

**"WOMAN, WHY WEEPEST THOU?": THE INFLUENCE OF MARY  
MAGDALENE ON *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE***

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Margery Kempe was a fifteenth-century English middle-class wife and mother who chronicled her transformation from sinner to saint. While her loud weeping was often viewed with hostility by her contemporaries, Kempe believed her tears to be the source of her power and a gift from God. Kempe's behaviour has been dismissed by many modern critics as hysterical, but her book is not random ramblings but patterned on the form of the confession, which was an integral component of her society. She also patterned her life on the legend of Mary Magdalene, whose own life, a transformation from sexual sinner to the beloved of Christ, was closely identified with the sacrament of penance. Mary Magdalene is also associated with the gift of tears. Mary Magdalene's tears had, by the fifteenth century, been broken down into tears of compunction, compassion and devotion; Kempe herself used this taxonomy of tears to describe her own gift. By modelling herself on one of the most popular and beloved saints in the Middle Ages, Kempe aligned herself with a powerful image of sin and redemption.**

## INTRODUCTION

The character and characteristics of Margery Kempe have been a topic of discussion, debate and dissension since the full manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* was published in 1934. She was born around the year 1373 and she lived her life in Bishop's Lynn, now King's Lynn, in Norfolk (Collis 9). Bishop's Lynn was a thriving port of some consequence and Kempe's father, John Kempe, was an important figure who had been mayor of Lynn five times. She married somewhat beneath her but the match seems to have been happy enough and her husband was a respectable and, it seems, a good-natured, man. Kempe was proud of her family's importance and was quick to mention her important connections and position if she felt threatened by authority: " ' Syr,' sche sayd , 'I am of Lynne in Norfolke, a good mannys dowtyr of the same Lynne, whch hath ben meyr fyve tymes of that worshepful burwgh and aldyrman also many yerys, and I have a good man, also a burgeys of the seyd town, Lynne, to myn husbond'"(Kempe 113). It is no mistake that Kempe's father is mentioned first in her defence because he is obviously the figure who Kempe believes will be more respected by her interrogators. In approximately 1396, Margery Kempe had the first of her fourteen children. It is this event that precipitates the crisis, and eventual redemption, in her life. Her book is a series of reminiscences of her spiritual journey told to a number of scribes when she was approximately sixty years old in 1436. Her children and the rest of her worldly life are not relevant to her story except in how they can be used to illustrate her spirituality. Thus her story does not begin with her birth but with her re-birth as a holy woman at the age of twenty. Kempe describes her sanctity in very specific terms and weeping is the most readily identifiable characteristic of that sanctity.

Kempe's descriptions of her outbursts of uncontrollable tears and screams have led many critics to dismiss her account as the inconsequential ramblings of an hysterical woman. The hostility of some of these critics is reflected in Kempe's own

descriptions of the hostile reactions of many of her contemporaries. Her “boysstows sobbyngys” (Kempe 51) seem to be the main cause of this animosity; her cries are so loud and so public that they disturb the people in the church, in the marketplace, and on pilgrimage. Helen Jewell views Kempe’s tears as a manifestation of the ignorance of the general female population of the late Middle Ages. She describes Margery’s main inspirations for her visions as a combination of imagination influenced by the rituals of mass and the emotionalism that was increasing in popular religion during the fifteenth century:

She became a useful illustration of the confusions in an undisciplined enthusiast, seeing biblical visions and believing herself married to the Godhead in a ceremony in the apostle’s church in Rome...Margery was excessive by nature, but she was only an exaggeration of the hysterical delusions any fervent, illiterate but impressionable woman could fall into, left too much to her own unbridled imagination, with the raw material of the church imagery and ritual as inspiration.

(Jewell 169)

But this analysis does not take into account the numerous references that Kempe makes to the many books that she names in her own book. To dismiss Kempe as an illiterate woman is to ignore her use and understanding of the texts that were read to her and how she adapted them in her own narrative.

In more recent scholarship, many feminists have defended Kempe. One such critic is Dhira Mahoney, who describes Kempe’s tears as a way of setting herself apart and emphasising her uniqueness: “her tears and cries are her public language, an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in defiance of the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system” (Mahoney 40). Mahoney interprets Kempe’s tears as one of the few tools of communication left to women in a patriarchal society that denies women an equal voice. She interprets the hostility that Kempe describes in a reaction to her tears by her community, church, and travelling companions as representing the hostility that an entrenched patriarchy has always

shown towards women who do not fit into their narrow mould of what a woman should be. But it is difficult to think of Kempe's tears as the last resort of the inarticulate. Kempe demonstrates throughout her narrative that she relies heavily on language. She is proud of her ability to tell stories and to argue in her own defence. Her tears do not replace her words; rather they have an importance that has nothing to do with rage, inarticulateness or proto-feminist angst.

Kempe does describe the hostility of her community to her emotional response to her religion, but the tears that are Kempe's identifying mark are not the anomaly that reading her book in isolation may first make them seem. They are, in reality, part of a larger movement in the fourteenth and fifteenth century towards a more emotional worship and active participation by lay people. As lay people became more educated they were looking for a way to engage more fully in their religion; they were actively encouraged in books and sermons to dwell on the emotional aspects of the biblical stories and to be caught up in the feeling that was generated. This became known as affective piety because lay people were encouraged to be affected through their emotions rather than to analyse their religion in an intellectual way. The masses were becoming more dramatic in their presentation. Kempe depicts one occasion at Candlemas in which she is "waveryng on eche syde as it had ben a dronkyn woman, wepyng and sobbyng so sor that unethe sche myth stondyn on hir feet for the fervowr of lofe and devocyon that God putte in hir sowle thorw hy contemplacyon" (Kempe 188). Eamon Duffy's book *The Stripping of the Altars*, on the practices of the English medieval church in the fifteenth century on the eve of the Reformation, describes the emotionalism of Margery Kempe in this passage as symptomatic of the Church's new emphasis on affective piety: "The Candlemas ceremonies were designed to summon up the scenes they commemorated, and the quest for the visionary vividness which made Margery unsteady on her feet lay behind the tendency in late medieval England to elaborate and make more explicit the representational and

dramatic dimensions of the liturgy. For Margery Kempe and her male clerical supporters, her tears are a gift from God and they define the way in which she worships her God.

Affective piety, which Margery Kempe and others practised, was encouraged by the orthodox Church in response to the perceived threat of heresy and reform. The Church of the later Middle Ages was undergoing many changes. Because of the movement of John Wycliffe and his followers, known as Lollards, the established church was feeling besieged. As Melissa Furrow points out in her article “Unscholarly Latinity and Margery Kempe,”

Article 7 of Archbishop Arundel’s *Constitutions* (drafted in 1407, proclaimed in 1409) forbade translation of any text of sacred Scripture into English, and ownership of any translation of the Bible made in the time of Wycliffe or later without the express permission of the diocesan; and it defined as heretical any disobedience of this article.

(Furrow 242-3)

The charge of heresy in England could lead to torture and death, as in the case of a priest who was, until 1399, the parish priest of St. Margaret’s parish in Bishop’s Lynn, Kempe’s church, and who was burned in the town square (Furrow 243). To have too great a knowledge of Scripture in English was to be vulnerable to charges of heresy and Kempe records that she was forced to defend herself time and again against the accusations of Lollardy. There are some critics who believe that Kempe was indeed a Lollard. Lynn Staley, editor of the new edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, believes that the book is fiction and the character of Margery Kempe, in her disapproval of swearing, was “thus dangerously aligning herself with the Lollards, who were known to disapprove of swearing” (Staley 5). Staley believes that Kempe’s habit of quoting the Bible, her use of it as the true authority and her criticisms of individual churchmen all point to her being a Lollard. But as Kempe herself protests, “No, serys, I am neythyr eretyke ne loller” (Kempe 42). As Furrow points out the



fundamental orthodoxy of Kempe's work and words is clear to all who examine her closely: "many times a pilgrim, a venerator of images, one who believed so vividly in the Real Presence that she once saw the Host flickering like a dove, she could never have been accepted as a Lollard" (Furrow 243). Indeed, all of Kempe's confrontations with her accusers, many of them highly literate and important churchmen, end with her being vindicated by the orthodoxy of her defence. In recording her persecution, Kempe is, in reality, often recording her triumph over authority figures.

Kempe's use of biblical texts as evidence that she was a Lollard is less convincing because many of the quotations that she cites need not be from an English Bible at all, but from orthodox texts that were becoming available in English in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One of the most influential texts for lay people in the Middle Ages was Nicholas Love's *The Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* which is a translation of a thirteenth-century text ascribed to St. Bonaventure called *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. It was written as an instruction book for pious lay people of England and it was careful to explain the beliefs and sacraments of the church in a highly orthodox manner. Clarissa Atkinson describes it as "a weapon in the battle against Lollardy" (Atkinson 153). Its scenes from the Bible, told in a highly dramatic fashion, were a way for lay people to know the stories in English without having to resort to a heretical English Bible. Many of the passages in Kempe's book are taken almost directly from it, which has led Gail Gibson to dismiss Kempe's visions as emotional reworkings of Love's book: "That Margery's living out of these spiritual exercises has seemed to modern readers like personal and idiosyncratic mysticism is largely testimony to the zeal with which she seized for her own life and time these Incarnation meditations" (Gibson 49). Kempe's orthodoxy, as well as her emotionalism, is made clearer by the sources for her book and the manner in which her book is written. The popularity of Love's book indicates that Kempe's brand of

affective piety was not as unusual as she or her twentieth-century critics would have us believe.

Many critics have called *The Book of Margery Kempe* the first English autobiography. Other critics, who have balked at this label because the book does not easily conform to the genre of autobiography, have labelled it a hagiography in which Kempe describes her life using the model of a saint's life. Some critics are troubled by the fact that her book is dictated to a number of scribes. Her use of them makes it problematic to decide how much is the authentic voice of the woman and how much has been made more orthodox by the scribe. But one model that was available to Kempe at this time that would explain Kempe's narrative better than either an autobiography or a hagiography is a model based on the sacrament of penance. Penance was one of the sacraments that was under attack by the Lollards, but Kempe's use of the sacrament gave her a model to organise her life and her narrative. Gregory Roper explains how the act of medieval penance worked:

But penance is a complex spiritual and psychological event; it requires the penitent to review his or her life and, with no small degree of introspection, relate to the priest a sort of autobiography of one's inner life. The handbook writers had to teach the whole process of self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-presentation to an age and audience unused to such things. They were teaching sinners how to discover and speak forth their own selves, their "I's", to slough off one's self and to regain another one according to the types of Christian life.

(Roper 165-6)

Indeed, Kempe's numerous confessions that she records having made train her on a way to describe her old life of sin and her new life as a holy woman and mystic. In remoulding her life from that of a middle-class wife and mother, Kempe is following not only the model of a hagiography, but of confession. Kempe's book analyses her life and describes her sloughing off of her old life as a sinner and finding a new identity as a saint.

The points that make the book troubling as an autobiography, such as the fact that she does not relate her life until her spiritual crisis at age twenty, are made more understandable when it is interpreted as a narrative of her journey from sinner to saint. Her life as a middle-class wife and her fourteen children are irrelevant to this record of her spiritual growth. If Kempe's narrative is interpreted as a confession, an "autobiography of sin" (Roper 167), the role of the scribe becomes not only understandable, but integral to the process; he is the confessor who guides, validates, and absolves the sinner. Indeed the unnamed scribes in Kempe's narrative probably were her confessors. Janet Dillon remarks on the close relationship women mystics had with their confessors:

Interdependence between them [woman mystic and confessor] necessarily constructs the text in addition to being constructed by it. Woman and confessor/scribe are bound together by the secrecy and exclusiveness of their spiritual relationship as well as by their common project. The confessor is the recipient of the secrets of the confessional and also of the secrets of revelation which cannot be told to unworthy auditors.

*(Holy Women and Their Confessors 126)*

In another article Dillon puts forward the hypothesis that Kempe's main scribe was her confessor Master Robert Spryngolde (*Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s* 131). The use of the pattern of confession as a way to tell a story has been raised by Jerry Root who sees the power of the confessional being usurped by lay people: "For if confession is as powerful as the manuals have claimed, some medieval penitents must positively embrace the discourse of confession on their own initiation, less as a form of overt resistance...and more as an operation, indeed, a struggle, of self-construction" (Root 255). Root uses the pattern of confession to interpret the prologue of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, but this argument works equally well to explain the motivation of Margery Kempe in writing her account. Her book can certainly be described as a "struggle of self-construction" as she tries to describe her old life as a

sinner to contrast with her new life as a saint. “Penance,” in the words of Gregory Roper, “regenerates the self; reforms one’s identity on a new model, a new role” (Roper 167).

There are many models that Kempe has to choose from when she sheds her old identity as a sinner and there are a number of articles that analyse the different models that were available. One of the most obvious sources for her models can be found in the books that she records being read to her. Although it seems quite certain that she was illiterate (Atkinson 28), she was familiar with many texts. Melissa Furrow contends that there are different stages in illiteracy and that Kempe could probably read a little Latin and English (Furrow 245). Kempe lists some books that she had read to her and often refers to books, which had been read to her by her confessor, as the source of her inspiration: “He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon & other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys ther-up-on, Seynt Brydys boke, Hiltons boke, Bone-ventur, Stimulous Amoris, Incendium Amoris, and swech other” (Kempe 141). “Seynt Brydys boke” refers to a book either about or by St. Bridget of Sweden, the female mystic who was a great influence on Kempe. The other books in her list emphasise her interest in mystical, contemplative literature. Many of these books use phrases that are to be found in Kempe’s own narrative and show how much the rhetoric and language of the mystical tradition had permeated her own prose. Examples of female interest in mysticism are found throughout these books.

Julia Bolton Holloway and Nanda Hopenwasser have written on the very real influence that St. Bridget had on the writings and the life of Margery Kempe. Indeed, Holloway believes St. Bridget was an inspiration to many women including St. Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. She says of St. Bridget, “[b]oth her life and her book were studied and emulated by women seeking power and respect” (Holloway 204). Hopenwasser connects St. Bridget with Margery Kempe and the fourteenth-century Beguine, Marie d’Oignes: “Marguerite D’Oingt, St. Bridget, and

Margery Kempe as visionaries are both paradigms for women's spiritual functions in the community and individuals who reveal their self-identities through their texts" (Hopenwasser 167). Both critics describe Kempe as struggling to fit into the mould of the continental mystic tradition. Kempe knew of these women and mentions Marie d'Oignes' book influencing her confessor. His distrust of the sincerity of her tears is allayed when he reads of "Maria de Oegines and of hir maner of levying...and of the plentyuows teerys that sche wept" (Kempe 149).

There is no doubt that St. Bridget of Sweden was an inspiration to Kempe. St. Bridget was also a wife and mother and as such made a more appealing role model for the married Kempe than many of the women saints whose virginity is an integral part of their legend and holiness. Kempe mentions St. Bridget throughout her own narrative and visits many of the sights that are associated with the saint in Rome and in England. Kempe's awareness of St. Bridget is evident when she sees visions of the Host at mass as a flickering dove. Christ assures her, "My dowtyr, Bryde, say me nevyr in this wyse" (Kempe 58). Thus Kempe surpasses the favours that were shown to St. Bridget by God. This is not the only time in her narrative that Kempe strives to outdo the models that she has named. When she is describing her visions to the Vicar of St. Stephen's, Kempe describes them as the result of God "dallying" in her soul and speaks "so excellently that sche herd nevyr boke, neythyr Hyltons boke, ne Bridis boke, ne *Stimulus Amoyis*, ne *Incendium Amoris*, ne non other that evyr sche herd redyn that spake so hyly of lofe of God but that sche felt as hyly in werking in her sowle yf sche coud or ellys mygth a schewyd as sche felt" (Kempe 51). Thus Kempe is not only fulfilling what the books and the mystics that wrote them said was the mark of a true mystic; she is able to surpass them in her own contemplative skills. But while St. Bridget's influence is undeniable, there are other contenders for the main influence in Kempe's life as well as in her narrative.

St. Elizabeth of Hungary is another married female saint that has been put forward as a model for Margery Kempe. Alexandra Barratt in her essay “Margery Kempe and the King’s Daughter of Hungary” lists a number of similarities between St. Elizabeth’s books *Revelations* and *Meditations* and passages from Kempe’s *Book*. Kempe mentions St. Elizabeth’s book as another example of crying women that convinces her confessor to believe in her: “Also, Elizabeth of Hungry cryed wyth lowde voys, as is wretyn in hir tretys” (Kempe 150). Hope Emily Allen in her 1940 text of *The Book of Margery Kempe* makes note of Kempe’s influences including near contemporaries St. Bridget who died in 1373 and Blessed Dorothea of Prussia who died in 1394 as well as St. Elizabeth of Hungary who died in 1231. At one point in her narrative, Kempe describes how Christ sends St. John the Evangelist to hear her confession when she is banned from the church for causing a disturbance. Allen contends that “St John was the traditional confessor” for many women and that “[t]he first miraculous occurrence of this miraculous confession seems to be that in the ‘Meditations of St. Elizabeth’” (Allen 299 n.81/4). Barratt describes St. Elizabeth as “an early example of the mixed life of action and contemplation that Kempe pursued and shining proof that Christ...loved wives as well as virgins” (Barratt 200).

St. Bridget and St. Elizabeth are particularly appealing models for Kempe because they too were wives and mothers who achieved holy status. Kempe often bemoans her lack of virginity that seems to her, as well as to many church fathers, to be the height of saintliness, especially in a woman: “For becawse I am no mayden, lak of maydenhed is to me now gret sorwe” (Kempe 60). This is why, although scholars such as Gail Gibson, believe that the Virgin Mary is the ultimate model of Kempe’s life, she is, in the end, unsatisfactory because she is too impossible an ideal to emulate. The miracle of the virgin birth not only cannot be replicated by mortal women but seems to emphasise the importance that God places on virginity over maternity.

The *Stimulus Amoris* and *Incendium Amoris* that Kempe records as having been read to her are also treatises that convince Kempe's confessor of the validity of her own spirituality, and, more specifically, her tears. The *Incendium Amoris* by Richard Rolle "mevyd hym [her confessor] to gevyn credens to the sayd creatur" (Kempe 150) by its linking of contemplative exercises and tears. Indeed the tears of these models seem to be the one factor that links them. But while tears are a part of the legends of these figures they do not necessarily mean the same thing as they do to Kempe. In his essay "Margery Kempe's Scribe and the Miraculous Books," Roger Ellis points out that the tears of St. Elizabeth of Hungary "unlike Margery's tears...generally express not pain but joy" (Ellis 166). Ellis also quoted the *Incendium* of Richard Rolle:

Tears do customarily wash you from faults...but burning love surpasses all things unimagably...I don't say weeping is useless, nor sorrow of the heart unfitting or unworthy of love in this exile: but I am struck by the man so caught up in the song of love that praying or meditating he cannot weep...but perpetually rejoices, his tears, so to speak, dried up in that fountain of true and endless joy.

(Rolle quoted in Ellis 163-4)

Rolle believes that tears are unnecessary to the worship of God while for Kempe they are what set her apart in both her community and her piety. They are a gift from God and she is bereft without them. They are how she identifies herself as being singled out for God's special attention; they are both the reason for her persecution and the means of her salvation. When she is barren of tears, for even half a day, she feels deprived of her identity:

Sche had thes myndys and thes desyrs wyth profownde teerys, syhyngys, and sobbyngys, and sumtyme wyth gret boistows cryingys as God wolde sende it, and sumtyme soft teerys and prevy wythowtyn any boistownesse. Sche myth neythyr wepyn lowde ne stille but whan God wolde send it hir, for sche was sumtyme so bareyn fro teerys a day er sumtyme half a day and had so gret peyne for desyr that sche had of

hem that sche wold a govyn al this worlde, yyf it had ben hir, for a few teerys.

(Kempe 189)

Many of the models put forward by critics as Kempe's main influence do allude to tears as a part of their worship but they are not integral to their identity in the way that they have become for Kempe. Tears are so central to Kempe's identity that her model should also have tears as the central identifying motif. The saint whose legend is most identified with tears, and one whom Kempe mentions throughout her narrative, is Mary Magdalene. When the legend of Mary Magdalene is examined it seems obvious that she best fits Kempe's own personality.

By the beginning of the twelfth century, Mary Magdalene was, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, the most popular female saint in the Middle Ages (Malvern 71), and Margery Kempe was not alone in wishing to hear about her and, perhaps, emulate her. Osbern Bokenham was an Augustinian monk in the fifteenth century. In his book, *The Legends of Hooly Wummen*, he describes how well-born women commission him to translate Latin saints' lives into English. He dedicates his story on Mary Magdalene to Isabel Bouchier, the duchess of Eu, the wife of Henry Bouchier, the earl of Essex, and the sister of Richard, the duke of York. Isabel was the sister-in-law of the powerful Cecily Neville, the duchess of York, and it seems clear that she was interested in having a particular story translated that meant something personal to her, as is seen in the conversation that Bokenham relates:

'I haue,' quod she, 'of pure affeccyoune  
 Ful longe tym had a synguler deucyoune  
 To that holy wumman, wych, as I guesse,  
 Is clepyd of apostyls the apostyllesse;  
 Blyssyd Mary mawdelyn y mene,  
 Whom cryste from syn made pure & clene,  
 As the clerkys seyn, ful mercyfully,  
 Whos lyf in englysshe I desyre sothly  
 To han maad.'

(Bokenham 139: 5065-73)



The “singular devotion” of the Lady Isabel for Mary Magdalene is some indication of how popular the saint was in the later Middle Ages. Margery Kempe’s singular devotion to Mary Magdalene was, in fact, part of a larger movement.

Mary Magdalene was the inspiration for many stories and poems as well as a mystery play based on her life called *Mary Magdalene*. Suzanne Craymer’s article entitled “Margery Kempe’s Imitation of Mary Magdalene and the ‘Digby Plays’” explores how Kempe manipulated the Mary Magdalene legend with specific reference to the *Mary Magdalene* play. Craymer describes Kempe’s life as being “elaborately patterned on the Magdalene’s legend” (175), but she seems to conclude that Kempe’s manipulation was as much for mundane glory as it was for spiritual recognition and indeed defines Kempe’s gaining membership in the “prestigious Trinity Guild of Lynn” (175) as showing she had attained ‘the status that she coveted before the conversion as well as the official recognition of the religious vocation which establishes her as a lover of Christ and a spiritual mother’ (180). There is no evidence, however, that Kempe’s election to the guild had anything to do with her recognition as a saint. Since Kempe’s family was an important one that had many political connections, Lynn’s acceptance of Kempe’s sainthood cannot really be inferred from her election.

But Craymer is right to identify the theatricality of the plays as an important influence on Kempe’s own public demonstrations of grief and piety. Indeed, the way in which medieval mystery plays interacted with their audience invited people to believe that they were actors in the biblical stories. At the end of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Mary is discovered by a priest after living as a hermit for thirty years in the desert. As she lies dying, she tells him who she is. The priest gives her the last rites, she dies and is lifted to heaven by angels. The priest then turns to the audience and announces the end of the play:

sufferens of this processe, thus enddyt the sentens

that we have playyd In yower syth.  
 Alle-mythty god, most of magnyfycens,  
 mote bryng yow to his blysse so brygth,  
 In presens of that kyng!

*(Mary Magdalene 135: 2132-6)*

The priest blesses the audience by hoping that they too will be brought to bliss as Mary Magdalene was. Clifford Davidson believes that Mary Magdalene is being identified with the Church "and hence her character may in the end be said to encompass the members of the audience as the action of the play, performed on the East Anglian place-and-scaffold stage, may in turn have seemed physically to encompass them" (Davidson 97). If this is the case, Kempe, as a part of the audience, is being actively encouraged by the play to envision herself as the character of Mary Magdalene.

The Bible does not record the scene in which Mary is taken up to heaven. This innovation is part of the legend that grew up gradually around her. The medieval legend of Mary Magdalene is a conflation of a number of biblical women. She was identified as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whose tears on the death of her brother were one of the major factors convincing Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead. She was the woman possessed by seven devils who was cured by Jesus. She was the unnamed woman taken in adultery who was defended from being stoned to death by Jesus. She was the penitent woman in Luke 7:37-50, who, with her alabaster jar of ointment which came to be one of her identifying icons, washed and dried Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair. She was present at the crucifixion. Her greatest role was that of being the first witness of the resurrection while she "stood without at the sepulchre weeping" (John 20: 11). The unifying characteristic of all of these roles is Mary Magdalene's tears. Her role as a penitent sinner who becomes the beloved of Christ was so appealing to medieval writers that her involvement in the life of Christ was enlarged and enhanced in the legends and drama, especially the events surrounding the Passion. Mary Magdalene's medieval legends portrayed a woman whose tears were not only validated by Jesus but allowed her, as the patron saint of

repentent sinners (Garth 11), to be a role model for imperfect humanity seeking a pattern of redemption.

The cult of Mary Magdalene was very popular in Margery Kempe's Norfolk. The so-called Digby *Mary Magdalene* is based wholly on her life and most critics agree that it was written in Norfolk in the early fifteenth century. Based on linguistic evidence, Jacob Bennett believes that the play was from Bishop's Lynn (present day King's Lynn), Kempe's home. Clifford Davidson believes that nearby Norwich, where "as early as 1286 there was an annual fair on the Magdalen's feast day" (Davidson 74) that included a procession, was the more likely sponsor. Kempe was a frequent visitor to Norwich and would have been almost as likely to have seen a play there as in her native Lynn. Even the church where Kempe worshipped, which she identifies only as St. Margaret's, was actually called St. Margaret with St. Mary Magdalene and All the Virgin Saints.

Margery Kempe uses the figure of Mary Magdalene throughout her narrative. Judith Bolton Holloway, in her argument for the overwhelming influence of St. Bridget of Sweden on the life of Margery Kempe, points out that Kempe began dictating her narrative on July 23, which is St. Bridget's day (Holloway 203). Interestingly enough, however, Kempe herself does not identify this day as St. Bridget's day but rather "[o]n the day next after Mary Maudelyn" (Kempe 21). Kempe's orientation of her work around Mary Magdalene would seem to contradict Holloway's contention of the importance of St. Bridget. Indeed, Kempe mentions so few specific dates that Susan Eberly argues "this reference should alert us to the importance of St. Mary Magdalene in the life of Margery Kempe" (Eberly 213).

Mary Magdalene's tears are the central identifying phenomenon for her as well as for Margery Kempe. In a vision, Kempe hears Jesus describe her gift from him as "terys of compunccyon, devocyon, and compassion" (Kempe 43). Susan Eberley notes that "the tears of the Magdalene are classified into three types: tears of

compunction for her sins as she first bathed Christ's feet; tears of compassion for the death of Lazarus and for the death of Christ; and tears of devotion for the Risen Christ" (Eberly 216). She notes that "Margery Kempe is familiar with this taxonomy of tears, and frequently speaks of it" (Eberly 216). Compunction is "the pricking or stinging of the conscience or heart; regret or uneasiness of mind consequent on sin or wrongdoing; remorse; contrition" (OED, def. 1). Compassion is "suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling" (OED def. 1). It is also, slightly differently, "the feeling or emotion when a person is moved by the suffering of another, and by the desire to relieve it" (OED, def. 2). Devotion is "religious worship or observance; prayer and praise; divine worship" (OED, def. 2a). It is also, more specifically, "worship directed to a specific object, e.g.. the Sacred Heart" (OED, def. 2b).

These descriptions of tears follow the life pattern of both Mary Magdalene and Margery Kempe. It begins with compunction: the tears that Mary weeps at the foot of Jesus when she anoints his feet with ointment. When Kempe is tempted by the flesh as Mary Magdalene was she describes herself as having wept "repentawns of hir synne wyth many byttyr teerys of compunccon" (Kempe 29). The tears of compassion are the tears that come with the observation of the death of Christ. It is when Kempe contemplates the Passion that she speaks more of compassion: "And anon sche wept wondyr sor, havynge more mynde, pite, and compassyon of the passyon of owr Lord Jhesu Crist than sche had befor" (196). When she has become converted and has her visions she describes how she "cryed ful lowde and wept and sobbyd ful sor as thow sche schulde a brostyn for pite and compassyon that sche had of owr Lordys passyon" (Kempe 177). The emotion of compassion is the most highly prized and the one that can only be reached through intense contemplation of the Passion. Kempe often describes the visions of the Passion as being a time of contemplation, describing herself as "wepyng and sobbyng so sor that unethe sche myth stondyn on hir feet for the

fervour of love and devocyon that God putte in hir sowle thorw hy contemplacyon” (Kempe 188). The tears of devotion reflect Mary Magdalene’s worship of Christ and the prayers that she devotes to him. Kempe usually describes her tears in worship as “beyng in gret swetnes and devocyon wyth gret plente of teerys” (Kempe 196). By imitating Mary Magdalene’s taxonomy of tears, Kempe is able to ally herself with one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages.

Mary Magdalene is a good model of piety for Kempe because she feels herself to be a sinner. This identification is even more understandable because so many writers explicitly state that Mary Magdalene is a worthy role model for all sinners. John Mirk wrote his *Festial* in c. 1403. Whether or not Kempe heard his sermons, his views on Mary Magdalene were echoed in her own work:

...for scho was the forme yn tyme of grace that dyde penawnce for her syynes, and soo recouered agayn the grace by doying penaunce, and repentyng that scho had lost by lust of flesch and sore synning. The whech ys made a spectakyll to a synfull to schow to all that wyll leue hor synne, and do penawnce for her trespas, that schuld rekeuer agaeyne the grace that thay haue lost, and oft moch more. And soo syse this womon, and how the schul here.

(Mirk 203)

Many of the stories, sermons and dramas make reference to Mary Magdalene as a model of humility. Her story is the ultimate example of redemption and sinners everywhere are encouraged to take heart from this example. There is no one who takes to heart more than Kempe Mirk’s admonition to use the example of Mary Magdalene to make a spectacle of her repentance. The different aspects of Mary Magdalene’s tears are associated with the different roles and identities that are assigned to her legend.

What follows is divided into three chapters, each one dealing with a different aspect of the legend of Mary Magdalene and the type of tears that is associated with

that role. Each of these aspects of Mary Magdalene's legend influenced the way Margery Kempe modelled her life as well as shaped her narrative.

The first chapter is an exploration of how Kempe was influenced by Mary Magdalene's identification with the penitent sinner, weeping her tears of compunction at the feet of Jesus and absolved of all her sins. The figure of the penitent Mary Magdalene was at the centre of a controversy surrounding the sacrament of penance. John Wycliffe uses Mary's silent confession to question the validity of the sacrament. But Kempe's reliance on her confessors for spiritual guidance and validation underlines the importance of penance and Mary Magdalene's identification with it.

The second chapter will deal with Mary Magdalene's role as personification of the contemplative life. This is based on her identification with Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his words while the busy Martha reproaches her for not helping. This scene develops in the Middle Ages into these two saints personifying the contemplative and the active life. While Kempe's life as a middle-class wife and mother of fourteen children would seem to make Martha the more apt role model, it is clear that Kempe is drawn to the contemplative life and is aware of many mystical texts that praise it as "the better part." Many texts counsel concentrating on the manhood of Christ, especially during his Passion, as a way of achieving spiritual ecstasy. Kempe follows this advice and often seems to be watching Mary Magdalene or taking her place in her visions.

The third chapter is focused on devotion, or Mary Magdalene's role as a saint. She is known as the "apostyllesse" (Bokenham 139: 1068) to the apostles, the "true loued Discyplesse" (Love 113) because it is she who brings the good news of Christ's resurrection to them. She is a traveller, a preacher who converts the heathen including the royal family of Marseilles. She performs miracles and is recognised as a powerful figure who will be prominent in heaven. Kempe, too, describes herself as one who

performs miracles and whose prayers are especially efficacious because of her status as the beloved of Christ.

If *The Book of Margery Kempe* is read as a confession rather than an autobiography, her emphasis on her spiritual experiences makes perfect sense. A narrative of spiritual growth being described as a confession was not new in the Middle Ages. Saint Augustine, one of the most influential saints, tells the story of his conversion in his book called *Confessions*. There is no doubt Kempe is aware of this precedent because she mentions him in her own narrative, calling him Seynt Awstyn (Kempe 234). Saint Augustine also describes early sins of lechery and pride: “So I muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell’s black river of lust. And yet, in spite of this rank depravity, I was vain enough to have ambitions of cutting a fine figure in the world” (*Confessions* 55). St. Augustine’s disgust is understood both by his contemporaries as well as modern readers to be part of the exercise of confession and his reputation does not suffer from either his sins or his dramatic renunciation of them. Margery Kempe’s descriptions of her sins and her repentance induce many to dismiss her as a hysterical anomaly; but this thesis will show that Margery Kempe was working with models of piety that were a part of her culture. Kempe was inspired by these models, the most influential of which was the legend of Mary Magdalene. Many of the other influences in Kempe’s life, such as the works of St. Bridget and Nicholas Love, also used Mary Magdalene as their exemplum of penitence, love and contemplation. Thus it is Mary Magdalene’s life that gave Kempe the pattern to reshape her own life.

## CHAPTER 1- TEARS OF COMPUNCTION

For Margery Kempe, her life begins where her book begins--with her conversion by Christ at the age of twenty. Her previous identity as a middle-class wife and mother is merely a foil for her new life as a saint. Her narrative describes her life as a sinner and her conversion to holy woman through her own tears of compunction and the blessing of Jesus Christ. There were many contemporary models that influenced Kempe's understanding of compunction, but the most significant was Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is the patron saint of repentant sinners including reformed prostitutes (Garth 11) because of her identification with sexual sin. Although all the biblical women thought to be the Magdalene are not all associated exclusively with sexuality, by the Middle Ages, the image of Mary Magdalene as the unnamed woman taken in adultery and her conflation with St. Mary the Egyptian (c. 400), who was a prostitute, consolidated her identification with sexuality. The combination of sinner and penitent and the spectacular nature of her reformation at the feet of Jesus makes Mary Magdalene an appealing saint for Margery Kempe. Kempe's book follows the same path of sensual sinner to weeping, penitent saint that exemplifies the life of Mary Magdalene. Indeed, Mary Magdalene's sexuality and identification as a sinner who was nevertheless forgiven and became the beloved of Christ made a more accessible model of female piety than the many saints whose main characteristic seems to have been an indestructible virginity. For Margery Kempe, Mary Magdalene's association with penitential tears of compunction and sexuality seems to have been irresistible.

Kempe uses the example of Mary Magdalene throughout her narrative to justify and validate her own claims to holiness. Mary Magdalene's association with tears makes her an obvious model for Kempe's own "boysstows sobbyngys and gret plente of terys" (Kempe 51). Even the medieval etymology of Mary Magdalene's name, found in the thirteenth-century *Early South-English Legendary*, reinforces the link between herself and Kempe's weeping what she describes as bitter tears:



This word Marie so is brigh[t]nesse: and bi-tokneth steorre of the se,  
 And soruwe also and biturnesse: ase the bok tellez me;  
 For ywane a man fielez in is heorte: that he hauez much mis-do,  
 And him thare-fore biguynnez to smeorte: that is to him bitur and wo,  
 he mournez and he sikez ofte ---: this ilke Marie fierde al-so,  
 that thing that was her leof and softe: was seth the hire fulle fo.

(*Early South-English Legendary* 462)

The bitterness of Mary Magdalene and of Margery Kempe comes from the knowledge that they are sinners; both of these women suffer from the same sins of pride and lechery.

Although many critics have pointed out that Mary Magdalene's sins are not named in the Bible, medieval accounts of her life associate her specifically with sexuality. The *Speculum Sacerdotale* describes her as "the synneful woman and seruyed to hure fleschly desires" (170). Of course, "fleschly desires" are not only sexual sins but also sins of gluttony and sloth. Nevertheless it is Mary Magdalene's association with sexuality that seems to be the characteristic with which Kempe identifies.

Some of the most vivid and detailed representations of the life of Mary Magdalene can be found in the mystery plays that were so prevalent in the later Middle Ages. These plays were important in bringing the stories of the Bible to life. They were acted by lay people for lay audiences and were a part of the flowering of the emotion that was found in lay worship at this time. In the fifteenth-century so-called Digby mystery play *Mary Magdalene*, almost certainly performed in either Bishop's Lynn or Norwich during Kempe's life, she is depicted as a sensual woman delighting in her lovers:

A! god be with my valentyne,  
 My byrd swetyn, my lovys so dere!  
 for they be bote for a blossom of blysse;  
 me mervellyt sore they be nat here,  
 but I woll restyn in this erbyr  
 A-mons thes bamys precyus of prysse,

Tyll som lover wol apere,  
that me is wont to halse and kysse.

(*Mary Magdalene* 76: 564-71)

The Mary Magdalene of this play has more than one lover and she openly delights in them. Her lechery seems to be more an almost innocent voluptuousness. But her pleasure is portrayed as being sent by the devil and the message is clearly that sensuality is a grave fault in a woman.

While Kempe does not record seeing a mystery play, the Mary Magdalene of this play comes out of a medieval tradition that Kempe was steeped in. The most convincing evidence of how familiar Kempe was with the legend of Mary Magdalene is the way in which her own life story follows the penitent saint's as well as the way in which her narrative emphasises the dramatic quality of her life. Gail Gibson believes that Kempe's weeping was more of a performance than a genuine display of emotion: "Margery Kempe of Lynn possessed an unswerving sense of devotional theater and ...she embraced her martyrdom deliberately and self-consciously" (Gibson 47). Gibson would seem to concur with other critics who believe that Kempe's tears were a literal interpretation of John Mirk's advice to repent, as Mary Magdalene did, by making "a spectakyll to a synfull to schow to all that wyll leue hor synne" (Mirk 203). While to label Kempe's tears as merely spectacle is to belittle her emotions, there seems no doubt that part of Kempe's style of worship was to make a public display of them. The emotional quality of Kempe's boisterous public weeping is an indication that she is attracted to the dramatic possibilities in narrating the story of her own life. Kempe's narrative records many similarities between herself and Mary Magdalene that go beyond the theatricality of their tears. The sins that Mary Magdalene embodies in the drama of *Mary Magdalene* are replayed by Kempe in the drama of her narrative. One of these sins is the sin of pride made evident by their mutual love of beautiful clothes.

Mary Magdalene of medieval legend was proud and beautiful and thus easily tempted into a life of sin. One of the manifestations of that pride was her love of

beautiful clothes. As Theresa Coletti points out, “Magdalene’s finery thus served as a resonant symbol of her sin, and consequently her conversion was often imaged as the casting aside of her worldly clothing” (Coletti 325). In *Mary Magdalene*, Mary is praised by her lover, Coryoste, for her beautiful clothes: “A dere dewchesse, my daysys Iee! / splendavnt of colour, most of femynyte, / your sofreyn coloures set with synseryte” (*Mary Magdalene* 74: 515-7). Coryoste makes the connection between Mary Magdalene’s colourful clothes and her sincerity, while the audience is supposed to see her clothes as representing a pride in her appearance.

Kempe also depicts herself, in her pre-conversion state, as being beset by the sin of pride, which is reflected in her love of beautiful clothes. She wears “gold pypys on hir hevyd and hir hodys wyth the typettys were dagged. Hir clokys also wer daggyd and leyd wyth dyvers colowrs between the daggys that it schuld be the mor staryng sygth and hirsself the mor ben worshepd” (Kempe 24). Kempe places herself in the tradition of Mary Magdalene even to describing her luxurious clothes and her wish to be worshipped. The kind of worship that she is seeking at this point is the worldly kind but Kempe’s desire to be worshipped does not diminish, she merely changes the reasons why she should be so. Kempe’s narrative can be seen as the desire of a woman to be worshipped, first for her expensive clothes and later for her holiness. Kempe’s detailed description of her clothes is not only to show her worldliness but to make her conversion, represented by a change of clothes, more dramatic.

When Mary Magdalene is freed from her devils by Christ’s forgiveness, she vows to change her ways and this change is reflected in her change of wardrobe: “and for that I haue synnynd In the synne of pryde, / I wol en-abyte me with humelyte” (*Mary Magdalene* 80: 682-3). Margery Kempe’s conversion helps her to recognise that her love of beautiful clothes means that “[s]he was smet wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory” (Kempe 28) and she is determined to change the way she dresses to reflect her new spirituality. She is instructed by Jesus to wear white clothing: “And

dowtyr, I sey to the I wyl that thu were clothys of whyte and non other colowr, for thu schal ben arayed aftyr my wyl” (Kempe 45). When Mary Magdalene goes to convert the king of Marseille, she is instructed by Jesus, through his angels, that she should wear a “mentyll of whyte” (*Mary Magdalene* 115: 1605) as they do. The distinctive colour becomes her identifier in the mind of the king as he dreams of her coming:

A mervelows shewyng, In my slep I had,  
That sore me troblyd, this same nyth:  
A fayer woman I saw In my syth,  
All In whyte was she cladd.

(*Mary Magdalene* 116: 1621-4).

Both Kempe and Mary change their clothes to reflect their new life under the instruction of their God.

In medieval times as now, white is the colour of purity and thus virginity. While in modern times white clothes, with the possible exception of wedding gowns, are not supposed to identify the sexual status of the wearer, for medieval people clothing was often interpreted as representing the inner state of the person who wore it. The hostility that Kempe encounters when she tries to change the way she dresses reflects the medieval idea that to change one’s clothing is an attempt to deceive. Thus Kempe worries that the fact that she is married and the mother of fourteen children will cause her to be mocked by her neighbours. She is correct in this prediction: “sche was howselyd al in whitte, and sithen hath sche sufferyd meche despyte and meche schame in many dyvers cuntreys, cyteys, and townys” (Kempe 107). It is not just lay people who feel that white clothes represent virginity. In Leicester Kempe is questioned by the Archbishop, “Why gost thu in white? Art thu a mayden?” (Kempe 124). Another member of the clergy attacks Kempe’s integrity on the basis of her clothes and “taking hir be the coler of the gowne, seyde, ‘Thu wolff, what is this cloth that thou hast on?’” (Kempe 121). Kempe seems to poke fun at the priest by reporting that passing children answer him, “Ser, it is wulle” (Kempe 121). But both

Kempe and the priest understand that he is not speaking literally but symbolically; the priest's accusation implies that Kempe is hiding her true nature rather than revealing it. Her white clothes are interpreted as a threat to society. The mayor of Leicester believes that her white clothes are a condemnation of marriage and he fears that she is setting an example for other women: "I wil wetyn why thou gost in white clothys, for I trow thou art comyn hedyr to han away our wyvys fro us and ledyn hem wyth the" (Kempe 117). Hope Emily Allen suggests that Kempe "takes white as symbolical of a very comprehensive purity, perhaps her clothing was partly meant to show that she was 'a maiden in her soul'" (Allen 273 n. 32/17). Allen is no doubt correct in her assessment that Kempe wishes her white clothes to signal her new chastity within marriage. By wearing white, Kempe is insisting that the clothes reflect this new state regardless of her former life as a sexual being. But the white clothes are important to Kempe for more than their public declaration of her sexual status; for Kempe they symbolise, not merely virginity nor marital revolution, but obedience to God.

When Mary Magdalene is ordered to wear white in order to convert the king and queen of Marseilles she has a revelation on the significance of white that has nothing to do with its usual association with purity. She exclaims,

O, gracyus god, now I vndyrstond!  
 thys clothyng of whyte is tokenyng of mekenesse.  
 now, gracyus lord, I woll natt wond,  
 yower preseptt to obbey with lowlynesse.

*(Mary Magdalene 115: 1607-10).*

For Mary, white has taken on a new meaning. Her determination to obey God is now reflected in her clothes. Kempe, too, sees her changes in clothing as a test of her obedience. When Jesus orders her to wear black clothes again, she does so even though she is berated by many people because these changes in clothing are a token of her obedience: "And sche dede hys comawndment. And than had sche felyng that sche plesyd God wyth hir obediens" (Kempe 90). When a priest expresses relief that

she has reverted to the black clothing, because it reflects his idea of who she is, Kempe defends her earlier wearing of white: “Ser, owyer Lord wer not displesyd thow I weryd whyte clothys, for he wyl that I do so” (Kempe 90). Kempe’s interpretation of her white clothes is a reflection of Mary Magdalene’s belief that they signified meekness rather than the priest’s more conventional ideas. For both Kempe and Mary Magdalene, their white clothes symbolise their change in status from worldly sinner to spiritual saint.

Kempe’s emulation of Mary Magdalene leads her to repudiate her former life as a sexual being. She is aware that her sexuality has ill-qualified her for holiness in a culture that values chastity in their female saints. Kempe worries that her lack of virginity may keep her from the bliss of heaven: “A, Lord, maydonys dawnsyn now meryly in hevyn. Schal not I don so? For becawse I am no mayden, lak of maydenhed is to me now a gret sorwe” (Kempe 60). Eiluned Bremner describes Kempe as trapped by the dichotomy of her society in which “a woman was forced to deny her sexuality in order to achieve a sanctioned role within the Church, or her sexuality effectively denied her holiness” (Bremner 119). In the play *Mary Magdalene*, Mary’s evolution into saint allows her to be called “that puer vergyn” (126: 1896) by the king of Marseilles, while the angels assure Mary that her status as the beloved of Christ puts her above the maidens dancing in heaven: “thou xall byn onoryd with Ioye and reverens, / In-hansyd In heven above wergynnes” (*Mary Magdalene* 131: 2022-3). This play suggests that Mary Magdalene is able miraculously to regain her lost virginity. As Suzanne Craymer points out, “[f]or the Magdalene, mystical union with Christ transforms her carnal sins into virginity” (Craymer 177). Jesus also assures Kempe that her role as his beloved gives her a special status and has made her a maiden again: “And forasmuch as thu art a mayden in thi sowle, I schal take the be the on hand in hevyn and my modyr be the other hand, and so schalt thu dawnsyn in hevyn wyth other holy maydens and virgynes, for I may clepyn the dere abowte and

myn owyn derworthy derlyng...myn owyn blyssed spowse" (Kempe 62). Kempe's belief that virginity could be regained through sainthood is reinforced almost every day by the name of her church in Lynn which is called St. Margaret with Saint Mary Magdalene and All the Virgin Saints. This implicit suggestion that Mary Magdalene qualifies as a virgin saint must have given Kempe hope that her own society would recognise her in a similar way. It is not difficult to understand why Kempe, who was uneasy about her non-virgin status, takes the model of Mary for her own.

Kempe's insistence on wearing white also indicates her determination to repudiate her sexual identity as a wife. Like Mary Magdalene's, Kempe's sins are largely sexual. Her early struggles to overcome temptation culminate in her attempting to get her husband to agree to a chaste marriage: "And aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyl to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn the wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comowning" (Kempe 26). Despite Kempe's graphic disgust for the sexual act, she admits that she had enjoyed sex earlier in her marriage. When she ends up taking care of her husband as an incontinent old man, she interprets this as penance for her earlier sexual enjoyment: "many tymys sche schuld an yrkyd hir labowr saf sche bethowt hir how sche in hir yong age had ful many delectabyl thowtys, fleschly lustys, and inordinat lovys to hys persone" (Kempe 173). Kempe's description of the pleasures of sex echoes the criticism of an angel who reproaches Mary, "In syn and sorow thou art browth, / fleschly lust is to the full delectabyll" (*Mary Magdalene* 77:592-3). The angel describes the pleasure that Mary takes in sex as "sin and sorrow". Kempe also describes her delight in terms of sin; for both women the delectability of sex is the work of the devil.

Kempe emphasises the similarities between her sins and those of Mary Magdalene by using the image of devils to represent sins. One of Mary Magdalene's

many personas is the woman in the New Testament who is possessed by seven devils and is healed by Jesus. St. Luke describes Jesus' retinue as he preaches through Galilee: "and the twelve were with him, And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils" (Luke 8: 1-2). This story becomes part of Mary Magdalene's medieval legend, with books such as *The South English Legendary* describing her as a sinful woman whom Christ "caste out of hure seue deuellen" (304). Kempe also describes her life before her encounter with Christ as one in which she was possessed by devils: "And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, devyls opyn her mowthys al inflaumed wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in" (Kempe 22). These evil spirits are often interpreted as the seven deadly sins, but, in the play *Mary Magdalene*, they are specifically linked to the sin of lechery as the devil proclaims, evoking obvious sexual imagery, that they are "to enter hyr person be the labor of lechery" (70: 432).

Lechery is instructed by the devil to tempt Mary Magdalene: "now, the lady lechery, yow must don your attendans, / for yow be flower fayrest of femynyte; / yow xal go desyyr servyse, and byn at hur atendavns" (*Mary Magdalene* 70: 422-4). In this play, Lechery is a woman, a gendering which fits in with the medieval notion of women having voracious sexual appetites. Margery Kempe and Mary Magdalene both seem to fit into this mould, but their early sexuality merely acts as a foil to their later spirituality. As in the Digby play, Kempe's sexual temptations are identified as being the work of the devil: "The devyl put in hir mende that God had forsakyn hir, and ellys schuld sche not ben temptyd. She levyd the develys suasyons and gan to consentyn for because sche cowde thynkyn no good thowt" (Kempe 29). Mary Magdalene is also depicted consenting to sin but with more of an air of delight as she speaks to Lechery, the devil's envoy:

your debonarius obedyans ravysst me to trankquelyte!  
now, syth ye desyre In eche de-gree,



to receyve yow I have grett delectacyon;  
 ye be hartely welcum on-to me!  
 your tong is so amyabyll devydyd with reson.

(*Mary Magdalene* 71: 447-51).

Both Margery Kempe and Mary Magdalene give in to lechery, but Kempe's succumbing seems to be more painful than Mary's delighted fall from grace.

When God punishes Kempe for her sin of pride, he sends devils in the form of lecherous thoughts that torment her as the devils of lechery torment Mary Magdalene: "And so he leyde befor this creatur the snar of letchery, whan sche wend that all fleschly lust had al hol be qwenchyde in hir" (Kempe 28). The sexual sin that Kempe is tempted by on this occasion is the sin of adultery. This aligns her with yet another of Mary Magdalene's medieval personas, that of the unnamed woman taken in adultery (Garth 18). Although there is no direct link between these two biblical figures, Susan Haskins believes that it is the overt sexuality of these women that links them in medieval minds. In her book, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, she writes, "[t]he woman's association with Mary Magdalene, remote though it is, centres on the fallenness of the mythical Magdalen and their sistership in sexual crime" (Haskins 27). She is brought before Jesus to be condemned but he questions instead the motives of her accusers: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8: 7). When her shame-faced accusers leave, Jesus and the woman are left alone together: "he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8: 10-1). All of the personas that Mary Magdalene has in the medieval stories are based on sexuality, so it is not surprising that Kempe's sexuality causes her to identify with the saint most associated with sex.

Later in her narrative, Kempe links herself with the woman taken in adultery. She interprets the story as another instance of Jesus protecting his beloved from her enemies:

Have mend, Lord, of the woman that was takyn in the vowtre and browt befor the, and, as thu dreve away all hir enmyis fro hir and sche stod alone by the, so verily mot thu dryvyn away alle myn enmiis fro me, bothin bodily and gostly, that I may stondyn alone by the and make my sowle ded to alle the joyis of this world and qwyk and gredy to hy contemplacyon in God.

(Kempe 234)

Kempe's identification with the woman taken in adultery is telling on many levels, not the least because she herself has been tempted by this very sin. Kempe is tempted by "a man whечh sche lovyd wel [who] seyde onto hir on Seynt Margaretys Evyn befor evynsong that for anythyng he wold ly be hir and have hys lust of hys body" (Kempe 29). It is only because the man rejects her, claiming that he was testing her, that she does not actually commit the sin. But Kempe believes that to consent in her mind to sin makes her as sinful as if she had committed the act: "And now sche saw how sche had consentyd in hir wyl for to don synne. Than fel sche half in despeyr. Sche thowt sche wold ben in helle for the sorwe that sche had" (Kempe 30). Kempe's despair echoes the despair of Mary Magdalene when she realises that she has wilfully sinned: "O I, cursyd cayftyff, that myche wo hath wrowth / A-gens my makar, of mytes most; / I have offendyd hym with ded and thowth" (*Mary Magdalene* 79: 631-3). Both women must come to terms with their sin and recognise that they are sinners and humble themselves before God before they can be forgiven. The stage is set for the next scene in the drama of Kempe's narrative, the story of her redemption.

Kempe's despair, caused by the knowledge that she had consented to the sin of lechery, leads to "repentawns of hir synne wyth many byttyr teerys of compunccon, and parfyt wyl nevyr to turn ageyn to hir synne, but rather to be deed hir thowt" (Kempe 29-30). Her desperation is mirrored by Mary Magdalene's lament for her wicked life:

A-las! how betternesse In my hert doth a-byde!  
I am wondyyd with werkes of gret dystresse.  
A! how pynsynesse potyt me to oppresse,  
that I haue synnyd on euery syde.

O lord! wo xall put me from this peynfulnesse?

A! woo xal to mercy be my gostly gyde?

*(Mary Magdalene 78: 606-9)*

In the play, Mary Magdalene acknowledges her unworthiness as a sinner and admits that she is looking for mercy rather than justification for her behaviour. She finds her “gostly gyde” in Jesus when she kneels before him and weeps at his feet. Kempe’s tears of compunction are the same tears that are associated with Mary Magdalene’s bitter tears of contrition.

The Bible contains a number of versions of the story of the penitent woman who came to Jesus and “stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment” (Luke 7: 38). In Luke, the woman is an unknown repentant sinner, but in Matthew and John she is identified as Mary of Bethany who sat at Christ’s feet and later came to be identified with the contemplative life. Her actions are considered so significant that they will cause her to be remembered: as Jesus says, “Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her” (Matthew 26: 13). The notion that Mary Magdalene’s act of repentance is not only approved by God but is the cause of her being immortalised must have been an attractive one to Kempe, who also wished to create a memorial to her actions. Jesus says that Mary’s misdeeds are forgiven because her act is an act of love: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much” (Luke 7:47). Mary’s act of love and penitence came, by medieval times, to be associated specifically with the sacrament of penance.

The sacrament of penance was one that was particularly apt in regard to the legend of Mary Magdalene because she exemplified the belief that all are redeemable, no matter what their sin, if they truly repent. Her many sins make her redemption a comforting example of God’s mercy towards all sinners; she is “the harlot saint [who] reflects one of the most attractive features of Catholic Christianity -- the doctrine that

no one, except Satan, is beyond the reach of grace” (Dillenberger quoted in Eberley 215) This belief is the cornerstone of the sacrament of penance. In the early fifteenth-century treatise *Jacob's Well*, the author describes the various components that make up a true confession. One of the components of true repentance is weeping and the author cites Mary Magdalene as his example:

...wepying, nogt leyghyng chere in herte, in face, in eye, but, as Marye mawdelen dede, wassche thou the feet of crist, this is, his manhod, wyth wepyng terys in thi confessioun, & crist schal cacche out of the vij. feendys, that is, vij, dedly synnes, as he dede out of marye mawdelyn. & thanne schalt thou haue forgeuenesse & mercy, as sche hadde & seynt Petyr for here wepyng. for wepyng is the watyr that jhesu desyreth to drynken.

(*Jacob's Well* 185)

Mary Magdalene's weeping is equated with her contrition, thus validating the use of tears as a way of showing true repentance. In the Digby play, Jesus explains that Mary is cleansed of her sins because of the sincerity of her repentance:

Woman, in contrysson thou art expert,  
And in thi sowle hast Inward mythe  
That sumtyme were In desert,  
and from therknesse hast porchasyd lyth;  
thy feyth hath savyt the, and made the bryth;  
Wherfor I sey to the, 'vade In pace.'

(*Mary Magdalene* 81: 686-91)

Mary Magdalene's act of tearful penitence at the feet of Jesus not only allows her to be forgiven but translates her from sinner to saint through Christ's forgiveness. This dramatic change in status is linked specifically with her tears at the feet of Jesus.

Kempe is also concerned with her life as a sinner and she wishes to confess so that she can be translated from sinner to saint. Early in her narrative she describes herself as haunted by a sin that she has not told in confession:

And than sche sent for hyr gostly fadyr, for sche had a thyng in conscyens which sche had nevyr schewyd befor that tyme in alle hyr lyfe. For sche was evyr lettyd be hyr enmy, the devel, evyrmor seying to hyr whyl sche was in good heele hir nedyd no confessyon but don

penawns be himself aloone, and all schuld be forgovyn, for God is  
 mercyful inow. And therfor this creatur oftyn tymes ded greet penawns  
 in fastyng bred and watyr and other dedys of almes wyth devowt  
 preyers, saf sche wold not schewyn it in confessyon.

(Kempe 21-2)

Kempe never does say in her narrative what the sin is that haunts her, but the interesting thing is how it does haunt her. She fasts and gives alms, but she knows that according to the teachings of the Church this is not enough to save her. Although she convinces herself, or is convinced by the devil, while she is healthy that internal penance and good deeds are enough, she becomes frightened when her health is threatened: “whan sche was any tym seke or dysesynd, the devyl seyde in her mende that sche schuld be dampnyd, for sche was not schrevyn of that defawt” (Kempe 22). Clarissa Atkinson describes Kempe’s belief that she could be saved without speaking her sin out loud as a “mistake and [Kempe] suffered bitterly for it when she postponed full confession until she feared death” (Atkinson 153). Kempe’s fear of damnation because she has not made a full confession is not a baseless concern. Her culture is filled with stories that stress the necessity of a full confession.

Throughout medieval literature, there are stories that moralise on the seriousness of not making a full confession. The writer of *Jacob's Well* recommends fasting, prayer and giving alms as part of the penance of the confessed sinner; thus Kempe is following in that tradition with her personal penance. But before the penance can begin, *Jacob's Well* makes it clear that there must be a confession made out loud to a priest:

Also loke that the heued of thi scauel be hole in truthe, that it be noght  
 brokyn wyth lesynges & falsnes, in lying on thi-self or on othere. And  
 loke thi schryfte be hole to on preest, & noght to manye...Also loke this  
 heued of thi scauel be hole in schryfte of alle thi synnes, that no synne  
 be kept vnschreuyn; for thanne were all lost...for on dedly synne  
 vnschreuyn thou schalt be dampnyd, thof alle thin other dedly synnes be  
 schewyd in schryfte to the preest.

(*Jacob's Well* 181)

*Jacob's Well* is not the only text that makes the point that one untold sin will negate the entire confession as well as good works. *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry* was written in French c. 1371. There is no known English translation until the reign of Henry VI. Nevertheless the stories told in this text that a French knight wrote for the edification of his daughters reflects the same values of Kempe's England. The knight tells one story in which a woman known for her good works dies but because she has left one sin unconfessed, she goes to hell and as a sign of her iniquity her body begins to smoke. When her soul is conjured to explain this phenomenon, she tells a story that Kempe might have recognised:

...beware by me, for whanne y was yonge, for the lust of my flesshe, y lay with a monke; & y durste neuer tell it to my confessour, for drede of encursinge, dredinge shame and the bobaunce of the worlde, maore thanne spirituel uengeaunce of myn synne. And yet y sende and gaue my good for Goddes sake, herde masses, and saide my seruice dililgently, wenyng that the good and the abstinence that y dede shulde haue clensed the synne that y durst not tell the preest, and therein y am deseiued, and lost; for y saie you all, who that dothe a dedly synne and confessith hym not therof, and deieth so, he is dampned perpetuelly; and therfor ye shulde tell the synne as foule as ye do it, and in the same manere.

(*The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry* 12-3)

Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* was a poem translated into Middle English in 1303 from William of Wadington's Anglo-French treatise entitled *Manuel des Pechiez*. Kempe does not mention it in her list of books, but its views on sin and confession reflect the culture that she lived in. Mannyng also tells a story in which a woman is weighed down by a sin of which she is so ashamed, she does not tell it during her confession. When she is finally able to confess her sin to a sympathetic friar, her sin comes out of her mouth all black. Mannyng explains that black represents the devil who has a hold on the woman through her one untold sin:

that yche blak, y dar wel telle  
that hyt was a fende of helle,  
that myght no lenger yn here reste

whan the synne oute gan breste;  
 But as longe as she the synne forhale,  
 the deuyll helde ful styll hys stale;  
 For euer-more he wyl a-byde  
 whyl o synne may hym hyde;  
 And, for that yche resun why,  
 Shryue we oure synne, alle holy;  
 Nat by parcelles, to prestes atwynne;  
 To one, alle holy, shryue thy synne;  
 To o preste telle hyt euery deyl,  
 Than art thou shryue holy well.

(Mannyng 370-1: 11867-80)

All these stories seem to indicate that the suppression of a sin was not an uncommon occurrence, as Mary Braswell observes in her analysis of the use of medieval penitentials: “Although full allowance was to be made for the imperfection of the human memory, it was soon apparent that there was less to fear from forgetfulness than from conscious suppression by the unwilling penitent” (Braswell 27). These stories all emphasise the danger to one’s immortal soul by keeping silent. Kempe’s fear of eternal damnation because of her untold sin, triggered by thoughts of death during her first pregnancy, finally impels her to attempt to confess the sin that has haunted her.

Confessions in the fifteenth century were different from the confessions that are made today. In the early Middle Ages, confession had not been compulsory, but in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that confessions must be heard at least once a year at Easter. Eamon Duffy writes that in Kempe’s time confession had become a way of shaping one’s spiritual life: “Pious and leisured lay people with spiritual guides were by the later fifteenth century confessing more regularly, using the confessional as a form of spiritual direction” (Duffy 60). Kempe’s book is testament to her search for spiritual direction. But she did not find what she was looking for when she finally did try to give a full confession. Whatever her sin was, her priest did not want to hear it:

And, whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing which sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye and gan sharply to undyrmyn hir er than sche had fully seyde hir entent, and so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he mygth do. And anon, for drede sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other syde, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer eight wekys and odde days.

(Kempe 22)

The reason for the priest's sharp reproving is not clear. It could be that he was made nervous by the content of what Kempe was trying to confess. On the other hand, Kempe herself describes the priest as a little too hasty. This may mean that Kempe was simply taking too long to reach her point. Confession was always popular and there were probably many other people lining up to be heard within earshot of the confessor. As Eamon Duffy points out, "Pastoral realism therefore demanded that the confession be kept within manageable dimensions; in a time-honoured formula the penitent was to be brief, be brutal, be gone" (Duffy 60). Kempe's confessor may simply have grown impatient with her halting confession. Thus Kempe had still not been able to confess the whole of her sin before the priest's reproof. So the sin, the thing, is still on her conscience negating all her confessions and all her acts of penance. The earthly representative of the church had failed her but Kempe had the example of Mary Magdalene to show her how to confess and be forgiven without the intermediary of a priest.

Kempe's despair over her sin of lechery has her, like Mary Magdalene, "knelyng in the chapel of Seynt John wythinne a cherch of Seynt Margaret" where she "wept wondir sore, askyng mercy and forgyfnes of her synnes and hir trespass" (Kempe 30); and like Mary Magdalene, she is able to confess her darkest sin directly to God without having to articulate it. Her penitence has put her in the same position as the repentant Magdalene kneeling at the feet of Jesus as well as imitating, as Suzanne Craymer notes, 'the gesture which remains associated in the Magdalene *vita* with the



Crucifixion" (Craymer 176). When Kempe turns directly to Jesus she is finally completely forgiven of all her sins. She reports Jesus speaking to her:

I, the same God, forgefe the thi synnes to the utterest poynt. And thou schalt nevyr com in helle ne in purgatorye, but, whan thou schalt passyn owt of this world, wythin the twynkelyng of an eye thou schalt have the blysse of hevyn for I am the same God that have browt thi synnes to thi mend and mad the to be schreve therof. And I grawnt the contrysyon into thi lyves ende. Therfor I bydde the and comawnd the, boldly clepe me Jhesus, thi love, for I am thi love and schal be thi love wythowtyn ende.

(Kempe 30-1)

The words of forgiveness could not be more complete to put the worried sinner's mind at rest. And Kempe is not only forgiven but, like Mary Magdalene, translated into the special beloved of Christ. As Jesus tells Mary in the Digby play *Mary Magdalene*:

With contyrsson thou hast mad a recumpens,  
thi sowle to save from all dystresse;  
be war, and kepe the from alle neclygens,  
and after thou xal be pertener of my blysse

(*Mary Magdalene* 81: 701-4)

Kempe does what the books she had read to her tell her to do. She uses the example of Mary Magdalene in her own life. By closely following the actions of the penitent Mary Magdalene, Kempe is finally able to feel shriven of the sin that haunted her early life. Like Mary Magdalene, her forgiveness by Jesus marks the end of her old life as a sinner and the beginning of her new life as a saint and beloved of Christ.

Kempe's tears of compunction heal her mind as Jesus casts out her devils of lechery. Luke did not say when Jesus had cast out Mary Magdalene's devils but the Digby *Mary Magdalene* represents this event as the result of Mary's confession to Jesus and his subsequent forgiveness and blessing. When he says to her "vade In pace" (*Mary Magdalene* 81: 691), the stage direction at this point reads "With this word vij dyllys xall de-woyde from woman" (*Mary Magdalene* 81); the exorcising of the devils is depicted as the direct consequence of Mary's forgiveness. Kempe also

describes her time of despair, before she is able to make her complete confession to Jesus, as one in which she is tortured by visions of devils: “And in this tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, devyls opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brennyng lowys of fyr as thei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sumtyme rampyng at hyr, sumtyme thretyng her, sumtym pullyng hyr and halyng hir bothe nygth and day duryng the forseyd tyme” (Kempe 23). Kempe’s confession to Jesus casts out her own devils as he himself promises, “I schal helpyn the and kepyn the that ther schal nevyr devyl in helle parte the from me” (Kempe 31). Kempe’s devils, too, are sent howling back to hell.

Because of Mary Magdalene’s close identification with penance, her actions were also used by people who wished to reform the Church by attacking the sacrament. The devil who tells Margery Kempe that private penance is enough is quoting the beliefs of the Lollards who were arguing against confessing to a priest in favour of speaking directly to God, or what they called private shrift. John Wycliffe writes that Mary Magdalene’s washing of the feet of Jesus and being blessed by him is proof that confessing your sins out loud to a priest is unnecessary: “Heere may we see hou pryuey shrifte is autorised of oure Iesu...yif man haue ful sorowe for his synne, yif he speke not afir o word but do wel and leue to synne, God forgyueth this synne” (Wycliffe 3: 299). Kempe’s decision to speak directly to God can be interpreted as either following exactly in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene in sincere repentance that makes her a special case or a conscious embracing of Lollardy. This point must be very clear because by the fifteenth century the notion of private confession and forgiveness by God directly smacked of Lollardy. Indeed, Lynn Staley believes that Kempe was a not so secret Lollard: “If she is unburdened of it [her hidden sin], as she supposedly is, she unburdens herself to Christ in private, where she receives an absolution equally private. Since her visions of and conversations with Christ occur only in her head, Kempe is, in fact, hinting at...a confession that any Lollard would be pleased to affirm” (Staley 90). Staley believes that Kempe’s book and criticism of the

inadequacies of such Church officials as Kempe's confessor are evidence of Kempe's Lollardy. But Mary Magdalene's penitential actions have more interpretations than John Wycliffe's.

In *The Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, Nicholas Love teaches that the story of Mary Magdalene being forgiven for her sins by Jesus after she weeps at his feet is a lesson to all Christians:

Firste as to a souerayne conforte of alle synful folke we haue here openly shewed in oure lord Jhesu the habandaunce of his endles mercy that soo soone and soo gladly forgafe soo many grete synnes & trespasses of this synful woman. And so doth he to alle that tryuly desyren and askyn his mercy but here behoueth charite & true love that was so specially commented of hym in this woman the which only pees bitween god & the synful man. As the Apostle saith that charite couereth the multitude of synnes and withoute the whiche it is impossible to please God.

(Love 57)

Love's book was written as an orthodox instruction book for pious lay people designed to reinforce and defend the sacraments of the Church. He confronts the interpretation of Wycliffe directly: "But here perauntur somme men thynken after the fals oppynyon of lollardes that schrifte of mowthe is not nedeful but that it suffyseth only in herte to be schryuen to god as this forsaide womman was" (Love 58). Love discusses whether the fact that Mary does not speak her sins but merely says them in her heart is not in contradiction to the sacrament of confession that expressly demands that the sins be spoken out loud to the confessor. Although Mary Magdalene does not name her sins out loud to Jesus as the medieval penitential books make clear is a necessary part of confession, Love argues that Mary Magdalene is a special case because she was able to be in the physical presence of Jesus and this circumstance is no longer possible, so all sinners must now speak their sins out loud to the priest: "And sythen we haue not here his bodily presence as Maudaleyn had therefore in his stede us behoueth to shewe to the preest by word that we haue offendid hym as man

as we shewen hym by repentaunce in herte that we haue offendid hym as god" (Love 57). Love believes that the important lesson to be drawn from Mary Magdalene's confession is the depth of her repentance: "And wold god that all synful peple wold folowe this woman in thy true forthynkyng & thenne withoute doubte they shold haue of god ful forgeuyng were the penaunce more or lasse of the prestes enioynynge" (Love 59). Love suggests that if sinful people emulate Mary Magdalene's sincerity they will be assured of God's forgiveness. Margery Kempe's close association with the legend of Mary Magdalene makes it more likely that she saw herself in the same special category of one who is able to speak to Jesus face to face.

Even after her confession to Christ, Kempe still goes to confession and is, in fact, distraught if she is barred from it because of her outbursts. God's interest in her spiritual well-being is made clear when he enables her to have her confession heard without the benefit of earthly clergy. When she is barred from a church in Rome "ful hevvy, most for sche had no confessowr ne myght not be schrevyn than as sche wolde" (Kempe 86), God sends "Seynt John the Evangelyst to heryn hir confession" to whom she told "alle hir synnes and al hir hevynes wyth many swemful teerys, and he herd hir ful mekely and benyngly. And sythyn he enjoyned hir penawnce that sche schuld do for hir trespas and assoyled hir of hir synnes wyth swet wordys and meke wordys, hyly strengthynge hir to trostyn in the mercy of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist" (Kempe 86-7). The figure of John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple of Christ, also has ties with Mary Magdalene. In the popular *Golden Legend* Jacobus de Voragine states that Mary Magdalene and St. John were married and that it was John's deserting her for Christ that led her into a life of sin:

Some say that S. Mary Magdalene was wedded to S. John the Evangelist when Christ called him for the wedding, and when he was called from her, she had therof indignation that her husband was taken from her, and went and gave herself to all delight, but because it was not convenable that the calling of S. John should be the occasion of her

damnation, therefore our Lord converted her mercifully to penance, and because he had taken from her sovereign delight of the flesh, he replenished her with sovereign delight spiritual tofore all others, that is the love of God.

(quoted in Garth 29)

This story is repeated by Mirk in his *Festial*: “Then, as mony bokys tellyt, when Ion the Ewangelyst schuld haue weddyd her, Cryst bade Ion sewe hym, and lyf in maydynhode; and soo he dyd. Herfore Mary was wrath, and gaf her al to synne and namely to lechery, yn so moch that scho lost the name of Mawdelen, and was callyd the synfull woman” (Mirk 203). The figures of John and Mary Magdalene are often linked in medieval literature and iconography, and Susan Haskins speculates that the linkage is “presumably derived from the gospel accounts, particularly in John, of the crucifixion where they are described standing with the Virgin by the cross” (Haskins 158). Certainly in medieval representations of the Crucifixion, the three characters that always appear together are the Virgin, St. John and Mary Magdalene. St. John and Mary Magdalene are also linked as the two best beloved of Christ. Thus it is not surprising that Kempe would include a visitation from the saint who had so many links with the woman she uses as an exemplar.

Although Jesus has become Kempe’s main confessor, she reports being shriven by earthly priests throughout her life, although her special relationship with Jesus complicates her relations with her earthly confessors. The association of a holy woman and her confessor is a complex one. In theory, the confessor is the one who has the power. Janet Dillon suggests that women like Kempe, who were in danger of being accused of heresy, “were encouraged by their confessors to make frequent confessions as a way of keeping an eye on the orthodoxy of their spiritual development” (“Holy Women and Their Confessors” 120). Kempe reports that her confessors try to influence her behaviour in life as well as validate her experiences. One of the first people she visits after her first vision is an anchor at the Dominican Priory at Lynn who wants to be kept informed of all her visions to be assured of their

orthodoxy: “I charge yow receyveth swech thowtys whan God wyl geve hem as mekely and as devowtly as ye kan and comyth to me and tellyth me what thei be, and I schal, wyth the leve of ower Lord Jhesu Cryst, telle yow whether thei ben of the Holy Gost or ellys of yowr enmy the devyl” (Kempe 32). Her confessors are the ones who “supportyd hir in hir wepyng and in hir crying and also enformyd hir in qwestyons of Scriptur whan sche wolde any askyn hym” (Kempe 162). Kempe’s confessors guide, advise, and protect her just as Jesus did for Mary Magdalene.

Because Kempe’s narrative can be interpreted as a confession, it is only natural that her spiritual relationship with her confessors would be more important to her than her secular relationships. Yet Janet Dillon believes that it is important to keep in mind that almost all the books written on or for women mystics were written by their confessors, who had a vested interest in stressing the importance of their roles in the women’s lives: “Revelations and lives mediated through confessor-scribes predictably tend to make confession central to the female visionary experience and to highlight the woman’s relationship with the confessor as the only one of any significant depth or closeness” (“Holy Women and Their Confessors” 126). There is always a question in Kempe’s book as to the amount of influence the scribe/confessor had on shaping the book. When Kempe is asked who she would like to have with her in heaven her husband or her confessor, Maystyr N, she chooses her confessor because he is more important to her: “For I may nevyr qwyte hym the goodnesse that he hath don to me and the gracyows labowrys that he hath had abowt me in heryng of my confessyon” (Kempe 34). She also asks that her confessor receive special grace because of his guidance. Jesus assures her that her desire to be with her confessor in heaven will be granted:

And, as for Maistyr Robert, thi confessour, I have grawntyd the that thu hast desiryd, and he schulde han half thy terrys and half the good werkys that I have wrowt in the. Therfor he schal trewly be rewardyd

for thy wepyng as thow he had wept hymselfe. And beleve wel,  
dowtyr, that ye schal be ful mery in hevyn togedyr at the last and schal  
blyssyn the tyme that evyr yowr on knew yowr other.

(Kempe 203)

Kempe's tears of compunction have not only saved her, they have saved her confessor who is the earthly representative of Jesus. Her penitence binds him to her as Mary Magdalene's did to Jesus; as Jesus' representative, the confessor has become more dear than her husband.

Jesus' promise that the confessor will be saved also highlights the power of Kempe's tears: "Sumtyme, dowtyr, I make the to have gret sorwe for thi gostly fadyrs synnys in special that he schulde have as ful forgevenes of hys synnys as thu woldist have of thyn" (Kempe 200). Kempe's tears save not only her but her confessor as well. Thomas Tentler has suggested in his book *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* that confession is used by confessors "as a form of social control, insofar as it encourages penitents to internalise the values of the church and to regulate their own behaviour through shame" (quoted in "Holy Women and Their Confessors" 120). But it would seem that in this relationship Kempe has the power, through her tears, to affect the life of the confessor as much as he affects hers. Indeed, throughout her narrative, Kempe describes how she disobeys the orders of her confessor if they are in opposition to her own wishes. Kempe accompanies her daughter-in-law to Danzig against the express wishes of her confessor. On her return, Kempe is told that "yowr confessowr hath forsakyn yow for ye wentyn ovyr the see and wolde telle hym no word therof" (Kempe 229). When Kempe returns to Lynn, she does receive some "ful scharp wordys," but she is reconciled with him when "owr Lord halpe hir so that sche had as good love of hym and of other frendys aftyr as sche had befor" (Kempe 230). Kempe's authority to defy the power of her confessor comes from her special association with God. It is a shift in the balance of power that Janet Dillon notes marks many of such relationships: "Relations between holy women

and their confessors threaten to overturn the classic power relations of the confessional: where the theology of confession appoints the confessor as God's representative and mediator of his grace, the woman's claim to direct revelation puts *her* in the role of divine representative" ("Holy Women and Their Confessors" 128). Kempe's imitation of Mary Magdalene gives her power over her confessors because she has the ability to speak directly to Jesus.

Master Robert has been identified by Janet Dillon as Master Robert Spryngolde, who was also the parish priest at St. Margaret's. Dillon, in her essay "Margery Kempe's Sharp Confessor/s," believes that he is the unnamed sharp confessor of her attempt to unburden her self of her secret sin (131). This is probably true because Jesus later explains to Kempe why it is necessary to have a sharp confessor:

And dowtyr, thu schalt blissyn me wythowtyn ende that evyr I gaf the so trewe a gostly fadyr, for, thow he hath be scharp to the sumtyme, it hath ben greatly to thy profyte, for thu woldist ellys as had to gret affeccyon to hys persone. And, whan he was scharp to the, than thu ronne wyth al thy mynde to me, seying, 'Lord, ther is no trost but in the alone.'

(Kempe 203-4)

Kempe interprets the confessor's sharp words as tools of God sent to help her achieve her status as a holy woman. Sandra McEntire criticises the confessor's "authoritarian, linear response [that] confirms her [Kempe's] fear, self-doubt, and dread" (56), but, in truth, it is this first sharp reproof that causes Kempe to turn to Jesus directly for help and sets her on the road to sainthood.

Mary Magdalene's association with the sacrament of penance gives Kempe the pattern of the confession on which to model her life as well as her narrative. The tears of compunction that Mary weeps for her sins are replicated in Kempe's own tears. The tears of compunction are the first stage of Kempe's spiritual development. As we



shall see in the next chapter, Kempe seeks to further consolidate her new found sanctity through recognised spiritual exercises. There were many books available in the fifteenth century on reaching a heightened spirituality through contemplation. Mary Magdalene once again becomes the central image in Kempe's evolution from penitent sinner to beloved saint. Her tears of compassion too have an influence on the life and narrative of Margery Kempe.

## CHAPTER 2 - TEARS OF COMPASSION

There are certain characteristics that set a saint apart. The continental tradition of mystic women emphasised the importance of visions as a way of proclaiming holiness and Kempe wished to deny her secular life and embrace a life of contemplation. For Kempe, the main characteristics of contemplative ecstasy were her tears of compassion. There were many books available to Kempe and she records some of the treatises that were read to her such as “Seynt Brydys boke, Hiltons boke, Bone-ventur, Stimulous Amoris, Incendium Amoris, and swech other” (Kempe 141) that influenced her concept of contemplation. These books all contained passages that not only describe how to achieve the contemplative life, but use the figure of Mary Magdalene as the best example of that life. By using Mary Magdalene as her model of piety, Kempe is able to appropriate her sanctity as she appropriates many phrases from these books to give her own visions the proper vocabulary that helps to validate them.

The tears of compassion that Kempe cries are evoked by her contemplation of the Passion of Christ. In this spiritual exercise of putting herself at the scene and contemplating his manhood, Kempe is following the advice of Nicholas Love, no doubt the “Bone-ventur” that she cites (see p. 5 above). In his *Mirror of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, Love explains how Mary Magdalene’s tears changed at the crucifixion of Christ: “She held the feete & loked upon hem wepyng & almoste faillyng for sorow & right as she before in hys lyf wesshe hem with teres of compunction now mykel more she wessheth hem with teres of grete sorowe & inward compassion. For as he very sothfastnesse witnesseth of hir she mykel loved & therfore hir wepte mykel” (Love 115). In looking at her narrative it is clear that she has been greatly influenced by this popular fifteenth-century treatise.

The figure of Mary Magdalene has been an exemplum for the contemplative life for a long time. Since the time of Origen in 240, she has been identified with the

bride in the Song of Solomon . Origen wrote explaining that the line “ While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof” (Song 1: 12) is a representation of the scene in which Mary Magdalene anoints the feet of Jesus with ointment: “because that ointment was full of faith and of precious, loving intention, Jesus Himself bore witness to her saying: *She hath wrought a good work upon me*” (Origen 161). Mary Magdalene’s role in anointing Christ with ointments is identified with the Bride’s in the Song and “Mary Magdalene became the sister-bride of Christ” (Malvern 65).

While Origen concentrates on the ointment as typifying Magdalene, other writers draw a comparison between the Bride searching for her Bridegroom –“By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but found him not” (Song 3:1); “I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer” (Song 5: 6)-- and the scene from John in the New Testament when Mary Magdalene searches for Christ at the tomb: “they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him” (John 20: 13). In his *Elucidatio*, the late twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille states that it is “the Magdalene’s search for Christ at the tomb [that] is recollected from the Song of Songs 3:1...it is to the garden in which this Mary sought him that Christ descends in Song of Songs 6:1” (quoted in Matter 167). That this link was commonly made in medieval England is indicated by the inclusion of the passage describing the search of the Bride as part of the mass celebrating the feast of Mary Magdalene (Yoshikawa 36).

The most influential writer to interpret the Song of Solomon was the Cistercian abbot, St. Bernard de Clairvaux in the twelfth century. St. Bernard wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song. His interpretations were very influential with other mystics throughout the Middle Ages. St. Bernard interprets the sensual images in terms of spiritual ecstasy: “Bernard equates Mary Magdalen-Bride with the contemplative soul and praises the divine love which ignites the Bride’s soul through contemplation”

(Yoshikawa 35). His interpretation of the Song made it a template for medieval mystics on how to achieve bliss through contemplation. In Sermon 57 he uses the image of fire to represent the intensity of contemplative love that will be used by many other mystics including Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe: "The fire that is God does indeed devour but it does not debase; it burns pleasantly, devastates felicitously...Recognize therefore that the Lord is present both in the power that transforms you and in the love that sets you aglow" (St. Bernard 2: 102). St. Bernard interprets the yearning of the Bride for the Bridegroom as the yearning of the soul for union with Christ. Later in the same sermon he equates Mary Magdalene with the burning Bride: "We find a contemplative Mary in those who, co-operating with God's grace over a long period of time, have attained to a better and happier state" (St. Bernard 2: 107). The sensuality of Song of Songs incorporates the two sides of Mary Magdalene, the sensual lover who could say, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine" (Song 1:2) and the contemplative who allows the kisses to be interpreted spiritually. The sensual images of the Song of Songs merge the sexual and the mystical just as the legend of Mary Magdalene herself does.

By the later Middle Ages, many medieval writers who wish to discuss the relative merits of the active and the contemplative use the biblical story of Jesus' visit to the house of Martha and Mary. While Martha is preparing the food, Mary sits at his feet and listens to him. Not unnaturally, Martha complains and asks Jesus to order Mary to help her. But Jesus supports Mary by saying "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10: 41-2). Many medieval mystics interpret Jesus' defense of Mary as a defense of contemplatives. To many mystics, this passage clearly shows Jesus' preference for the contemplative life over the active. The duties of Martha, representing the active life,

and Mary Magdalene, representing the contemplative life, are clearly divided. In the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, “Huswifschipe is marthe dale. Marie dale is stilnesse & reste of alle worldes noise” (*Ancrene Wisse* 212). Kempe may seem more suited to the realm of housewifery with Martha, but temperamentally she yearned to be like Mary Magdalene. But while the stillness and rest of the contemplative may have appealed to her, her life shows little evidence that she was either still or quiet.

Although Christ had expressed his preference for the stillness of the contemplative life, many of the mystical treatises are sensitive to the accusation of laziness such as the one Martha implicitly used against Mary. The unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives a typical example of the mystical argument of the fourteenth century with its emphasis on the contemplative life. Martha’s complaint to Christ that Mary was not doing any of the work is depicted as representing the criticism of all active people who are so caught up in the daily business of life that they cannot comprehend the life of the contemplative:

& right as Martha pleynid that on Marye hir sistre, right so yit into this day alle actyues pleinen of contemplatyues. For & ther be a man or a womman in any companye of this wored -- what companye se-euer it be, religious or seculers, I oute-take none -- the whiche man or womman (whether that it be) feleth hym sterid thorow grace & be counsel to forsake alle outward besines, & for to sette hym fully for to lyue contemplatyue liif after their kunnyng and their concience, their counseyl acordyng: as fast their owne brethren & sistres, & alle their nexte freendes, with many other that knowen not their sterynges ne that maner of leuyng that thei set hem to, with a grete pleyning spirit schal ryse apon hem, & sey sharply vnto hem that it is noght that thei do.

(*Cloud of Unknowing* 49)

It is taken for granted by the *Cloud* author that the active people tend to be jealous of the contemplatives’ higher status because the contemplatives are the best-beloved of God, just as Mary Magdalene was the best-beloved of Jesus. He quotes the gospel in which Jesus defends Mary as having chosen the better part:

& also therto to be besy aboute the necessities of this liif, therefore to deliuer hir of doute that sche might not both serue God in bodely besines & goostly to-gedir parfitely -- imparfitely sche may, bot not parfitely -- he echid to & seyde that Mary had chosen the best partye, the whiche schuld neuer be taken fro hir.

(*Cloud of Unknowing* 52)

In defending the contemplative life at the expense of the active life, the author of the *Cloud* was representing the views of the early Middle Ages. But by the end of the fourteenth century, the role of Martha was becoming better regarded.

One of the writers who reflects the increasing importance of the active life in the late fourteenth and fifteenth century in appreciation of the role of Martha is St. Bridget of Sweden, who, in her book *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, describes the virtues of the contemplative and the active lives as personified by Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha. The impracticality of the majority of people being able to practice the life of a contemplative hermit led to a new ideal of the mixed life, incorporating both active and contemplative. Although St. Bridget praises the contemplative life that is idealised in the fourteenth-century male mystical literature, Christ tells her that there is no shame in leading a life of active good works: "Marie oweth not to be idelle no mor then Martha...And if he wax tediousse in praying, and temptaciones grow apoun him, then he may labor with his hondes some honeste and profitable werke, other to his owne profette if he have nede, or ells to the profette of other" (*Revelations* 26). St. Bridget's revelations are more understanding towards the figure of Martha: "Know thu also that though the parte of Marie be beste, yett the parte of Martha is not euyll, bot prayseable and well plesinge to God" (*Revelations* 34). The life of Mary and contemplation is still admitted to be the "best" but the life of Martha is being given more authority than it had ever been given before.

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is also used by Bridget as a way of illustrating the respective virtues of the active and the contemplative life. When the brother is dead, Martha asks Christ to bring him back, but he does not do so

until Mary asks him: "Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (John 11: 32). The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* interprets this as a sign of Christ's marked preference for the contemplative over the active life, while St. Bridget has Christ interpret it for her as having Martha being a part of the process of becoming a Mary:

So in spirituall lyf he that perfyteley desyrith to be Marie muste fyrst be Martha, laboryng bodely to my wyrship. And he oweth fyrst to conne with-stande the desyris of the flesh and the temptacion of the fende and after-warde he may wyth diliberacioun ascende up to the degre of Marie. For he that is nott preued and temted, and he that hath not ouercomen the styrrynges of hys flesh, how may he contynually entende and cleve to heuenly thinges?

(*Revelations 35*)

Thus Martha and Mary, rather than being two separate ways of worshipping God, are, in St. Bridget's book, described as two stages of a process towards a more spiritual life. Thus Kempe can take heart that while she may be described as a Martha in her early years as a wife and mother, it is merely a preparation for her true calling as a Mary Magdalene figure. Her early struggles with the temptations of the flesh and worldly pleasures can be seen as a necessary step in her transformation into a contemplative. Thus the examples of Martha and Mary are not separate paths to God, but one path.

By the fifteenth century, most of the writers had accepted the new importance of Martha in her active role. Osbern Bokenham was an Augustinian friar of the convent of Stoke Clare who translated a number of saints' lives over his lifetime that were eventually gathered together in 1447 under the title *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*. Bokenham has raised Mary, her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus to the level of nobility, in keeping with the noble lady who commissioned the work. When they divide their estate, Mary gets her own castle, "So that a castel callyd

**Magdalun / To Mary fel in there departysoun, / Where-of she namyd was Magdelyne”**  
**( Bokenham 148: 5384-6).** Mary is described as a sinner who repents and achieves not only forgiveness for her sins but perfection. The story of Mary and Martha is told again in praise of the contemplative life:

**Be this processe we seen that the ocupaycoun  
 Of actyf lyf in this mortalyte,  
 To the lyf of inward contemplacyoun  
 May in no wyse paryfycat be.  
 (Bokenham 152-3: 5570-3)**

The life of Mary as the contemplative and best beloved of Christ is confirmed in Bokenham’s story. But he does give praise to the active life as well:

**Yet bothen ben good, as doth dyscrye  
 The exaunple befor, wherfore enuye  
 Betwyn them tweyne owyth no more to be  
 Than is betwyn a posatyue & a comparatyue degre.  
 (Bokenham 153: 5580-3)**

By the later Middle Ages, during Margery Kempe’s time, the active life was given more authority than it had been earlier. Many writers were now advocating the “mixed life,” an amalgamation of the active and the contemplative. But Kempe was in many ways a throw back to an earlier time. Her life as a middle class woman would seem to have been tailored for the active or mixed life with an emphasis on charity. But Kempe longed to be a contemplative like Mary Magdalene, although her temperament, social standing and marital circumstances all work against it.

But even the mystical Margery was like other lay women in her need to somehow incorporate her religion into her worldly life. She was part of a growing number of lay women in the fifteenth century who were very religious but who did not, or could not, remove themselves from the world to pursue a purely contemplative life and were looking for religious models that could be incorporated into their worldly



lives (Ross 48). Even while she was writing, that is to say dictating, her book, Kempe continued to live in the secular world of Bishop's Lynn. Although Kempe reports in her second book that she has achieved something of the ascetic state: "It befel sone aftyr that the creatur befor wretyr had forsakyn the occupasyon of the worlde and was joynyd in hir mende to God as meche as frelte wolde suffyr" (Kempe 207), there seems to be some historical evidence Kempe did not leave the world as much as may be deduced from her writing. In the 1438 Account Roll of the Trinity Guild of Lynn, a Margery Kempe is mentioned, a reference that seems to indicate she was a regular member: "Et de Iohanne Asshedenpro jintroitu Margerie Kempe in plenam solucionem xx s"(quoted by Emily Hope Allen, Appendix III: 358). Lynn Staley describes the Trinity Guild as "the most important of Lynn's civic institutions... the Guild controlled everything: it owned the quay, regulated a boat's right of passage, and had the monopoly of various trades that were secured to its members, who were the bankers and capitalists of Lynn. Its authority extended even further, for it was the real governing force of the town" (Staley 75-6). If Kempe is indeed a member of this most powerful secular guild, then her life is not the gradual withdrawal from world affairs that seem to be implied.

By the fifteenth century many of the religious tracts on the idea of the "mixed life" or the "medlid liffe" had been translated into English and one of the most influential authors was Walter Hilton. In one of his treatises that is bound with the works of Richard Rolle, but shows a much different attitude towards the efficacy of good works, Hilton says not only that the active life is comparable in virtue to the contemplative but that it would be a sin to neglect your earthly duties and business. Hilton stresses that charity comes from fulfilling your earthly obligations:

Also itt longith to som temperall men, the which han soueraynte with michell haver of worldely goodis, and han also as itt wer lordisshipe ouer othir men forto gouerne and sustene hem, as a fader hath ovir his children, a maistre ouer his seruantis, and a lorde ovir his tenantes,

the which men han also recyved of oure Lordes yifte grace of deuocioun, and in party sauoure of gostely occupacioun, vnto these men also longith medlid liffe, that is both actife and contemplatife. For if these men, stondynge the charge and the bonde which thei haue taken, wille leve vterly the besynes of the world, the which owe skilfully to be vsed in fulfillynge of hir charge, and hooly yeve hem to contemplatife liffe, thei doo not well, for thei kepe nott the ordir of cherite.

*(English Prose Treatises 26)*

Hilton uses Christ himself as an example of the “mixed life” whose works of charity were combined with his spirituality:

For-thi our Lorde, forto sterve som forto vse this medlid liffe, toke vpon hym silfe the person of swiche maner of men, both of prelates, and of othir swich as ar disposed ther-to as I haue seide, and yave hem ensample, by his owen wirkyng, that thei shulde vse this medlid liffe as he did, that tyme he comyned with men and medled with men, shewynge to hem his dedis of mercy.

*(English Prose Treatises 26)*

He compares the active and contemplative lives to the two wives of Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and like St. Bridget believes that the Martha/Leah representation of the active life is a necessary step that must be mastered before one can attain the perfection of the contemplative life exemplified by Mary/Rachel: “So sall thou do after ensauple of Iacob, take thise two lyfes, actyfe & contemplatyfe, sen Godd hase sett the bathe the tane and the tother” (Hilton 31). Lay women were able to use this model of Martha as a new exemplum of the efficacy of good works.

Even though Martha’s active life was becoming more accepted in her time, Kempe was not convinced that good works are equal in the eyes of God to contemplative thoughts. Kempe is worried at one point that the act of writing her book is keeping her from her prayers because she “seyd fewer bedys for sped of wrytyng than sche had don yerys befor” (Kempe 203). But Christ comforts her that her writing is as important as prayers: “Drede the not, dowtyr, for as many bedys as thou woldist seyin I accepte hem as thow thu seyist hem, and thi stody that thu stodiist

for to do wrytn the grace that I have schewyd to the plesith me ryght meche” (Kempe 202). Jesus bestows his preference on Kempe’s work just as he defended Mary Magdalene’s style of worship to Martha. In writing her book, Kempe is fulfilling God’s will and sensations she experiences writing it are comparable to those of high contemplation: “whil the forseyd creatur was ocupiid abowte the writyng of this tretys, sche had many holy teerys and wepingys, and oftyntymys ther cam a flawme of fyre abowte her brest ful hoot and delectabyl” (Kempe 205). The delectability that used to describe the physical sensations of love is now used by Kempe to describe the fire of contemplation.

The image of the fire as a sign of contemplation is derived from the *Incendium Amoris or the Fire of Love* by Richard Rolle, the Hermit of Hampole. It is a book dedicated to describing the sensations of love that are achieved through high contemplation. Kempe’s outbursts alienate her from some people but for others they are a confirmation of her divine gift. At one point her spiritual advisor expresses doubts about her sanctity but he is convinced by reading of similiar accounts in other books, including *The Fire of Love*, describing mystical experiences: “He red also of Richard Hampol, hermyte, in *Incendio Amoris* leche mater that mevyd hym to gyvyn credens to the sayd creatur” (Kempe 150). The sensations described in this book on contemplation indicate that Kempe, too, has reached that state of grace.

In the introduction, its fifteenth-century translator, Richard Misyn, states that he has undertaken the translation at the behest of a woman, a nun, who is interested in learning, as Kempe was, how to live a more contemplative life:

At the reuerence of oure lorde Ihesu Criste, to the askynge of thi desyre, Systre Margarete, couetyng a-sethe to make, for encrece also of gostely comforth to the & mo, that curiuste of latyn vnderstandes noght; I, emonge lettyrd men sympellest, and in lyfyng vnthrfyest, this wark has takyn to translacion of lattyn to englysch, for edificacyon of many saules.

(*Fire of Love* 1)

This dedication indicates that Kempe was not the only woman interested in learning from texts that dealt in mysticism. This translation by Misyn was done in 1435 which, as Melissa Furrow points out, was too late to have been read to Kempe (“Unscholarly Latinity” 242). Furrow believes that Kempe was read to in Latin and Karma Lochrie believes there are “Latin residues in Kempe’s text” (Lochrie 115). Kempe’s first editor, Emily Hope Allen, however, believes that the priest either “presumably employed English translations or adaptations of most, if not all, of the originally Latin works which he read to her...[or]...paraphrased some Latin works for her in his own words” (Allen 276 n. 39/23-4). But whether Kempe heard *The Fire of Love* in Latin or in English, its influence on the characteristics of her own contemplation is clear.

*The Fire of Love* is a mystical treatise whose emphasis on the physical attributes of Jesus is typical of the affective piety of the late Middle Ages. It contains descriptions of physical sensations of prayers that are reflected in Kempe’s narrative. The main metaphor in *The Fire of Love* is the comparison of love to a burning fire in the heart. The first time that Rolle feels this burning marks the beginning of his mystical conversion: “I satte forsoth in a chappell & qwhilst with swetnes of prayer or meditacion mikyll I was delityd, sodanly in me I felt a mery heet & vnknawn” (Rolle 36); this heat is the fire of love in his soul. Rolle uses the image of heat to describe the physical sensation of the love of God that the contemplative feels: “So the saule with lufe (els before sayde) sett o-fyer, treuly felys moste verray hete” (*Fire of Love* 2). This description is echoed in Kempe’s own narrative: “Sche was in hir chirch at myddennyght to heryn her matyns, and owr Lord sent hir so hy devocyon and so hy meditacyon and swech gostly comfortys that sche was al inflawmyd wyth the fir of love, the wech encresyd so sor that it brast owt wyth lowde voys and greet crying” (Kempe 190). Sometimes the pain from the heat is so intense Rolle piously hopes that no man should suffer as he is suffering: “playnly I troued slyke hete to no man happyen in this exill: ffor treuly, so it enflaumes the saule als the element of fyer ther wer

byrning" (*Fire of Love* 2). Clearly, the path of the contemplative is not always a comfortable one.

The metaphor of God's love being like a fire in the heart or the soul is one that Kempe uses throughout her narrative. The gift of fire is explained to Kempe by Jesus:

Also owr Lord gaf hir an other tokne, the whech enduryd abowtyn sixteen yer and it encresyd evyr mor and mor, and that was a flawme of fyer wondir hoot and delectabyl and ryth confortabyl, nowt wastyng but evyr incresing, of lowe, for, thow the wedyr wer nevyr so colde, sche felt the hete brennyng in hir brest and at hir hert, as verily as a man schuld felyn the material fyer yf he put hys hand or hys fynger therin. Whan sche felt fyrst the fyer of love brennyng in hir brest, sche was aferd therof, and than owr Lord answeyd to hir mend and seyde, 'Dowtyr, be not aferd, for this hete is the hete of the Holy Gost, the whech schal bren away all thi synnes, for the fyer of lofe quenchith alle synnes.

(Kempe 93)

Richard Rolle also identifies the burning as "the gyft of my maker" (Rolle 2). He describes it in a way that is echoed in Kempe: "Bot als it wer if thi fynger wer putte in fyer, it suld be cled wyth feleyng byrnyng: So the saule wyth lufe (als befor sayde) sett o-fyer treuly felys moste verray hete" (*Fire of Love* 2). The intensity of her love for God burns Kempe as it does Rolle and other mystics and its intensity often causes her to burst forth in uncontrollable tears. For Kempe, the crucifixion of Jesus is an especially evocative event and her descriptions of uncontrollable love and tears are usually the result of her meditation on the events surrounding the Passion. Indeed it is at Calvary that she has "the fyrst cry that evyr sche cryed in any contemplacyon" (Kempe 76):

Tho wordys wrowt so in hir mende whan sche herd spekyn of the parfyte lof that owr Lord Jhesu Crist had to mankynde and how der he bowt us wyth hys bittyr Passyon, schedyng hys hert blood for owr redempcyon, and suffryd so schamful a deth for owr salvacyon, than sche myth no lenger kepyn the fir of lofe clos wythinne hir brest, but, whethyr sche cowlde er not, it would aperyn wythowteforth swech as was closed wythinneforth. And so sche cryed ful lowde and wept and

sobbyd ful sor as thow sche schulde a brostyn for pite and compassyon  
that sche had ofowr Lordys passyon.

(Kempe 177)

This passage brings together a number of strands of Kempe's devotion that are connected by an intense physical love for Jesus and all of these strands are attached to the medieval legend of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was known as the beloved of Christ whose actions are praised by Christ as being motivated by love. She is also depicted as an example of the contemplative life. She was present at the crucifixion, which is one of Kempe's favourite images, but she is not present in this scene, because Kempe has put herself in the role of Mary. She is the epitome of the blessed contemplative like Mary, typified as a figure of burning love. And she portrays herself as sobbing with pity and compassion at the crucifixion of Jesus just as Mary did: "And the forseyd creatur wept and sobbyd so plentyuowsly as thow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey sufferynge hys Passyon at that tyme. Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, and that cawsyd hir to have compassion" (Kempe 75). For Kempe, all of her emotions were bound to her gift of tears and tears were identified with many women, but only Mary Magdalene exemplified with her tears the penitent, the contemplative, as well as the lover of Christ.

The high state of contemplation is identified with the burning that Mary Magdalene felt at the sight of Jesus at the tomb in the guise of a gardener. When Christ speaks to her in Kempe's vision, Mary is described as reacting to the question of "Why weepest thou?" as "not knowyng what he was, al inflawmyd wyth the fyre of lofe" (Kempe 187). This description is explained more fully in Love's interpretation of the biblical scene. He explains that Jesus asked her why she wept: "Our lorde asked that he wyste wel to that ends as saynte Gregory saith that by hir ansuere in the nemyng of hem the fyre of loue shold be more feruently kyndled in her herte" (Love 122). The fire of love in Mary's heart is kindled even though she does not immediately recognise her interlocutor. This is because Mary is in the presence of

God which her heart has recognised even if her eyes have not. The heart inflamed with love is a sign that the true contemplative is in the presence of God; whether or not he shows himself and even if one does not immediately recognise Jesus, if one's actions are done in love that is enough.

Kempe's use of the Passion story as a tool in achieving a higher state of contemplation is largely inspired by Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*. The amount to which she owes, not only her visions, but her actual words to Love's treatise compels Eamon Duffy to write that Kempe's mystical experiences "seem in places little more than literal-minded paraphrases of the relevant sections of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* or of Richard Rolle's almost equally influential *Meditations on the Passion*" (Duffy 237). Love's popular book is a fifteenth-century translation of the thirteenth-century *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, written for an Italian nun, attributed to St. Bonaventure. Love transformed the "contemplative text into a model for the lay devotions of men and women who lived very much in the world" (Gibson 49). His treatise reflects the fifteenth-century predilection for affective piety, as he continually urges his readers to "ymagne & inwardly thynke on him in his passion" (Love 99). While it is clear that Love's prose strongly influences Kempe, it would be a mistake to dismiss her visions as merely reiterations of Love. Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong believes that Kempe is using texts that were available to her to dramatise her faith:

She does, after all, clearly exceed the goals of instruction to lay folk, intended by texts like *Meditations* which meant only to intensify the moral and ethical precepts of Christianity and to enhance the observance of the sacraments. The most dynamic thing Kempe does to those meditations is to bring them out of private rooms and silence to the church and the street, to re-create them as public witness to God's love.

(Armstrong 27)

Kempe's visions that place her at the scene of the crucifixion are in accordance with Love's advice: "At the begyunyng thou that desyrest to haue sorouful compassion thorough sentence inward affection of the peyneful passion of Jhesu thou must in thy mynde departe in manner fro the tyme of the myghte of the godhede fro the kyndely infirmyte of the manhede" (Love 99). Kempe is careful throughout her account to emphasise how well she has followed this advice and has dwelt, almost exclusively, on the manhood of Jesus. Her description of being moved to tears when she sees small boys is part of this religious discipline of emphasising Christ's humanity: "Sche was so meche affectyd to the manhode of Crist that whan sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her armys, yyf sche myth wetyn that thei wer ony men children, sche schuld than cryin, roryn, and wepyn as thei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode" (Kempe 91).

Love advises his readers to imagine Jesus as a "fair yong man, of the age of [33] yere beyng the fairest, the wysest, the most ryght wys in lyuyng" (Love 99-100). This is the Jesus that Kempe reports converting her, "in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, and most amyable that evyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye" (Kempe 23). The rewards for using this type of affective piety to imagine the humanity and suffering of Christ were great: "For to hym that wold serche the passion of oure lorde with all his herte and alle his inward affection there shold come many acuoute felynges and sterynges whiche he shold fele a new compassion and a new loue" (Love 100). Compassion is the emotion that is stirred by gazing upon the body of Christ; by empathising with his physical pain, one, paradoxically, becomes more spiritual. And so Kempe did feel these new stirrings: "the fyr of love encresyd in hir, and hir undirstandyng was more illumynynd and hir devocyon mor fervent than it was befor whyl sche had hir meditacyon and hir contemplacyon only in hys manhod" (Kempe 197). Kempe performs the spiritual exercises that are part of Love's instruction for lay people and uses them to try to achieve a more contemplative life.



The emphasis on Christ's humanity also makes it easier to see him in the role of lover as he was for Mary Magdalene.

Kempe uses the book of Nicholas Love to recreate scenes from the Bible and to help her reach a state of higher contemplation that she is searching for. Gail Gibson believes that her visions are merely emotional retellings of stories that she has heard, not original but "a life of extremely literal and concrete achievement of those very spiritual exercises" (Gibson 49) of Love's *Mirroure*. In Kempe's vision of the resurrection, Jesus first appears to his mother:

And whan he had suffyrd hys modyr to ask what sche wolde and had answeyrd to hir questyons, than he seyde, 'Modir, be yowr leve I must go spekyn wyth Mary Mawdelyn.' Owr Lady seyde, 'It is wel don, for, sone, sche hath ful meche sorwe for yowr absens. And, I prey yow beth not long fro me.'

(Kempe 187)

Christ's visit to his mother before Mary Magdalene is not to be found in the Bible, but this scene is to be found in Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*:

Our lorde Jhesus spekyng with his blessid moder atte his fyrste appierynge to hir as hit was tolde and sayde before among other louely comynynges tolde hir of the grete besynesse and feruente felynge of Maudaleyne and saide that he wolde goo shewe hym bodily to hir to comferte hyr. And oure lady gladdede therof said. My blessid sone goth in pees and comferte hir. For she loueth you full moche and full truly and was ful sory of youre dethe.

(Love 122)

As Gail Gibson observes on the enormous influence of Love's ideas and prose on *The Book of Margery Kempe*: "It is often when Margery Kempe sounds most like her inimitable self that she is, in fact, most the Pseudo-Bonaventure" (Gibson 49).

Another reason that Mary Magdalene came to be identified with the contemplative life is the way in which her legend grew in the Middle Ages. The medieval Mary Magdalene's life does not end in Israel but she, accompanied by her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus, travel to Marseilles where she converts the

populace. Mary then spends the last thirty years of her life as a hermit in the desert being fed by the angels until she is found by a passing bishop, identifies herself, dies and is buried. Mary's life as a hermit identifies her even more closely with the medieval ideal of the contemplative life. In *The Fire of Love*, Richard Rolle describes hermits as the most likely to hear God's voice because they are not surrounded by worldly distractions: "ffor the bitter drynke of penance grete labour tha haue lowyd, now with lufe of he contemplacione sett ofyer, onely to god to take hede & cristis kyngedome to byd tha were worthi. Hermetis lyffe therfor is grette, if it be gretely done" (Rolle 30). The reason that Mary Magdalene becomes a hermit is her great love for Jesus: "Joseph teeles vs that Marie Magdalein for the grete brennyng loue that sche loued God wold neuer haue housebonde ne se man with hire ygen after the ascension of Crist" (*Speculum Sacerdotale* 170). So, too, does Kempe's encounter with Jesus make her turn all her thoughts to him and despise her former life. After she hears the music of heaven she too no longer wishes to have a husband: "And aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth her husbonde" (Kempe 26). The love that Mary Magdalene felt is described in the same terms as the love that the contemplative achieves in *The Fire of Love*: it is a burning that is so intense that Mary is often depicted in iconography as naked, covered only by her hair. Reau in his *Iconographie de L'Art Chretien* writes that she is represented as naked "qu'elle brûlait de l'amour de Dieu au point qu'elle ne pouvait supporter aucun vêtement" (Reau 855). The burning love of the contemplative is another aspect of the special love that Mary Magdalene feels for Jesus. The intensity of Mary's inner love is manifested in the inability of her body to wear the same clothes that she used to wear. Kempe's obsession with changing her clothes to reflect her inner transformation can be seen as reflecting the spirit of this legend.

Mary Magdalene's last thirty years in the desert is the pinnacle of her transformation from sinner to saint. Her experiences are a reflection of the description

of the sensations experienced by the most devout and successful mystic. Mary's devotion to the spiritual life is so great that she is described as no longer needing to eat earthly food: "sche gede in-to deserte and there sche dwellyd the space of xxx yere vnknowyn to alle maner of men ne neuer ete mete of man ne dronke drynke" (*Speculum Sacerdotale* 170). Kempe also changes her eating habits at the request of her new love, Jesus Christ. Christ first tells her she must give up meat: "my derworthy dowtyr, thu must forsake that thow lovyst best in this world, and that is etyng of flesch. And instede of that flesch thow schalt etyn my flesch and my blod, that is the very body of Crist in the sacrament of the awter" (Kempe 31). Later when she is praying to Christ that she might live chastely with her husband Jesus comes to her in a vision and counsels her, "'Thow must fastyn the Fryday bothen fro mete and drynke" (Kempe 35). Kempe fasts every Friday until her husband agrees not to sleep with her if she will give up her fast and pay his debts. Kempe talks to Jesus who assures her, "For, my derworthy dowtyr, this was the cawse that I bad the fastyn for thu schuldest the sonar opteyn and getyn thi desyr, and now it is grawntyd the" (Kempe 38). Kempe uses the discipline of the ascetic contemplative, and its exemplar Mary Magdalene, to shape her life to her own satisfaction. She is able through her following of this example to lead the life she has chosen.

Another recurring manifestation of high contemplation is the sound of heavenly music that is the result of thinking about Jesus. In his *Incendium*, Richard Rolle describes the fire of love in his heart and then the music "of louynge euerlasting & swetnes of melody vnsene" (36) that accompanies his contemplation. The music is a sign of great favour and a signal that God approves of the contemplative act. Rolle describes it in personal and circumstantial terms:

Whils treuly in the same chappell I satt, & in the nyght before sopar  
als I myght salmys I songe, als wer the noyes of redars or rather singars  
abowen me I beheld. Qwhilst also prayand to heuyns with all desire I  
toke hede, on what maner I wote not sodanly in me noys of songe I

felt, & likyngest melody heuenly I toke, with me dwellyng in mynde.  
 Forsoth my toyth continually to myrth of songe was chaungyd, end als  
 wer loueyinge I had thinkand, & in prayers & salmys sayand the same  
 sounde I scheuyd, & so forth to synge that befor I sayd for plente of  
 inward swetness I bryst oute, forsoth priuely for allonly befor my  
 makar.

(*Fire of Love* 36)

Mirthful music as a sign of God's favour made a big impression on Kempe. It is also clear that Rolle's style of writing, relating the homely details of his surroundings as a backdrop to his spiritual conversion, suited her own characteristically highly idiosyncratic style of writing:

On a nygth, as this creatur lay in hir bedde wyth hir husbonde, sche  
 herd a sownde of melodye so swete and delectable, hit thowt, as sche  
 had ben in paradyse. And therwyth sche styrt owt of hir bedde and  
 seyde, 'Alas, that evyr I dede synne, it is ful mery in hevyn.' Thys  
 melody was so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr myght  
 be herd in this world wythowtyn ony comparyson, and caused this  
 creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to have ful  
 plentyuows and habundawnt terrys of hy devocyon wyth greet  
 sobbyngs and syhyngs aftyr the blysse of heven.

(Kempe 26)

Both Rolle and Kempe react to the heavenly music with an uncontrollable physical outburst. For Rolle this is manifested in a burst of singing and with Kempe it is a burst of tears. Kempe's tears are her special gift from God, her way of expressing the unexpressable emotion that comes from intense meditation and contemplation. According to Rolle, the music is only heard when the contemplative has successfully been able to block out worldly concerns: "This is gostely musyk, that is vnkawen till all that with warldly bisynes lefull or vnlefull ar occupyde. No man ther is that this has knawen bot he that has stodyyyd to god onely to take hede" (*Fire of Love* 87). Thus Kempe's ability to hear music is endorsed by Rolle's treatise which marks her as special.

Mary Magdalene's experiences in the desert include the music that Rolle, and Kempe, describe as part of their mystical contemplation of God. *The South English*

*Legendary* describes how Mary is lifted into the air where she is fed by the angels and where she also hears merry music:

Euerich day seue sithe angles fram heuene come  
 At eche tyme atte seue tiden & this holy thing up nome  
 Into the eir fram the eorthe anhei & there hure helde longe  
 And vedde hure with seruise of heuene & with murie songe.  
 (312-3)

In his *Festial*, John Mirk explicitly connects Mary Magdalene's ability to go without meat and drink as well as her ability to hear the heavenly music to the discipline of contemplation:

Then, for Mawdelen wolde gyue her al to contemppacion, scho gode  
 pryuely ferre ynto a wyldynes, and was ther thrytte yere vnknownen of  
 all men wythout mete othir drynke. Then, vche day seuen sythes,  
 angels beron her vp ynto the eyre, and ther scho was fulfuld wyth  
 melody of angels, that scho nedude non other bodyly fode.  
 (Mirk 207)

Mary's ability to reject sustenance and be fed on the prayers alone is a manifestation of the highest state of contemplation and it is one that the medieval mystics strive to emulate. Richard Rolle describes the perfect contemplative as a hermit who retreats from the world and practices ascetic eating habits: "Hym therefore it behoues that in godis lufe will synge & syngandly lufe & byrne, in wildernes to be, & in to mykill abstinence not to lyfe, nor to be gifyn on any wyse to superfluite or waste" (Rolle 25). Kempe is obviously drawing on this tradition when she describes one of her mystical experiences in terms of its sustaining quality: "Than, as sche went on a tyme in the White Frerys Cherch at Lynne up and down, sche felt a wondyr swet savowr and an hevynly that hir thowt sche myth a levyd therby wythowtyn mete or drynke yyf it wolde a contynuyd" (Kempe 165). Kempe describes her ability to achieve a high level of contemplation that could feed her soul but she does not have the luxury to sustain that level of contemplation because the world intrudes on Kempe in a way that it does not for the hermit.

The angels that surround Mary Magdalene after her conversion are a gift from God that feed, comfort, and sustain her. That angels appear to Mary is evident in the Bible when an angel tells Mary that the body of Christ is risen from the sepulchre: "But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre. And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman why weepest thou?" (John 20: 11-13). In the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Mary is comforted by angels who appear at the request of Jesus in response to her prayers for food and drink. Jesus instructs the angels:

My grace xall grow, and don descend  
to mary my lover, that to me doth call,  
Hyr assatt fro to a-mend;  
she xall be relevyd with sustinous corporall.  
now, awngelus, dyssend to hyr.

(*Mary Magdalene* 114: 1587-91)

These angels guide Mary; they say "we xal go be-fore yow with solem lyth; / In mentyll of whyte xall be ower arraye" (*Mary Magdalene* 115: 1604-5). Angels also comfort Mary in her hermitage in the desert. The angels in white are another gift from Jesus that Kempe reports receiving in addition to her gift of burning fire. When she is in devout prayer she reports seeng "wyth hir bodily eyne many white thyngys flying al abowte hir on every syde as thykke in a maner as motys in the sunne" (Kempe 92). These apparitions are explained by Jesus: " 'And therfor be not aferde, dowtyr, for thes betokyn that thu hast many awngelys abowte the to kepyn the bothe day and nygth that no devyl schal han power ovyr the ne non evyl man to der the'" (Kempe 93). Like Mary Magdalene in the legends, Kempe is surrounded by angels who guard her and validate her messages as coming from God rather than the devil.

In the Digby play, *Mary Magdalene*, Mary Magdalene's death scene is filled with images of joy and love and song. The angels sing: "with-owtyn end to be in blysse, / now lett vs syng a mery song" (125: 2122-3). This scene could be the

inspiration for Kempe's own vision of song and her assertion ever after that heaven was a merry place: "And evyr aftyr this drawt sche had in hir mende the myrth and the melodye that was in heven, so mech that sche coud not wyl restreyn hyrself fro the speking therof. For, wher sche was in ony cumpanye, sche wold sey oftyntyme, 'It is ful mery in heyven'" (Kempe 26). The joy of heaven is linked throughout the literature with the highest contemplative state which Mary Magdalene reached by literally being carried up to the heavens by angels. Suzanne Craymer believes the music is a sign of Heaven and Heaven's validation of Mary Magdalene's, and thus Kempe's, life: "The music in Kempe's vision bears similarities to the angel's song in the *Digby* play by indicating that heaven endows her with tears, the tendency to preach, and the desire for chastity" (Craymer 176).

Kempe's use of Mary Magdalene as her model of contemplation explains her tendency to conflate her description of contemplative love with a description of "dallying" with Jesus:

Than aftyr this sche was in gret rest of sowle a gret whyle and had hy contemplacyon day be day and many holy spech and dalyawns of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst bothe afornoon and aftyrnoon, wyth many swet terys of hy devocyon so plentiuowsly and contynualy that it was mervayle that hir eyne enduryd er how hir hert mygth lestyn that it was not consumyd wyth ardowr of lofe, whych was kyndelyd wyth the holy dalyawns of owyr Lord whan he seyde to hir many tymes, 'Derworthy dowtyr, lofe thow me wyth al thin hert, for I love the wyth al myn hert and wyth al the myght of my Godhead, for thow wer a chosyn sowle wythowt begynnyng in my syghte and a peler of Holy Cherch.'

(Kempe 42)

Hope Emily Allen believes that Kempe's use of the word *ardor* in this passage means that she is differentiating between *ardor* and *fire*: "Margery may have believed herself visited by two sorts of fire" (Allen 271 n. 29/15). Karma Lochrie believes that this is further evidence that Kempe was reading the *Incendium Amoris* in the original Latin since Rolle makes it clear in his Latin prologue that "he uses *ignis* metaphorically to describe *ardor*, the flame or heat of love" (Lochrie 115). But *ardor*, for Kempe, could

keep its second meaning of passionate love because she saw herself as a Mary Magdalene figure, whose spirituality was intertwined with her sensuality. As we shall see, Margery Kempe's claim to special status is based on her role as the beloved of Christ.



### CHAPTER 3 - TEARS OF DEVOTION

While Kempe appropriates the language of the mystics in describing her spiritual love, she is not using the words of love solely in the metaphorical way that many writers do. Kempe's innate sensuality becomes a part of her worship of God and her language of spiritual love is filled with descriptions of physical love. Many medieval authors emphasise Mary Magdalene's special status as the best beloved of Jesus, such as John Mirk in his *Festial*, who describes Mary Magdalene as "soo holy a womon, that our Lorde Ihesu Crist aftyr his moder louyd her most of all woymen" (Mirk 203); that is a role that Kempe wishes to emulate. The sheer physicality of Mary Magdalene's form of worship is one that seems to have appealed to Margery Kempe. In turning her back on her husband and the temptations of the flesh that she had enjoyed for many years, Kempe cannot completely subdue her own sexual nature and her worship of Jesus is described in highly physical terms. This practice is not inconsistent with the advice given in instruction books for lay readers, such as Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, but it does seem somewhat at odds with Kempe's stated goal of withdrawing from the world into contemplation. But as much as Kempe may yearn for the contemplative, she herself describes a life in her narrative that is not consistent with her professed wish. She describes the public nature of her worship, dramatic confrontations with figures of authority and preaching to people. She travels extensively in a time when women were expected to stay at home. Her contemporary, Julian of Norwich, is much closer to the contemplative ideal in that she is an anchorite, walled up in her cell in Norwich. The same contradictions are found in the legend of Mary Magdalene. The asceticism and emphasis on spirituality that are the characteristics of the contemplative seem, at first glance, to be incompatible with Mary's other roles. How can the same figure represent both sexuality and the body as well as the denial of the body? The component that ties these seemingly disparate roles together is love. Mary Magdalene

symbolises love of Christ on both the physical and spiritual plane. Mary Magdalene's legend also incorporates wandering, preaching and confrontation with authority. As stated earlier, the medieval career of Mary Magdalene does not end with her witnessing the resurrection. She travels to Marseilles, performs miracles and converts the populace, including the king and queen. She does not withdraw into the desert to live the life of a contemplative until her status as a saint is assured. Kempe also creates stories of her sea travels, her miracles and her status as a local saint who is used by the people to save them in times of peril. Jesus assures her that her prayers are especially efficacious because of her role as his beloved and the people of Bishop's Lynn and beyond often come to her to help them in times of great need. While Kempe never calls herself a saint, by patterning her life on the behaviour of Mary Magdalene, her narrative leads the reader to that inevitable conclusion.

Many medieval writers, including Margery Kempe, believed that Mary Magdalene's most important role was as the beloved of Christ. Osbern Bokenham declares it is Mary's singular affection for Christ that is her most outstanding characteristic as a saint:

And not oonly she atteyenyd to perfeccyoun  
 Of hooly lyf, but eek so syngulerly  
 to cryst she extendyd hyr affeccyoun,  
 That where-euere he was she drew hym ny  
 And lystnyd hys wurdys ful deuoutly;  
 Where-fore whan ony wythe hyr dede acuse,  
 Euere redy was cryst hyr to excuse.

(Bokenham 152: 5535-41)

Jesus always protects Mary because of her love for him. Mary's tears are the inspiration for Kempe's own weeping. The affection that Mary Magdalene and Margery Kempe feel for Jesus in his role as the son of God tends to blur some of the distinctions that Kempe has tried to make between the different types of tears that she

weeps. In one of her visions, Jesus divides her roles, using her tears as the main identifier:

Whan thow stodyest to plese me, than art thu a very dowtyr; whan thu wepest and mornyst for my peyn and for my passyon, than art thow a very modyr to have compassyon of hyr chyld; whan thow wepyst for other mennys synnes and for adversytes, than art thow a very syster; and, whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens.  
(Kempe 44)

According to this passage, Kempe's tears for Christ's passion are tears of compassion that lead to contemplation and this is often how Kempe describes these tears. But the tears of compassion, linked to high contemplation, often seem to become conflated with the tears of devotion in which Kempe is acting out the role of saint. The tears of devotion in Kempe's narrative come when she is weeping for others' sins. They are also identified with her yearnings for heaven where she is assured of her place in the exclusive company of saints. But Kempe's lover-like tears are not exclusively linked to her yearning for heaven; the longing that Kempe feels on earth for Jesus seems more lover-like than maternal, thus often making her tears of compassion seem more like tears of devotion. As Susan Eberly says, "The relationship between Christ and Kempe, like that between Christ and Mary Magdalene, is clearly a love relationship" (Eberly 217). The love that Kempe feels for Jesus is described with such a sensuality that her neatly divided taxonomy of tears sometimes become blurred.

Kempe often describes her tears of devotion as part of her worship of Christ at the celebration of the mass. When she is receiving the Eucharist, she records herself as praying, "Lord, as wistly as thu art not wroth wyth me, grawnt me a welle of teerys, wherthorw I may receyve thi precyows body wyth al maner terys of devocyon to thi worshep and encresying of my meryte" (Kempe 87). Kempe's tears of devotion are a gift from Christ and a sign that he approves of her style of worship. On another

occasion, Kempe describes her longing to be with Christ in heaven when she is “heryng hir messe and revolvyng in hir mende the tyme of hir deth, sor syhyng and sorwyng for it was so long delayed” (Kempe 169). Jesus comforts her by reminding her of those who also had to wait to be joined with him: “Dowtyr, thu must bethynkyn the of my blissyd modyr that levyd aftyr me in erth fifteen yer, also Seynt John the Evangelyst, and Mary Mawdelyn, the which lovyd me rith hyly” (Kempe 169). Jesus has put Kempe in the same category as the three figures who are identified as those whom he loved best on earth and who love him. They are also the three figures represented as being present at the crucifixion.

The medieval legend of Mary Magdalene as the best beloved of Christ is one that is based on the number of times in the Bible that she seems to be touching the body of Christ. The medieval author Rabanus Maurus in his *De Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et Sororis Eius Sanctae Marthae*, written c. 800 A.D., emphasises how Mary Magdalene dared to touch Jesus when even John the Baptist, Jesus’ own cousin, did not:

even when baptizing Jesus [he] did not dare to touch the sacred head of the Lord, and said he was not worthy to unloose the latchet of his shoes; *Ecce magna humilitas!* But Mary bedewed, washed, dried fondled and anointed His feet with her tears, hands, hair, eyes and ointments; *Ecce mirabilis familiaritas!*

(quoted in Garth 72)

Kempe too describes her love and worship of Christ in terms of a lover. She uses her tears to anoint his body and she always aches to touch Christ’s body. She often describes her most intimate visions in terms of physical intimacy and the sensation of touch.

In Mary Magdalene’s three major roles in medieval legend, one of the common threads is her touching of Jesus. In her initial act of penitence she kisses Christ’s feet and dries them with her hair. In her role as the model of the contemplative life, she is

again found at the feet of Christ, listening to his words and being defended from Martha's scolding by Christ's declaration that Mary had chosen the better part. As Christ's mourner, Mary is again often depicted at Christ's feet, clutching the foot of the cross, and when he is being buried she is often shown kissing his feet or hands. Kempe describes scenes of Mary Magdalene's participation in the Passion in which touch is a major component: "And anon Mary Mawdelyn toke ovr Lordys feet and ovr Ladiis sisterys toke hys handys, the on syster on hand and the other sister an other hand; and wept ful sor in kysyng of tho handys and of tho precyows feet" (Kempe 185). The emphasis of Mary at the feet of Jesus is not lost on Kempe: "And anon in the syght of hir sowle sche sey ovr Lord standyng ryght up ovyr hir so ner that hir thowt sche toke hys toos in hir hand and felt hem, and to hir felyng it weryn as it had ben very flesch and bon" (Kempe 196). David Lawton interprets Kempe's familiarity with the particulars of the Mary Magdalene legend as a sign of her being more educated than her narrative admits: "Evidently, Kempe understands very well the significance of Jesus' feet and her own relation to them in the role of Magdalen: she is, in a limited sense, learned" (Lawton 100). Whatever the actual scope of Kempe's learning, she is certainly manipulating the stories and legends of her world to accommodate her vision of herself as specially favoured by God.

In many of the pictorial representations of Mary, she is often portrayed touching the feet of Jesus, whether she is kissing them in penitence, listening to him or at the crucifixion and resurrection, on the ground. Indeed it is especially noteworthy in the many medieval representations of the crucifixion that Mary is represented clinging to the foot of the cross. In the scenes of the deposition and the interment Mary is also often shown to be kissing or touching Jesus' hands or feet. In Kempe's vision of the crucifixion she reports Mary Magdalene begging the Virgin Mary, "I pray yow, Lady, gyf me leve to handelyn hys feet, for at thes get I grace" (Kempe 184-5). Thus Mary Magdalene sees the feet of Christ as not only the feet of her lover

but the means by which she has received her conversion. Suzanne Craymer notes that Mary Magdalene's mention of her conversion ties the two incidents together: "The word 'grace' identifies the Magdalene's behaviour at the Crucifixion with her earlier conversion where she receives forgiveness at Christ's feet" (Craymer 176). What Craymer does not mention is that this quotation is lifted almost word for word from Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* where Mary Magdalene asks of the Virgin Mary, "I pray you suffre me to dyghte the feete at the whiche I found so mykel grace" (Love 114).

When Kempe is first saved by Jesus, after the birth of her baby, she describes Jesus as a good looking man, "in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, and most amyable that evyr mygth be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde" (Kempe 23). The vision of the good looking man who comes to her bed leads Kempe to interpret her love for God in very physical terms. She yearns for Jesus to touch her: "Sche thwt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir. Sche was smet wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory and felt it not, for sche desyryd many tymes that the crucifix schuld losyn hys handys fro the crosse and halsyn hir in token of lofe" (Kempe 28). Kempe's desire for the love of Jesus impels her to look for signs of physical affection that mark the relationship between two lovers rather than a spiritual one.

In the fifteenth-century poem, *The Lamentatyon of Mary Magdaleyne*, the language of grief is more that of a lover mourning than of a disciple mourning a god. The falling down and weeping that is so much a part of Kempe's affective piety is mirrored in the description of the behaviour of Mary Magdalene at the cross. Mary Magdalene's speech is typified by a dramatic outpouring of emotion:

Out of my wytte I almoste distraught,  
Tare my heere, my handes wrange and folde,  
And of that sight my hert drank such a draught  
That many a fal swounyng there I caught;

I brused my body fallyng on the grounde,  
Whereof I fele many a greuous wounde.  
(*Lamentatyon* 38: 149-54)

In the Digby play *The Burial of Christ*, Mary Magdalene is depicted sobbing at the feet of the crucified Christ. Her grief is personalised by the physicality of her relationship with Jesus: "Thes blessite fete thus bludy to be-hold, / Whom I weshid with teres manyfold, / And wyped with my heare" (*Burial of Christ* 175: 98-100). Later in the same play the reference to Mary Magdalene's close association with the feet of Jesus is made again:

Thes are the swete fete I wipet with heris;  
And kissid so deuowtlye;  
And now to see tham thyrlite with a nayle,  
How shulde my sorowfull harte bot fayle  
And mowrn contynually?  
(*Burial of Christ* 180: 266-70)

The figure of Mary Magdalene clutching at the foot of the cross is also represented in the fifteenth-century poem:

Than kneled I downe in aynes outrage,  
Clyppynge the crosse within myn armes twayn,  
His bloode distylled downe on my vysage,  
My clothes eke the droppes dyd distayne.  
To haue dyed for him I wolde ful fayne.  
(*Lamentatyon* 39: 162-6)

The role of Mary Magdalene as the vocal mourner becomes more dramatic in the fifteenth century with the church's attempt to engage lay people through their emotions. The mystery plays manifest the emotionalism attached to the Passion. In *The Burial of Christ* Mary Magdalene laments the death of Christ in dramatic language that rivals anything Kempe records. Christ's death has become a spectacle:

Who saw euer a spektacle more pitevs,  
A more lamentable sight & dolorous?  
AA! this wofull daye!  
Alese, this sorow that I endure  
With grete inwarde hevynes & cure!  
Alese, that I do not dye...

Yf I myght dy with yow / my hart wer wel easid;  
O! ffaynt, & faynt it is.

(*The Burial of Christ* 182: 324-7 & 331-2)

This is not so very different from Kempe's description of her own behaviour at the sight of the crucifixion:

And whan their cam up onto the Mownt of Calvarye sche fel down that  
sche mygth not stondyn ne knwelyn but walwyd and wrested wyth hir  
body, spredying hir armys abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow  
hir herte schulde a brostyn asundyr, for in the cite of hir sowle sche saw  
veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed.

(Kempe 75)

This dramatic dialogue of the crucifixion scenes is not found in the Bible. But it indicates that the drama inherent in Christ's death was felt by more people than Kempe. The descriptions of Mary's physical role are not exclusive to Kempe; rather they emphasise an aspect of her role that attracts Kempe specifically to her. Her personal dramatics, while she was berated for them by some people, had a basis in the drama that was a part of medieval life. As Eamon Duffy makes clear in his book *The Stripping of the Altars*, Kempe's dwelling on Christ's humanity is a part of the movement towards realism in the late Middle Ages: "The affective dimension of all this, the dwelling on the details of Christ's suffering reflected in the realism of late medieval images of the Crucifix...were vital elements in an understanding of redemption in which the humanity shared by Saviour and sinner was central. The Crucifix was the icon of Christ's abiding solidarity with suffering humanity" (Duffy 237). As the poem and the play on Mary Magdalene indicate, emotionalism surrounding the Passion was far from unusual.

Another great sign of Mary Magdalene's special status with Jesus is the fact that she is the first to see the risen Christ and is then charged by Jesus to give the good news to the apostles. For this reason she is often known as the apostle to the apostles, "To that holy wumman, wych, as I guesse, / Is clepyd of apostyls the



apostyllesse” (Bokenham 139: 5067-8), or as Love calls her “the true loued Discyplesse” (113). The scene in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, in her role as *apostyllesse*, after his resurrection, often known by its Latin admonition *Noli me tangere*, is described by Kempe in great detail. She describes herself as being with Mary, performing her actions, sharing her emotions:

And anon aftyr the creatur was in hir contemplacyon wyth Mary Mawdelyn, mornyng and sekyng owr Lord at the grave, and herd and sey how owr Lord Jhesu Crist aperyd to hir in lekenes of a gardener, seying, ‘Woman why wepist thou?’ Mary, not knowyng what he was, al inflawmyd wyth the fyre of lofe, seyde to hym ageyn, ‘Sir, yyf thou hast away my Lord, telle me, and I schale takyn hym agen.’ Than owr merciful Lord, havynge pite and compassyon of hir, seyde, ‘Mary.’ And wyth that word sche, knowyng owr Lord, fel down at hys feet and wolde a kyssyd hys feet, seying, ‘Maistryr.’ Owr Lord seyde to hir, ‘Towche me not.’ Than the creatur thowt that Mary Mawdelyn seyde to owr Lord, ‘A, Lord, I se wel ye wil not that I be so homly wyth yow as I have ben afor,’ and mad hevy cher. ‘Yys, Mary’, seyde owr Lord, ‘I schal nevyr forsake the, but I schal evyr be wyth the wythowtyn ende.’

(Kempe 187-8)

The phrase, “Woman why wepist thou” recalls the question that Jesus asked Kempe when she was first in despair: “owyr mercyful Lord Cryst Jhesu, blessyd mot he be, ravysched hir spyryt and seyde into her: ‘Dowtyr, why wepyst thou so so?’” (Kempe 30). In using these words, Kempe equates her despair with the despair of Mary at the tomb and implies that, like Mary Magdalene, the comfort of Jesus is her only cure.

In the play *Mary Magdalene*, Mary interprets Jesus’ resurrection as the confirmation of his divinity and her rhetoric changes from that of a grieving lover to one more suitable to a burgeoning saint:

O, thou dere worthy emperowere, thou hye devyne!  
to me this is a Ioyfull tyding,  
And on-to all pepull that aftyr vs xall reyngne,  
thys knowledge of the deyyte.

(*Mary Magdalene* 96: 1086-9).

In this play, Mary is able to see the big picture and look beyond her former role as a friend and confidante of Jesus. She has successfully sublimated her earthly idea of love and she is able to embrace the new religion rather than the man.

On the other hand, Kempe's emphasis on the humanity of Jesus makes her interpret this scene as a lover's rejection rather than a god's declaration. She marvels that Mary Magdalene is depicted as being happy in this scene:

for, yyf owr Lord had seyde to hir as he ded to Mary, hir thowt sche  
cowde nevyr a ben mery. That was whan sche wolde a kysyd hys feet,  
and he seyde, 'Towche me not.' The creatur had so gret swem and  
hevynes in that worde that evyr whan sche herd it in any sermown, as  
sche dede many tymy, sche wept, sorwyd, and cryid as sche schulde a  
deyd for lofe and desir that sche had to ben wyth owr Lord.

(Kempe 188)

One of the reasons that Mary Magdalene is such an appealing role model for Kempe is the special role that touch plays in the relationship between Mary and Jesus. Kempe interprets Christ's rejection of touch as a rejection of that special bond and her identification with Mary makes her interpret this scene as a rejection of herself as well. In consciously imitating the life of Mary Magdalene, Kempe has come to identify with her so closely that the rejection of one is taken to heart by the other. Kempe does not seem to have progressed beyond her earlier visions of vainglory when she yearned to be held by Jesus.

Kempe's rejection of the implications of rejection in the *Noli me tangere* scene may have been bolstered by, or suggested by, the opinion of Nicholas Love, in his *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*. Love agrees that Jesus' rejection was out of character with his stated desire to comfort Mary Magdalene and thus infers a touching farewell:

And furthermore though oure lorde soo straungly as it semith answered  
hir at the begynnyng byddyng hyr that she shold not touche hym,  
neuertheless may not trowe but that afterwarde he suffred hir to touche

hym and to kysse bothe handes & feete or they departed. For we may suppose and godly trowe that sythen he wold soo affectuously and specially after his owne moder first before all other vysyte and appiere to that he wolde not therby in any menere distourble hir or heuy hir but rather in all poyntes comforte hir.

(Love 123)

At the tomb of the risen Christ, Nicholas Love reports that Jesus promises Mary Magdalene, “Drede not but be stedfaste and truste wel that I shalle euer be with the” (Love 123). Kempe recreates this comforting conversation in many paraphrases throughout her narrative, including in her vision of the resurrection of Christ when she hears him say to Mary Magdalene, “ I schal nevyr forsake the, but I schal evyr be wyth the wythowtyn ende” (Kempe 188). At her own conversion she hears Jesus promise her, “boldly clepe me Jhesus, thi love, for I am thi love and schal be thi love wythowtyn ende” (Kempe 31). Kempe is attracted to these physical demonstrations of love and her own brand of affective piety is filled with images of sexual and sensual love. She is told by Jesus to call him “love” just as Mary Magdalene is identified by medieval writers as the beloved of God. When Jesus speaks to Kempe about the grace that he has given her it is compared to marriage and the wedding bed:

for thu wost wel that I far lyke an husbond that schulde weddyn a wyfe. What tyme that he had weddyd hir, hym thynkyth that he is sekyr anow of hir that no man schal partyn hem asundyr, for than, dowtyr, may thei gon to bedde togedyr wythowtyn any schame er dred of the pepil and slepyn in rest and pees yyf thei wil.

(Kempe 201)

The relationship between Kempe and Jesus is formalised in Rome where she is wedded to Christ. After the ceremony, her description of her relationship with Jesus becomes even more lover-like. She hears Jesus speaking to her as a husband:

Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be loveyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst

**boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn  
hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt.**

**(Kempe 95)**

Kempe's relationship with Mary Magdalene is one that sometimes seems based on rivalry: " 'A, blysfyl Lord,' seyd sche, 'I wolde I wer as worthy to ben sekyr of thy lofe as Mary Mawdelyn was'" (Kempe 169). Jesus comforts Kempe and assures her she is as important to him as Mary: "Trewly, dowtyr, I love the as wel, and the same pes that I gaf to hir the same pes I geve to the. For, dowtyr, ther is no seynt in hevyn displeysed thow I love a creatur in erde as mech as I do hem" (Kempe 169). Not only is Mary Magdalene, who is now represented as a peer rather than a rival, not displeased by Kempe, but she is actively championing her in heaven. In one vision Jesus praises Kempe for her choice of Mary Magdalene as a saint to pray to and emulate:

**Also, dowtyr, I knowe the holy thowtys and the good desyrys that thu  
hast whan thu recyvyst my precyows body in thi sowle and also how  
thu clepist Mary Mawdelyn into thi sowle to wolcomyn me, for,  
dowtyr, I wot wel anow what thu thynkyst. Thu thynkyst that sche is  
worthiest in thi sowle, and most thu trustyst in hir preys next my  
moder, and so thu maist ryth wel, dowtyr, for sche is a ryth gret mene  
to me for the in the blysse of hevyn.**

**(Kempe 198)**

Jesus' description of Mary Magdalene as a "mene" to him seems to imply that Mary is acting as an intermediary between Kempe and Jesus. The fact that Kempe envisions Mary Magdalene taking such a particular interest in her reflects her own preoccupation with the saint.

But it is the tears that are the true bond between Margery Kempe and Mary Magdalene. Jesus differentiates between Kempe's tears of compassion that she weeps for his crucifixion and the tears of power that she cries for the adversity of others. Her tears for other sinners are very powerful and Jesus assures her that these tears will

save whom she wishes: “Dowtyr, I have many tymys seyde to the that many thousand sowlys schal be saved thorw thi preyerys, and sum that lyn in poynt of deth schal han grace thorw thi meritys and thi preyers, for thi terys and thi preyers arn ful swet and acceptabil unto me” (Kempe 178). In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Jesus praises the power of tears to save sinners: “manys hartt is my gardeyn here.../ whan that gardyn is wattyeryed with terys clere, / than spryng vertuus, and smelle full sote” (96: 1081 & 1084-5). Even the Virgin Mary encourages Kempe’s weeping by reminding her that “ne Mary Mawdelyn was not aschamyd to cryen and wepyn for my sonys lofe” (Kempe 80). Like Mary Magdalene, Kempe finds her identity as a saint through her tears. Although Kempe’s tears cause her to be persecuted and ridiculed they are validated time and again throughout her narrative by being compared to the tears of Mary Magdalene.

Kempe describes how her tears and her stories are able to affect many people. When she is in Lambeth “many worthy men desyred to heryn hir dalyawns and hir comunycacyon, for hir communycacion was so mech in the lofe of God that the herars wer oftyntyme steryd therthorw to wepyn ryt sadly” (Kempe 49). Her ability to move others to tears by communication and weeping is described (*communication* seems to be Kempe’s word for her style of preaching) in an encounter she has with a man on the road: “And so they fellyn in good comunicacyon as thei went togedir be the wey, to whom sche had many good talys and many good exhortacyons tyl God visited hym wyth terys of devocyon and of compunccyon to hys hey comfort and consolacyon” (Kempe 97). Emily Hope Allen observes that the ability to move others to tears is a common sign of sanctity in the continental female mystic tradition. In her note on these passages, she quotes a summary by Dr. Nieboroweski of the *Process* of the Blessed Dorothea of Prussia on her ability to move others to tears in which the date is given: “Ihm selbst hat sie am Tage Magdalena (22. Juli) Tranen erbeten” (Allen 275 n. 37/18). The fact that the date is the feast day of Mary Magdalene is

probably not a coincidence. Mary Magdalene is not only associated with tears but it is recorded in the Bible that her tears were able to move Jesus. When Mary's brother Lazarus dies Martha tells Jesus that if he had come sooner he could have saved her brother. Jesus responds by giving her a lecture on faith. But when Mary comes, falls on her knees, and tells Jesus the same thing, her tears evoke a different response: "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept" (John 11: 33-5). This story emphasises the powerful tool that tears are, especially for a woman; Mary's tears had the power to move Jesus himself. When women mystics claim the power for themselves they are tapping into the powerful tradition of Mary Magdalene. When Kempe cites her tears of devotion for others, she is implying that her tears still have the power, like Mary Magdalene's, to move Jesus to compassion and action.

Kempe reports growing numbers of people who are beginning to accept her own estimation of her sanctity. Her visions have assured her that she has been singled out by God and now circumstances in her community seem to be confirming this. She is transformed from a sinner who needs to be forgiven to one who listens to the sins of others and has the power to forgive them. In one incident, Kempe has a confrontation with a hostile monk who tests her by asking her to name his sins. Kempe is able to convince by telling him that he has sinned "in letthery, in dyspeyr, and in worldly goodys kepyng" (Kempe 40). Kempe's gift of seeing into his heart is through her tears. She tells him "yyf I may wepe for yow I hope to han grace for yow" (Kempe 39). Kempe's tears are the secret to her ability to see into his soul. If she can cry for his sins then she can grant him grace; one assumes that if she had been unable to weep "wondyrly fir hys synnes" (39) that he would have been damned. Jesus tells Kempe to tell the monk to "forsakyn hys synne" (Kempe 40), but Kempe puts it more strongly to the erring monk: "Sorwyth for yowr synne, and I schal help yow to sorwyn" (Kempe

40). In bidding the monk to weep and promising to weep with and for him, Kempe presents herself as a model of compunction to the monk as Mary Magdalene was a model of compunction to her. But while the monk's tears will be the tears of compunction, Kempe's tears, at this stage in her saintly development, are the tears of devotion that the saint weeps for the sinner. The monk is so converted from his former distrust that he gives Kempe "gold to prey for hym" (Kempe 40). This story is not unlike a miracle connected with the legend of Mary Magdalene.

The *Speculum Sacerdotale* records a miracle of Mary Magdalene that occurred after her death. A clerk, steeped in sin, visits the sepulchre of Mary Magdalene who berates him for his sins: "Why and wherfor dost thou so wickydy ayeinst the prayers and the merites that I make for the?" (173). The monk is abashed at the list of his sins and Mary's promise to champion him if he will atone. He is converted and becomes a holy man. Kempe reports that *her* monk ends his days as the head of the monastery, thus proving that the monk's gold has been well spent and Kempe's prayers and tears are powerful in their ability to move God. Like Mary Magdalene, Kempe has become an advocate as well as an exemplum for other sinners.

While Kempe never actually calls herself a saint, her narrative suggests again and again that she is one. When she meets a man who is sent to arrest her, he says to her "Damsel, yf evyr thu be seynt in hevyn, prey for me" (Kempe 130). Kempe seems to shy away from a direct naming of her goal and politely deflects the man by implying that all people are capable of reaching sainthood: "Sir, I hope ye schal be a seynt yowrselpe and every an that schal come to hevyn" (Kempe 130). While Kempe says that she hopes all people will be saints, it is clear throughout her narrative that she thinks that she is a special case. By modelling herself on Mary Magdalene's behaviour, Kempe can assure herself and others that her life is following a prescribed pattern of holiness.

In the beginning there is doubt whether Kempe's visions are from God or the devil and she does not seem sure herself. Her early conversations with different ecclesiastics is not only to gain validation for her visions but to assure herself as well as others that her visions are from God and not the devil. One man says to her, "Eythyr thu art a ryth good woman er ellys a ryth wikked woman" (Kempe 115). But as time goes on Kempe records in her account that more people are accepting her as a holy woman. While she is being tried in Leicester for being "a fals strumpet, a fals loller, and a fals deceyver of the pepyl" (Kempe 113-4), she is defended by a man from Boston who says, "in Boston this woman is holdyn an holy woman and a blissed woman" (Kempe 114). Her reputation is becoming more positive because she is able to continually defend herself from her prosecutors.

Hostile forces both lay and ecclesiastical are constantly telling Kempe to go home, be quiet and act more like a housewife. She reports that different "men of the cuntre" say to her "Damsel, forsake this lyfe that thou hast, and go spyne and carde as other women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo" (Kempe 129). But Kempe does not go home. In a time when women were expected to stay in the home, Kempe's wanderings are most remarkable. She reports travelling all over England; she goes on pilgrimage to the Holy Land; she travels to Rome and in her later years she travels to Germany against the express wishes of her confessor. All this travelling would seem to be at odds with Kempe's ambition to be a contemplative; but the same contradiction lies within the legend of Mary Magdalene.

In the medieval legends, Mary Magdalene is put on a ship with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus in the hopes that they would drown. The Digby play *Mary Magdalene* includes long scenes describing Mary's sea voyages. It is the description of these voyages that convinces philologist Jacob Bennett that the mystery play originated in Bishop's Lynn, now King's Lynn: "The language of the play is that of Bishop's Lynn, and the *Mary Magdalene* is just the sort of play one might expect to



come out of a place as salty, as rich, and as controversial as that city was in the middle of the fifteenth century” (Bennett 2). It is the same language that Kempe uses to describe her own sea voyages.

In the Digby play *Mary Magdalene*, there are a number of scenes involving ships and the sea. Mary arrives in Marseilles on a ship. After she converts the king and queen they set off for the Holy Land to visit St. Peter. Before they sail, Mary blesses them and when they are in danger the king comforts the queen :

a! My dere wyffe! no dred ye have,  
butt trost In mary mavidleyn,  
And she from perelles xall vs save;  
to god for vs she woll prayen.

(*Mary Magdalene* 121: 1750-3)

Kempe reports that Jesus speaks to her in regards to sea voyages. When she was on pilgrimage Jesus tells her not to take the ship she has booked on. She tells some of the other pilgrims of her vision: “and thei teld it forth to her felawshep, so than thei durst not seyl in the schip whечh thei had ordeyned” (Kempe 74). On the way to Germany, Kempe is in a storm at sea in which she berates God for forsaking her when he for “two nyghtys, sent hem swech stormys and tempestys that thei wendyn alle to a ben perischyd” (Kempe 214). She prays to God in despair of her life and receives an assurance that they will be saved: “why dredist the? Why art thu so aferd? I am as mythy her in the see as on the londe” (Kempe 214). The Virgin Mary then promises Kempe, “for I telle the trewly thes wyndys and tempestys schal sone sesyn and ye schal han rith fayr wedyr” (Kempe 215). Thus Kempe’s prayers are answered and she becomes a favourite of the captain, who even lends her his cloak to keep warm for the rest of the trip. This miracle is typical of Kempe. Her miracles, as a rule, are not large and flashy but usually personal in that they are helping her in some way.

That Kempe could perform miracles is made explicit in two incidents involving her church, St. Margaret’s with Mary Magdalene and All the Virgin Saints. When

Kempe was kneeling at mass during Easter week she was struck on her head and back by “a ston which weyd three pownd and a schort ende of a tre weying six pownd that hir thowt hir bakke brakke asundyr” (Kempe 35). When she cried “Thesu mercy” (35), the pain was soon gone. While she reports that some malicious people interpreted the injury as “a tokyn of wreth and venjawns” (36), Jesus assures her that her preservation is a miracle: “Helde this for a gret myracle, and, yyf the pepyl wyl not levyn this, I schal werkyn meche mor” (Kempe 36). The saving of Kempe is done to show the people that she is protected by God and when many people do not believe it then Kempe saves St. Margaret’s Church.

Kempe records that a fire in St. Margaret’s Church would have burnt the whole town of Lynn “ne had grace ne myracle ne ben” (Kempe 157). Kempe is able to save the church because she “cryed ful lowde many tymes that day and wept ful habundawntly, preying for grace” (Kempe 157). Kempe notices that the people who have mocked her tears in the past are now willing, in this time of crisis, to believe in them:

And, notwythstandyng in other tymes thei myth not enduryn hir to cryen and wepyn for the plentiuows grace that owr Lord wrowt in hir, as this day for encheuwyng of her bodily perel thei myth suffyr hir to cryen and wepyn as mech as evyr sche wolde, an no man wolde byddyn hir cesyn but rathyr preyn hir of continuacyon, ful truxtyng and belevyng that thorw hir crying and wepyng owr Lord wolde taken hem to mercy.

(Kempe 158)

Kempe’s wry observation that the same people who had berated her for her tears now look to her to save their town with those same tears is one that she will make again. The townspeople’s faith in Kempe’s tears is not misplaced. Kempe demonstrates the power of her tears when there is a snowfall that puts out the fire. After this, the people of Lynn begin to believe in Kempe’s sanctity. This seems to be the fulfilment of the promise that Jesus makes to her : “Dowtyr, I schal makyn al the world to

wondryn of the, and many man and many woman schal spekyn of me for lofe of the and worshepyng me in the" (Kempe 80). Kempe's intercessory tears of devotion have not only saved the town, they have assured the people, in a most public way, that God listens to her.

While saving St. Margaret's gains Kempe a new respect from many people, she is often in trouble with the authorities because of her emulation of another aspect of Mary Magdalene. Because of her role as the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus, Mary Magdalene is known throughout the Middle Ages as disciplesse to the disciples. In the play *Mary Magdalene*, the angel Raphael tells Mary to go to Marseilles "[a]nd byn a-myttyd as an holy apostylesse; / Alle the lond xall be techyd alonly be the" (107: 1381-2). Mary is a teacher and converts the people at the express commandment of God. But Kempe gets into trouble when she speaks. Women were not allowed to preach and in this troubled time an accusation of preaching could lead to accusations of being a Lollard. The role of Kempe as a saint whose preachings convert people, as Mary Magdalene's preaching converted the people of Marseilles, is a source of contention between her and the ecclesiastical as well as the lay authorities.

Kempe records many incidents in which she is challenged by clergy. She is able to convince many of the hostile clergy that she is a holy woman through a combination of intelligence, knowledge of scripture and her confidence in her own saintliness and right to be who she says she is. Many of the clergy do not know what to make of Kempe. Her particular interpretation of holy behaviour is not the kind that they easily recognise. She is not an anchorite, though there are clergy that seem to wish that she was so easily dealt with, agreeing with one elderly and powerful monk who says, "I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" (Kempe 41). But walling women up was no guarantee that the women would be silenced, as many people (including Margery Kempe) who went to seek advice from Julian of Norwich could attest.

Being locked in a house of stone does not stop Kempe either as she describes her behaviour after her arrest on the orders of the Duke of Bedford; being confined does not keep Kempe from continuing to move people with her words: “Than stode sche lokyng owt at a wyndown, tellyng many good talys to hem that wolde heryn hir, in so meche that women wept sor and seyde wyth gret hevynes of her hertys, ‘Alas, woman why schalt thou be brent?’” (Kempe 130). The persecution of Kempe takes on overtones of *Imitatio Christi*. In York, Kempe is accused of preaching but she answers, “I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I use but comownycacyon and good wordys, and that wil I do whil I leve” (Kempe 126). Kempe makes a distinction between the accusation of preaching, which could get her into trouble, and speaking, communication. Throughout her narrative Kempe describes herself as a teller of tales. Her tale of a bear and a pear tree pleases the archbishop who is hearing her case: “Than the Erchebisshop likyd wel the tale and comendyd it, seying it was a good tale” (Kempe 127). And she tells parables, “good stories,” as Christ does and is persecuted by the religious powers although loved by the people. The parallels to Christ are increased in this instance to mirror the crucifixion scene by Kempe asking for something to drink, “for sche was evyl for thyrste” (Kempe 130), as Christ did on the cross. Kempe’s love of a good story not only is evident throughout her narrative but is proved by her narrative. *The Book of Margery Kempe* can be interpreted as another of her stories that is used to help *communicate* her convictions. As she explains in the beginning of her narrative, “Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherin thei may have gret solas and comfort” (Kempe 17). The intention of the book, like Kempe’s stories, is to instruct and comfort through her example.

Kempe’s preaching is considered dangerous by many authorities because they are afraid of the example that she is setting: not the example of a sinner, but of a woman who has left her husband and who travels seemingly where she wishes. As

discussed earlier, Kempe's white clothes are interpreted as a dangerous sign of wifely insubordination: "I wil wetyn why thow gost in white clothys, for I trowe thow art comyn hedyr to han away owr wyvys fro us and ledyn hem wyth the" (Kempe 117). She has also incurred the wrath of the powerful Duke of Bedford by being suspected of counselling marital rebellion to two noblewomen, Lady Westmoreland and Lady Greystoke. A clerk accuses her, "my Lady hir owyn persone was wel plesyd wyth the and lyked wel thy wordys, but thu cowseledyst my Lady Greystokke to forsakyn hir husbonde, that is a barownys wyfe and dowytyr to my Lady of Westmorelonde, and now hast seyde enow to be brent for" (Kempe 132-3). The threat of burning seems a harsh punishment for giving poor advice, even to a baron's wife. It seems more likely that it is the act of preaching, rather than what Kempe has said, that is perceived to be the gravest threat to society. Again Kempe uses the defence that she merely tells stories: "I telde hir a good tale of a lady that was dampnyd for sche wolde not lovyn hir enmiis and of a baly that was savyd for he lovyd hys enmys and forgaf that thei had trespassyd agen hym, and yet he was heldyn an evyl man. The Erchebischoep seyde it was a good tale" (Kempe 133). While Kempe is banned by her church from being an "apostolesse," she nevertheless manages to travel and tell her stories to an appreciative audience. As a result of her story telling and her public displays of weeping, Kempe is becoming more accepted on her own terms as a holy woman.

The legends of Mary Magdalene and the books of other women saints had made a great impression on Kempe's own narrative. She had shaped her life on these stories and now it was time to shape a narrative that would reflect and strengthen the pattern of her life. Kempe's determination to put her life on paper indicates how well she understood that the power of sainthood did not rely on the deed alone but in the recording of those deeds. Kempe sees her book as living after her and being global in its implications as she describes how God "comawnded hyr and chargyd hir that sche schuld wrytyn hyr felyngs and revalayons and the forme of her levynys that hys

goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle the world” (Kempe 19). When the priest who is her scribe turns against her because her theatrical behaviour is condemned by a powerful friar, it is books relating the lives of other saints that convince him to believe in Kempe’s sanctity. Another time Kempe asks a priest if there is anything wrong with her tears. He answers, “ ‘Margery, I have red of an holy woman whom God had govyn gret grace of wepyng and crying as he hath don yow’ ... Thus the sayde doctowr confermyng hir crying and hir wepyng, seyde it was a gracyows and a specyal gyft of God” (Kempe 160). Kempe experiences first hand how the power of the written word can influence people. She receives the validation she seeks because her actions are like the actions of saints. The respect in medieval society for the written word meant that one’s sanctity was more convincing if it was recorded.

Kempe’s scribe is probably also her confessor. In using her confessor to record her story, Kempe is following the tradition of continental women mystics such as St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena. For as Janet Dillon points out, “The greatest testimony a cleric could offer to a female visionary was of course his decision to document her life or her visions in writing” (*Holy Women and Their Confessors* 125). In the cases of Marie D’Oignt, St. Bridget and St. Catherine, the male confessors took it upon themselves to write the story of their holy charge. These men did not only validate the sanctity of these women by writing them down but they also enhanced their own status as clerics by describing themselves as the close companions of saints. The willingness of these men to take on the task of writing about the continental women after their death is contrasted sharply with Kempe’s description of the difficulty she faces in trying to find a scribe for her revelations while she is very much alive.

Kempe goes through at least three scribes and after the first one dies she describes how she prevails upon a priest to continue the work. He avoids writing it for years until Kempe and his conscience finally convince him that he must. He had said it

was so poorly written by the first scribe that he could not read it. Kempe is able to help him and “sche schuld prey to God for hym and purchasyn hym grace to reden it and wrytyn it also. The preeste, trustynge in hire prayers, began to redyn this booke, and it was mych mor esy, as hym thowt, than it was beforntym” (Kempe 20). Kempe has finally convinced her confessor to validate her experiences and preserve them as an example to others. This miracle is not as dramatic as the saving of St. Margaret’s church but it is more important to the legend of St. Margery Kempe.

In keeping with her role as holy woman, Kempe ends her book with a prayer of her own composition. One passage reveals the consciousness of her own sinfulness that gives Kempe a special affinity with saints who were acknowledged sinners themselves before their conversion: “And specyaly I blisse the, Lord, for Mary Mawdelyn, for Mary Egipcyan, for Seynt Powle, and for Seynt Awstyn. And, as thu hast schewyd ther mercy to hem, so schewe thi mercy to me and to alle that askyn the mercy of hert” (Kempe 234). St. Mary of Egypt was a third-century prostitute who at her conversion became a hermit and lived in the desert for forty years. The story of her later life is so similar to the additional legends of Mary Magdalene’s own sojourn in the desert, she is thought by many historians to be the inspiration for it; over time, with the similarity of names and early life of sexuality, the two stories became merged into that of one woman. St. Augustine admits to an early life of sexuality in his writing before his conversion in his book *Confessions*. St. Paul is the only one in Kempe’s special category whose sins were not sexual, but his sins of persecution and his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus make him one of the most important examples of the ability of God’s love to convert the greatest sinner to the greatest saint. While all of these saints’ lives conform to the pattern of moving from sinner to saint, the life of Mary Magdalene is the pattern that Kempe follows most closely.

## CONCLUSION

Kempe's desperate search for sainthood and validation in her own time seems to have been, finally, somewhat successful. Her belief that writing a book describing her spiritual conversion would add to the legend of her sanctity did not work out as she anticipated. Her story seems to have been lost and was not found in its entirety until the twentieth century. Since that discovery, Kempe has become the same controversial figure that she was in her own time. But even she could not have foreseen the way in which some modern scholars would defend her.

The problem with some of Kempe's defenders is that in their attempt to redress earlier imputations made on her validity and sanity, they characterise her as a victim of a patriarchal society. Dhira Mahoney describes Kempe's "tears and cries [as] her public language, an individual expression of separateness through bodily action in defiance of the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system" (Mahoney 40). Mahoney's portrait of the inarticulate martyr is not one that Kempe would recognise or identify with. Such readings of Kempe's outbursts deny her any power. They also make it appear that Kempe's tears are her only means of expression when it is clear that she is highly articulate and relies heavily on words and her own ability to manipulate them to extricate herself from difficulties. Hope Weissman describes Kempe as hysterical but believes that her hysteria is "symptomatic of repressive social and sexual attitudes, and of rigidly defined sex roles" (Weissman 202). But Kempe saw her visions as a source of power and in most clashes with the representatives of the patriarchal society she depicts herself as triumphant.

Some feminists, such as Karma Lochrie, believe that Kempe's work should be re-examined, but they feel that there are too many points in Kempe's narrative that do not allow them to embrace her as one of their own. Lochrie is quick to distance herself from feminist defenders of Kempe as well as Kempe herself: "I find Kempe's behavior undesirable as a feminist practice in the twentieth century, and I certainly



would not want to argue for her championship of women” (Lochrie 9). The problem with Kempe is that she does not easily lend herself to the role of either victim or strong advocate of feminism.

Lynn Staley has solved this conundrum in her own mind by her belief that Margery Kempe is, in reality, two people: Margery the fictional character and Kempe the intellectual writer. Staley believes Kempe is using the seemingly innocent and orthodox form of the autobiography to actually criticise the church:

[L]ike Chaucer and Langland, Kempe employs techniques and strategies that enable her to construct a context or background for the narrative of the self she also creates. Thus, although Kempe uses autobiographical apparatus to shape an account of Margery as a representative type, she uses those details as a screen for analysis of communal values and practices.

(Staley 39)

In her book, Staley elevates Kempe from an hysterical woman to that of a calculating writer creating a fictional character for her own purposes. She gives Kempe an authorial control and a self-awareness that makes her the equal of Chaucer and Langland. Staley’s use of the word *autobiographical* indicates a belief that the genre existed for Kempe to draw upon. Timea Szell also refers to Kempe’s book as an autobiography: “Her autobiography represents her as a notorious undesired element in company...A simultaneous narrative concern involves the imaging and re-creation of Kempe as spiritually perfect following the problematic and elusive models offered for such perfection to women by the late medieval culture” (Szell 74). Szell believes that Kempe is creating two separate images of herself; one is a loud and troublesome woman and the other is a holy woman. Szell and Staley both call Kempe’s book an autobiography. Szell believes that Kempe is trying to reconcile two images; while for Staley the genre of autobiography is being used to create an elaborate fiction of a life.

Of course, in a sense all autobiographies are a fiction. They are reconstructions of reminiscences which are gathered from the author's memory and pieced together as part of a pattern. The difficulty of memory is dealt with directly by Kempe at the beginning of her book: "Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the order whan thyngys befellyn" (Kempe 20). Gayle Margherita interprets these words as a genuine attempt to explain inconsistencies in Kempe's narrative: "In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as in any autobiography, the question of history is implicit. The autobiographical text foregrounds the difficulty of reconstructing the past, and the problematic of origins per se: the beginning of a textualized life is always an aesthetic decision" (16). While Kempe may say that any gaps in her narrative are due to her poor memory and the passage of time, it is clear that, in reality, the gaps are as striking as the things that she remembers.

Kempe is interested, not in recording her life as it happened, but in shaping her narrative as a testament to her sanctity. She uses the familiar pattern of the confession to chart the story of the saving of her soul. She recounts only the part of her life that are pertinent to her redemption. Her story does not begin with her birth and childhood, but with the birth of her child, which signals her re-birth as Christ's beloved. She has fourteen children, but she does not mention them, except her eldest son because her conversion of him reflects on her own powers. Kempe's family life is of no importance to her book except when it impinges on her quest for recognition as a saint. Her book is more concerned with creating a legend of her life in which her boisterous sobbing is interpreted as a sign of holiness. In crafting her book, Kempe does follow a pattern, but it is not recognisable as an autobiography; rather it is based on a number of literary influences, the most significant being the life of Mary Magdalene.

The labelling of Kempe as hysterical, even if such hysteria is the fault of society, ignores how much her behaviour was a product of her culture. Kempe had many literary models of sanctity available to her and she names a number of them; throughout her narrative, there are passages that seem to come almost word for word from these models. Kempe's reading and interpretation of Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ* was entirely in keeping with the emphasis on affective piety that was such a feature of late medieval England. The mystery plays were another source of theatrical devotion that was reflected in Kempe's own form of worship. The aspect that seems to disturb so many of Kempe's contemporaries as well as modern critics is Kempe's weeping. But the weeping is deeply indebted to Mary Magdalene on whom Kempe patterns her life.

The legend of Mary Magdalene exemplifies the tears of compunction, compassion and devotion that Kempe identifies as her own special gift from God. The first step in Kempe's conversion is her penitence, in which she recreates the scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene as the template of her own conversion. She weeps her tears of compunction at the feet of Jesus. The next step is to attempt to become a holy woman in her community. She again evokes the image of Mary Magdalene at the feet of Christ as the exemplum of the contemplative life. Kempe's dramatic reactions to her contemplation of the Passion are characterised by her tears of compassion. Finally, Kempe gains the power to intercede for her community. The source of her power is in her tears of devotion that mark her as the beloved of Christ.

Margery Kempe was not interested in living the life that was laid out for her in late-medieval England. Her desire to live differently from her society's expectations had her searching for models that would validate her right to become a holy woman. In the religious culture of her time, including the readings of her confessors, the mystery plays, and the dramatic re-enactments of the liturgy during mass, she found the models she needed. This thesis has argued that the legend of Mary Magdalene

was a dominant influence on Kempe's life. But how much of Kempe's book is a reflection of her life history and how much is it constructed on a literary pattern, with her omitting the parts of her life that do not relate to that ideal? Is Mary Magdalene Kempe's personal saint or is her *vita* merely a hagiographic model on which to organise the book? The "life" of Margery Kempe is both her life as it was lived and the narrative that has been handed down to us. Kempe used the legend of Mary Magdalene as the model for her own experiences, both mystical and historical; and she has shaped her book in the form of a confession. Mary Magdalene's association with the sacrament of penance further solidifies Kempe's identification with her. Throughout her narrative, Kempe records how important it is to be able to find models of behaviour to give validity to her own behaviour. Her tears are the greatest manifestation of her special status with God and she deliberately invites comparison by categorising them as tears of compunction, compassion and devotion, a taxonomy associated with Mary Magdalene. By aligning herself with one of her culture's most beloved saints, Kempe gives herself an authority to speak to God and to live a life based on her interpretation of his wishes. Margery Kempe's devotion was not an anomaly that put her outside of her society: rather she, was a product of her society in which one's love for God was an emotional experience and in which Mary Magdalene was one of the most potent examples.

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