APOCALYPTIC MOTHER: REVELATIONS OF A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

by

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ABSTRACT

JULIE BRUCE. Apocalyptic Mother: Revelations of a World Turned Upside Down in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. (Under the direction of DR. JOANNE MAGUIRE ROBINSON)

The Book of Margery Kempe is a fifteenth-century memoir that recounts the transformation of an English prophet or mystic from a “sinful wretch” to a vessel for the “Holy Ghost.” She interprets this change in her life as one from abundance and fertility to barrenness. The transitional moment in her life reflects on the trauma experienced with her first pregnancy during which she feared her own death. From this moment forward, she progresses in stages through a series of revolutions towards the role of a prophet, with a message of union and inclusion. The evidence for this claim derives from the biblical texts re-contextualized through her experiences in England and abroad. Kempe most welcomes the experiences of mothers and their children, desiring to reunite those who are separated through her divine gift of tears. This paper analyzes Kempe’s propheticism alongside the models in her book (i.e. the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene) to suggest that the danger she poses as a public mother compares more closely with the Old Testament apocalyptic mother, Rachel, who is cast out of society for a similar threat.

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Margery Kempe recounts a transformation in the life of a fifteenth-century English prophetess. This prophetess situates her narrative alongside the hagiographies of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, but scholarship on the relationship between Kempe and these biblical figures questions the continued presence of Kempe's voice after her supposed union with the Virgin Mary. Instead of writing a mystical narrative, she appears to scholars like Clarissa Atkinson to be developing an autobiography. Yet, original scholarship in the 1970s contemplated her mysticism because there are more voices in the book than just her own. The multiple voices throughout the book suggest that Kempe is not presenting herself as a mystic attempting divine union, but a prophetess who uses the authority of those figures to promote her own message. The prophet status of Kempe evokes attention from priests around her as she presents them with a paradox that defies conceptual norms. She claims that she mothered fourteen children before becoming a public figure, wherein she continues her mothering role. This transition presents a threat to priests who develop mothering personas in relation to their religious communities and to her union with God. Her union with God is contingent upon her abandonment of familial and territorial ties, but she recounts the mothering of one of her children at the end of her book. In partly pursuing this union, but remaining in some ways tied to her home and family, she becomes a liminal figure. In this liminality, Kempe uses biblical texts read to her by priests and re-contextualizes them in fifteenth-century England. The result is an apocalyptic message based on the trauma

she experienced during her first pregnancy. This message appears to suggest the reunion of mothers and their children, which can then be broadly construed as a doctrine of inclusion wherein no child of God is left behind.

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CHAPTER 1: SUMMARY OF KEMPE'S BOOK

The Book of Margery Kempe is a fifteenth-century memoir that recounts the transformation of an English prophet from a "sinful wretch" to a vessel for the "Holy Ghost." She interprets this change in her life as one from abundance and fertility to barrenness. This transition frees her from the traumatic experience she endured during the birth of her first child, after which, she was tortured by demons, refused to eat, and isolated herself from friends and family. The denial of her current circumstance spurns a slow distancing from her life as a married mother, which she associates with danger and death. Marriage and children go hand in hand for Kempe because they are closely aligned in the mind of her husband. After this initial scare, she is uncomfortable continuing to engage in sexual relations with him. Once she receives the gift of weeping, she cries out to Christ so that he will ward off her husband's touch. This crying for help becomes her weapon against the sin of lust and sexuality. This avenue through which she achieves distance from her husband and family compares with manners of distancing from current circumstance throughout ancient and medieval Christianity.

During this phase of denial, Christ appears to her with intent to pull her out of this state. Following his appearance, she resumes eating and socializing. She also dresses in higher fashion and starts a brewing business. These changes in her manner of life appear to represent an attempt to create an identity distinguished from that of her husband. Her scribe explains, "Her whole desire was to be respected by people." (16-17) She

constantly craved more to add to her persona, to create an independent selfhood. Christ appears to her once more after her failed endeavor at creating her own business and releases her from her husband's sexual bondage by encouraging her to deny the body. This visitation follows with penance for her bodily sins. The reaction by her peers was that they refused to associate with her. So, once again she is engaging in an act of distancing herself from others. She oscillates between engaging and distancing as a tactic for avoiding complete annihilation, but also allowing for the opportunity of getting out of the current situation.

This second transition comes with temptations which manifest almost wholly in the form of bodily lust, suggesting that this is the primary obstacle with which she deals. The major temptation occurs in the Church of St. Margaret, in which a man shows interest in sleeping with her, but when she returns to consent to the affair, he refuses to have her. She goes into deep despair weeping in the Church of St. Margaret for her naivety, when Christ comes to her asking "Daughter, why are you weeping so sorely? I have come to you, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross suffering bitter pains and passion for you. I, the same God, forgive you your sins to the uttermost point." (23) This response is repeated throughout the book. It distinguishes from Kempe's weeping in self-pity and the weeping that is to save the world from sin. Old English homilies separate these types of weeping, some holy and others less holy.

This moment leads to a third transition. Kempe refers to three biblical stories: the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight to Egypt. The symbolism of the stories correlates with a departure from fertility and monoculture, in her mind. I argue this case because after she connects with the Virgin Mary through these biblical passages,

she soon decides to go on pilgrimage. The point of her pilgrimage is not so much a separation as her husband goes alongside her much of the way, but it is an attempt to create union with foreigners as well as those native to her own country. As she traveled around England, various priests and church officials interrogated her perceived power to communicate with the Holy Spirit. One monk in Canterbury said, “Either you have the Holy Ghost or else you have a devil within you, for what you are speaking here to us is Holy Writ, and that you do not have of yourself.” (34) She told them a story of laughter in the face of rejection, to which they could not understand why she would laugh at people with such disdain for her. The world is topsy turvy as she laughs at those who would typically make her cry and she cries for those who she deems worthy of her tears. They threatened to burn her, causing her to reflect on the idea of dying for Christ. She appreciated the notion in theory, but she is fearful of death, and thus imagined a beheading as an easy death. Though, Christ assured her that “no man shall slay you.” (37)

Following her beginning interactions with priests around her home in England, she travels to Rome, Jerusalem, and walks along the Santiago de Compostela to see the places where Christ visited. Her husband and other Englishmen were to sail with her and God assured her that no one should die in the ship that carries her. These companions left her quickly once they noticed her obnoxious crying, but her husband stayed trusting the Lord wherever he sent her. Their next mission was to visit the Bishop of Lincoln, where she planned to receive the mantle of chastity and the ring symbolizing her marriage to Christ. The Bishop told her that he needed more proof of her worth, that after her trip to Jerusalem she may be ready. He suggested the archbishop may give her the items she

desired. Since this book is not in order, there are several chapters that recount flashbacks to a vision that happened long ago. So, in the next chapter she writes that the Lord commanded her to stop having children long before her pilgrimage. These statements about the state of her personal life are interspersed with visions that sometimes elude a frame of time altogether, and other times reference her current experiences.

As she emerges from a series of contemplative conversations with Christ, she is encouraged to visit a woman before going to Jerusalem. Kempe assures this woman that her husband is in purgatory, where he will remain for thirty years, but he will achieve salvation. As she re-enters a contemplative state, she laments her sexuality, wishing that she had been killed as soon as the priest baptized her. The Lord forgives her for these sins, promising that she will be placed among saints Mary Magdalene and Margaret. Her first prophecy occurred in the following chapter when she declared in the church of St. Margaret that a perfectly well man would be dead soon. She also prophesies that those who are sick will be well. When she arrived in Germany, her companions from England treated her with hostility. She retorted that she could continue her love for God in Germany as in England. Her scribe recounts this response writing, "At these words her companions were angrier than they were before, and their anger and unkindness were a matter of great unhappiness to this creature, for they were considered very good men, and she greatly desired their love, if she might have had it to the pleasure of God." (68) With this disagreement, she finds another group in Germany to join. They dressed her in a white sack to make her look like a fool, but others still held her in higher regard than all the others. She angered them once again when she refused to eat meat with them, so they handed her off to the legate and "he received her as though she had been his mother."

(71) This man helped her adjust to German life by converting her money into the foreign currency. Then, an old man who the Lord sent to be her guide came along, but he told her that he did not want any harm caused to him on account of the attention she drew. When she arrived in Italy, her former English companions asked her back into their group. From there, they traveled to Venice together, but once they arranged a ship for Jerusalem, they tried to ostracize her once more by not arranging for any supplies to be given to her. She responded by telling them that Christ revealed to her that the ship was unsafe. They transferred to another ship by her command, but they took away her supplies when they prepared to settle in for the night.

Upon arrival, she prepared to visit the church of the Holy Sepulchre, whereupon the Franciscans directed her to the places where Christ suffered. Throughout this trip she wept often, but her scribe writes that these tears came to her unexpectedly as "she never knew the time nor hour when they would come." (75) Kempe also felt as though she had very little control over her crying as she often tried to hold it in for fear of ridicule. Yet, these tears are special, because the men and women who cry for some loss in the world do not please the Lord as she does. According to Kempe, these weepers could not bear the suffering that comes with the tears for the loss of Christ.

When she arrived at Mount Quarentyne her companions would not help her up the mountain, so "a Saracen took her under his arm and led her up the high mountain." (80) Her scribe writes about this visit explaining, "The Saracens also made much of her, and conveyed and escorted her about the country wherever she wanted to go. And she found all people good and gentle to her, except her own countrymen." (82) This memory of her experience as hailed more worthy by foreigners than Englanders could very well convey

her message that Christ belongs to all, not just those in her home country. Her next journey was to Rome, where she encountered a German priest. She prayed for thirteen days that the priest would understand her language, whereupon he came to her and could understand every word she spoke in English. Again, she tries to reconcile the differences between herself and foreigners. She became friends with this priest and he told her to take off her white clothes. In result, an unfriendly priest came to her and told her that he was glad she began wearing black again for he can now tell that she has a devil inside her. To this snarky remark, she says, "Sir, I hope I have no devil within me, for if I had a devil within me I should be angry with you, you know. And sir, I don't think I am at all angry with you for anything you can do to me." (92) In this interaction, it appears that she does present a threat to priests, but she aruges that an angry woman is the true threat to Christianity, not the speaking woman. Both are condemned in various places, but to Kempe, the angry woman would be much worse.

Her next experience in Rome occurs as she sees women carrying boys through the streets. She imagines that those boys were Christ, whereupon she weeps copiously. These visions also extended to handsome older men who she thought she could marry. With these thoughts, she contemplates her marriage to Christ and the Holy Father, and Christ becomes intimate with her in her bed. After this occurrence, Christ tells her "you are to me a true mother to all the world, because of that great charity which is in you . . ." (97) This represents another progression for Kempe as in this instance she becomes the wife of Christ and the mother to the world. Next, Christ tells her to give away all of her money as is mirrored in the book of Job. This moment testifies to her increasing need to show her complete devotion to Christ. He assures her that she will be alright financially

because as he tells her, “I have friends in every country, and I shall cause my friends to comfort you.” (99) She interacted with his friends through weeping, whereupon they would offer her money for her sorrows. For the remaining period of time she is in Rome, she witnesses the Passion in the relationship between a mother and son, wherein the mother nursed the child until the child ran to Kempe. As the child went back and forth to his mom and Kempe, she noticed the mother’s look of sorrow when the child left. Kempe wept at the sadness the mother felt. In another instance, Kempe meets a priest who calls her “mother.” (103) Upon finding her, he decides to help her find accommodations along her journey.

Soon after she decided to return home to England. When she returned she fell sick to the point where she felt she might die. As she contemplated her death, she decided that she would like to go to Santiago first. She stayed in Santiago for fourteen days and then returned home. Upon her return, she is accused of Lollardy by the Mayor of Leicester, John Arnesby. He threw her into prison where she struggled with the Steward who was confused that she did not fear her imprisonment. Soon they declared her to be a good woman and let her go. At her release, she recited the Articles of Faith to prove her innocence. Next, she travels to York, where she is stopped for being out her part of the country without her husband. They ask for a letter from her husband regarding his permission for her placement, but when she is unable to produce one they throw her into prison. They ask her if she is a virgin and she declares that she is not. They tell her that she should not be teaching others if she is not a virgin. She answers, “I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live” (134) She then told him a tale about a horrible bear that ate flowers and then

"turning his tail towards a priest, discharged them out his rear end," to remind the archbishop of his sins of lust and gluttony. The archbishop liked the story so much that he set her free. As soon as she prepared to board her next boat, she was captured again as "the greatest Lollard in all this part of the country." (137) They accused her of lying about the pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome because it conflicted with Lollardy. She is presented with this accusation a couple more times on her journey back home to Bishop's Lynn, where she returns to the Church of St. Margaret.

Following her return, the Lord tempts her for twelve days with impure thoughts of naked men because she refused to believe any revelation that Christ sent her regarding the damned. He explains to her that she must recognize the difference between Christ speaking to her and the devil. Then, she must choose which voice she prefers. This exercise is intended to force her to acknowledge that some people will be damned. Though, later in the book she continues to hold to the notion that everyone is capable of salvation. The pressing relevance of Christ to Kempe baffles those around her as when she visited a lady's house where she saw an image of the *pieta.* She began to weep and the woman's priest told her, "Woman, Jesus is long since dead." (156) She responded, "Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so, I think, it ought to be to you and to all Christian people." Time and place is blurred in Kempe's life as she works to create a meaningful narrative for her salvation and the salvation of others. Christ reminds her that he sent St. Paul to convince her of her salvation and also that she should be appreciative as he says, "you have your will in the matter of chastity as if you were a widow, although your husband is still living and in good health." (169) The ability to live

as a widow while her husband is still alive is one that grants her the privilege to travel, speak, and dress as she wishes.

In addition to this reminder of his benevolence, Christ directs Kempe to begin eating meat again so that she will be able to endure her “perfection of weeping.” (171) In the next chapter, she recalls a fire at the Guildhall of the Trinity in Bishop’s Lynn. Her confessor looked to her for direction on what to do with the sacrament as the church was burning. She encouraged him to throw the sacrament into the fire, placing the body of Christ with the mother church. Once again, Kempe symbolically reunites the mother and son. When a snowstorm suddenly came and quenched the fire, she cried loudly in thanks. Those around her said, “. . . our Lady never cried. ‘Why do you cry in this way?—and she said, because she could not do otherwise.” (172) This statement, first, suggests that Kempe publicly claimed to emulate the Virgin Mary, and second, shows that Kempe is more concerned with what her tears convey in her own message than whether they can authentically be identified with the Virgin Mary.

A more accurate reflection of her mission is found in her witness to a man in the church of St. Margaret for whom she was very concerned. She asked him what bothered him and “He said things were very difficult for him, because his wife had just had a baby, and she was out of her mind.” (186) They took her away because she felt demons all around her and would not let anyone touch her. Kempe visited her in the room where she was bound every day, praying for her until God restored her wits. The experience of this woman reflects Kempe’s own personal issues with pregnancy at the beginning of her transition. The problems that this woman faces—the inability to care for her child after its birth--are the ones that Kempe feels she has a duty to fix. In the following chapter,

Kempe's husband falls down the stairs of their home and is badly injured, so she returns to care for him. She lived with him for years afterwards as he slowly digressed, needing more attention. The time this kept her from contemplation concerned her, but she found a way to turn it into a punishment for her former lust towards him.

In the following chapter, Christ explains her gift of tears as a manifestation of his divine power. He relays, "I sometimes give you slight weeping and soft tears, as a token that I love you. And sometimes I give you great cries and roarings, to make people afraid of the grace that I put into you, in token that I wish that my mother's sorrow be known through you, so that men and women might have the more compassion of her sorrow that she suffered for me." (191-192) Christ continues with analogies to thunderstorms and gentle rains—language that is most prevalent in the book of Job. On Palm Sunday she has another revelation that many people will die, but she reconciles this negativity with the vision that Christ will break into hell and save all of the devil's souls. Next, she saw the Virgin Mary swooning at her son's crucifixion. Christ then told her that she "shall be crowned as queen of heaven, as lady of all the world, and as empress of hell." (197) At the end of her vision, she sees the Virgin Mary asking for her son's body to be given to her after his death because she is unwilling to part with him. Kempe then imagines herself caring for the Virgin Mary after his death, trying to offer her food, to which she replies, "Give me no food but my own child." (204) Later in the vision, Christ appeared to her, the Virgin, and Mary Magdalene as described in the gospel accounts. Kempe explains her following thoughts writing that when she failed to weep, she felt sad, but when she was once again given the gift of tears, she returned to a happy state. The topsy

turvy emotions reflect her desire to become the opposite of what she is for the salvation of others.

Continuing her contemplation, she learns from an angel that her name is written in the Book of Life, a relief for Kempe who felt unworthy of salvation for her earlier temptations with lustful thoughts. Then, when she entered the Church of St. Margaret she has a vision so vivid that she imagines touching the feet of Christ. Touching Christ is the closest Kempe comes to a divine union. At a later time, she returns to write Book 2 of her memoir. She states that there was an important occurrence after writing the first book, which involved her son. She took it upon herself to save him from his attachment to worldly goods as a merchant. Her first prescription to him was to avoid women or God would punish him. He did not take her advice and grew pimples all over his face. Kempe prayed that his face would heal and when he was returned to good health, he married a woman in Germany. This appeased her as she felt that his new wife would keep him from his former lustful ways. Appreciative of the blessings that he received, her son returned to England to tell his mother how his life was improved. Soon after returning home, he fell sick and died. Since his wife desired to return home to Germany, Kempe escorted her. On her journey, she was asked to go on pilgrimage to Wilsnack, where the blood of Christ was kept. The man regretted asking her soon after, but had no choice but to stay with her even though he was very fearful. At this time, Kempe tells her age—sixty years old—as she recounts how much harder it was to keep up with this young man guiding her. When they reached Aachen, her group decided that she could no longer travel with them because she posed too much of a danger. She stayed alone that night, where she was visited by priests who called her “an Englishwoman with a tail,” among other hurtful

insults. (248) The company she took the next day was among the beggars. They wore no clothes to avoid vermin, but Kempe felt uncomfortable removing her clothes, so she attracted the critters. Next, she met a nice and wealthy woman in London who agreed to travel with her, but once she returned to join her, the woman said, “What! Do you think to go with me? No, Ill have you know that Ill not get involved with you.” (252) Kempe returns home in fear, trying to keep at least two women close to her so that she will not be taken by any man. When she arrives, she is told that her confessor was very angry with her for leaving and that she should not expect to find many friends. God helped her gain their forgiveness and she repented afterwards, saying, “grant me in this life a well of tears springing plenteously, with which I may wash away my sins through your mercy and your goodness.” (261) Book 2 then ends with a prayer to the Lord starting each askance with “I cry you mercy.” It seems as though the ending of the book is the culmination of all her weeping to strip away all of the mistakes and trials endured throughout her journey.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Margery Kempe's book is simple and straightforward compared to many other divinely inspired treatises. Yet, despite her writing in vernacular, mundane language, some debate continues on how her book should be interpreted. Some scholars disagree with her mystical status, while others strongly suggest that her book matches closely with those of mystical authors such as Julian of Norwich and St. Bridget of Sweden. Nancy Bradley Warren provides a preliminary summation of the feminist scholarship on Margery Kempe's book. In the beginning of her essay she notes that studying medieval English texts is a fairly recent endeavor, starting only within the last twenty years. One of the first studies of Kempe's book was that of Evelyn Underhill in 1963, who claimed that Margery Kempe did not qualify, in any way, as a mystic. Underhill suggested that Kempe simply suffered from a "hysterical bent." This branding of Kempe as irrational derives from a misunderstanding of medieval religious thought and practice. Her flamboyant outbursts were to be understood, in her own words, as a manifestation of God's message through her.

In the following decades of the 1970s and 1980s scholars began to notice the lack of historicity in Underhill's definitive statement. Emily Hope Allen was the first of these scholars, who proposed that placing Kempe within the context of other medieval holy women might give us a better picture of what her behavior meant during her time period.

Warren understands Allen's scholarship as a precursor to that which arose in the 1990s by Caroline Walker Bynum and the school of New Historicism. Yet, before this shift, another trend arose in the 1980s that privileged post-Freudian feminist psychoanalytic applied to the behavior of medieval mystics. These scholars include Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Warren explains that this methodology was and is still often used in mystical scholarship, but Liz Herbert McAvoy, while finding their theories useful at times, believes that there is a serious problem with ahistoricity and "a tendency towards an essentialist view of the feminine with the application of contemporary post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory to medieval texts."[1]

Following McAvoy's acceptance and objection towards this methodology, Warren turns to the thoughts of Caroline Walker Bynum, who places the female body at the center of the medieval world. It is also during this period that excerpts from Margery Kempe's book begin to appear in the *Norton Anthology of British Literature.* Included in this era of scholarship are Sarah Beckwith, Karma Lochrie, and Lynn Staley. Each play a large role in my understanding of Margery Kempe's mysticism. Sarah Beckwith lends a view of the problems Kempe encounters with creating an authority for her text, Karma Lochrie examines how the mystical text is read as the female body as well as how laughter represents a feminine critique of patriarchal society, and Lynn Staley and Clarissa Atkinson discuss the genre of Kempe's text. Clarissa Atkinson argues for the autobiographical nature of the text and Lynn Staley claims that the work is actually best

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[1] Nancy Bradley Warren, "Feminist Approaches to Middle English Religious Writing: The Cases of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich," *LIC3 Literature Compass* 4, no. 5 (2007)., 1384.

thought of as fiction. Staley distinguishes between Kempe the author and Margery the character to suggest that Kempe is a social activist seeking a worldly revolution.[2]

Since Kempe appears to carry out a mission throughout her book, I argue that Margery Kempe is a mystical prophet. I agree with Sarah Beckwith's recognition that the problem with placing her book among those of mystical authors is her refusal to become absorbed into Christ, but I also question whether any of the mystical authors completely become absorbed into God. Her book is similar to an autobiography as Clarissa Atkinson claims, but at the beginning of her book it is written, "Her whole desire was to be respected by people."[3] While this is before her conversion experience, it remains crucial aspect of Kempe's identity. She is not content with simply reporting her life story, as most autobiographers are not. Her life must have purpose and she must be influential for otherwise she would be revealed as nothing but an average layperson. While she recognizes this lack of humility at the beginning of her book, she is unable to completely abandon her individuality. The problem is one of authenticity. The public display of her imitation of the Virgin Mary and Christ brands her a danger to those around her, because she is a mother of fourteen claiming to be a virgin. The question of the genre of Kempe's book challenges the categories of autobiography and mystical narrative, suggesting that there is little distinction between the two.

Not the only person to have discussed the prophetic identity of Margery Kempe, Diane Watt recalls within the book that Kempe foretells the future, makes predictions,

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[2] Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
[3] Margery Kempe and B. A. Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages* (London: The Folio Society, 2004)., 15-16.

and receives revelations about the fate of the dead.[4] In her book *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,* Watt suggests that Kempe's autobiography is her attempt to convince her community that she is a true secretary of God. While she points to a few other studies comparing Margery Kempe and modern prophets, and she herself makes a good case for Kempe's propheticism, she does not discuss what is being prophesied. Kempe writes in her proem that the book is not in order and that she recorded her experiences as she remembered them, so to say how Kempe foresaw the completion of her message would be disingenuous to her intentions. Kempe would not have developed her narrative with the intent to end on a particular note. Only through reading the book with a perspective that ties various models together can Kempe's book have meaning. This observation begs the question: do prophets know they are prophets? Her scribe aligns her life with other mystical figures to give the story credibility, or authority, but the intent never seems to be to become that figure. Prophets carry messages from generation to generation and, therefore, usually they have characteristics in common to identify themselves as part of the lineage. In Margery Kempe's identification with Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, and through her, Rachel, the lineage of "ghostly mothers" continues, wherein the desire is for children to be reunited with their mothers.

[4] Diane Watt, "Secretaries of God : Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England," (1997).

CHAPTER 3: HAGIOGRAPHICAL MODELS

Rachel

It may be difficult to determine if there is such as distinct difference between a hagiographical model and a prophet. The characters in both categories carry messages and have certain identifying features that designate them as a member of a particular sect. Whether Kempe knew of Rachel or identified with her is not the purpose of this study. Rather, the similar experiences in Rachel's death in childbirth and Kempe's metaphorical death after childbirth appear to produce a traumatic result that leads them to become what I call "ghostly mothers." Both Kempe and Rachel have different objectives in separate contexts, but their roles in the world mirror one another through their ostracization from society and the response to that separation. This response is one of union and inclusion.

The story of Rachel begins in Genesis 29. Jacob, later named Israel, first came upon her as she was watering her father's sheep. He kissed her, proceeding to follow her to her father's house, where he promised to work for seven years so that he could marry her. The immediacy of Jacob's decision is a theme in the Old Testament. Amy Kalmanofsky explains this in her reference to Robert Alter, who explains that "a biblical narrative about a young woman at a well is really a story about a bride."[5] After seven years, Rachel's father tricked Jacob, sending Leah to his room instead of Rachel. When Jacob discovered that he slept with Leah, he went to her father in disappointment.

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[5] Amy Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (2014)., 21.

Therein, Rachel's father responded that Jacob must work another seven years to marry her. Once they consummated their marriage, God made Leah fertile and Rachel barren, because Jacob loved Rachel more. Kalmanofsky suggests that Rachel's beauty led to God's curse and that Rachel is not the first in the Old Testament to be punished for her beauty. This is also a theme present in various places. For example, Sarah, Abraham's wife, is barren because of her beauty. The story continues with Rachel's sorrow in Gen. 30:1, which reads, "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!"[6] After Leah bore six children, God gave Rachel a child, who she named Joseph. The difference between Rachel and Leah is that Rachel is exalted higher than Leah. Her story is meant to be modeled after that of Sarah, who must first conceive through her maidservant Hagar before God bestows his blessing of fertility upon her. Rachel is the mother next in line after the primal mother of Israel, Sarah. Following Joseph's birth, Jacob and his family left the house of Rachel's father because while his own house had grown, Jacob's house had not. Rachel and Leah claim, "All the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children . . ."[7] With this declaration, Rachel steals her father's household gods as they depart. Her act of sitting on the gods defines the objects as in her possession as opposed to her sister's. Kalmonofsky, while unsure of the meaning of the stealing of teraphim, gives the suggestion that to Rachel this means that her sons, rather than Leah's, will be the rightful heirs of the household. However, she could also be asserting herself as the new authority of the household. During travel,

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[6] Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha : Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977)., Gen. 30:1.
[7] RSV, Gen 31:16.

Rachel bore a second son, that she named Ben-o'ni (son of sorrow), but during this painful pregnancy she died. She was buried there on the way to Ephrath. As Kalmanofsky notes, "For Rachel who dies in childbirth, fertility—or rather her selfish desire for it—proves to be lethal."[8] Dissatisfied with a single child, she prays for another. Because she is not thankful for God's blessing, but yet pleads for more, she is buried alone between her father's and her husband's homes, "aborted from the family."[9] According to Gen. 46:22, the descendents attributed to her number fourteen in all.

Her burial is of question for biblical scholars simply because when reading her story, she does not appear to commit sins that are worthy of such punishment as to be buried outside of the family plot. In a cave in Canaan, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah are buried.[10] And yet, Rachel is shown as the dominant and favored wife by Jacob throughout the narrative in Genesis. Benjamin Cox and Susan Ackerman argue that "the anomalous way in which the biblical authors treat Rachel's burial is the result of the particular means by which her death was thought to have come about, in childbirth."[11] In their argument for this thesis, Cox and Ackerman recall that the act of giving birth was considered a contagion that must be contained in the Ancient Near East. If the child was to be a boy, the mother must wait seven days before interacting with the community and if a girl, fourteen days. Further, women who died during childbirth, of which there is only one other instance in the Old Testament (and the literature lacks an explanation of the burial), generally were buried outside of the city limits. For instance, in fifteenth century England, Cox and Ackerman note that these

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[8] Kalmanofsky, *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*., 26.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Rachel's Tomb," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 (2009).
[11] Ibid., 140.

women "were frequently interred outside the sanctified walls of their local churchyards."[12] Moreover, one account of their special burials, these women are known to scholars of religion as "the bad or evil dead." Overall, the liminality of these figures defined them as evil or dangerous. The period between being a mother with no child to being a mother with child is one that Arnold van Gennep describes as a betwixt and between state. The death of the Rachel coupled with the liminal state in which she dies poses her as a double threat to her community.

Rachel's unique place in the history of the Israelite people becomes even stranger for the norms of biblical literature. She is described in Jeremiah as weeping from her tomb for the Israelites who have been exiled. The only other voice from the dead that appears in the Old Testament is that of Samuel and his call is made against his will as if he preferred not to be disturbed from his rest. Rachel's voice is a willful cry for her people.

It appears in Jeremiah 31:15-17, reading:

> "Thus says the Lord:/'A voice is heard in Ramah,/lamentation and bitter weeping,/Rachel is weeping for/her children;/she refuses to be comforted for /her children,/because they are not."/Thus says the Lord:/'Keep your voice from weeping,/and your eyes from tears;/for your work shall be rewarded,/says the Lord,/and they shall come back from the /land of the enemy./There is hope for your future,/says the Lord,/and your children shall come/back to their own country.

[12] Ibid., 142.

Surrounding these verses Jeremiah prophesies the restoration of Israel and the topsy turvy world that the restoration will bring about. Jeremiah writes of the restoration, ". . . their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. Then shall the maidens rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow."[13] Imagery of the watered garden signifies rebirth and renewal, mirroring the Genesis narrative of the Flood. Also, the meaning of joy and sadness in earlier stories might help shed light on the symbolic intention with the latter portion of this verse. For instance, in the story of the birth of Isaac, his name in Hebrew means laughter or joy. Whereas Sarah's sorrow, and Rachel's as well (who names her child after her sorrow), is represented in barrenness. Fertility and the birth of children translates into joy for the Israelite people, while barrenness signifies that one is unfavorable in God's eyes. Therefore, the barren land and the barren wombs of women will be given life. Moreover, Jeremiah claims that in this new age, "a woman protects a man."[14] Also, the law will no longer be prescriptions which the outer body must follow, but the law will instead be written upon the hearts of the people. It will be prescribed from within rather than from without. The order of the world will be flipped and tragedy will turn to triumph. In sum, the world will be blessed and right once again when Rachel's children return and her barren curse has been taken away.

Virgin Mary

[13] RSV,Jer. 31:13
[14] RSV. Jer. 31:22.

The prophecy of Jeremiah returns once again in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew. In chapter 2, the Old Testament Mother of Israel is surmounted by the New Testament Mother of God. The Virgin Mary does not cry for the children of Israel that are slaughtered by King Herod. Rather, she flies to Egypt to protect her newborn son, who is prophesied to be the new King of the Jews. Because the wise men tricked King Herod by returning to their homeland instead of reporting to him the location of the Virgin's child, Herod killed all of the first born children of Bethlehem. Following this Matthew writes, "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

> "A voice was heard in Ramah,
> wailing and loud lamentation,
> she refused to be consoled,
> because they were no more."15

After the destruction, the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt after the death of King Herod saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." This chapter might be interpreted as the Virgin Mary abandoning the Jews, those whom her newborn son is prophesied to protect, to be slaughtered. Mary Clayton, professor at University College in Dublin, states that "the story of the Magi and the flight to Egypt is intended to show that Jesus' kingship was universal and not restricted to the Jews."[16] The *Proteuangelium Jacobi* describes the birth of Christ as follows: after her annunciation, the Virgin Mary "remains three months with

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[15] RSV Matt. 2:18.
[16] Mary Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998)., 7.

Elizabeth, hiding herself from the children of Israel as her pregnancy becomes evident."[17] The hiding with Elisabeth could also mean that the Virgin Mary was suspected of having a child out of wedlock, wherein she would be severely punished and possibly stoned to death if others knew. Later, Joseph discovers that she is with child and also is in disbelief that she has not committed adultery. However, this hiding could suggest that the Jews are being kept in the dark that the one who is being proclaimed as their new ruler is currently in her womb. This understanding would theologically mirror Mary's assumption to heaven, where a palm from the tree of life (symbolic of Christ) is used to heal Jews of their blindness.[18] The intent was for the children of Israel to be unaware of this surprise birth. They only learn after the killing of all firstborn sons—the demise of the social order.

In medieval texts it would be difficult to deny that the Virgin Mary is considered a warrior against the prevailing social order and the persons associated with the current order, the Jewish people. As demonstrated above in the discussion of Rachel's barrenness and later her gift of fertility, as well as in Jeremiah's prophecy of the restored order representing a woman and land that is fertile, Phyllis Bird continues to argue that "Barrenness was a shame and a reproach in Israel . . . The barren woman was deprived of the honor attached to motherhood--the only position of honor generally available to women, representing the highest status a woman might normally achieve."[19] The people of Israel valued fertility as a gift and lamented barrenness. Yet, this social order is flipped with the emergence of Christianity in the ancient world. Seen as a world of corruption,

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[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Ibid., 27.
[19] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974)., 62.

most adequately personified by King Herod's tyranny, the present order was foreseen to be reversed by the entrance of Christ into the world. However, for Christ to bring about this new world, the present world had to be destroyed. This maneuvering is done quite tactfully by the warrior Virgin who flees from Israel to Egypt to save her son, the new savior, while the first born sons of Israel are slaughtered.

This transition from the old world to the new world is brought to life through the rejection of sexuality, which remains closely tied to marriage and pregnancy in biblical literature. Peter Brown declares that sexuality is the "one potentially reversible process shared by all human beings."[20] Without procreation, he argues, "that layer, at least, of the somber landslip of the 'present age' would not continue." Rejecting sexuality and the present age, then, go hand in hand. The slaughter of the first born male children of Israel, regarded less here as a historical occurrence, is more symbolic of what was considered necessary in the second century to bring about their new savior, Christ. Once again, it is the fear of death that spurns the need for a remedy in the renunciation of sexuality. Brown further explains that for the ancients, begetting children distracted them from their own mortality. Fertility was perceived as the remedy for death and barrenness was associated with death, as shown in Jeremiah. However, when Christianity emerges, this notion changes as sexuality is now seen as the cause of death. For instance, Augustine intertwines Adam and Eve's fall into sin and their copulation. Before lust, Adam and Eve were considered on the same level as the angels. Lust leads to death rather than delaying it. Brown continues, "Consequently, the renunciation of sexual intercourse came to be

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[20]Peter Brown, *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)., 84.

linked on a deep symbolic level with the reestablishment of a lost human freedom, with a regaining of the Spirit of God, and, so, with man's ability to undo the power of death."[21]

Not only did Christ's arrival regard the union of men and women for procreation to be associated with death and the persistence of the current social order, but it was understood that the relationship between mothers and their children should be broken. Through leaving one's home and following Christ, the new world could come about. Christ revalued the family as an unnecessary tie rather than nurturing protection from what the outside world might bring. In Matthew, he declares, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his household.[22] Again, this move is a tactful one in that the most assured way of recruiting followers of the new movement is to disassociate them from their families and their homes.

The Virgin Mary mirrors Christ's message in her separation from all other women. Since Eve is representative of death and fertility, the Virgin is described by Ireneaus as alone among her kind. She has escaped the inescapable—the body of the female, who bears the reputation for provoking lustful acts. Bernard Prusak refers to the *Testament of Reuben* in his article on pseudepigraphical myth and Christian origins, which reads "For moreover, concerning them, the angel of the Lord told me, and taught me, that women are overcome by the spirit of fornication more than men, and in their heart they plot against men; and by means of adornment they deceive first their minds, and by the glance of the eye instill poison, and then through the accomplished act they

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[21] Ibid., 86.
[22] RSV Matt. 10:34-36.

take them captive….And the women lusting in their minds after their forms, gave birth to giants, for the Watchers appeared to them as reaching even unto heaven."[23] The myth of the Watchers that the *Testament of Reuben* mentions is an account in Jubilees before the first flood, wherein angels descend from the heavens to copulate with the daughters of men. The evil giants that were born in result created much havoc upon the earth. In other words, the world was in a state of disorder. It was one in need of reform. The reason for this reform, which came by way of a flood, was equal to the cause that sparked the acceptance of the messiah in the form of Christ later—lust.

In the early middle ages, following the nascent years of Christianity's emergence, the Jews were perceived as holding the potential for wreaking havoc upon the world that Christ had ushered in. They were understood as the group that carried about this lust within their hearts. As Geoffrey Chaucer tells in *The Prioress' Tale,* a young boy went to school in the Jewish Ghetto to learn the songs of the Virgin, wherein he was captured, slit by the throat, and thrown into a pit. Within this tale, Chaucer writes, "Our first foe, the serpent Satan, that has his wasps' nest in Jews' hearts, swelled up and said, 'Oh Hebraic people alas!' Is this a thing that is honorable to you, that such a boy shall walk as he pleases in scorn of you and sing of such a subject, which is against your law's (due) reverence?"[24] The imagery of the wasps' nest may likely refer to the danger of lust and sexuality that the Jewish people pose as threat to a young virgin boy who devotes himself to the Virgin mother. Chaucer calls him "the innocent," recalling the Garden of Innocence, before lust has corrupted mankind. Another stereotypical association with the

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[23] Ruether, *Religion and Sexism; Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*., 94.
[24] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Prioress' Tale in *the Canterbury Tales*," The President and Fellows of Harvard College, sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/priort/pri-par.htm.

Jewish people during the medieval period is mercantilism. Chaucer explicitly states that the Jews *hired* a murderer. The Ghetto was also known for its "foul usury and shameful profits." The rejection of monetary profits and the adoption of asceticism in medieval and ancient times went along with the rejection of sexuality and the family. The accumulation of worldly items seemed pointless for a sect set on creating a new world order. Therefore, when Chaucer writes that they threw "the innocent" into a pit, the pit is to be read as the worst punishment for the boy seeking transcendence and union with his virgin mother.

Her power to save this "innocent," and other virgin children, derives from the gifts that she received when she was assumed into heaven. In addition, her new position lends her a similar status to Rachel's in the Old Testament as she is hailed as this apparitional or ghostly figure that may traverse between the heavenly and the earthly realm. The difference in the two characters in the Christian context is that Mary is not considered dangerous in comparison with Rachel's reputation, as Mary eluded the sin of womanhood through her role as virgin mother. Elizabeth A. Johnson argues that it is Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion, where she witnesses the death of the savior; that places her as a mediator for mankind, and specifically for children. In this tradition, she is given the power to help lost children find a home. She does not necessarily return children to their mothers, but rather to the motherly image of Christ.

Mary Magdalene

Kempe structures her narrative around the theme of whore becoming virgin. In the majority of her life story, Mary Magdalene might be the best hagiographical model to relate to Kempe's prophecy. Actually, one of the tales of Magdalene found in Jacobus de Voraigne's *Golden Legend* mirrors Kempe's prophetic journey to the extent that it could

be argued that Kempe is situated, either by her or her scribe, in the role of Magdalene. Katherine Ludwig Jansen recalls how Magdalene converted a couple to Christianity. They agree to become Christians as long as Magdalene will help them conceive of a child. Once they are granted their wish, they depart on pilgrimage as an initiation for their new faith. While on a ship to Rome, the woman goes into labor and dies, wherein her fellow shipmates cast her out onto an island. On their way home, the ship passes by the island and the passengers find the child alive. The father prays to Magdalene to revive the mother, who soon reveals that she is alive once more. Kempe endures such a similar occurrence as she undergoes a metaphorical death after the birth of her first child. To complete the hagiographical narrative, this child becomes a merchant and an immoral man only to be saved when he returns to his mother.[25] Determining whether Kempe knew the legend recounted above is practically impossible, but she may have known of Mary Magdalene's miraculous abilities to help women in labor and the often conflated imagery between her and the Virgin Mary during the early Middle Ages.

In Kempe's conversations with Christ, she sometimes says that she wants to be as worthy of his love as Mary Magdalene. She also declares Magdalene as his "true lover" compared with the Virgin Mary.[26] Yet, her frequent conversation and identification with the Virgin Mary versus her sparse mention of Mary Magdalene suggests that she does not view herself as reaching the level of this lover. The reasons for this could well relate to the belief that while Mary Magdalene is seen as mother and virgin in the medieval period, she is given the title of mother much like other male prophets ascribe to motherhood. Without having born children, she represents little threat to male prophets. Since

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[25] Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen : Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[26] Kempe and Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages*., 182.

Magdalene has no ties to husband or family, she embodies the ideal prophet. She represents the transformed Christian from a period of lust to a life of virginity, but the absence of a family makes her transition cleaner in the perspective of the medieval church. Her devotion to Christ also sets her on a plane separate from those living after Christ's death. Kempe declares Christ as her lover, but her material life contradicts her claim in so many ways. If she resembled the lives of other medieval mystics, she could have entered a convent at an early age before marriage and children to avoid suspicion of traversing boundaries. However, her public image along with her private life as a mother and wife, transgresses the boundaries of public and private that the medieval church fathers kept separate in their writings.

This dichotomy of public and private space that is set up ideally in the medieval church is often not the case in practie. Margery Kempe is one of the few examples of a woman in the Middle Ages that presents her life story in a manner in which it can be gleaned that she blurred the boundaries of public and private. In other mystical narratives, such as Elisabeth of Schonau, their lives are hidden in the stories of the saints they emulate or the divine messages they are relaying. While Kempe's book is clearly not purely an autobiographical account of her life, it is also not completely regarded as a divine treatise. Her distinction from the ideal model of the church allows the modern reader to take a glance at what a medieval English woman's life may have looked like in reality. Penelope Johnson discovers this veering from the theoretical prescription in the medieval world when she studies the documents of practice found in French medieval cloisters. She claims that while nuns are written about as shut off from the rest of the

world, in reality, they often left their convents to run errands, and even visit relatives.[27] This study shows that just because these public aspects of the mystical life are hidden in their narratives does not mean that these parts of their lives did not exist.

This transgression of boundaries in *The Book of Margery Kempe* sheds light on her apparent indecision when she converts. While she follows the prescriptions that Christ sends to her through revelations, she also records her failings at becoming the perfect wife and daughter. In some cases, these are not even perceived as failings. When she reunites with her son in Book 2 or when she returns to her husband when he falls ill, she incorporates these "failings" into her hagiographical pursuit. It is not a "failing" to her when she acknowledges her own son. He is incorporated into her mission to help reunite children with their mothers. Even in this ending, she shows that the fulfilling of the covenant is a long process that cannot be completed in her lifetime. In this sense she resembles other prophets after the time of Paul who state that the end of the ages will not happen within any foreseeable future.

Not only is public and private merged, but the familiar and foreign, and wilderness and lush garden are joined together to represent her belief, alongside Julian of Norwich, that all should be well. No creature should be condemned to hell. Even when she judges those around her, telling them whether they will live or die, she refuses to condemn them to the place down under. The judgment that she imparts is not one that is permanent or damning. In this merging of dualities and the lack of acceptance she receives at home and in foreign lands her story aligns more closely with Rachel's. A theme throughout her entire book is that she is a dangerous woman because she refuses to

[27] Women Berkshire Conference on the History of, Dorothy O. Helly, and Susan Reverby, "Gendered Domains : Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History : Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women" (Ithaca, 1992).

accept social binaries. The Virgin Mary is never portrayed as dangerous. Kempe's emulation of the Virgin Mary could reveal how unrealistic the theory of the virgin mother is when practiced. This miraculous mother impersonated by humans can only truly represent the very image that it works against. Jane Schaberg argues that throughout the ages there have been competing interpretations of the birth of the Christ child, some of which suggested that Christ was a bastard child.[28] In a painting of the nativity scene by Pieter Bruegel, a visitor that comes to see the Christ child suspiciously whispers in Joseph's ear. Art historians suggest that he is in disbelief of the virgin birth.[29] The belief appeared to be not that Christ was heaven sent, but that Mary committed adultery. Therefore, the human mother of Christ is sometimes regarded as a whore more so than a woman given a child by God.

Kempe surely did not ascribe to this view of the mother of God because she perceived her mission as ridding herself of the impurity of lust through becoming like the virgin mother. If the mother appeared to actually be a whore, she would not have seen her as someone to become. Yet, she sees Mary Magdalene as even further up the pedestal of female models. This likely resides in Magdalene's ability to become mother without literally having children. Both of these figures represent the dichotomies between mother, whore, and virgin. These female roles as concepts critically influenced medieval women as they were tried on for practicality. Yet, we see that in Kempe's book, these ideals do not come across as wholly separated. Margaret Hallissy discusses how these types play out in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Saint's *Legends.* Hallissy describes

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[28]Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus : A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).
[29] Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Adoration of the Kings.*The National Gallery, London (1564).

the heroines of these stories as "lifeless abstractions."[30] The characterizations found in Chaucer derive from pre-Christian sources, but they are fit into the mold of the Christian saints. According to Hallissy, this adaptation means that these characters can never be angry. The transition from pagan to Christian derides this aspect of femininity, which could reveal much about why the Virgin Mary is not perceived as dangerous. These Christianized women also have a particular place in society. In fifteenth century paintings such as Robert Campin's *The Merode Altarpiece*, the Virgin Mary is given place inside of the home.[31] Interesting enough, the cover of *The Book of Margery Kempe* for Penguin Classics also positions her inside of the home beside the fireplace.[32] Why this would be the case is a mystery to be solved because her character in the book certainly does not match this image.

Regardless, the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor and apparitional savior appears later in church history. In the Middle Ages, her depiction most often existed inside of the home. Most telling of this prescription for women to remain in their designated places is the statement that synthesizes Hallissy's book clearly and concisely, that "the true wife, like the clean maid, is virtuous by virtue of what she does not do."[33](95) Applying this assertion to *The Book of Margery Kempe,* Kempe can only fulfill this good wife paradigm by not acting at all. Again, it is impossible to achieve this concept of woman, but some women do better at this than others. Margery Kempe is one woman that does not stick well to this ideal because she succumbs to the three primary areas where women

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[30] Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows : Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993)., 27.
[31] Robert Campin, *The Merode Altarpiece.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1427-32).
[32] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin ; Viking Penguin, 1985).
[33] Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows : Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct*., 58.

become dangerous: "excesses of speech, instability of place, and immoderation of dress." One of these areas is only transgressed at the beginning of her narrative, since after her conversion, she dresses herself in mud and wears clothes with lice to create solidarity with the downtrodden individuals with whom she associates. The first two of these dangerous areas are acted out throughout her entire book without apology. She defends her right to speak by refuting a cleric in England who held up a quote of St. Paul against her, stating, "I do not preach, sir; I do not go into any pulpit. I use only conversation and good words, and that I will do while I live."[34] Demanding the right to speak in public directly contradicts the medieval conception of the Virgin Mary, but it follows the persona of Rachel. Additionally, her constant desire to re-live the passion by re-tracing the steps of Christ and the Virgin Mary puts her outside of the spectrum of this good woman. Though, the mobility of Margery Kempe harkens back to the differences between living the holy life in the ideal and living this life in reality.

The question of the relevance of Mary Magdalene as an ideal prototype for Kempe's life works really well absent the notion of Kempe's literal motherhood. Again, this presents difficulties for her that Magdalene would not have endured because she could embody the male adoption of motherly characteristics without presenting a threat. Rachel's relevance can be shown through Susan Sered's analysis of the relationships between Mary, Fatima, and Rachel. She writes, "Thus while Mary more closely resembles the ancient goddesses who mourn their dead divine sons, Rachel embodies a different myth, that of a human mother dying in childbirth and eternally seeking her live children."[35] She further contrasts Mary and Rachel, claiming that Rachel derives power

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[34] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*., 164.
[35] Susan Sered, "Rachel, Mary, and Fatima," *CUAN Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991)., 135.

from being dead and Mary's power comes from her being alive. Rachel as a human mother who dies while bearing a child compares more closely with Margery Kempe than any other ideal prototype. Her desire to become the Virgin Mary, who presents the antithesis to Rachel, leads her back to the very type of woman she tries to abandon.

CHAPTER 4: PROPHETICISM IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

What is a Prophet?

First, what is a prophet? Watt states that a prophet is "one who speaks on behalf of God and one who speaks for God."[36] She also argues that in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern period, prophecy was considered a feminine experience. Her evidence for such a claim is that primarily female prophets were given the most credibility because of their humble status. She writes that their existence on the margins of society was thought to make them more receptive to the Holy Spirit. Elaine E. Lawless adds to this conception arguing, not necessarily that prophecy itself is feminine, but that there is a distinctly feminine form of prophecy. She suggests that women preachers more often reach out for female narratives and experiences when putting together their sermons. She also writes that they are more revolutionary in their messages to redefine and renew the canon. They argue that "genres of religious discourse must be stripped of their male bias and replaced with inclusionary language that embraces all religious seekers . . ."[37] The female prophet with most frequent reference in the studies of Christianity is Mary Magdalene. Kempe refers to Mary Magdalene often in her book as a biblical character that she feels a certain resemblance to. Mostly, her identification with Mary Magdalene concerns her attachment to worldly goods and her desire to proclaim herself as a born-again virgin. But, one way that Kempe has trouble relating to Mary Magdalene is in the

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[36] Watt, "Secretaries of God : Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England.", 3.
[37] Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)., 8

biblical representation of Mary as a whore, not a mother. She does not have children and a husband. Therefore, Mary's prophesies cannot be the same as Kempe's for their different experiences lead them to seek different voices. Karen L. King explains in her article on early Christian women prophets, "For both the Corinthian women prophets and the *Gospel of Mary,* the practice of women's exercise of authority is tied to attitudes that did not define women's identity in terms of their roles in marriage and motherhood."[38] Despite Kempe's rejection of her children at the beginning of her journey, she never foregoes the role of mother. She continues to see herself as such throughout the book. Her motherhood therein distinguishes her from the prophets and mystics who reject these roles.

In modeling her narrative after Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary, Kempe is primarily concerned with how her sexual status will be perceived. Karen L. King declares in reference to sexuality and prophecy, "When women's prophetic status is positively valued, their sexual purity is emphasized, often by pointing out that they were virgins, chaste widows, or even occasionally devoted wives. But when a writer opposes a woman, her sexual status becomes an explicit basis for condemnation" In the event that Kempe is on pilgrimage in foreign areas without her husband nearby, she is accused of trying to lure the wives of good men away or harshly interrogated for having no male accompaniment.

Further, the notion of a female prophet who is a mother and speaks in public is a paradox according to ideal ancient and medieval Christian social values. King writes that 1 Timothy creates a dichotomy between women speaking in public and women bearing children. The two activities could not be done together as one was either a mother who

[38] Ibid., 28.

bore children or a public figure. Kempe's attempt to remain a mother and become a public figure transgresses this boundary between public and private. This distinction parallels the separation between body and soul as the home was often understood as symbolic of the body and the communal life outside of the home was identified with the mind or the soul. In order to enjoy the rewards that come with living a life of the soul, one needed to reject the household roles that were identified with the body. As King discusses this differentiation, she notes that the *Gospel of Mary* "supports women's leadership but at the cost of women's bodies."[39] While Kempe denies her body to become salvific mother in territories outside of England, she remains a salvific mother to her own child, which in effect calls her to recognize the fertility of her own body rather than the barrenness that God gives her when she departs on pilgrimage. Yet, while Timothy, Mary, and Tertullian create these dichotomies between mother and speaker, Nicole Beriou expands on this point in her article, "The Right of Women to Give Religious Instruction in the Thirteenth Century," purporting that even though women's motherly and vocal roles were not interlinked, male clerics often used images of mothers feeding their children when referring to their own teaching and preaching. Augustine and many others identified the preacher as "the mother of souls."[40] Beriou thinks of this strange appropriation as another way of excluding women from these roles. It also appears that these male clerics recognize the special affinity that women have for receiving the Holy Spirit, so they simply take on the characteristics of women that most qualify them for this reception.

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[39] Ibid., 32.
[40] Ibid., 180.

Given these various definitions of prophecy, my definition of a prophet is one who transforms his/herself into a receptacle for God's divine message. The exclusion of women from being mothers and prophets harkens back to the Christian notion that one must transcend all familial and territorial ties to become Christ's wife alone. Therefore, men can take on this imagery because they cannot biologically become earthly mother, whereas women must abandon these ways of defining themselves to create legitimacy. A male can take on a feminine identity as a prophet, but a woman must relinquish her femininity completely or she will be constantly interrogated for her inconsistency. Kempe's inability to abandon her femininity poses a threat that causes those around her to question her true devotion. These dichotomies also affect the way scholars think about her true mysticism because she appears to have an identity outside of her role as prophet.

In the proem of her book, Kempe begins to tell her audience of the salvation that came to her, turning her from a "sinful wretch" to a vessel for the Holy Spirit. In this second paragraph her narrative is described as one of redemption, wherein she lives a life of sin, but rejects that life to receive Christ's message. In other words, she becomes a prophet. Her scribe writes, "Her worldly goods which were plentiful and abundant at that date, were a little while afterwards quite barren and bare."[41] This is what she calls a "topsy turvy world." This world flipped upside down counters the revolutionary world that Jeremiah prophesies. Rather, the early and medieval Christian conception of social reform involves rejection of the fertility of the land and the birth of children. This conception denigrates the earth and the role of woman as mother. While Rachel considers herself blessed to bear children after years of enduring a barren womb, Kempe rejoices that her womb will now be barren instead of fertile. This Christian apocalyptic message

[41] Kempe and Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages*., 4.

that Peter Brown discusses in early Christianity is a theme within Kempe's book. Though, she is clear to say at the end of the proem that her book was not written in order as these events in her life occurred, she is creating a fiction out of her life story. The presentation of her life demands an authority figure to create authenticity. She is placing herself within the mystical narrative of a Mary Magdalene that becomes a Virgin Mary. Yet, in chapter one she declares that at age twenty she bore a troubled pregnancy during which she believed she would die. This experience associates with the story of Rachel more so as she undergoes a metaphorical death following this pregnancy. This trauma sends her into an apocalyptic mindset wherein she deems herself responsible for the reunion of mothers and children and the inclusion of all. She appeals to St. Paul in her visions occasionally where she is assured a place in heaven alongside him. It is possible that she is drawing upon Paul's message of inclusion to the Galatians as it might be re-appropriated to her culture in England and abroad.

Before Kempe is redeemed, her attitude resembles Rachel's in a few discrete ways. After the pregnancy she describes in chapter one, Kempe undergoes a metaphorical death wherein she finds herself tortured by demons for half a year. During this time she tears at her skin, refuses to eat, and remains isolated from her friends. When Christ appears by her bed one morning, she overcomes her battle with death and returns to her friends to eat and drink as she had done before. Her attitude after this horrific incident reveals her as a woman who seriously questions her current status as a wife and mother. She desires to have the power that felt absent during childbirth. Kempe deeply desires to escape the life of a woman to attain a respectful role in society—one that allows her to

continue her life journey in a safer and more secure position. Her scribe discusses her composure at this time, writing that she wore flamboyant attire that required that others notice her in a crowd. He states, “Her whole desire was to be respected by people.”[42] Through her dress rather than any sexual sin committed, she identifies with Mary Magdalene. It is her manner of clothing herself that presents her as a danger and a threat. Rachel’s beauty also poses a threat to the happy marriage of Jacob and Leah. For this reason, God makes her barren and Leah fertile. The woman who is comely must be adequately punished for the danger that her womanhood puts upon men. An early church father, Tertullian declares that “blessed sisters [should] have nothing to do with the lewd and seductive tricks of dress and appearance.”[43] His great fear is that men will be tempted to sin in their minds through the sight of women who adorn themselves with frivolities such as Kempe’s gold pipes on her head. God’s punishment according to Tertullian for beautiful women would be to make them barren. Perhaps the rationale behind that thought would be that these women who most often tempt men are designated as instruments for sexual acts that are not directed towards conceiving of a child. John Chysostom’s homily on Genesis reveals an ancient perception of the narrative of Rachel compared to Abrahram’s wife, Sarah. He describes Sarah’s response to her gift of barrenness as such, “Lo, the Lord has stopped me from bearing children; so go into my maidservant so that you may have children by her.' Chysostom then declares, "Notice the woman's excellent attitude: she said nothing of the kind that Rachel later said to Jacob, "'Give me children--if not, I'll die."[44] Here, the impatience shown by Rachel marks her as

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[42] Ibid., 15-16.
[43] Tertullian et al., "Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works," (1959)., 141.
[44] Ibid.

a figure that is not well looked upon among some ancient Christian sects. She becomes a lesson to other wives that they not blame their husbands for their lack of fertility.

Kempe's insistent craving for more to satisfy her worldly persona leads her to take up brewing and begin a horse mill. She fails at both endeavors, blaming her inability to keep steady business at either shop on her lack of humility. Nevertheless, Kempe imposes her authority within the household upon her husband. She claims that her father was of high regard as a mayor of Lynn and that her husband struck lucky to have her to take care of him. In chapter 11, John Kempe bargains with her, telling her that he will refrain from sexual intercourse with her if she will pay his debts before she goes to Jerusalem. She maintains the monetary authority in the household of her, John, and her fourteen children. Interpretations of Rachel's stealing her father's household gods, when her and Jacob depart from his home to create a new home for their growing family, claim that Rachel uses the masculine fear of her womanhood (her menstruation) to hide the gods under her, declaring herself the head of the new household.

After Kempe's conversion, she is placed through a series of temptations, one of which she remembers vividly. A man appears to show sexual interest in her in the Church of St. Margaret—the saint known for her magnificent resourcefulness in shoving the cross in the face of the dragon that swallowed her, wherein the beast split apart and she climbed out. When Kempe returns to ask the man she met in this church if he still wants her, he refuses her. The embarrassment caused her great shame because she fell for the temptation and found herself rejected. Following the incident, she lay in the church of St. Margaret weeping to which Christ responds, "Daughter, why are you weeping so sorely? I have come to you, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross suffering bitter pains and passion

for you. I, the same God, forgive you your sins to the uttermost point."[45] This conversation between Kempe and Christ may reveal the meaning of Kempe's tears throughout her narrative. In this instance, Kempe receives as gift that designates her as a savior for the world.

Weeping, the greatest of all gifts given to Kempe, is portrayed in this narrative as an apocalyptic gift. Kempe's tears heal and destroy, they identify her as a judge of sinners with the power to decide who lives and who dies. The tears perform magical powers for Kempe as when her husband wishes to touch her to which she said, "Jesus, help me,' and he had no power to touch her at that time in that way, nor ever after with carnal knowledge."[46] The power weeping has for her individual circumstances is also magnified on a communal and eventually worldly scale, wherein she cries out loudly and people refuse to go near her. Further, the gift of tears performs the task of a baptism into a new life. They are symbolic of her new birth as a different woman. Because she is young again and revitalized the aging world is placed in opposition to her. The world needs renewing just as she was renewed. Her role as a redeemer of the world is put to the test when she departs on pilgrimage. Almost all of the ships she is to be carried on are to be sailed in terrible weather, but Christ tells her "I shall lead you there and bring you back again in safety, and no Englishman shall die in the ship that you are in."[47] In addition, he tells her to wear white "and no other color." This difference in dress symbolized her new innocence and rejection of the life associated with the earth, her family, and fertility.

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[45] Kempe and Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages*., 23.
[46] Ibid., 28.
[47] Ibid., 39..

As Kempe progresses through her journey the salvation of the individual leads to that of the whole community, and eventually she is considered savior of the world. After her own salvation, she relays in chapter 23, while in the Church of St. Margaret, that a man who mourns his wife's death, who "is now in good health . . . shall be dead within a short time."[48] In this same chapter, she also prophesies that a friend who is sick will again be well. These few instances led to many men coming to her with concern over their lives. Along with this gift, she saw into the inner souls of her fellow countrymen. For example, she saves a priest from buying a book from a traveling salesman because she sees that the man will not return with the book as he promises. The gift of seeing the inner soul through the outer body is one that can be found among prophets, as well as the ability to foretell death and wellness.

However, her tears are the special gift that Christ tells her she must not be hypocritical in. He says that she may be hypocritical in all other acts but that one. The language Kempe uses when talking about her tears on pilgrimage is apocalyptic. Her scribe recalls the frequency of her tears while in Jerusalem, saying that they happened often at first, but when she returned to England, they happened seldom and sporadically. He explains that they occurred "just as God would visit her with them, sometimes in church, sometimes in the street, sometimes in her chamber, sometimes in the fields, when God would send them, for she never knew the time nor hour when they would come."[49] This reflection reminds of Paul's writings in 1 Thessalonians 5: 2-3, reading, "For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them

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[48] Ibid., 59.
[49] Ibid., 75.

as travail comes upon a woman with child." Kempe would know particularly well this serendipitous feeling of not knowing when the child is to come and the pain of waiting for the moment of arrival. The imagery is explicitly intended to be interpreted as though the earth is birthing a savior. Kempe is nurturing the arrival with her tears as Christ tells her that she has given the saints, the Virgin Mary, and God "drink very many times with the tears of [her] eyes."[50] The nourishment received through her prepares the world for the birth of a new and holier age, wherein sex and death will be conquered.

The cosmic scale on which her tears are given meaning is relayed in Christ's response to her desire to rid herself of tears and to reconnect with her community. He sends her a long message on the importance of her gift:

> "Daughter, you see how the planets are obedient to my will, and that sometimes there come great thunderclaps and make people terribly afraid. And sometimes, daughter, you see how I send great flashes of lightning that burn churches and houses. You also sometimes see that I send great winds that blow steeples and houses down, and trees out of the earth, and do much harm in many places, and yet the wind may not be seen, but it may well be felt . . . so . . . I proceed with the might of my Godhead; it may not be seen with man's eye . . . it may well be felt in a simple soul . . . As suddenly as the lightning comes from heaven, so suddenly I come into your soul and illumine it with the light of grace and of understanding . . . You also well know, daughter, that I sometimes send many great rains and sharp showers, and sometimes only small and gentle drops. And just so I proceed with you, daughter, when it pleases me to speak in your soul. I sometimes give you slight weeping and soft tears, as a token that I love you. And sometimes I give you great cries and roarings, to make people afraid at the grace that I put into you, in token that I wish that my mother's sorrow be known through you, so that men and women might have the more compassion of her sorrow that she suffered for me."[51]

Christ's answer to Kempe sounds as though it is a paraphrase of Job, who asks God why he must suffer so greatly to which God tells him not to question his right to do what He

[50] Ibid., 58.
[51] Ibid, 223.

wills with his creation. According to an Old English sermon on Psalm cxxxi.6 deriving from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in England, there are four types of tears. Of those, Job's tears are described as those that are shed "for the weary of the world."[52] The composer explains that these tears come from those who wish to depart from their sorrow by escaping their weary lives. Kempe appears to feel this similar feeling. This type of tear is known as well water, while the three other types of tears include, those shed for one's own sins (salt/sea water), those shed for the sins of fellow Christians (snow water), and those shed by the man who sees with his mind's eye his place in heaven. These descriptions of tears come from Job 38, as God answers Job with questions regarding his power of creation. A strand of verses include verse 16, "Have you entered into the springs of the sea . . .," verse 22, "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow," verse 25, "Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain," and verse 28, "who has begotten the drops of dew?" Each of these verses are in parallel with the four types of tears in the previous sermon. The desire to escape from a weary life is interestingly associated with the well, where Jacob first discovers Rachel watering her father's sheep. Soon after, she leaves her father's house to form a new life with Jacob. As mentioned earlier, the well symbolizes marriage in biblical literature. Her new marriage represents the end of the age she spent with her father.

The end of the age and the beginning of a new age must be relayed in language that humans can understand. Since sexuality is so fundamental to the nature of living beings and marriage is so culturally ingrained, the rejection of one object of sexual desire

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[52] Morris, Richard. *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises (Sawles Warde, and Pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd: Ureisuns of Ure Louerd and of Ure Lefdi, &C.) of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 155.

must be replaced with another object of sexual desire. Kempe's sexuality in her marriage to her husband is rejected for the bodily relationship she develops with Christ. In one revelation, the Mother of God teaches Kempe how to please Christ in a way that is so embarrassing that she would not repeat it. The mother of Christ is shown as knowing that which will pleasure her son and she gives this to Kempe. The Virgin Mary relinquishes her role as mother and wife to give Kempe this status. The tears of the well demolish the world of one life to create one anew. Job testifies to this desire when he begs for his suffering to end and his life to be restored.

This topsy turvy world is magically begun through her gift of tears, but most interesting of note would be the biblical narratives she refers to during her moment of transition. These narratives show that she is not departing the life of a whore for the life of a virgin, but that she rejects the fertility and prosperity of the world for the wilderness. This wilderness is represented through her dedication to a life of pilgrimage, which begins in relation to three biblical stories: the Annunciation, the Visitation of the Magi, and the Flight to Egypt. Each of these stories makes interesting contrasts with the Old Testament. Rachel experiences a life of wilderness through her death, where she is buried outside the realm of her homeland—permanently regarded as a foreigner to her people. In the context of the Old Testament, this transition is a punishment for her increasing desire to bear more children than God has bestowed upon her. The afterlife in her case is then to become mother to the entire earth.

The Divine Message

The virgin mother of God is hailed as a mother to all of the children in the world. She is understood as the savior of lost children, helping them find their way home.

Margery Kempe becomes this savior to lost children when she abandons her family to become a prophetess to the world. In her book, she transforms after her sexual temptation in the church of St. Margaret. She falls on the floor of the church weeping, to which Christ tells her that she has no cause to weep since he died on the cross for her sins. She is later given the gift of weeping, but these tears shed before her transformation is not condoned by Christ. These tears do not serve the purpose of cleansing the world of its impurities as her gift from God later intends. This message that there is no reason to weep after Christ dies on the cross is one that appears throughout western literature. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy,* the wise and gifted poet Virgil is contrasted with his pupil when Dante is told not to weep anymore.[53] His guide continues to weep because he is not given the opportunity to have lived with the knowledge of Christ's resurrection. Those who know would have no cause to weep.

The Virgin Mary's weeping differs from those without knowledge of the resurrection. Her weeping is for the apocalyptic transformation of the world. Once Kempe is aware that she no longer needs to weep for her sins have been wiped away through the crucifixion, she has a vision of herself caring for the Virgin Mary as a child. She recalls that the Virgin Mary went away after twelve years and when she came back she was the Mother of God. This sequence of the Virgin Mary leaving for a while and coming back with the child of God conveys the secrecy of the event of the annunciation. The miraculous event of Christ becoming human is one that is hidden from the world. In the Anglo-Saxon *Protoevangelium of Jacobi* she hides her pregnancy from the children of Israel.

[53]Alighieri Dante and John Ciardi, *The Divine Comedy* (New York: Norton, 1977)., 548.

The secrecy of Christ's conception parallels with the church message that this is a special pregnancy. Marina Warner provides a brief history of the importance of the virgin birth as a necessary requirement for gods in the pre-Christian Roman Empire. She explains that it "was a shorthand symbol, commonly used to designate a man's divinity."[54] Therefore, she suggests that the initial rejection of the virgin birth among Christians derived from the church's adoption of the belief from pagan religions. She suggests that the doctrine of the virgin birth always relied on knowledge about human reproduction. For instance, she writes, "After the spread of Aristotelian biological ideas in the thirteenth century, the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit was closely identified with the operation of the male in human generation. But while Origen and later Aquinas could find natural phenomena to uphold them, the men of the contemporary empirical world cannot. "[55] Originally Christ's birth was not described as "unnatural" as the church fathers developed scientific/magical explanations for such an unusual phenomenon. Rather, it was simply that this rare birth through a virgin designated a person as special.

The Old Testament understood miraculous birth as a testament of fertility in old age, not a virgin pregnancy. The prophets of the Old Testament are typically born to women who are barren for the early portion of their lives, but are given a child in their later years. These women are expected to give their husbands to their housemaids for birthing children until they are bestowed by God. Margery Kempe births her child according to natural laws. She only mentions the birth of one child that leads her into a sickness convincing her to refrain from sex furthermore. This does not occur in old age as

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[54] Ibid, 34.
[55] Ibid, 39.

she writes that she was twenty years of age, so her child is not miraculous or destined to become a savior. Neither is she a virgin as she writes that her pregnancy occurred shortly after marrying her husband. In this way she does not tell her story as a direct imitation of the Virgin Mary, nor is she claiming that she was barren until old age. This refusal to subject herself to either model reminds that Kempe presents herself as a prophet, that is, she hears and listens to the voices of those above her, but she uses those voices to promote her own message that is particular to her experience. The story of the annunciation represents her transition from a life of fertility to a life of barrenness, it does not in any way represent her connection to her own children. Here is where her prophecy becomes more and more evident, where her emulation of the Virgin Mary has more worldly value than spiritual value.

The Adoration of the Magi is regarded as representative of the relationship of Christ as savior not just to the Jews, but to all of the people of the world. Kempe's mention of this story is in relation to her contemplative witness to Christ's birth, wherein the wise men purport that they are heading home. This abandonment in Kempe's perspective makes her weep as she connects with this story so closely in her own mission. At this point, she departs from her fourteen children to begin her ministry to the rest of the world. Her fear for her own condemnation to hell in the beginning of her narrative is projected onto the rest of the world. She feels a tremendous guilt for all that God plans to condemn. Any of his messages that involved the damnation of others were blotted out from her psyche. Her scribe recalls, ". . . if she saw a creature being punished or sharply chastised, she would think that she was more worthy to be chastised than that creature,

for her unkindness towards God."[56] The nativity scene most adequately represents the new world order that Paul's Christianity envisions. Paul describes his faith in the Letter to the Galatians, stating that he was an overzealous Jew who felt called to preach a message regarding his vision of the Son to the Gentiles. In her confrontation with the archbishop, Kempe is accused of breaking Paul's rules for communal faith by speaking too much. With the invoking of Paul, it leads to wonder whether she was exposed to the letters of Paul often in English homilies. If so, she could have done something with Paul's message that Christians have done over and over throughout the ages. She could have decided that Paul's letters applied to her life directly in England. She would not have considered herself a Jew, but she often expresses a sense that national loyalty is important to those around her.

Lynn Staley presents the thesis that Margery Kempe's pilgrimage is a revolutionary protest in favor of the textual shift from Latin to the vernacular English tongue. Since Kempe was illiterate and relied on priests to read stories to her, she would have greatly desired the opportunity to read the texts in her spoken language. One of her special gifts is the ability to miraculously help a traveler understand her English speech. While in Rome, a German priest felt alienated while she spoke to a crowd of people at the dinner table. To help him out of his gloomy state, she told him "a story of Holy Writ" that she learned from her homeland. He then repeated the story in Latin that she conveyed to him in English. The fellows at the table sat in awe because "he could not understand any other English person."[57] Since this German man was capable of understanding her English, she felt that her home country should make an attempt to communicate those

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[56] Kempe and Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages*., 181.
[57] Ibid., 104.

who do not know Latin. It is a political move to bolster the transition from Latin to English translations in texts and sermons.

This community that she creates through the common language of English parallels with Paul's notion of Christ's body as the glue that holds the church together. In her home country, Kempe most often refers to the body to purport her message of unity. Her fellow church members look to her as an authority figure when a church in Bishop's Lynn is burning. Her confessors asks her if he should throw the Eucharist in the fire, to which she responds, "Yes, sir, yes! For Lord Jesus Christ told me it will be well."[58] This scene represents the union of the body and the church. The nativity scene also evokes this message when the three wise men gather around the newly born body of Christ. With reference to this scene in the life of Christ, she transports this story into her own context to reflect her mission to bring the entire into the fold of Christ, not just her English brethren.

As discussed in relation to the Virgin Mary and the birth of Christ, the flight to Egypt represents a shift from the Christ child as savior of Jews only to savior of the entire world. The story also contrasts the concepts of barrenness and fertility as the land of Israel is made barren before the return of Christ, where the land is restored to fertility. Margery Kempe recalls the flight to Egypt right after her description of the visitation of the wise men. Both of these narratives represent to extension of the church, but the Visitation highlights the body of Christ as the unifying symbol, while the flight to Egypt expands the landscape of Christ's reign. As Kempe's scribe relays this story, ". . . an angel came and commanded our Lady and Joseph to go from the country of Bethlehem

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[58] Ibid, 202.

into Egypt. Then this creature went with our Lady finding her lodging day by day . . ."[59] A York Mystery Play that Kempe and her husband may have attended given her mention of the Crucifixion mystery play in her book, relays this story with the voice of Joseph saying: "Now certis, full ille to thee at saye/Ther is noght ellis but us most flee/Owte of oure kyth where we are knowyn/Full wightely bus us be withdrawen/Both thou and I."[60] Joseph's language transposes the "known" and the "unknown," telling Mary that they will leave that which they know and venture into the unknown. Kempe departs on this adventure with the Virgin Mary not long before she decides to go on pilgrimage. Her pilgrimage involves a kind meeting with both a Samaritan and a German priest, who she finds more amicable and welcoming than her community that travels with her from England. It is a theme in her book that she feels most comfortable and understood by those that are foreign than by her own people.

[59] Kempe and Windeatt, *The Book of Margery Kempe : A Woman's Life in the Middle Ages*., 26.
[60] "The York Corpus Christi Plays: Play 18, the Flight to Egypt," d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/davidson-play-18-the-flight-to-egypt.

CONCLUSION

Margery Kempe personifies the apocalyptic mother whose world is flipped upside down after the birth of a child. These “ghostly mothers” are found throughout biblical literature among the figures of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Rachel. Each of these hagiographical models convey similarities to Kempe’s experience. The figure most identified with Kempe would be Rachel, as she is understood currently by biblical scholars. However, that is a redaction upon what Kempe would have known about Rachel, but much of what modern scholarship produces on the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene also projects some degree of current thought onto the past. Despite the issues with ahistoricity in this study, Rachel and Margery Kempe endure a similar traumatic experience, leading them to haunt their surrounding societies for the faults that produce such dangerous women.

These dangerous women possess the power that society ascribed to women, but they also ventured outside of the domain of their homes, producing a double threat to those around them. The combination of prophet and mother conflicted with the desire for male priests to maintain control over the position of public mother. This control was exercised through the ancient Christian prescription for new followers to abandon their families, their land, and their sexuality. These were the requirements for becoming a public figure. The public persona that maintained relationships to these aspects of their lives were questioned for their authenticity. Margery Kempe continues to be questioned for authenticity by mysticism scholars who are suspicious of her dual identity as someone

who desires union with God, but remains connected to her home, family, and individuality. The concern is not that Kempe does not adequately portray the characteristics of a mystical prophet, but that it is too often assumed that other mystics do not have these same worldly personas.

The apocalyptic mother is the historical figure that tries to forge a place for herself in a public world that mostly accommodates and rewards masculinity. She presents a danger because she voices concerns that others prefer to avoid discussing, such as the terrifying anxiety that mothers experience when they are separated from their children. While priests work to tap into this feeling that mothers understand, they recognize that women who carry and birth children have a knowledge that they cannot reach. Their authority is greatly compromised by those who they believe have an innate gift, which the Virgin Mary, Rachel, and Margery Kempe display through weeping.

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