



Feminist Approaches to Middle English Religious Writing: The Cases of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich

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Abstract

Feminist study of Middle English religious writings is a relatively new field, but it is a rich and well-developed one. Although the work of such pioneers as Eileen Edna Power set the stage in the early twentieth century, feminist scholarship of the corpus of medieval religious texts in English only emerged as a truly vibrant area of inquiry in the past twenty years. Indeed, the entry of such figures as Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich into the canon, marked iconically by their entries into the Norton Anthology of British Literature in 1986 and 1993 respectively, suggests at once how recent a scholarly development such work is and how strong an influence such scholarship has had on the study of Middle English literature. Using the cases of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich as test cases, this essay explores the key debates that have driven and shaped feminist scholarship on Middle English religious texts over the past two decades, and it explores newly emergent trends. It examines the impact of psychoanalytic criticism on medieval feminist scholarship and interrogates the contributions made by scholars who embrace French feminist approaches. It addresses the paradigm shifts enacted by the ground-breaking work of Caroline Walker Bynum as well as the questions concerning gender and essentialism raised by her work. The importance of New Historicism in the field is also a key concern in the essay, as are new takes on historicist research, especially the work of scholars who are rethinking questions of historical periodization.

Feminist approaches to medieval religious writing are not limited to scholarship focusing on texts by and for women. However, widespread assumptions about medieval women's incapacity to produce or comprehend texts worthy of serious scholarly consideration meant that for much of the twentieth century, Middle English religious texts by women, or primarily directed toward a female readership, were ignored. Accordingly, among the primary tasks of feminist scholars were overcoming the perception that such texts were not worthwhile objects of study and, concomitantly, making these texts readily available to scholars and students.

Though feminist scholarship on the corpus of medieval religious texts in English only emerged as a truly vibrant area of scholarship relatively recently, within approximately the past 25 years, the pioneering work of such early twentieth-century medievalists as Eileen Power set the stage for much twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist scholarship. Her groundbreaking *Medieval English Nunneries* (1922) examines, alongside historical documents and archival records, extensive selections from Middle English religious literature, and this book provides a clear example of feminist efforts to recover little-studied texts. Furthermore, it admirably illustrates feminist efforts to reframe master narratives, including the narrative of medieval Christianity itself.

The initial reception of Power's work also mirrors the at times fraught history of the reception of feminist scholarship within the academy. When *Medieval English Nunneries* first appeared, Power fell victim to the same set of misogynistic assumptions that had done so much to render religious texts by and for medieval women obscure. *The New Statesman* announced the publication of *Medieval English Nunneries* by attributing it to the male historian G. G. Coulton; another reviewer also elided Power's authorship, identifying the book as 'another of Coulton's anti-catholic outpourings' (Berg 123). In spite of this initially dismissive treatment of her work, Power managed to crack the male-dominated hierarchy of British academia, gaining a prestigious chair at the London School of Economics. Her professional success itself foreshadows the ultimate arrival of feminist scholarship in the scholarly mainstream. Indeed, much as Power ultimately triumphed and gained prominence within the academy, so too have religious texts by and for medieval women, and, along with them, feminist approaches. Two works in particular have attained exalted status, status one might deem comparable to Power's prestigious professorship: *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*.

As Deanne Williams notes, *The Book of Margery Kempe* plays 'a foundational role in the establishment of a canon of women authors, and it occupies an important position in recent theoretical and revisionist approaches to medieval studies'. She continues, 'Margery is a touchstone for the concerns of contemporary feminist and medieval scholarship' (137). Scholarship of the past twenty-five years would equally enable us to apply these assessments to Julian of Norwich. Accordingly, because it is not possible within the scope of this essay to offer a comprehensive account of *all* feminist scholarship on *all* Middle English religious texts, it seems appropriate to proceed by way of an exploration of the history of scholarship on *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich. Indeed, considerations of space and scope compel the omission here of many areas of feminist inquiry of great importance worthy of consideration in separate essays; in particular, discussions of the audience of Middle English religious writing generally and female readership of such texts more specifically come to mind as key areas in which important feminist

research has been done.¹ For the purposes of this study, the cases of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich will serve, in good medieval fashion, as instructive *exempla* that highlight trends, concerns, and conflicts in the field.

Julian's *Showings* was more widely known earlier than Margery Kempe's *Book*, largely as a result of the works' dramatically different histories in print. Wynkyn de Worde printed a radically expurgated form of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in 1501 as *A Shorte Treatyse of Contemplacyon*, and Henry Pepwell included this dramatically cut, 'sanitized' version in his 1521 book *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*. The full text remained unknown to modern scholars until 1934, as I discuss below. In contrast, Father Hugh (Serenus) Cressy was responsible for the first printed edition of the entire long text of Julian's *Showings* in 1670. This text was 'reprinted in 1843, in 1864, and again in 1902'. A modernized version appeared in 1877, and Grace Warrack's edition of BL Sloane 2499, published in 1901, 'introduced most early twentieth-century readers to Julian'. Warrack's volume, significantly, included a 'sympathetic, informed introduction'. Soon thereafter, in 1911, the manuscript of the short text was found in the British Library (MS Add. 37790, fols. 97–115), and Dundas Hartford quickly published a modernized version (Crampton 17–18).

Although some early discussion of Julian 'raised the question of her visionary experience's validity' (Crampton 19), Julian's writings generally garnered a positive reception by early twentieth century readers. In addition to the 'sympathetic introduction' in Warrack's edition, Evelyn Underhill famously dubbed Julian the 'first English woman of letters' (*Cambridge Medieval History* 7:807, qtd. in Crampton 18). The acceptance of Margery was far less ready; in fact, as in the canonization processes of so many medieval saints, debates about legitimacy (in this case both of the medieval text and of what might be deemed early feminist approaches to it) slowed things down.² Dismissive attitudes not unlike those displayed toward Eileen Power's work were initially directed not only toward the medieval female author of the *Book of Margery Kempe* but also toward the female scholar largely responsible for the identification and publication of the full text. In 1934, Hope Emily Allen was called upon to examine a manuscript that Colonel William Butler-Bowden had brought to the Victoria and Albert Museum to be identified. This manuscript was, of course, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Allen, involved with other projects, did not wish to take on the job of transcribing or editing the manuscript, and she 'suggested to the board of the Early English Text Society (EETS) that Sanford B. Meech do the work'. Meech was 'involved with her on the *Early Modern English Dictionary*', and Allen planned to collaborate with him on the *Book of Margery Kempe* and to write the introduction (Hirsch 235). The dispute that developed between the two is now widely known. Meech, perhaps in concert with Butler-Bowden, sought 'to force her off the project', and he treated her with 'irritation, anger, and contempt' (Hirsch 235).

Following the appearance of the full scholarly edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, criticism on the text was slow to take off, a state of affairs characteristic of other work on Middle English religious texts by and for women. In the *MLA International Bibliography*, for the period from the full text's appearance in print in 1934 through 1959, only six entries appear when one searches for *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and of those, two are by Hope Emily Allen and two are by Sanford Meech (one of his being the EETS edition). In spite of her earlier and more positive reception, scholarly work on Julian of Norwich, feminist or otherwise, was equally as scarce through much of the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Revealingly, the *MLA International Bibliography* shows no entries on Julian of Norwich earlier than 1951, and, significantly, as Crampton points out, 'when E. K. Chambers wrote *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages*, published in 1945, he did not refer once' to Julian. She continues, 'H. S. Bennet's *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, published in 1947, gives her one reference in passing' (18). The 1950s produced six works on Julian included in the *MLA International Bibliography*, and the 1960s only five; similarly, the entries in the *MLA International Bibliography* for the 1960s also reveal only five works on *The Book of Margery Kempe* to add to the six that appeared between the full text's publication in 1934 and 1959. By way of contrast, a search in the *MLA International Bibliography* for work on William Langland's religious poem *Piers Plowman* yields ninety-two entries in the same period.

The relatively few responses that the *Book of Margery Kempe* did engender when critics initially got their hands on it tended to echo the sort of contemptuous attitudes that Stanford Meech and William Butler-Bowden displayed toward Hope Emily Allen in their working relationship.³ Indeed, one might say that 'irritation, anger, and contempt' abounded in early work on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In a review of *The Book of Margery Kempe* published in 1936 in *The Spectator*, the renowned scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill, the same scholar who praised Julian's learning in the *Cambridge Medieval History*, claims that Margery does not meet the criteria for being labeled a mystic. Underhill instead labels Margery as having a 'hysterical bent' (qtd. in Hirsch 235–6). Other early assessments echo Underhill's view, including that of D. L. Douie, who describes Margery as having 'a somewhat unbalanced temperament' (qtd. in Hirsch 236). David Knowles, with an air of settling the question, authoritatively pronounces on Margery's hysteria and lack of true mysticism in his *The English Mystical Tradition* (1961). He declares that *The Book of Margery Kempe* originates in 'the vivid imagination and retentive memory of a sincere and devout, but very hysterical woman', adding that it contains 'little . . . of deep spiritual wisdom, and nothing of true mystical experience' (148). Nearly twenty years later, in *Writers and Pilgrims* (1981), Donald Howard sounds the same note, declaring, '[S]he was quite mad – an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend' (34).

Although, as I discuss below, it was not until the 1970s and early 1980s that feminist scholars took up in a concerted way the cause of refuting such pejorative assessments, efforts to rehabilitate Margery Kempe were not entirely unknown in the early part of the twentieth century. None other than Hope Emily Allen embraced the cause of defending Margery Kempe from being entirely dismissed as 'hysterical'. To accomplish this end, she believed it was necessary to historicize Margery's devotional practices, another manifestation of the feminist work of recovery and recasting historical narratives. Accordingly, Allen sought to situate Margery in a context of other medieval holy women, who were then comparatively unknown, in the (never published) second volume of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁴ Allen saw the *Book* as a 'new development in late medieval religiousness, a "mystical" development that originated in Rhineland spirituality' and was strongly associated with Syon Abbey (Hirsch 236). Hirsch notes:

This new tradition at once contextualizes and illuminates the *Book of Margery Kempe*, countering the charge of hysteria with a historically based explanation of some of its more discordant elements and putting its protagonist in the company of some very great mystics, such as Saint Bridget of Sweden, who influenced Margery Kempe herself. Throughout, Allen was concerned to show how far women were responsible for this new movement, particularly in England. (236)

In spite of Allen's efforts, which were not widely known in her day since the second volume of *The Book of Margery Kempe* remained unpublished, the early accounts of Margery as hysteric spawned a critical school of 'diagnosing' (and often at the same time dismissing or condemning) Margery Kempe; this critical trend has continued into relatively recent times. In his translation of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Barry Windeatt posits rather benignly that Margery suffered from a 'heart condition, or some other sickness' (189).⁵ Edmund Colledge, perhaps best known for his work editing the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich with James Walsh, writes that Margery is a 'morbid neurotic' ('Margery Kempe' 220). Less accusingly, many scholars have called Margery a victim of post-partum depression or psychosis (see, for instance, Clarissa Atkinson's influential book *Mystic and Pilgrim*). Nancy Stork suggests Tourette's syndrome as a possible cause for Margery's disruptive devotional behavior, and William Ober attributes her visions to 'scotomata, common in migraine', and notes, 'an epileptiform component accompanied some of her outbursts' (32).

This interpretive stance is by no means confined to the work of scholars of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The impetus to read medieval holy women's practices and texts in light of modern medical or scientific discourses has proved strong. Consider, for example, Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* (1985), which places medieval female saints' fasting practices in dialogue with anorexia nervosa (although he does *not* claim medieval women were suffering from this same disorder) and the studies that

attribute mystical experiences to the ingestion of such substances as ergot. Although Julian is frequently presented as an intellectual, 'traditionally' pious foil for the 'hysterical', over-the-top Margery Kempe in readings of Middle English religious literature, even Julian's texts have not been immune from the critical desire to diagnose or pathologize. Ober, for instance, using Robert Carter's nomenclature, calls Julian's 'sixteen "shewings"' a 'primary event' of hysteria (9); interestingly, though, he textually 'canonizes' Julian, referring to her throughout his article as 'St. Julianna'.

The desire to defend Middle English religious texts by and for women in the face of such interpretations, which, even when not presented pejoratively, tend to carry stigma, spurred some feminist critics to action. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the social feminism of the women's movement and feminist literary criticism coincided, registering simultaneously on the radar screens of popular and academic culture. Titles of essays published in this era are revealing: see, for instance, Roberta Bux Bosse's 1979 essay 'Margery Kempe's Tarnished Reputation: A Reassessment' and Drew E. Hinderer's 'On Rehabilitating Margery Kempe'.⁶

One should note, however, that the category of 'hysteria' by no means disappeared from scholarship on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, or on mystical texts generally, with the rise of feminist criticism. Scholars continued to be interested in the question of hysteria, especially in relation to Margery Kempe and her *Book*, through the 1970s and 1980s, and even into the twenty-first century, though the interpretive lenses shifted dramatically. In her Marxist-inflected feminist reading of Margery Kempe first published in 1983 in her book *Writing Women* and reprinted in 1994 in the edited collection *The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect: Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, Sheila Delany declares the insufficiency of psychoanalytic approaches to *The Book of Margery Kempe* even as she accepts its terms and participates in the 'diagnostic' critical tradition:

Everyone agrees that she was 'neurotic': Allen's diagnosis emphasises hysteria, and to this we may add post-partum psychosis, wish-fulfillment, infantile regression and reaction formation as obvious neurotic syndromes revealed in the book. Yet because psychoanalysis generally omits the social factor in the development of neurosis, suspending the individual in artificial isolation, it cannot provide a real understanding of neurosis, which is not, after all, an answer but the very thing to be explained. (79)

Similarly, Nancy Partner states,

To accept that Margery Kempe's experiences . . . were hysterical in origin is not to denigrate them or dismiss them, but rather to see clearly and with sympathy the extreme distress and thwarting of women's lives, and the lengths to which they were sometimes driven for expressions and relief. ('Reading' 262)

Becky Lee illustratively emphasizes the ongoing presence of the discourse of hysteria in feminist scholarship. She states that in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars' 'focus shifted to Kempe's revelations about her world', but the

assessment of Margery Kempe as hysterical ‘went unchallenged’. In Lee’s view, the consensus remained ‘that “to diagnose Margery’s case as hysteria need not be to trivialize her significance or her *Book’s* value as cultural testimony”’ (108).

However, as Stork points out, citing Partner’s reliance on a Freudian framework for ‘rehabilitating’ Margery Kempe as a case in point, feminist efforts to rethink hysteria as an interpretive category do not always accomplish as dramatic a revision as they might claim. Stork writes,

Margery’s defenders today are mainly feminist critics, who often assume that she suffered from a form of ‘hysteria’, but that hysteria itself is the only form of expression for women’s voices in a patriarchal society. In these readings, Margery Kempe’s bizarre behavior is seen in as positive a light as possible, yet the underlying assumption, that some early sexual trauma caused her bellowing and weeping, is not challenged. (262)

As Liz Herbert McAvoy observes, the essentialism to which so many feminist writers object in Freud’s work haunts feminist engagements with medieval texts that employ interpretive paradigms making use of the work of such post-Freudian feminist psychoanalytic theorists as H  l  ne Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Though she uses ideas from these theorists herself, McAvoy notes that ‘there are self-evident problems connected with ahistoricity, anachronicity, and a tendency towards an essentialist view of the feminine, within the application of contemporary post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory to medieval texts’ (13).

The attention to hysteria by feminist critics and by those against whom feminist critics often position themselves should be understood in light of changing engagements with Freud’s work over the course of the twentieth century. As Stork notes, *The Book of Margery Kempe* ‘was discovered at the height of prestige of Freudian psychodynamic theory’ (261), and Williams draws attention to the importance of ‘psychoanalysis in the history of twentieth-century medieval studies’ (139). As feminist theory has taken on, shaped, and revised Freudian psychoanalytic theory, feminist critics have approached Margery, and other mystics, accordingly. Williams points out, ‘Feminist appropriations of hysteria in the wake of Freud, such as H  l  ne Cixous’s celebratory self-identification with Freud’s Dora in *Le rire de la Meduse*’ have enabled ‘a congenial point of entry into *The Book of Margery Kempe*’ (151–2). Similarly, one finds in work that examines Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* feminist scholars’ employing Freudian theory as well as feminist scholars’ revising the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition. For instance, Nancy Coiner considers questions of gender and subjectivity through Freud’s concept of the ‘unheimliche’ in ‘The “Homely” and the Heimliche: The Hidden, Doubled Self in Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*’. Julian’s famous discussion of Jesus as Mother has attracted attention from feminist critics who revise Freudian concepts of maternity using ideas drawn from the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow,

and others. One of the best examples (and one that also considers the very important question of maternity in relation to *The Book of Margery Kempe*) is McAvoy's *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*. In her extended analysis of maternity in *Showings*, McAvoy explores Julian's use of discourses of motherhood, arguing that Julian,

like Kristeva . . . draws upon maternity as an image, hermeneutic and linguistic tool which also serves to validate a widespread female bodily experience which, even vicariously, tended to lay outside the realm of male perception in the Middle Ages. (18)

The convergence of political and literary feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s coincided not only with the scholarly work of rehabilitating Middle English religious texts by and for women but also with the increasing visibility of such texts. In this era, feminist scholars of medieval religion began to create venues where their voices could be heard, as is made clear by the establishment of such journals as *Mystics Quarterly*, initially founded in 1974 under the title *Fourteenth Century English Mystics Newsletter* by Valerie Lagorio and Ritamary Bradley (both important feminist scholars of Middle English religious texts, and the latter one of the first to publish on the theme of maternity in Julian's *Showings*).⁷ This journal, along with others like *Studia Mystica*, the first issue of which appeared in 1978, created fora that introduced a wider range of scholars to an ever-growing corpus of medieval religious texts by, for, and about women.⁸

A significant increase in the *amount* of scholarship on Margery's and Julian's texts went hand in hand with such developments. The number of entries on Margery Kempe in the *MLA Bibliography* doubles from five in the 1960s to ten in the 1970s; the tally for Julian is up to twelve, from five in the 1960s. These works are not, of course, all feminist in their methodologies or theoretical orientations. However, the very existence of such works as *A Bibliographical Index of Five English Mystics*, which situates Margery and Julian alongside Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton, suggests that the 'canonization' of Julian's texts and *The Book of Margery Kempe* as 'legitimate' works toward which scholars of Middle English religious literature should direct their attention was underway.

Not coincidentally, it is also in the 1970s that editions of Julian's texts from the manuscripts (as opposed to versions or modernizations) become available, another indication of the growing acceptance of this body of material as worthy of serious scholarly attention and, of course, an important catalyst for increased scholarship. Marion Glasscoe's edition of MS BL Sloane 2499

appeared in 1976, and Francis Beer's text of the short version in 1978. That was the year, too, of the Colledge and Walsh two-volume addition including both texts, a comprehensive introduction, and a critical apparatus that provides a base for other students of Julian. (Crampton 18)

In her unpublished second volume of *The Book of Margery Kempe* Allen had, in ways that anticipated feminist work of rehabilitation from the 1970s and 1980s, attempted to undertake the work of redefining canonicity in both its religious and literary valences; she sought to change the terms of the debate about what is legitimate (in every sense of the term) and worthy of study. Her comparative, context-focused scholarly methodology also in some respects anticipated two of the most important forces that converged to shape feminist scholarship on Middle English religious texts as it developed in the 1980s and into the 1990s: the groundbreaking work of Caroline Walker Bynum and the critical approaches brought to prominence in newly theorized guises by the school known as New Historicism. Indeed, in the 1980s, feminist scholarship on Middle English religious texts benefited from what would prove to be an extraordinary paradigm shift in medieval studies, one that, as it turned out, would have the effect of enabling Allen's unrealized efforts to bear fruit in the work of later generations of scholars.

Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* was published in 1987 as the inaugural volume in Stephen Greenblatt's series 'The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics'. With this book, Bynum did nothing less than bring female spirituality and the female body to the center of medieval studies, a process that she had set in motion with her 1982 book *Jesus as Mother*.⁹ Bynum reshaped the field by emphasizing women's particular experiences of God, distinctively female religious practices, gendered interpretations of religious symbols, and women's own understandings of their identities and the performances thereof (as opposed to patriarchal and/or misogynistic understandings of women's identities and practices). In her own words in her preface she rightly claims that she 'advance[s] theories about the nature of asceticism and about women's use of symbols that are far-reaching in their implications for women's history and for the history of religions' (xv). She further observes, 'Both to knowledgeable medievalists and to committed feminists – although for different reasons – these theories will seem to be audacious reversals of received wisdom' (xv).

Rita Copeland's review of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, published in the influential journal *Speculum* in 1989, makes clear the book's impact. Copeland begins by noting that, in the two years since its publication, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* had

already found a large audience both within and beyond medieval studies, among historians of sexuality, feminist historians and critics, and, more generally, literary scholars regardless of field and period, whose work is invested in the relationship between texts and social practice. (143)

She observes that Bynum's book serves as a corrective to previously dominant trends in scholarship of medieval religion, scholarship that had tended to 'emphasiz[e] poverty and chastity. . . as central motifs of religious

life' (143). The book also, as Copeland indicates, revises and corrects 'some dominant trends in feminist criticism and histories, tendencies to focus on the obviously sexual component of gender roles' (143).

Bynum's scholarship, along with New Historicist interests in processes of 'self-fashioning' (to adopt Greenblatt's influential term), the operations of ideological systems, and the cultural work done by previously unconsidered categories of texts, did much to boost the importance of Middle English religious writing within the field of medieval studies, and to attract a new generation of feminist scholars to such texts. In 1984, E. Jane Burns, Roberta (Bonnie) Krueger, and Elizabeth Robertson founded the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* (renamed *Medieval Feminist Forum* in 1999), providing a new venue for feminist scholarship and highlighting the profession's growing interest in such scholarship. The sense of scholarly legitimacy of Middle English religious texts by and for women, as well as of feminist critical approaches, that began to emerge in the 1970s and grew through the mid-1980s solidified in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Revealingly, it is in this period that excerpts from the *Book of Margery Kempe* and the *Showings* appeared for the first time in the *Norton Anthology of British Literature*. *The Book of Margery Kempe* made its Norton debut in volume one of the fifth edition in 1986. Somewhat ironically, since so much criticism explicitly plays the (seemingly) unorthodox and unsophisticated Margery against the (at least seemingly) quite orthodox, and in truth quite theologically sophisticated, anchoress Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe achieved the canonical status of inclusion in the *Norton Anthology* earlier than did Julian of Norwich.¹⁰ Excerpts from Julian's *Showings* first appeared in volume one of the sixth edition of the *Norton Anthology of British Literature* in 1993.

The mid-1990s then saw the publication by the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University of the TEAMS editions of *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (1994; edited by Georgia Ronan Crampton) and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1996; edited by Lynn Staley). As the TEAMS Web site states, 'The goal of the TEAMS Middle English text series is to make available to teachers and students texts which occupy an important place in the literary and cultural canon but which have not been readily available in student editions'.¹¹ The publication of these editions of Margery's and Julian's texts both highlighted the legitimacy of these works in the undergraduate and graduate curricula and helped foster still more scholarship in the field.¹²

Another event heralding newly won scholarly legitimacy for Middle English writings by women occurred in 1992, when Alexandra Barratt published a collection of excerpts (most of which deal with religious subject matter) entitled *Women's Writing in Middle English*.¹³ This volume might be seen in some ways as the fulfillment of Allen's desires to contextualize Margery Kempe; it contains excerpts from Margery's writings, as well as Julian's, but it makes available to scholars and teachers of Middle

English literature a wide range of texts by other women writers, both those originally written in Middle English and those by women from other countries whose texts were translated into Middle English (for instance, St. Birgitta of Sweden, St. Catherine of Siena, Marguerite Porete, Elizabeth of Hungary, Mechtild of Hackeborn, and Gertude the Great). Similarly, texts by many of mystical and religious writers whose work Allen intended to excerpt in volume two were, by the 1980s, published in full scholarly editions and became the focus of feminist scholarship. St. Catherine of Siena, and the Middle English translation of her *Dialogue* entitled *The Orchard of Syon*, are cases in point.¹⁴ The Early English Text Society edition of *The Orchard of Syon* had appeared in 1966, but St. Catherine's writing became available to a much wider audience in 1980, when Paulist Press published a modern English translation of the *Dialogue* in their Classics of Western Spirituality series.

A massive upsurge in scholarship on *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Julian's *Showings* occurred in concert with the advent of Bynum's work, the wide acceptance within medieval studies of New Historicist approaches, and the Norton canonizations of their texts. The *MLA International Bibliography* records 43 entries on Margery Kempe in the 1980s and 111 in the 1990s, while Julian appears in 52 entries from the 1980s and 64 entries from the 1990s. In this outpouring of scholarship, one sees, half a century after Allen's proposed second volume to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, scholars employing versions of her vision and enjoying the new legitimacy of the subject matter. Such scholars as David Wallace, Susan Dickman, and Ute Stargardt took up the comparative approaches Allen had advocated and turned their attention to many of the medieval texts she had planned to consider, signaling strong growth in work on female saints' lives, virginity literature, and anchoritic literature alongside scholarship on mystical texts. Wallace, Dickman, and Stargardt situate Margery in relationship to other mystics (St. Catherine of Siena, Marie d'Oignies, Dorothea of Montau, Angela of Foligno) who engaged in similar forms of spirituality and who produced texts that are in some respects similarly startling.¹⁵ Their work also emblemizes a key shift toward seeing Middle English texts and medieval English religious culture in dialogue with developments in continental female piety, a trend also evident, for example, in Nicholas Watson's essay on the 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love'. Similarly, Rosalynn Voaden's edited collection *Prophets Abroad*, and feminist as well as New Historicist work on St. Birgitta of Sweden, Syon Abbey, and its texts (a field that has, since the early 1990s, emerged as particularly dynamic) continue the comparative, internationalist focus in feminist work on Middle English religious texts. The inauguration in the 1980s of an annual conference in Britain (initially called the Exeter Symposium) focusing on the medieval mystical tradition, and the publication of a series of volumes of essays based on work presented at the conference, likewise indicate the scholarly energy concentrated

around this newly legitimate body of material in the late 1980s through the 1990s.

In the flood of scholarship on the writings of Margery and Julian in the 1980s and 1990s, the importance of the attention that Bynum had drawn to the female body and female religious practices (especially female Christocentric devotion focused on the Passion and the Eucharist), is obvious. One notes, for instance, many essays and books that explore the female body and the body of Christ. Sarah Beckwith's extremely influential essay 'A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe' is a case in point, interrogating with a Lacanian lens the 'positive' mysticism so strongly gendered feminine. Another representative example is Elizabeth Robertson's essay 'Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*', published in 1993 in a collection of essays called, significantly, *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*. Robertson references as a starting point Bynum's work on 'medieval notions of the body, particularly in relationship to the experience of women in the religious life' (142) and goes on to consider 'the ways that medical ideology shapes the literary representation of the feminine in mystical work' (142). Robertson's essay highlights the New Historicist impulse to place texts in dialogue and to attend to questions of 'textual environment', to invoke Paul Strohm's formulation. It also represents a significant, revealingly feminist, departure from earlier work that uses twentieth-century medical/psychological theories to interpret Middle English religious texts.

Maria Lichtman's 1991 essay, '“I Desyrede a Bodylye Sight”: Julian of Norwich and the Body' illustrates a further important development in feminist scholarship in the wake of Bynum and New Historicist methods – that is, theoretically informed explorations of the relationships between language itself, processes of writing, and the gendered body. A parallel example in scholarship on *The Book of Margery Kempe* is Karma Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, also published in 1991. Lochrie explores questions concerning the embodied, gendered experience of mysticism in conjunction with Margery's struggles to gain literary authority. Similarly, in her essay 'Body into Text' Wendy Harding explores the gendered dynamics of the relationship between Margery Kempe and her clerical scribe; she 'consider[s] *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a dialogue between representatives of opposing orders of medieval society' (170). Lynn Staley addresses questions of gender, authorship, and authority even more fully in *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, in which she distinguishes between 'Margery' the character and 'Kempe' the author. Staley also discusses what she designates the 'trope' of the scribe.

Examinations of gendered embodiment, and such embodiment's relationship both to language itself as well as to processes of accessing literary or textual authority, tap into another set of issues that emerged as vital ones in feminist scholarship on Middle English religious texts in the early

and mid-1990s: the nexus of gender, literacy, vernacularity, and authority. In his extensive work on Julian of Norwich, for example, Nicholas Watson turned to such questions in the early and mid-1990s. In ‘“Yf Wommen be Double Naturally”: Remaking “Woman” in Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Love’, Watson takes as his starting point the premise that

medieval women writers often respond to the gender stereotypes which they inherit from their culture neither by accepting nor by rejecting them, but rather by thinking through them in as active and positive a way as possible, identifying with them and even intensifying them to the point where their ‘authorized’ meaning (as understood, for example, by institutionally powerful men) undergoes basic shifts. (8)

Watson’s magisterial essay ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409’ (in which Julian features) did much to establish a new set of scholarly concerns around vernacularity and debates about orthodoxy, issues that have subsequently informed feminist scholarship on Middle English religious writings, including a substantial body of feminist work on Wycliffite and Lollard texts.

In the decade of the 1990s, one observes a notable impetus to survey and mark out the field of feminist scholarship on Middle English religious writing – indeed, of feminist medievalist work generally. Collections of essays devoted to Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich appeared (*Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sandra McEntire in 1992, and *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, also edited by McEntire, in 1998), as did many more broadly focused collections in which feminist scholarship on religious texts is well represented (for examples, see the aforementioned *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* from 1993 and *The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* from 1994). The publication in April 1993 of a volume of the journal *Speculum* devoted to the topic ‘Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism’ emblemizes this moment of summing up and taking stock. Judith Bennett’s ‘Medievalism and Feminism’ provides a particularly useful historical consideration of ‘feminist work in medieval studies’ as ‘a thriving enterprise with a distinguished past – and a promising future’ (311–12).

Essays in this issue of *Speculum* similarly bear witness to a moment both of critical self-consciousness and of self-critique. As the editor Nancy Partner indicates in her introduction:

Now that women medievalists and medieval women are visibly and permanently part of the scene, there remain some major disagreements over how centrally the results of more than two decades of scholarship on women have been incorporated into the main body of medieval studies: as Judith Bennett sees it, ‘although *women* are better assimilated into medieval studies in the 1990s, *feminist scholarship* is not’, while in Allen Frantzen’s view, ‘feminist scholarship today pervades the disciplines of art, history, law, literature, and religion’. (305)

In an essay entitled 'Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible', Kathleen Biddick strongly criticizes Bynum's work, rejecting her structuralist approach and charging her with the essentialism to which many feminists object in other theoretical paradigms.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, feminist scholarship on Middle English religious texts has remained a thriving field. To turn once again to the *MLA International Bibliography* as a benchmark, one notes that between the year 2000 and the time of writing this essay in the fall of 2006, 29 entries for work on Julian of Norwich have appeared. Significantly, in 2005 the Norton Critical Edition of *The Showings of Julian of Norwich* appeared (edited by Denise N. Baker), increasing the accessibility of this text (particularly in undergraduate teaching), and Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins published a new scholarly edition of the short and long versions of Julian's *Showings* in 2006. Their exceptionally detailed and meticulously researched scholarly edition continues feminist work of textual recovery, including previously unedited material from manuscripts associated with the Cambrai Benedictine nuns whose community was largely responsible for preserving Julian's text. Even more strikingly, there are 97 entries since 2000 in the *MLA International Bibliography* for work on Margery Kempe; one of these, from 2001, is also a Norton Critical Edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (edited and translated by Lynn Staley), a publication that demonstrates the ever-increasing importance of this text in the syllabi taught in colleges and universities.

Web sites devoted to both Margery and Julian, as well as to such figures as St. Birgitta of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena, abound. See, for instance, Julia Bolton Holloway's site provides material on all of these figures; additional examples include the site 'Mapping Margery Kempe' and a page with multiple links on St. Catherine of Siena.¹⁶ The publication in 2003 of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (edited by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace) highlights not only the solid places of Margery and Julian in the canon of Middle English religious writing but also the increasingly prominent place of other religious writing by and for women in the field of feminist medieval studies.¹⁷ In addition to Nicholas Watson's chapter on 'Julian of Norwich' and Carolyn Dinshaw's chapter on 'Margery Kempe', one finds in this volume a chapter on 'Enclosure' by Christopher Cannon in which he gives extensive consideration to anchoritic literature, a chapter entitled 'Beneath the Pulpit' by Alcuin Blamires that attends to women's engagements with orthodox and official as well as heterodox and unofficial versions of 'vernacular theology', and a chapter by Alexandra Barratt entitled 'Continental Women Mystics and English Readers'.¹⁸

In the new millennium, feminist scholars of religious writing have begun to revise methods and assumptions associated with the New Historicism that so dominated the 1990s. Rethinking historical periodization, reconsidering binaries of 'medieval' and 'early modern' as well as

'Catholic' and 'Protestant' as they apply to religious texts by and for women is a current topic of significant interest. David Wallace's essay 'Periodizing Women: Mary Ward (1585–1645) and the Premodern Canon' is an illustrative example with which to end. Wallace 'considers the misalignment of premodern women's experiences and textual remains' with the 'developmental narratives' of 'periodization paradigms' (397). His test case is Mary Ward, a woman 'at once unknown and a figure of European stature; an epical traveler inspired by saints' lives, à la Margery Kempe' (397). He argues that the

absence of Mary Ward from the corpus of premodern English women's writings speaks both to long-running struggles within Roman Catholicism and to assumptions of Protestant historiography complicit with such absenting. The habilitation of Mary Ward wins new points of observation upon long histories of English women and writing that ride out medieval / Renaissance, Catholic / Protestant divides. (397–8)

Wallace's essay signals new developments in the new millenium in the ongoing feminist aims of recovering little-known texts and reframing narratives, opening fresh fields in which scholars engaged with the by now well established feminist commitment to editing English religious writings might work. His essay also points to a vibrant and innovative future for feminist scholarship on medieval religious texts by and about women.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ See, for instance, Bartlett; Krug; Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*; Erler.

² For a discussion of the publication history, as well as the critical history, of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, see Mitchell.

³ Nancy F. Partner provides an overview of negative critical responses to *The Book of Margery Kempe* in her essay 'Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*'.

⁴ Although Allen quoted the Jesuit David Thurston's remark 'That Margery was a victim of hysteria can hardly be in doubt' ('Prefatory Note', *Book of Margery Kempe*, lxxv), and though she used the term 'hysterical' in describing the religious movement she believed influenced Margery (Hirsch 236), she was, according to Hirsch, at least initially committed to preventing Margery

from being tarred by the brush of such accusations. On Allen's complex, shifting attitudes toward Margery, see Williams.

⁵ He also quotes Dr. Anthony Ryle, who describes Margery as having 'hysterical personality organisation' (Windeatt 301).

⁶ Valerie Lagorio provides a survey of critics who condemn and critics who defend Margery and her *Book* in 'Defensorium Contra Oblectatores'. Nancy Partner usefully discusses the rise of feminist criticism and the emergence of less condemnatory readings of *The Book of Margery Kempe* ('Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*' 31–3).

⁷ See Bradley.

⁸ Of course not all of the scholarship published in these journals concerned texts by or for women; nor did all authors take feminist approaches to the texts in question.

⁹ As Jane Chance says of *Jesus as Mother*, with 'what seemed a curious, eccentric book', Bynum in fact launched 'the beginning of a whole field of study of women mystics and the representation of the female body' (xxxii).

¹⁰ Knowles, for instance, once again downgrades Margery Kempe, stating characteristically that Margery 'is clearly not the equal of the earlier English mystics in depth of perception or wisdom of spiritual doctrine, nor as a personality can she challenge comparison with Julian of Norwich' (139). Robert Stone, in his book from 1970 entitled *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich* (incidentally, the first work listed in the *MLA International Bibliography* that is devoted to a sustained joint examination of Margery and Julian) makes a rather similar point. Stone claims, 'The work of Julian is strikingly intellectual. She is an analytical mystic, carefully examining her visions, her conclusions, and her questions about the conclusions'. In contrast, 'The work of Margery Kempe . . . is basically nonintellectual. There is little or no examination of philosophical causes, effects, or questions. Instead, we find a primarily emotional reaction, personalized, focusing on Margery herself' (qtd. in Chance xxvii).

¹¹ See <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm>>.

¹² The TEAMS *Book of Margery Kempe* and *Shewings* are currently also both available on line as full text electronic editions, something that further increases accessibility. See <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/staley.htm>> for *The Book of Margery Kempe* and <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/julianfr.htm>> for the *Shewings*.

¹³ In the introduction to this volume, Barratt notes 'the virtual canonisations, both literary and religious, of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich' (1).

¹⁴ As Hirsch observes, 'many of the works which Hope Allen had intended to include in her second volume were published in full, or were at least projected for future publication' ('Hope Emily Allen, the Second Volume' 14); these included the *Ancrene Riwe* (now better known as the *Ancrene Wisse*) – the French text was published in 1954, and Tolkein's edition of the Corpus Christi College manuscript was published in 1961 – and the *Orchard of Syon* (which did not actually appear until 1966 but was slated by EETS for much earlier publication).

¹⁵ See Wallace, 'Mystics and Followers in Siena and East Anglia'; Dickman; Stargardt.

¹⁶ See <<http://www.umilta.net>> by Julia Bolton Holloway; 'Mapping Margery Kempe' <<http://www.holycross.edu/departments/visarts/projects/kempe/>>; St. Catherine of Siena <<http://www.op.org/domcentral/trad/cathlinks.htm>>.

¹⁷ Similarly, as part of the strong current trend in publishing 'companion' volumes, D. S. Brewer put out *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe* (edited by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis) in 2004.

¹⁸ Even chapters that are not explicitly focused on religious writing often give considerable consideration to religious texts. For instance, Daniel Kline's chapter on 'Female Childhoods' discusses both religious drama and *Pearl*; Ruth Evans's chapter on 'Virginites' examines the *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad* alongside several saints' lives, Marian poetry, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*; and Dyan Elliott's chapter on 'Marriage' juxtaposes conduct texts, patristic writings, and Middle English penitential volumes with such works as the Paston letters.

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