the same manner.

Margery likely chose Katherine's *Life* because Katherine's story resonated with her as a woman who chose to pursue God at the expense of her duties as a mother and wife just as both Katherine and Maxentius' wife. It also would have been clear to her audience that Margery's actions paralleled Katherine's *Life*. An audience familiar with these tropes would recognize this parallel. Evidence of this is shown in Capgrave's description of the death of Maxentius' wife that Winstead notes calls back to Margery's expressed wish to be beheaded, indicating that Capgrave may have been familiar enough with Margery's work to include allusions to it in his translation of St Katherine's *Life*. Though Margery herself did not die a martyr, the crafting and performance of her actions within her auto-hagiography frame her in a way that imply her likeness to martyrs.

Margery's desire to remain an active member of society while pursuing chastity was a decision that pushed against social norms. Margery Kempe was married to John Kempe, a burgess of Lynn, with whom she had fourteen children. Margery showed dissatisfaction in her marriage to John for both social and personal reasons. Margery's status as the daughter of the five time mayor of Lynn and her family's status as part of the mercantile elite was one of the factors that contributed to this dissatisfaction. Due to her family's prominence in Lynn, she felt that she was marrying beneath her as her husband's career was not as successful or prestigious as her father's. Though John was not a peasant by any means, he also was not as successful or noteworthy as someone such as Margery would expect her husband to be. In fact by the end of

both her and her husband's life, Margery was the more noteworthy and successful person between the two as a result of her religious endeavors. Though Margery did experience disdain from many people and there were times her husband did seem embarrassed by her or on her behalf, he still continued to accompany her on her pilgrimages. As David Gary Shaw has argued, Margery's travels and pursuit of her religious mysticism \ allowed her husband John opportunities to interact with important members of the clergy from local monks to bishops of prominent cities. John Kempe eventually found that it was more beneficial to actually follow his wife and support her in her religious aspirations than pursue his own success.<sup>52</sup>

The major point of contention in Margery's marriage to John largely had to do with the role of sex – or more accurately Margery's desire to avoid it. Margery did not want to have sex with her husband. However because of medieval expectations of what was required in marriage, Margery was not allowed to simply refuse to have sex with her husband. There was an expectation of what she refers to throughout her narration as having to have sex because of the “debt” of marriage. This marital debt was essentially what medieval society in fifteenth century England and other parts of Europe deemed as spouses having sexual commitments to each other that could not be rejected. Though the concept of ‘conjugal debt’ is present in fifteenth century England, it was not solely limited to this time. Rooted in biblical texts, the ‘conjugal debt’ prevailed throughout the Middle Ages in Europe.<sup>53</sup> Margery faced the dilemma of not wanting to have sex with her husband, but not being allowed to refuse if he decided he wanted to have sex.

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<sup>52</sup> David Gary Shaw, “Social Selves in Medieval England: The Worshipful Ferrour and Kempe,” in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner, 3-21. (Hodder Education and Oxford University Press, 2005.)

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed discussion of the conjugal debt, see Ruth Mazzo Karras, *Medieval Sexualities*, 60.

This dilemma led her to find ways to circumnavigate this problem through financial and religious negotiation.

Margery approached the problem of marital debt through negotiations with her husband using the celebration of religious chastity as the foundations for her arguments. One of the ways Margery tried to avoid sexual relations within her marriage was to persuade her husband to make their marriage a chaste marriage where both parties would take a vow of chastity. Her initial efforts show a degree of fluctuating success as her husband was not keen on having a chaste marriage as shown through their discussions negotiating the 'debt'. Margery ended up bargaining for marital chastity by offering to pay her husband's debts and to socialize with him on Fridays instead of fasting. She bargained:

Grant me that you shall not come in my bed, and I grant you to requite your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God so that you never challenge me by asking the debt of matrimony after this day while you live, and I shall eat and drink on the Friday at your bidding.<sup>54</sup>

Margery's bargain showed that she knew she technically could not refuse her husband. With few options available she used her religious pursuits as the reason she did not want to have sex with him, which gave her an avenue to state why she was refusing his advances.

Margery Kempe's pursuit to stop having sex with her husband and avoid any sexual relations in the future also took on other strategies outside of direct negotiation with her husband. She continued to use religion and chastity to achieve her goals through wearing white clothing as well as seeking approval from authoritative church figures. By dressing herself in white clothing, Margery publicly announced her claim to sanctity and virginity, her rejection of sexual relations

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<sup>54</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 20.

with her husband, and her humility. Margery recounts one of her efforts to wear white clothing in her book where she says to the Bishop of Lincoln, “My lord, if it pleases you, I am commanded in my soul that you shall give me the mantle and the ring and clothe me all in white clothes.”<sup>55</sup> Margery’s words demonstrate one of the ways in which she attempted to navigate sexual relations within her marriage and live a chaste life. Margery, as opposed to the other saints discussed previously, was not a virgin and had already been married with children. By asking a Bishop to approve her request, she sought validity for her claim to live a life of married chastity that would be difficult to argue against as she would have official church approval for her actions. In addition to having official church approval, Margery would also be declaring to the world that she was not going to have sex with anyone.<sup>56</sup>

Margery’s use of religion as a way to escape sex within her marriage does not mean she was not serious about her religious pursuits. She may very well have been devoutly religious and perhaps wanted to dedicate her life to God as a chaste woman in emulation of other chaste or virgin saints. However it is also possible to read her actions as someone who was navigating her relationship with sex, sexual attraction, and her own identity in terms of its relationship to her religious experience and sexual experiences. Looking at the way she describes her thoughts on sex, it is also possible that her experiences may align similarly with asexual experiences and that her sexual identity overlapped with her religious desires as well. In this way Margery’s sexual orientation and religious beliefs and pursuits would be working in conjunction with one another.

For instance, Margery Kempe illustrates her aversion to sex when she recalls how her husband presented the hypothetical question as to whether if he were to be slain unless she had

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<sup>55</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginitly*, 221-224.

sex with him, she would save him. In response Margery Kempe replies, “Forsooth I had rather see you be slain than we should turn again to our uncleanness.”<sup>57</sup> Margery Kempe’s words here highlight not only how much she wants to continue in a chaste marriage instead of reverting back to having to have sex with her husband, but also demonstrates in her answer that by medieval standards she would not be considered a good wife. Margery’s strong feelings of aversion to sex here and also her dedication to pursuing chastity could potentially be seen as an overlap between her religious identity and sexual identity. Margery does genuinely seem to want to pursue a life of chastity and live the rest of her life in this way. Her religious desire to live a chaste life and to follow Christ could also potentially be overlapping with her personal desire to not have sex with others, especially her husband.

Though Margery was said by her husband to not be a good wife for her answer, it does not necessarily contradict her pursuit of following Christ’s model of sacrifice. The refusal to have sex even to save someone’s life may initially appear contradictory to the model of Christ’s self sacrifice, however Margery’s refusal in actuality aligns more with the medieval women’s model of Christ.

Though the medieval understanding of the model of Christ often emphasized self sacrifice it did not apply to sex acts. In fact the sacrifice of one’s own family and even children were seen as acceptable sacrifices in order to follow God by living chastely. In *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, Barbara Newman looks at the roots of a Christina tradition of sacrificing children to obey and follow God in both the story of Isaac and Abraham, and also in Christian hagiography. According to Newman, the ultimate paradigm of maternal martyrdom to

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<sup>57</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 18.

follow God's will is in Mary, the mother of Christ, accepting her son's sacrifice of his life for the sins of others.<sup>58</sup> Other hagiographies featuring mothers sacrificing or abandoning children include Guibert of Nogent's hagiographic record of his mother, who after being widowed, waited until his adolescence and then placed him in a monastery at the age of twelve so she could pursue an ascetic life and follow God.<sup>59</sup> As Newman describes, some of these works featuring maternal martyrdom even posit that their sacrifice of their children and family model Christ's Passion. Mary's willingness to allow for the sacrifice of her son for the sins of others to follow God demonstrated the belief that following God's heavenly will was placed higher than the demands of earthly life. Margery's answer that she would prefer to have her husband slain may not necessarily make her a good wife, but it did not detract from making her a good Christian. On the contrary, it provided an established foundation of putting God above both her husband and children in pursuit of her religious vocation.

Margery's desire to pursue chastity and a religious life may be completely genuine, but her actions also make it clear that she is using religion as a way to simultaneously avoid sexual relations on a personal level. This discomfort is starkly apparent when she states how "after this time she had never desire to common fleshly with her husband, for the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she had rather, she thought, eat or drink the ooze, the muck in the channel, than to consent to any fleshly commoning, save only for obedience."<sup>60</sup> This passage demonstrated that Margery considered sex with her husband to be repulsive. She found the idea and action of having sex with him again so deplorable that she asserted that she would rather

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<sup>58</sup> Newman, "Cruel Corage," 82-83.

<sup>59</sup> Newman, "Cruel Corage," 85. For other examples of maternal martyrdom refer to Newman's discussions of Juetta of Huy (1158-1228), Margaret of Cortona, and Angela of Foligno.

<sup>60</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 10.

consume muck from the channel. Margery's reaction to her husband also indicated that she did not feel sexual attraction to him. This lack of sexual attraction was apparent as she revolted against even the idea of looking at her husband in a sexual light in relation to herself. Though not all asexual people are sex repulsed, Margery showed a similar reaction and experience that does overlap with the experiences of some asexual people in their relationship to sex and sexual attraction who are sex repulsed.

If Margery has been established to have been crafting her religious identity using hagiography as demonstrated by Margery's references to Saint Katherine, it is viable to explore the possibility that her crafting of her sexual identity could be a part of her construction of self as well. In Margery's formation of identity and how she viewed herself, she may not have seen her feelings toward sex and attraction as divorced from her religious goals. She may have understood them as aligned and working in tandem. There exists the potential to view Margery Kempe as a woman who may have had a pre-modern sexual orientation that would have exhibited similarities in experiences to present-day asexuality. However this observation does not assert that Margery was asexual in the same way as someone who is asexual in the present-day. Her sexual experiences and identity as shown in the complex navigation of how she wove her identity together with hagiography demonstrated how her performance of her self-perception was deeply rooted in her environment, society, and religion.

One of the initial instances that may appear to complicate an asexual reading of Margery is the three years of temptation she mentions near the beginning of her book. Margery recounts that:

In the second year of her temptation it befell that a man she loved well said unto her on Saint Margaret's Eve before evensong that despite anything, he would lie by her and have his lust of his body, and she should not withstand him, for, if he

might not have his will that time, he said, he should else have it another time, she could not choose.<sup>61</sup>

In her description of the event she says that he said those words to see what she would do, but she believed in the earnestness of his words and intent. She later approaches him after the service of evening prayer to have sex with him thinking he would act on his words, but he says she can't know his intent and they part ways for the night without anything further happening between them. She could not stop thinking about the man and his words and described how after they part that night his words vex her. As she lay next to her husband that night she contemplated about how if she wanted to have sex she technically could have it with her husband but the thought was "so abominable unto her that she might not endure it, and yet it was lawful unto her at a lawful time if she had wanted"<sup>62</sup> Eventually, as she describes, she did go to him:

At the last, through the inopportunity of temptation and the lack of discretion, she was overcome, and consented in her mind, and went to the man to learn if he would then consent to her. And he said he wouldn't for all the good in this world; he had rather been hewn as small as meat for the pot. She went away all shamed and confused within herself, seeing his stableness and her own unstableness.<sup>63</sup>

The event of Margery's temptation in her second year of pursuing virginity, when read as part of an inquiry of asexual resonances, raises questions concerning demisexuality, consent, and the way religion tied together with the navigation of medieval sexuality. The asexual resonances in Margery's story are not necessarily negated by her instances of sexual attraction to others. As Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper discuss in *Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual*

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<sup>61</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 13.

*Archive* “Infelicitous language aside, such a limiting search for “true asexuality” (not to mention ‘hard-core asexuality’) closes down queerly asexual possibilities for archiving, emphasizing wholesale and rigid asexual identity over asexual moments, glimpses, resonances.”<sup>64</sup> In understanding sexuality and specifically asexuality as a spectrum, Margery’s instance of desire does not necessarily prevent Margery from fitting under the umbrella of asexuality. Margery mentions that the man she planned to sleep with was someone she ‘loved well’, there is the possibility that Margery could fall under demisexuality as someone who only feels attraction to those she has a close bond to. On the other hand, Margery could also be read as heterosexual through this example of her sexual desire. A definitive label of Margery’s sexuality is however not the goal of this inquiry.

This study of Margery’s life is not aiming to answer the question if Margery Kempe was asexual or not asexual. Rather, the goal of looking at Margery through an asexual lens and observing asexual resonances in her life is more about the questions it raises about how medieval sexuality is navigated. The incident with the man described above, as demonstrated by the words he uses when he first approaches Margery, was non-consensual and could be interpreted as threatening by the way he described how he would have her whether she chose to be with him or not. One reading of the events could be that Margery later went to the man because she felt threatened and may have feared what he would do later. However, another interpretation of the events could also be that her initiative in approaching the man after they initially parted and met with him a second time to see if he was willing to consent to have sex with her could indicate a growing sexual attraction to this man that she had an established bond with. Another further nuance to the situation is Margery’s thoughts on feeling lust for this man as indicative of God

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<sup>64</sup> Przybylo, and Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive”, 301.

forsaking her.<sup>65</sup> Margery's perception that her sexual desire was a sign of God abandoning her reflected how religion was intertwined in her perception of the navigation of her sexuality. The idea of God abandoning her combined with her feelings of sexual desire trouble her greatly and her contemplation regarding the matter reflects how religion informs the way Margery performs and perceives sexual desire in relation to herself. Her attraction to this man that she describes as 'well loved' by her also marks a contrast to her lack of attraction to her husband as even though she is described as feeling lust toward this other man, it is not simply the act of sex that she seeks but sex with this specific person. The separation of sex as an act versus feelings of sexual attraction by Margery is shown in her description of how even though the man's words tempt her to have sex, the idea of having sex with her husband is still abominable and something she does not think she can endure. Similarities to demisexual experiences of only feeling attraction after a close bond has formed between the parties involved could potentially apply to Margery in light of her reaction. On the other hand, heterosexual experiences could also be a possibility of reading this event. However these two orientations are not the only possibilities to consider, rather Margery's sexuality remains open especially when taking into account the dubious nature of consent both in the proposition by the man described in this event and in the lack of consent in the conjugal debt of her marriage.

Though Margery was navigating a society that stressed and privileged heterosexual marriage and relationships for people outside of the clergy, to assume the default that she must have been heterosexual boxes her into a rigid definition that cannot be completely confirmed in light of the existence of the conjugal debt. Margery's lack of choice to deny sex with her husband casts doubt on whether Margery's sexual actions could be equated with sexual

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<sup>65</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 12.

attraction. By using our understanding of how present-asexuality is understood, we can use a similar understanding to view Margery's situation that her sexual acts did not automatically equal sexual attraction and orientation. This is not to cancel out the possibility that Margery experienced heterosexual attraction. By opening the possibility that Margery can be read through an asexual lens that juxtaposes similar experiences does not confirm she was asexual. Instead it opens the possibility that she could be experiencing her sexual identity in a way where she could be asexual but she could also be a multitude of different sexualities that may not have a label.<sup>66</sup> There is potential worth exploring in the unknowability of how exactly Margery may have viewed her sexual orientation even if she herself may not have used the term sexual orientation to think about her sexual attraction, sexual repulsion, and other feelings relating to sex.

To view Margery through an asexual lens explores the possibility that Margery could exist in a shifting space of uncertainty and possibility. If the consensus is that pre-modern sexualities were different from present-day sexuality, then heterosexuality as an orientation must also be put under the same level of scrutiny and historical specificity. To fully broaden the possibility of Margery's text and our understanding of medieval sexuality, there needs to be a move away from the assumption that Margery Kempe and other medieval figures were heterosexual as a default. This is not to say that Margery could not have been heterosexual. She very well could be. The precarious nature of assuming heterosexuality as the default "normal"

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<sup>66</sup>Meghan L. Nestel, "A Space of Her Own: Genderfluidity and Negotiation in The Life of Christina of Markyate," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55, No. 1 (2019): 100-134. Nestel talks about the discussion of "third" as a gender category and the discussions by scholars such as Jack Halberstam's review of Marjorie Garber's work and how "third" as a gender is not singular and narrow definitions ignore the multitudes of multiple "thirds" and possibilities outside of the binary. Though Nestel's work on Christina of Markyate work focuses on gender and genderfluidity, the theories discussed can be applied to sexuality as well. Just as gender can have multiple "thirds", sexuality in its wide spectrum should be considered with the same degree to the possibilities of its many multitudes.

state and not viewing it as another category of sexuality in need of similar scrutiny closes the doors of new perspectives and potentially runs the risk of skewing our perception of history.

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