

MEDIEVAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

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By

Ong, Li Ling

Regina, Saskatchewan

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## Medieval autobiographical writing in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

### Abstract

*The Book of Margery Kempe* has been studied extensively for the view it gives of an unusual woman in the fifteenth century, but less so for the nature of autobiographical writing it exhibits. This thesis examines the characteristics of medieval autobiographical writing as it appears in the *Book*, by looking at the autobiographical forms prevalent in the medieval period, such as confessions, hagiography, and religious treatises, and by comparing Margery's writings with the works of other religious mystics. Hence, I also examine *Of S. Theodora, A Virgin who is Also Called Christina*, the biography of Christina of Markyate (c.1096-c.1160), the *Memorial* in *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*, by Angela of Foligno (c.1248-c.1309), *The Herald of Divine Love* (*Legatus Divinae Pietatis*) by Gertrude the Great, also known as Gertrude the Great (c.1256-c.1298), and *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit*) by Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1208-c.1282).

I start with autobiographical theories formulated by Georges Gursdorf and Roy Pascal, and review some of the current theories on women's autobiography. Autobiography, I argue, contains three identifying features: 1) the impulse to write about the private life for the public, 2) the use of a literary form derived from earlier genres, and 3) the aesthetics of shaping a personal account. I show that medieval autobiographical writing contains many characteristics derived from the confession, the hagiography, and religious and devotional works. Medieval women like Margery Kempe, Angela of Foligno, and Gertrude of Helfta were particularly adept at altering these literary forms to create an autobiographical text.

In many cases, these women's mysticism motivated them to write, and I argue that the autobiographical mode was in part formed by the need to express their religious experiences. For Margery, Angela,

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MEDIEVAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN *THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE*

Chapter 1

Introduction to medieval autobiographical writing

*of S. Theodora, A Virgin who is Also Called Christina*, of Christina of Markyate (c.1096-1160), is a biography, or more specifically, a hagiography. *The Herald of Divine Love*, Book 2, by Gertrude of Helfta (c.1256-1298), is a spiritual memorial about her mystical life. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, by Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1208-1282), contains mystical visions, poetry, discussions between entities called Love or the Soul, and is her spiritual treatise. The *Memorial*, in *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno* (c.1248-1309), dictated by Angela of Foligno to her confessor, is a book of mystical revelations. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe (c.1373-1440), is an autobiography. Except for the last, none of the above texts is an obvious example of medieval autobiographical writing. Even the classification of *The Book of Margery Kempe* as an autobiography is complicated by its heavy use of hagiographical conventions and its dictated nature, leading us to question its authenticity. Yet it remains an autobiographical work; it is personal, individual and original.

For the purposes of discussion, we may safely assume that an autobiography is a self-authored work that takes in the events of one's life at one or a few sittings, attempting to shape it into a coherent whole. This working definition serves to describe the writings of the medieval woman mystics mentioned above, and enables us to study them. Currently, there are few studies of the autobiographical quality of the texts of Margery Kempe and those of other women writers in the medieval age, and minimal inquiry into their contribution to medieval

autobiographical writing as a whole.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, however, I find that women's autobiographical writing in the medieval age--a most prominent example being *The Book of Margery Kempe*--appears to be at the forefront of the genre of autobiography, far more than men's writing. As a consequence, I argue that women writers in the medieval period were more adept at autobiographical writing, and expressed their individuality more seriously than men did. We find autobiographical writing not only in Margery's *Book*, but also in texts where the writer has had occasion to write personal, individual and convincing narratives, such as the texts of Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude of Helfta, and to a lesser extent, Christina of Markyate. These texts derive from other literary forms (such as the hagiography) that often do not share the same literary emphasis as autobiographies; they are thus better described as autobiographical works than as autobiographies.<sup>2</sup>

In her discussion of the autobiographical genre, Elizabeth W. Bruss sets out three rules to define the autobiographical act: firstly, that the autobiographer is the source of the subject matter, and claims individual responsibility for it; secondly, that events reported by the autobiographer are asserted as being true; and thirdly, that the autobiographer admits to believing what he has reported (10-11). These rules are not ironclad, but their presence provides "a field within which the task of self-imaging and self-evaluation is understood to take place, making whatever does take place recognizable as a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Most discussions have been about literary authority rather than autobiographical writing. Examples of such essays include Karma Lochrie's *The Book of Margery Kempe: The Marginal Woman's Quest for Literary Authority*, Lynn Staley Johnson's "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe," and Sarah Beckwith's "Problems of Authority in Late Medieval English Mysticism: Agency and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." Furthermore, I think that Margery's *Book* requires rather less public justification (for its existence in the fourteenth century) for the simple reason that except for the pamphlet (excerpted from the *Book*) *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon* printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 and reprinted by Henry Pepwell in 1521, it did not circulate publicly until 1934. (Meech and Allen xlvii-xlviii.)

self-evaluation" (Bruss 13). What is striking about this explanation is that the autobiography is recognised as a public genre; it must be seen to be performing an autobiographical act. This public nature of autobiography is also discussed by Georges Gursdorf. He comments,

The author of an autobiography gives a sort of relief to his image by reference to the environment with its independent existence; he looks at himself being and delights in being looked at--he calls himself as witness for others; others he calls as witness for what is irreplaceable in his presence. (Gursdorf 29)

The autobiographer intentionally makes public that which is private and individual.<sup>3</sup> This is an intention that is made explicit from the onset of writing, unlike in diaries or letters. Consequently, the public nature of its presentation distinguishes the autobiography from other forms of life-writing. This feature, which I call the autobiographical impulse, is the impulse for public self-reflection on one's life.

The autobiographer is not only compelled by this impulse to write about his or her life, but also to do it publicly, i.e., in a public genre, and for the public. Hence, no matter how much someone like Angela of Foligno protests that she was encouraged by her confessor to dictate the events of her life, or Christina of Markyate protests that she was plagued by sicknesses sent by God until she agreed to dictate her life, or Gertrude of Helfta claims that she was called by God to write about her visions, individual will was required for them to agree to compose their thoughts for public display. Louise Collis, who bases her biography of Margery Kempe on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, notes that Margery had the "industry, self-confidence, and will-power" to describe her life (258). The autobiographical impulse present in works such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *Of S. Theodora, a Virgin who is Also Called Christina*, *The Herald of Divine Love*, the *Memorial* in *The Blessed Book of Angela of Foligno*, and *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* defines them

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, all autobiographies are autobiographical works, but not all autobiographical works are autobiographies.

as autobiographical works, and it is the reason these texts were chosen. They all reflect the impulse for public, retrospective recollection of personal narratives. These personal narratives are not simply the recitation of past events, but also stories about past experiences when those events occurred. But this impulse does not constitute the whole of the autobiographical activity. Other processes are also at work. James Olney questions all three parts of the word: 'auto-', 'bio-', '-graphy'--and what we mean by the self (the *autos*), the life (*bios*) and the act of writing (*graphe*)--in order to analyze the autobiographical act ("Autobiography" 6). The desire to tell of the *autos*, the conception of one's *bios* as a whole, and the act of writing (*graphe*) form the entirety of the autobiographical enterprise. I will show that Margery is engaged in the autobiographical mode; she is writing 'autobiographically' when she individualizes her account with frank details of her life, her conversations with God, and the people she meets. This allows a serious evaluation of the nature of autobiographical writing in the *Book*, other than regarding it merely as an example of women's autobiography,<sup>4</sup> or as an account of Margery as a madwoman, a mystic, or the subject of a manipulative scribe<sup>5</sup> (as have been previously done). Autobiographical writing is neither static nor simple, but takes place within a complex process of composition.

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<sup>3</sup> This is true even of autobiographies that are not widely circulated.

<sup>44</sup> Studies of autobiography have usually left out Margery Kempe, or dismissed her in favour of more complete texts (usually by men) such as those by Augustine or Rousseau. In contrast, studies that concentrate on women's writing and women's autobiography almost never fail to mention and describe Margery's achievements in depth. See Janel M. Mueller, "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur': Female Spirituality, Selfhood, and Authorship in 'The Book of Margery Kempe'," in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton, (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1987), pp.57-69; Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, (especially chapter 3); Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers"; and Peter Dorsey, "Women's Autobiography and the Hermeneutics of Conversion."

<sup>5</sup> John C. Hirsh believes that Margery's scribe, and not Margery, should be given credit for the writing of the *Book*: see "Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975): 145-150; still other scholars have taken to referring to the subject and the author of the *Book* separately, i.e., as Margery and Kempe respectively, e.g., in *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, by Lynn Staley.

In an article titled "Fictions of the self: The End of Autobiography," Michael Sprinkler describes this state of complexity in his conclusion: "no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (342). His is one of numerous theoretical forays into the definition, the writing process, and the psychological impetus behind autobiography in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. William C. Spengemann's comment, "the more the genre gets written about, the less agreement there seems to be on what it properly includes" (xi) applies more than ever to the sheer number of theoretical frameworks that are mutating in the scholarly world. Mary Sue Carlock in "Humpty Dumpty and the Autobiography," and Spengemann in his bibliographical essay in *The Forms of Autobiography*, review the parade of definitions that has appeared since Misch and Anne Robeson Burr,<sup>6</sup> both pointing out that definitions often change according to the purpose scholars wish to achieve. Spengemann points out:

[While] these definitions usually purport to be statements of fact, they are really explanations of how the word

'autobiography' will be used in particular instances . . . .

[Those] who wish to demonstrate the artistry of autobiography have no difficulty including poems and novels in that genre. And of course, those who maintain that writing refers primarily or solely to the self will find all writing to be autobiographical by definition. (185-6)

The definitions become wider and more general as the genre becomes more studied, and this presents a substantial problem to the study of medieval autobiographical writing: it seems to be impossible to determine what it is until a consensus can be reached on the definition of autobiography, but surely our view of autobiography must also be shaped by what we know of medieval autobiographical writing.

Writing autobiographically--being in the autobiographical mode--not only includes 1) the autobiographical impulse, 2) the consideration of the literary form, but also includes 3) the act of crafting one's life: how concerned the writer is with deliberately shaping the past, the creative skill with which this is done, and how previous mistakes and inner conflicts are dealt with. An autobiographical narrative can be dispassionate--as the description of Christina of Markyate's trials at the hands of her family is--or intense--as are Angela of Foligno's dictated revelations of her divine visions--but autobiography and autobiographical writing are always personal, subject to the author's prejudices, judgement, and strength of recollection. Gursdorf puts it this way: "in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of man, for it is first of all the man who is in question" (43). In fact, the threat of autobiography becoming 'fictionalised' is always present. The autobiography is characterised by the precedence it gives to the evaluation of self and personal identity. It is a personal narrative that is historical.

To put it another way, an autobiography is always a historical account, objective in intention but inevitably subjective in execution, a document that serves ultimately to justify the moment of composition, or more strictly, the subject at the moment of composition. This is a main reason why letters and diaries are not considered to be autobiographical texts: not only are they usually private communications, but they are often composed at various stages throughout a person's life, and are filled with momentary concerns rather than with the reflective viewing of the past. Autobiography thus "assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time" (Gursdorf 37). It does not portray the quintessence of the personality--as shorter accounts such as obituaries often do--but the sum of it, a task that is both monumental and full of difficulties, for

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<sup>6</sup> Her study, *The Autobiography: A Critical and Comparative Study*, (Boston and New York, 1909), and Misch's *The History of Autobiography*

every personality contains contradictions and irrational compulsions. Autobiographical writing is necessarily an imaginative enterprise.

At a time when there were ready substitutes for the autobiography, such as the confession or the apology, autobiography was slow to develop. However, the decline of medieval forms, such as conversion narratives or the confession due to, for example, increasing secularization of society, meant that autobiography soon became the new form for the writing of personal histories. Because of its history, the autobiography remains an elusive genre. On the one hand, it is distinguished by the personal voice of the author. On the other hand, it derives its form both from societal norms about self-representation and from literary trends. For example, the emphasis on adherence to classical and biblical forms of exegesis in the medieval period resulted in wide respect for precedent, which appears in each writer's attempts only to 'improve' or 'add' to the knowledge remaining from the past, and not strictly to show innovation or originality (as we value it today). A. J. Minnis says, "[it] is possible to speak of 'theory' of authorship rather than 'theories' because of the high degree of consistency with which medieval scholars treated the subject and employed its characteristic vocabulary . . . . hardly surprising in an age which was obsessed with classification, valuing the universal over the particular and the typical over the individual" (2). Aware of the need for respectable public reception,<sup>7</sup> medieval writers often resorted to portraying themselves in typical patterns: the penitent sinner, the pilgrim, the saint, or the Christian warrior.

While autobiographical forms have been around for a long time--the letter, the confession, or the apology--the autobiography did not distinguish itself as a genre until originality and personal voice became valued in society, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bruss points out that though autobiography acquires the

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are landmark studies of the genre.

characteristics it now possesses as a result of changes in the literary system--as genres developed (such as the lyric) or became obsolete (the literary epistle)--its practitioners also appropriated techniques from other types of discourse, such as the apology, which is no longer in popular use (8-9). These actions all affect the way we view autobiography today. For instance, the autobiography is seen to have taken over the role of a genre like the epistle, but at other times, an autobiographer may also choose to adapt the features of other genres, perhaps the traveller's account, into his or her narrative. This was already occurring in the early medieval period.<sup>8</sup> Many forms used at this time allowed the writer to describe life events and explain them--the apology, the hagiography, the biography, the confession, the exemplary life--but they did not always express personal assertions easily when writers attempted to adapt them for autobiographical purposes. Instead, medieval writers usually ran into difficulties of 'individualising' their lives that have led modern scholars to suspect the sincerity and veracity of their accounts. These writers' efforts are often seen as inadequate or eccentric (also a common complaint of *The Book of Margery Kempe*) where autobiographical quality was concerned. In addition, the autobiography is unique in being an open-ended narrative that forces the reader, not the author, to give closure to the account. At the end of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the reader is confronted with Margery in her old age, living alone, still facing the suspicions of her neighbours. It is a picture that sits uneasily with the continual reminders in the *Book* that Margery--assured by God from

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<sup>7</sup> This was especially so for women writers. Religious writers also had to avoid charges of heresy.

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Lehman, "Autobiographies of the Middle Ages," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (5th series)*, 3 (1953): 41-52; Jonathan Goldberg, "Cellini's *Vita* and the Conventions of Early Autobiography," *MLN* 89 (1974): 71-83; and Albrecht Classen, "Autobiography as a Late Medieval Phenomena," *Medieval Perspectives* 3.1 (1988): 89-104. Though none of the authors refers specifically to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, these essays provide a survey of early to late medieval texts that can be loosely referred to as autobiographies and autobiographical writings--works that are readily identifiable as autobiographies and those that contain autobiographical content respectively.

beginning to end--is bound ultimately for heaven. In an autobiography, the author is forced to review his or her life as a complete narrative even though his life is not yet completed. Hence, as Gursdorf notes, "autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed" (41). This creates a situation where the autobiographer is forced to construct a persona in order to write the autobiography, a task that is complicated by the fact that "no trick of presentation can prevent the narrator from always knowing the outcome of the story he tells" (Gursdorf 42). The narrator is placed in the position of pretending to be objective (though he is ultimately doomed to failure), i.e., by not commenting on the impact of events encountered with the subjectivity of hindsight. The writer has to narrate his or her story from an unstable platform that is both fictitious and truthful at once.

It is precisely this instability that provides the autobiographical enterprise with its inner tension, forcing the autobiographer to attempt an objective stance where it is not possible, and compelling him or her to deliberately craft the text. But this is not a negative aspect. Unlike automatic writing, as favoured by psychologists to reveal the self, autobiography succeeds precisely because it has a creative aspect. The self that is revealed is very much the work of the writer. Autobiography cannot be objective: "[even] when what they [the autobiographers] tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it always is true evidence of their personality" (Pascal 1). At the same time, the form of the autobiography demands an aesthetic attempt to review and formulate the events of one's life into a semblance of unity, or at least of coherence. This rule is not absolute, but I speculate that even a work that appears incoherent may contain idiosyncratic forms of organization. The reconstruction of a life is in fact "a shaping of the past," which "establishes certain stages in an individual life, makes links between them, and defines, implicitly, or explicitly, a

certain consistency of relationship between the self and the outside world" (Pascal 9). The author is driven by the autobiographical impulse, a consideration of the genre's literary requirements, and the art behind his or her work. The form of the account depends on the traditions he or she identifies with, e.g., the confession, or the hagiography, or even the letter. The writer then takes the past events in life, as seen by the self, and attempts to re-create them into the account of a person that best reflects the entirety of the personality. Here, the writer is not relating historical events (which are factual and verifiable by an outside source), but the experiences of them, which are personal and--depending on the beliefs or prejudices of the subject--not necessarily factual.

This feature--that the autobiography purports to be 'truthful' but cannot deliver truth--is a unique characteristic of the genre. The situation becomes more involved when we consider texts such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*. For medieval religious writers, the autobiographical text is often complemented by the evangelising urge to tell others about their mystical experiences, which was often described (to them by God, or by their confessors) as a way to encourage others to live a pious life, or to spread orthodox beliefs in society. Medieval autobiographical writing thus exhibits a couple of specific influences from other literary forms: the religious treatise, the hagiography and the confession. One of the earliest forms, the confession, can be regarded as a direct parent of the autobiography. It was an early form of autobiographical writing, providing autobiography with three identifying characteristics: the creation of a public, yet private discourse; the tendency for self-examination; and the expectation of an account of one's actions and sins.

Early Christianity seems to have practiced open confession,<sup>9</sup> and if so its completely public character must have tested the sinner severely; the admission of guilt was public, as was the exclusion from the body of the faithful, the performance of arduous penitential exercises, and the reconciliation with the body of the faithful. Moreover, each Christian could undergo confession only once in his or her life (Tentler 4-5). These features--the public character, the rigour of the resultant penitential process, and the single opportunity for confession--would have all contributed to the development of the medieval autobiographical form, the most well known example being Augustine's *Confessions*. Medieval autobiographical writing can be said to have gained its skeleton formula from the practice of confession:

Each man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts--whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life. The rule requiring confession of sins gives to self-examination a character at once systematic and necessary. Augustine's great book is a consequence of this dogmatic requirement: a soul of genius presents his balance sheet before God in all humility--but also in full rhetorical splendor.

(Gursdorf 33)

We tend to read the *Confessions* as an autobiography because a large section of it fits conveniently into this category, but it is a confession--personal narrative, meditations, and all. Karl J. Weintraub notes: "[for] Augustine's enterprise all shades of meaning of 'confessing' were central, and without a God as the all important recipient the book would be useless" (22). He is, as Weintraub emphasises, "confessing" (23, emphasis on the continuous action). In the same way, the open confession questioned the individual's private conscience, but took place in public: "men were bound to bring to light particular elements of their inner life for public judgment" (Misch

580). Though he was one of the first writers to write fully about the inner life, Augustine "did in fact believe in the practical religious usefulness of congregational confession," and in the *Confessions* retained the rhetorical character of the form (Misch 583). For Augustine, the confession was not merely a recitation of sins, but an account of the inner consciousness. Walter J. Ong remarks, "introspection and greater and greater internalization of conscience mark the entire history of Christian asceticism" (*Orality* 153). This is true not only of Augustine, but also of Margery Kempe and other mystics, who were motivated to write autobiographical texts due to a need to examine their conscious minds so as to confess their thoughts. The examination of one's conscience was crucial to a good confession, since only an honest, personal account could allow the penitent to 'start over.' Perhaps not surprisingly, this is also one of our expectations from autobiographies; we expect the autobiographer to 'confess' to us, the public, his or her innermost thoughts. Clearly, the confessional procedure contributed greatly to the literary stipulation that an autobiography be a public, yet private, document.

Like Peter Abelard's *Historica calamitatum*, which was written later, the *Confessions* also fulfills many of the requirements for an autobiography by modern definitions. These requirements, or steps, include 1) the viewing of one's life as whole, 2) the use of this process of reflection to interpret the past and so 3) the clarification the development of the self.<sup>10</sup> The *Confessions* includes Augustine's life before Christianity, his conversion experience, and his search for self-knowledge. The last partly explains books 10-13, in which Augustine breaks away from personal narrative to meditate upon three

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<sup>9</sup> This is a subject of debate among historians. While open confession existed for a short period, the practice died out by the twelfth century.

<sup>10</sup> These points are made at length by Roy Pascal in chapter 1 of his *Design and Truth in Autobiography*.

topics: memory, time and the Creation.<sup>11</sup> This meditation, however, foreshadows one of the most identifiable characteristics of the autobiography: self-reflection upon the past so as to understand the present. Misch argues that the *Confessions* "belonged to an epoch in which the individual had lost that natural confidence in action and judgement, and could only attain it by making an intellectual effort" (633). This intellectual effort emerges in Augustine's shaping of his autobiographical text. Discussing the difference between oral and print cultures, Ong notes, "[the] very reflectiveness of writing . . . encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconsciousness" (*Orality* 150). The writing of the *Confessions* is possible because of Augustine's conscious effort towards intelligent self-reflection, and is a direct result of its derivation from the confessional experience. In addition, the *Confessions* is made up of a series of confessional acts at first--the conceptual act (of arranging events into a sequence), the penitential act, the act of thanksgiving to God--followed by the act of self-revelation to the self and finally the assertion that faith brings truth and knowledge (Spengemann 5). For Augustine, the ability to differentiate between these acts--conceptual, penitential, and thanksgiving--shows that contemplation and narration of the past involves the negotiating of chronological, philosophical and personal limitations. These acts of confession show that he was aware of the need for premeditation; books 1-9 are deliberately arranged to give a picture of his life, while the remaining books record his periods of self-reflection on more abstract matters, but all reflect periods of Augustine's introspection.

It can be seen that the Christian confession encouraged a complete accounting of one's life by creating "a formal system of introspection," and this was "probably the crucial contribution of confession to autobiography" (Zimmerman 122). This aspect has often

been ignored in discussions of autobiographical theory--probably because of its obvious religious associations, since autobiography is now regarded as a secular genre--but it is of some importance here. Medieval female mystics often created their autobiographical texts via confessions (official or not). Angela of Foligno, for example, dictated the *Memorial* and the *Instructions* on the urging of her confessor, confessing and revealing<sup>12</sup> her mystical experiences at the same time. Christina of Markyate's *vita* was created from her own recounting of the trials she had undergone. Even *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a direct result of Margery's confession of sins and her experiences to an amanuensis. For someone like Margery, illiterate but articulate, the arrangement of the confession would be seen as the natural means by which she could narrate her life. It helped to give an aesthetic shape to her account. The confessional form--both in the early and medieval church--thus helped to shape the practice of self-examination in the composition of autobiographical texts.

Developments in the confessional procedure also continued to influence the autobiographical genre. By the twelfth century, private penance had largely replaced public penance. This was a necessary development as Christianity was no longer confined to "zealous and selective communities," as in the Early Church (Tentler 5). The penitent was also allowed to confess secretly and privately, and was allowed to do so more frequently, rather than once or twice in a lifetime (McNeill and Gamer 20-23). The Lateran Council of 1215 even required each Christian to go to confession at least once a year. This increased emphasis meant that etiquette for conducting a confession (which had also been gradually formulated since the earlier centuries)

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<sup>11</sup> This frustrated scholars attempting to classify his works. These scholars saw that books 1-9 were about Augustine's autobiographical enterprise, but that the remaining four books were not.

<sup>12</sup> These two actions are different in that confessing puts Angela in the position of the penitent, and revealing puts her in that of a teacher or advisor; she uses both in her book, and each has different implications in the make-up of her autobiographical stance (see chapter 2 below).

came into greater use, etiquette that helped to encourage the telling of a complete confession. For example, confessors were advised to begin by asking the penitent's occupation and marital status so as to better understand the confession, and not to look directly at the penitent, since this might confuse or discourage the telling of sins (Tentler 83-4). Instructional manuals, or *summae confessorum*, which summarised the information needed by a priest to carry out the confession, became popular. Often, they also provided formulae to teach and remind confessors what elements were required of a confession. One such formula went: "It [the confession] should be simple, a good confession, humble, pure, faithful, true, frequent, naked, tearful, rapid, whole and prepared beforehand" (quoted in Zimmerman 123). The last requirement, prior preparation, also became more heavily emphasised as members of the clergy urged the laity to attempt some sort of self-examination before confessing. Jacopo Passanvanti, a Dominican preacher, even recommended bringing written notes to the confessional (Zimmerman 124). A good confession also had to be a complete one; the author of a manual, for example, might "commend a general examination of one's whole life" (Tentler 110). In addition, discussions of the 'good' confession by clerics suggest that a confession should be "produced by the sort of reflection implied in premeditation" (Zimmerman 123). This need for retrospection is one of the characteristics of autobiography. As a result of these developments, the directions given by confessors to the public influenced the way personal narratives--such as autobiographical writing--were composed. Even the insistence on the relevance of the penitent's account--to confess only matters relating to sin--inculcated the idea of a fixed principle (or rule) for reviewing one's life, creating a sense of organization and purpose, which became important in the development of the autobiographical form later.

However, under the more reassuring and familiar setting of the secret confessional, it also became easier to be less declarative about

one's wrongdoings than would be accepted in the open confession. The open confession had been possible only because early Christianity flourished in small, dedicated (and often persecuted) communities, but such keen devotion was diffused as the religion became increasingly accepted all over the continent. This meant that medieval men and women were no longer inclined towards open confession and the severity of the experience. Margery Kempe, for example, after the birth of her first child, when she thought that she might not live, became desperate to confess "a thyng in conscyens which sche had nevyr schewyd befor that tyme in alle hyr lyfe"<sup>13</sup> (21; 6). Until then, she had kept the deed a secret even from her priest. In other cases, the secret confessional seemed insufficient to address the need for public contrition for some of the fervently religious. For example, medieval female mystics were well known for their eagerness to go to confession, some going several times in one day. Such a fervent practice suggests that perhaps the closed confessional did not adequately satisfy these women's urges to unburden themselves. Public displays of devotion were prominent among women mystics, as seen by Margery's open fits of weeping. Angela of Foligno admits she even enjoyed imagining how she could make public her sins, and confessed that she wished to parade naked through public with pieces of meat hanging from her neck and to proclaim her many vices. This admission indicates her desperation to publicly state her sins, perhaps even a desire for open confession. We can see that Augustine's *Confessions* derived its conception from the enormity of the open confession, but Angela no longer had such a model to work from. The impact of the confession on the development of the autobiographical form is undeniable, but by the thirteenth century there were indications that the confession--the private confession available to penitents--was no longer suitable for fulfilling the

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<sup>13</sup> All quotes are taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, edited by Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1996). The first page number refers to this edition; the second to the Meech-Allen edition, which I have included

autobiographical impulse of women mystics and they began to set their thoughts on paper. It is for this reason that the autobiographical texts of women mystics are so extraordinary; they made use of but did not follow blindly or shallowly the literary requirements shaped by the confession. Instead, medieval women mystics sought inspiration from other literary forms, such as the hagiography or the mystical treatise, and adapted them to create personalised texts.

Although women mystical writers in the medieval period possessed the advantages of a having a 'set' form for autobiographical writing, as derived from the confession, these literary requirements did not seem to have dealt fully with their autobiographical impulses. This partly explains why there were so few imitations of the *Confessions*, or more precisely, imitations of its autobiographical mode in the Middle Ages. Part of the reason probably has to do with the decline of public confession, a practice that Augustine based his work on, but which was not available to medieval writers. Weintraub also argues that unlike medieval Christians, Augustine had been brought up as a classical man, and "the conditions in which [he] came to an understanding of his own experience were radically different from those faced by medieval autobiographers." Augustine underwent a "profound and conscious reorientation of his life" when he became a Christian (Weintraub 49). The *Confessions* resulted from an urge to present himself not as a learned pagan, but as a Christian. His is the sort of autobiographical narrative few medieval Christians, who did not make the same transition, would feel compelled to write. Hence, though Augustine's *Confessions* was widely copied and read in the medieval period, it was never effectively imitated. Instead, the development of the autobiographical form in the medieval period depended on other literary forms, such as the conversion narrative, the travel account and the hagiography. Margery Kempe even makes explicit the literary forms from

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because it remains widely used. Staley's edition, published by TEAMS, is a modernised version of the *Book*.

which her book derives: "[a] schort tretys of a creature [autobiography--one depicting the failures and triumphs of one's life] sett in grett pompe and pride of the world, wech sythen was drawyn to ower Lord [hagiography] be gret poverté, sekenes, schamis, [conversion and mystical accounts] and gret reprevys in many divers contres and places [travel accounts]" (21; 5-6). Conversion narratives, especially those by women mystics that narrate the subject's spiritual initiation into the contemplative life, are probably the most similar to the *Confessions* in terms of intent, but are quite dissimilar in terms of compositional strategy, being modeled after devotional texts or hagiographies, and not the confession. The medieval travel account, especially to the Holy Land (a journey that Margery also undertook), was a good form for personal narrative, while the hagiography was more often used to narrate the life of a third person.

By the fourteenth century and especially in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the hagiography had become a significant influence in autobiographical writing, helping to shape its literary form. One of the reasons for this involvement was the increasing popularity of hagiographies among the lay community. Even an illiterate woman like Margery Kempe knew of many such accounts by listening to them being read by others. The clergy often saw hagiographies as an important means of transmitting and enforcing their teachings. For example, as monks and friars (especially in Italy) came to realise that the accounts of women mystics echoed their own ideas that holiness was centered on mysticism and contemplation, they wrote large numbers of *vitae*--with "recurrent hagiographical themes such as flight from the world, refusal of marriage, virginity, extreme asceticism, devotion to the suffering Christ, and a preoccupation with exceptional mystical states"--as a means of preserving the memory of these women (Lachance 41). Among the Franciscans, as in the case of Angela of Foligno, such *vitae* served as inspiration for the faithful (Lachance 41-2). At the same time, these *vitae* could strengthen Franciscan teachings,

especially those that encouraged devotion to the humanity of Christ and identification with him, particularly through the cross and the Passion. In addition, the *vitae* clearly also appealed to the secular clergy. Because they were written with orthodox teachings in mind, their popularity discouraged the clergy from turning to potentially heretical beliefs, such as Lollardy. Devotion to these holy women--who were sanctioned by the church--thus helped to focus the attention of the people on these officially accepted figures and the orthodox teachings they represented. The use of hagiographical themes is of special interest in the development of autobiographical writing in the medieval period, given its prominence in the make-up of the texts by female mystics mentioned above. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in particular, combines conversion narratives, devotional works, and travellers' accounts with hagiography. With other similarly conceived texts, it acquires the peculiar label of 'autohagiography,' "an account of a holy person's life written or told by its subject" (Greenspan 218). This designation is initially puzzling, for traditionally, a hagiography can only be a type of biography: a sacred biography, "a narrative text of the *vita* of the saint written by a member of a community of belief," which operates by providing "a documentary witness to the process of sanctification for the community and in doing so becomes itself a part of the sacred tradition it serves to document" (Heffernan *Sacred* 16). The hagiography is a narrowly defined genre, subject to conventions and expectations, a text that is accepted by many in the church to be inherently sacred, a text that teaches the truth of the faith through example, and a text that celebrates the saint's intimacy with God.

The social demands of the hagiographical text would be impossible in an autobiographical work, because this form is primarily focused towards public acceptance, while an autobiographical work, if it is to succeed in unveiling the subject for the reader, cannot be more concerned about mass acceptance than it is about presenting the self.

The hagiography is a public text (written by a member of the public) made public, but the autobiography is a private text made public. Even the social origins of the hagiography are diametrically different from those of autobiography. Early hagiographical accounts relied on stories that came from the audience, who acted as witnesses, while autobiography, even early autobiography, came from the author. Moreover, the autobiographical text cannot function as an exemplum for the laity any more than it can serve as a barometer of social acceptability. A hagiography is based on the shared values of the community, but the autobiography is not. More specifically, the hagiography is based on the *desired* shared values of the community, but the autobiography is based on an individual's position within society's spectrum of accepted values. The autobiographical work can "offer an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men," as Pascal puts it (1), but it has no other socially redeeming value. Yet, the traditional, social functions of the genre aside, the thematic concerns of hagiography can, and do, enter the composition of such autobiographical texts as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and other texts by female mystics. Clarissa W. Atkinson points out that it was the presence of similar hagiographical details (especially from the *vita* of Mary of Oignies, such as the weeping) in Margery's account that convinced the scribe to take her seriously (31-33). Hagiography obviously played a crucial role in Margery's medieval autobiographical text. Christina of Markyate's *vita* is meant to be her hagiography, but as I will show, the frankness of this account, as well as the relative lack of hagiographical clichés in it, also seem to show that the *vita* is the result of Christina's own autobiographical assertions. Its editor C. H. Talbot comments, "[the] usual desire to edify, to speak only of the supernatural qualities of the Saint, to borrow from or draw parallels with the lives of other saintly persons is conspicuous by its absence" (6). He points to these features to justify the opinion that "the whole tone of the story is autobiographical rather than

historical" (Talbot 6). Perhaps it is autobiographical, not from the veracity of the actual events depicted, but certainly, from the attempt to individualise Christina as a unique female mystic. The altered hagiography thus provides a personal account of Christina's life.

The medieval form of autobiography made use of characteristics from earlier literary forms, the most prominent being the confession and the hagiography. However, these forms of expression were often limited for autobiographical purposes in that they usually required conformity of some sort to the dictates of the chosen genre, e.g., a hagiography could not be too idiosyncratic lest it detract from its overall message of religious piety, and a confession usually emphasised the sins being revealed rather than extraneous details about the subject's life. This situation is intensified in medieval autobiographical writing because the requirement of shaping one's life into a whole also derived mainly from the traditions of the confessional, the hagiography and for mystics, the mystical treatise. As such, the autobiographical work is seen (consciously or unconsciously) as an accounting of the subject's sins, and as a commentary on the subject's worthiness (or saintliness). The value of the subject's life value as a teaching example is also considered. Thus, when medieval writers attempted to ignore the dictates of literary norms and place content before form, they often ran the risk of rendering the form – which, as I mentioned, often has public functions – irrelevant. It must have been difficult for a medieval writer to declare outright that she was creating a new form, e.g., an autobiography, at a time when form (and even content) seemed to be pre-dictated, with expectations of generic conventions to live up to. Saints' lives, for example, frequently include miracles and other supernatural phenomena as a matter of course (whether or not such actually happened). What a writer can do is to work on a known, accepted genre--such as the hagiography--and modify its features for personal effect. But because this text still contains the textual

features of the form it is derived from, it becomes self-contradictory in the roles it is supposed to play. For example, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, public hagiographical features contrast with private self-reflection; it is partially hagiography, and partially autobiography, and so the entire text becomes suspect because it appears to carry the label of autobiography erroneously. The encounters with God are so different from what we usually expect from mystical treatises--at one point, God even thanks Margery for her devotion, instead of the other way round (Kempe 201; 214)--that both her mysticism and her autobiographical passages become questionable. At best, she is a 'minor' mystic; at worst, her personal narratives are merely derivative of well-known hagiographies.

Margery Kempe's *Book* includes conventions of the travel account, the hagiography, and texts of mystical contemplation, but these are, more often than not, a skeleton structure for her personalised narrative. The use of hagiographical conventions, for example, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, did not limit Margery's urge to express herself as she re-created an account of her life as a testimony to her saintly status, but did provide a usable--and acceptable--structure in which she could indulge her autobiographical impulse. In addition, it should be noted that women writers often wrote fewer books--Margery Kempe wrote one, and even Gertrude of Helfta, who was educated, wrote only two--and some 'experimental' writing would not be out of place in such a small output (for men and women both). This is especially true of the accounts of women mystics, who often felt compelled to reveal their experiences as clearly as possible, but were seldom able to undergo the 'apprenticeship' of composition that male writers did through imitations, commentaries or critiques of earlier texts. A reason for these experiments probably comes from the difficulty mystics (of both sexes) faced in expressing the "inexpressible"--they found it difficult to give a "physically discernible form . . . to a spiritually perceived experience" (Stoudt 151-2)--and had to look for new literary forms. At

the same time, perhaps because they were usually less educated and hence less familiar with scholarly forms, women who chose a literary medium for autobiographical writing often caused these media to become destabilised and less rigid. Women writers could also be less inclined (either due to lack of learning or lack of desire) to imitate scholarly forms in their urgency to communicate personal thoughts. This 'failure' does not negate their autobiographical mode--in many ways, I think that women's autobiographical writing in the medieval period reveals a far clearer example of the workings of this mode--but it does help to explain the existence of current theories in the context of women's writing and women's autobiography.

The earliest theories by critics of women's autobiography<sup>14</sup> argue that women tend to write about domestic matters and personal relationships rather than public concerns. Other than its overly simplistic overtones, these types of theories are misplaced in describing the writings of medieval women mystics. Margery Kempe's *Book* and Mechthild of Magdeburg's visions are defined by their 'insular' concerns of private devotions and mystical visions, but this is not the same as a thematic divide on the basis of the writer's gender. While Margery's account is full of descriptions of the people she meets (supposedly a 'womanly' preoccupation), her narrative shows that she regards these encounters as part of her religious journey. There is little mention of domestic life in Margery's *Book*, or in that of Christina of Markyate, who lived as a recluse. Angela of Foligno's well-known assertion that she prayed for the deaths of her family so that she would be free to devote her life to God hardly upholds the assumed sanctity of domestic life for a woman.

The theory that women tend to write about domestic matters is dated, and has since been de-emphasised in theoretical discussions. Other theories derive from a feminist, rather than thematic, reading of

women's writing. Estelle Jelinek's collection of essays represents one of the first attempts to create a body of studies on the tradition of women's autobiography. In her introduction to *Women's Autobiography*, she comments, "irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women," and "the narratives of [their] lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organised into self-contained units rather than connecting chapters" (Jelinek 17). This is true of Margery's *Book*, which is not chronological (though possibly because her account was dictated), and certainly true of Mechthild of Magdeburg's book, which is made up of short observations, poetry and songs. They are thus differentiated from male autobiographies for "[unlike] the rhetorically controlled--and therefore simplified--narratives characterised by canonical male traditions, women's self-portraits tend to be focused on the unfinished process of 'dailiness' and are in many cases either diaries themselves or somehow modeled on the diary form" (Dorsey 77). Letters and diaries often give fragmentary, un-chronological narratives because of their momentary nature. In contrast, autobiography aims for a continuity of vision--Gursdorf says it "recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (38)--in order to give an account of not only the life (*bios*) but the self (*auto*) as well. But as I will show, this characteristic of 'irregularity' applies only rarely to the writings of medieval women mystics. Gertrude of Helfta, for example, notably gives an account of her life as a mystic that is both chronological and retrospective about her experiences. The first book of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, too, attempts (if unsuccessfully) a continuity of narrative: it traces her life from her illness after giving birth, to her spiritual conversion, and finally to her old age in Lynn. In doing so, it provides a personal view of her and her life.

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<sup>14</sup> A typical approach is that taken by Domna C. Stanton in her essay, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in *The Female Autograph*, pp. 3-20.

The above theories have derived mainly from studies of secular autobiographies from the seventeenth to the present century, but a third theory addresses religious women writers in particular. Mary G. Mason argues, "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness [usually God]"; she proposes that Julian of Norwich's intense identification with the Passion allows her to compose *The Showings* in her "vivid, unique, even radical consciousness" (210, 211). Thus, Margery Kempe develops her autobiographical impulse because of her own identification with the dual roles of wife-mother and pilgrim-mystic (Mason 211). The self is not "presented as the stage for a battle of opposing forces and where a climactic victory for one force--spirit defeating flesh--completes the drama of the self" (as apt a description of many men's autobiographies as any), but as a series of identifications between roles (Mason 210). These identifications appear in autobiographical writings that contain conversion narratives. In his discussion of women's conversion narratives, Peter Dorsey adds, "the hermeneutics of conversion is obviously centered much more on a relationship and an interdependency (between self and God) than it is concerned with individuality" (77-8). The female autobiographical impulse is relying on an external focus to achieve inner consciousness.

Closely related, I think, to the role of the external focus in developing women's inner life is the idea that tension exists between the private and public selves. The roles of daughter, wife or mother are at odds with the autobiographical self that would make itself public, because the woman writing exclusively as a mother or as a daughter can only present herself within that role, instead of allowing her whole personality and self to appear. The woman writing only as a wife or daughter makes that role, not her person, public. An extreme example of this appears in books of advice by mothers to their offspring, such as Dhoua's *Manual* (c.841) for her son, William. Sidonie Smith remarks, "[when a] woman chooses to leave behind cultural

silence and to pursue autobiography, she chooses to enter the public arena . . . . [and since] autobiography is a public expression, she [the female autobiographer] speaks before and to 'man' " (52, 49). I think that perhaps she does not speak strictly to 'man,' but certainly, to a public domain that has been dominated by men. This implies that women's autobiography must negotiate the barriers of publication as well as the fear of 'going public' in such a domain. Yet, medieval women mystics were the ones who found the prospect of portraying the self seemingly irresistible. The idea of being able to address the public not simply as women, but as representatives of God, encouraged them to make use of the autobiographical form in new ways. For medieval women mystics, the tension between private and public selves was there, but the difficulty of entering the public sphere must have been mitigated partly by the large numbers of women's devotional works that flourished privately and publicly in this period.

Theories of women's autobiography are often based on the assumption that because women often held an inferior position in society, their writings are--when compared to men's autobiography--less concerned with public life, more personal, more likely to dwell upon family life and relationships, more humble in tone, less chronological in structure, in a word, more 'alien.' I argue that this has less to do with the 'alien' nature of women's writing than with the different roles they played in society. For example, women may have been less aware of the importance of following literary conventions since they did not fully involve themselves in the literary world, or were not as familiar with literary traditions. Thus, they held on to a less rigid view of literary forms. In addition, because medieval women were less concerned with public life and thus more inclined to express their personal thoughts even though they might be considered 'womanly' for doing so, there was a greater tendency for women to express more of their individual thoughts than was ordinarily acceptable, whereas a male writer concerned for his career was constrained by the need to

follow literary form and display his scholarship. This can be seen in marked difference in tone between male-authored texts and those of women mystics: few male-authored texts, for example, exhibit the rambling, confused (if personal) voice found in Margery's *Book*.

At the same time, medieval women seldom had a literary reputation to uphold or risk and this gave them the license to manipulate or even distort these scholarly forms to their satisfaction. Margery Kempe takes this license for composition with her characteristic directness. Unlike many other women autobiographers, she hardly mentions her domestic life; there is little information about the many children she has borne. Indeed, she seems to ignore them all except for Thomas. Her behaviour often seems irrational and extreme; even if these are 'typical' feminine traits then they are hardly the positive ones we hope to find from a woman writer. Yet, judging from the contents of *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde Ihesu cryste, or taken out of the boke of Margery kempe of Lynn*, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in London in 1501, it was Margery's spiritual life that was deemed worthy of consideration, since the pamphlet contained only extracts from the *Book* that touched on her visions and her advice about religious devotion.<sup>15</sup> Meant as a "manual of practical mysticism," the pamphlet is as much Margery's as the entire *Book* is (Holbrook 42). If this fact begs the question of the dictates of publication, I can only argue that the treatise was among the many books and texts related to mysticism published in England at this time. As a religious treatise it carries at least as much weight as a male-authored devotional text, at least in the fifteenth century. The reactions of modern readers, however, seem to indicate that Margery's text is significantly inferior

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<sup>15</sup> Meech's and Allen's remarks that the pamphlet "give a very imperfect and one-sided impression of Margery's character and a rather flavourless one of the *Book*" (xlvi) can be countered by Sue Ellen Holbrook's opinion that it "does not so much distort or marginalise Margery Kempe as it does transform or represent what she wrote" (42).

to mystical texts of the late medieval period.<sup>16</sup> Since it was discovered, *The Book of Margery Kempe* has risen slowly from the status of a male co-authored text to the ravings of a hysterical woman, and finally, has been acknowledged for being what it says it is: a personal, if mediated, account of the life of Margery Kempe. Louise Collis states: "[Margery] tells us in detail, what it was like to be an eccentric medieval woman" (12). A study of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, together with the texts of other women mystics, can reveal the nature and characteristics of medieval autobiographical writing as practiced by early developers--particularly religious women--of this form.

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<sup>16</sup> It has been unfavourably, and unfairly, I might add, compared to Julian's *Showings*; Margery's mysticism, for example, is often held to be shallow compared to her.

## Chapter 2

## Relationships With Scribes and Confessors

of the three aspects that make up the autobiographical mode--the autobiographical impulse, the literary form chosen (and adapted), and the artistic composition and shaping of a personal narrative--the third is probably the most subjective in execution.<sup>17</sup> This is because the act of shaping a narrative not only depends on the first two aspects (the impulse and the form used), but is also affected by the addition of a collaborator to the creative process. The mediated nature of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, causes its authenticity to be continually suspect. Scholars are uncertain as to the role Margery played in the writing of the *Book*, as well as the editorial role played by her two amanuenses. The *Book* is popularly known as the first English autobiography, but its creative process of composition has generally been overshadowed by discussions of Margery (with some overlapping) as a social critic<sup>18</sup>, a mystic<sup>19</sup>, and as a medieval woman.<sup>20</sup> Margery's transformation of her experiences into narratives, her attempts to relate events as they unfold, and her deliberate creation of her life as a "merowr" (Kempe 178; 186) for those around her are the actions of a person who is writing autobiographically.

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<sup>17</sup> This can be seen in the way varied texts, e.g., Montaigne's *Essays*, poems, etc., are regarded as autobiographies by some scholars.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Lynn Staley Johnson, "Margery Kempe: Social Critic," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 22.2 (1992): 159-84.

<sup>19</sup> See Carolyn Coulson, "Mysticism, Meditation, and Identification in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (1996); Sandra J. McEntire, "The Journey into Selfhood: Margery Kempe and Feminine Spirituality," in McEntire, pp. 51-69; also her "The Doctrine of Compunction from Bede to Margery Kempe," in Glasscoe, pp. 77-90; William B. Ober, "Margery Kempe: Hysteria and Mysticism Reconciled," *Literature and Medicine* 4 (1985): 24-40; and Sarah Beckwith, "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe."

<sup>20</sup> See William Provost, "Margery Kempe and Her Calling," in McEntire, pp. 3-15; Deborah S. Ellis, "Margery Kempe and King's Lynn," in McEntire, pp. 139-63; and James H. Landman, "The Laws of Community, Margery Kempe, and the 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale'," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28.2 (1998): 389-425.

Autobiographical narration is a quasi-imaginative process; it uses an imaginative effort to re-create the remembered past, yet it cannot be fiction. This aspect of autobiographical writing, the aesthetics, requires the shaping of life events into a coherent narrative, but assessing the autobiographical quality in Margery's *Book* is often difficult. One main reason is the difficulty of attributing voice in the *Book* and other similarly mediated texts. Like Margery Kempe, Angela of Foligno and Christina of Markyate also created texts that were not written personally but through an intermediary agent. These agents helped them to transform oral recollections into textual ones, from the vernacular to Latin, and from potential heterodoxy to orthodoxy. However, scribal interference in these mediated texts by these intermediaries also distorts the autobiographical presence in the texts, making it difficult to judge the role these women played in composition.

This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that autobiographical writing itself is a transforming process, seeking to turn the subject's experiences into a constructed narrative without actually falsifying the past. Hence, autobiographical writing always includes an aesthetic component that conflates the confusing, self-contradictory experiences of one's life into an artificial whole. Autobiography, Louis A. Renza asserts, "transforms empirical facts into *artifacts*" (2). Though excuses have been made for the so-called weaknesses of Margery's *Book* as an autobiography on the basis that it was dictated, I think that oral recollection provides an impetus for a creative and imaginative imposition of 'mock' order on its writing as a whole. Here Ong's discussion of the psychodynamics of orality is invaluable. In oral cultures, he says, "thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings . . . or in other mnemonic systems" (*Orality* 34). This is partly true of Margery Kempe, since hers is not a purely oral

culture, but it shows that oral recollection often imposes a pattern or order on the events being revealed. By nature, speech is more immediate than writing, and tends towards the creation of sequential narratives, sometimes through over-simplification. This immediacy, if the narrative is to be comprehensible, forces the speaker to rearrange events to give the impression of cause and effect. For example, in order to avoid confusing the listener with irrelevant or copious details, it is usually necessary for someone narrating an account orally to organize (or even simplify) the events and artificially create a sequence where there might be none. Several events that have occurred at once must be narrated in turn. This does not mean that what is being told is false; the aesthetics of autobiographical narration (even orally) mean that past events, as they are recalled, are inevitably transformed by the subject's subjective view. The narrator reveals not truth but experience.<sup>21</sup> This is a creative aspect of the composition process.

In autobiographical narration, the author is in fact composing the circumstances that brought him or her into the moment of composition. He or she occupies the same creative space as the subject, describing a personality that is itself being constructed. As Pascal elaborates,

The autobiographer has in fact a double character. He exists to some degree as an object, a man recognisable from outside, and he needs to give to some extent the genetical story of his person.

But he is also the subject, a temperament whose inner and outer world owes its appearance to the manner in which he sees it. (71)

Autobiography attempts to justify both the subject and his or her character. But in mediated accounts, this reality is sometimes ignored. For instance, the use of a third-person narrative is irresistible to those scholars who would see two agents (other than the

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<sup>21</sup> Autobiography is remarkable because it attempts to distinguish the individual from his or her fellow readers by revealing particular

scribe) in the writing of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Lynn Staley, commenting on the role of Margery Kempe as a social critic, distinguishes between the subject (Margery) and the author (Kempe): "If the *Book*, as has been argued, describes Margery as fashioning an identity for herself or as struggling to articulate a subjectivity seen as threatening the community, we must not forget that it is Kempe who so describes Margery's progress towards spiritual and rhetorical authority" (*Dissenting* 11). In other words, 'Margery' is the timid, hysterical woman created by the calm, observant 'Kempe' to describe the social conditions of England and Europe. Rather than resort to such critical sophistry, we can see in the *Book*, following Sprinkler,<sup>22</sup> the complex authorial stance employed by Margery Kempe as the result of the collapse of boundaries between subject, where the self and author are generated by the act of autobiographical writing itself. This act, which is grounded in the autobiographical mode, involves layered elements such as the autobiographical impulse, authorial control, genre conventions, and creative and editorial decisions as well, all of which create narrative uncertainty of the sort found in Margery Kempe's narrative. The mediated nature of her *Book* only adds to this complexity.

In Margery's *Book*, the self, the life and the (re)creative urge (the *autos*, the *bios*, and the *graphe*) combine to present not merely a 'mirror' but the entirety of Margery's life; the book does not merely recite her sins and actions, but also includes a retrospective look at her experiences. Julian Yates suggests that the book is "structured by two competing and complementary imperatives," the hagiographical, which "casts Margery as a 'sinful wretch' whom God refashions through mystical experience," and the autobiographical, "which records the traces of everyday events and her reactions to them" (85). Hence, as a religious account, Margery's text is authorised by the passages of her

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biases or habits; an entirely objective account would be, I think, undesirable.

<sup>22</sup> See above, p. 5.

direct experience with God, but as an autobiographical narrative, it is authorised by all of her recollections. However, Margery's text, with its use of the third-person narrative, confuses the boundary between her voice and that of God, and this ambiguity "has led to the constant accusations of Kempe's egocentricity" (Beckwith "Problems" 191). Perhaps this is why so many critics find her so overpowering; she is hysterical, vain, down-to-earth, trivial, mercenary, annoying, and far too forward in pushing her unfamiliar (to most of us) tendencies onto her readers than other women mystics. Her frankness in an autobiographical narrative is needed, but there is the sense that she seems to say too much--for example, we know of her anxieties about sex from the ways she dwells on the subject, not because she had the insight to discover this in herself and relate it to the scribe. As Beckwith notes, "[she] is showy, she craves an audience and likes a scene. She competes with other saints, she is too vain in her piety, possessive about Jesus--too loud, too boisterous, too noisy" ("Problems" 177). There is even a curious incident that reveals her disingenuous attitude (in her writing process at least), where Margery seems to have 'invented' an episode she was not party to. The *Book* relates an incident that occurred in Margery's absence:

whan sche [Margery] was gon, the preste seyed to hys modyr, 'Me marveylyth mech of this woman why sche wepith and cryith so. Nevyrtheles me thynkyth sche is a good woman, and I desyre gretly to speke mor with hir.' Hys modyr was wel plesyd and cownselyd that he schuld don so. (Kempe 141; 143)

John A. Erskine calls this section an example of Margery's fictional or creative mode, which is "not unlike that of the novelist" (82). He concludes, "[either] Margery and one or both of her clerks were unaware of their mode of writing, or they had a common awareness of the composed nature of the narrative, and did not object implicitly to sharing that awareness with the reader" (Erskine 83). It is possible that either Margery, or the scribe, or both parties included the

incident as a creative effort, perhaps as a way of showing her acceptance by the new priest. Here, both the process of scribal mediation and the autobiographical writing by Margery imply an element of outright creativity--'invented' events like the one above, rather than description of real ones. Another aspect of Margery's creativity can be seen in the way she describes herself as 'this creature.' This narrative strategy shields Margery from criticism while allowing her to use this stance to authorize her account. On the one occasion in which she slips into the first person, Staley correctly says, "the effect is electrifying" (*Dissenting* 79). Her third-person account of the visit with her husband to the Bishop of Lincoln to make vows of married chastity switches to a first-person account when Margery says, "the Bysshop dede no mor to *us* that day, save he mad *us* rygth good cher and seyde *we* wer rygth wolcome" (Kempe 46-7; 34, emphasis added). Her account, which has previously appeared to be revelatory, narrows to a personal (and only a personal) account with this change of pronouns. This incident only shows how effective Margery's third-person narrative has been to allow us read her mediated account as an authorised text by a religious woman, revealing her own compositional strategy.

Clarissa W. Atkinson points out that unlike other religious accounts, Margery's was written by a scribe<sup>23</sup>--not a religious biographer or a confessor--and hence was not bound by rules for the clergy (or for the confessional); as a result "his threats, indecisiveness, and encouragement of her more sensational abilities show him concerned less for her soul than for his own career and reputation" (31). This scribe was reliant on his writings for a living. Thus, he would see the need to create texts that would not bring unwelcome attention from the authorities, and could draw interest from potential readers. He was initially wary of Margery's reputation and even after he was won over, he needed continual reassurance--both

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<sup>23</sup> Meech and Allen identify this second scribe as a priest, although I think what Atkinson has in mind is that he is acting mainly as a scribe, and not so much as a religious advisor.

to confirm that her beliefs were orthodox and to allow him to accentuate the more sensational sides of her mysticism, so as to attract more readers. Margery tells the reader that he required her to prove herself a mystic by revealing her prophetic feelings: "The prest wech wrot this boke for to prevyn this creaturys felyngs many tymes and dyvers tymes he askyd hir qwestyons and demawndys of things that wer for to komyn, unsekyr and uncerteyn as that tyme to any creatur that schuld be the ende . . . . And ellys wold he not gladlych a wretyn the boke" (Kempe 64; 55). His role in the *Book* is thus significant. Johnson adds,

The very presence of a scribe at certain points in the *Book* heightens the bookish quality of this first autobiography in English. With its allusions to other books of spiritual counsel, its attention to its own veracity as a written text, and its careful delineation of the chronological relationship between experience and transcription, it seems to insist upon its own literary authority. In part, this authority rests upon the presence of a scribe whose fear, skepticism, service, and emotive recognition duplicate perhaps any man or woman's reaction to the carefully conceived protagonist of the *Book of Margery Kempe*.

("Trope" 837)

Margery's scribe thus exists as a witness to her extraordinary life. Atkinson also argues that in his attempt to portray Margery in an orthodox light, the second scribe--who before writing the second book, also rewrote the first book--may have influenced or even manipulated her account. For example, since he was convinced by reading the *vita* of Mary of Oignies that Margery's fits of crying came from God, he may have attempted to emphasize the occasions when Margery's actions were most identifiable with those of Mary of Oignies, such as the attempts to wear white clothes (as Mary wore a white woollen coat and mantle) and a chaste marriage with her husband (Mary's was also named John) (Atkinson 33). After he had read the life of Mary of Oignies and other

continental mystics who also wept, the scribe admits, "[then] he levyd wel that the good woman, which he had beforne felt meche mor plente of grace than evyr dede he wythoutyn any comparison" (Kempe 149; 153). The comparison with other holy women not only relieves his mind of any possible association with the heretical, but also grants him the licence to make those comparisons in the *Book*. He interferes in her narrative to satisfy his own literary requirements.

As in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Angela of Foligno's mediated *Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*<sup>24</sup> contains several instances of scribal interference. A brief study of this book thus allows us to compare the influence that relationships between scribes and women mystics had on written texts. Angela's relationship with her confessor-scribe and his role in the writing of her book can be read from the *Memorial* itself. Their association begins soon after he witnessed Angela's screaming fit at the church of St. Francis of Assisi. Curious, he begins to question her: "I made a strong effort to arouse her suspicions because I myself had so many. I advised and compelled her to tell me everything . . . . I told her that I wished to do this so that she could in no way be deceived by an evil spirit"<sup>25</sup> (*Blessed* 137). After being convinced, he begins to record her words. This scribe, known only as Brother A. (often thought to be Brother Arnaldo) in the text, refers to himself throughout as 'I, brother scribe,' ('ego frater scriptur'; '*io, frate scriptore*') but this assertion of closeness does not detract from his editorial role in the

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<sup>24</sup> *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno* contains two sections: *The Memorial*, which gives an account of her revelations and her inner journey (as told to Brother A.), and *The Instructions*, a redacted version by unknown disciples, which presents her as a spiritual mother, advising and teaching the reader. Citations referring to *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno* (*Blessed*) come from the English translation by Paul Lachance, while citations (in parenthesis) referring to *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno* (*Il Libro*) come from the critical edition prepared by Ludger Thier, O.F.M. and Abele Calufetti O.F.M., which contains both Latin and Italian (in italics) versions.

<sup>25</sup> "valde conatus fui reddere ei illud suspectum quia et ego illud suspectum habebam tunc. Et consului et co gi eam quod totum diceret mihi [. . . .] Et hoc dicebam me velle facere ut ipsa nullo modo posset ab aliquo malo spirito esse decepta"; "*comenzai a forzarme de meterli sosperto, inperò ch'io allora sospeto aveva*" (*Il Libro* 170-1).

composition of the *Memorial*. Catherine M. Mooney, who takes a close look at his relationship with Angela, describes him as "chatty" and "immediately accessible to the reader" ("Brother A." 39). As the confessor-scribe in a devotional text, his presence is welcomed by readers who might otherwise doubt the orthodoxy of Angela's revelations, but there are also several occasions throughout the book that show Brother A.'s scribal interferences as well as efforts (not unlike those of Margery Kempe's scribe) to manipulate the text. Of those who played a role in helping religious women to write their "spiritual life histories," Ute Stargardt comments, "[these] clerics, in their roles as mentors, were not only intimately acquainted with the spirituality of the women placed in their care through helping their charges develop their spiritual gifts, they also became their most enthusiastic supporters, eager to expose the fruit of their own labours to public scrutiny" ("Male" 210-1). Brother A.'s enthusiasm apparently also manifests itself in the way he alters Angela's account. Though Angela's confessor asserts that he "did not want to write down one single word which was not exactly as she had said it"<sup>26</sup> (*Blessed* 125), the account cannot be read as entirely hers. One reason comes from the mix of first and third person narratives in the *Memorial*, which resulted when Brother A. wrote in the third person, although "she [Angela] always spoke to me concerning herself in the first person"<sup>27</sup> (*Blessed* 137). However, in order to finish the task more quickly, he "sometimes left [his] text in the third person, and [had] not yet corrected it,"<sup>28</sup> even in the final version of the text (*Blessed* 137). Brother A. also had the practice of taking down her words in Latin,

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<sup>26</sup> "Et ego nolebam unam dictionem plus scribere nisi sicut ipsa loquebatur"; "*E io non voleva una adizione più scrivere como essa parlava*" (*Il Libro* 134-5).

<sup>27</sup> "Et illud quod ego scripsi in tertia persona, ipsa dicebat semper, loquendo de se, in prima persona"; "*E quello ch'io da lei scipsi como de terza persona, senpre essa dizeva in prima persona parlando*" (*Il Libro* 172-3).

<sup>28</sup> "sed accidebat mihi quod ego scribebam in tertia persona propter festinationem et adhuc non correxi illud"; "*ma adivenivame ch'io lo scriveva in terza persona per la freza, e ancora no lo coressi*" (*Il Libro* 172-3).

even though Angela spoke to him in Italian. But when pressed for time, he would take down her words in the vernacular, waiting until later to translate them. This situation raises the suspicion that we do not always have Angela's word "exactly as she had said it" (to use Brother A.'s phrase; *Blessed* 125). Once, after hearing what he had written, Angela told him that he "wrote truly but in a simplified and abbreviated form"<sup>29</sup> (*Blessed* 138). Though he claims to take down Angela's words, he often ends up summarising what she has told him. These signs of scribal interference all affect the veracity of voice in Angela's autobiographical text.

Angela's autobiographical work is, in many ways, exemplified in the first chapter of her book, where she gives an account of the first twenty steps of her spiritual journey. This chapter contains many characteristics found in the *Memorial*: Angela's recollection of her revelations in both first and third person narratives, Brother A.'s self-insertion in the narrative, and her depth of feeling towards God. Despite Brother A.'s scribal interferences, this chapter presents her life in a unique autobiographical fashion. Angela experienced these steps before meeting Brother A. Thus, when he began to record her earlier revelations, it became necessary for her to compose in the autobiographical mode. The impulse to confess her life was motivated by Brother A., and she chose the literary form of the devotional text--or perhaps it chose her--by setting out her journey in a series of steps towards God. This form provided the basis for her composition of a personal narrative, where, in the midst of describing the steps that she took, Angela also recalled incidents that occurred to her. For example, Angela first reveals that the second step is the confession of sins, then describes the circumstances of her search for a confessor to whom she could confess all her sins. The ninth step, meanwhile, is to "seek the way of the cross" ("eset via cruce"; "*era la vie de la*

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<sup>29</sup> "Et ipsa dicebat quod ego vere scribebam, sed detruncate et diminute"; "*Et essa diceva, che io veraze cossa scriveva, ma ditroncatamente*" (*Il Libro* 172-3)

*croxe*") (*Blessed* 126; *I'l Libro* 136-7) and Angela reveals that she "was inspired with the thought that if [she wants] to go to the cross, [she] would need to strip [herself] in order to be lighter and go naked to it"<sup>30</sup> (*Blessed* 126). This, in turn, she interprets as stripping herself of all her possessions, as well as of her family; she admits to having prayed to God for their deaths, and after it happened, she felt "a great consolation" ("magnam consolationem"; "*grande consolazione*") (*Blessed* 126; *I'l Libro* 138-9). After the eighteenth step, she reports that she "felt God so vividly and felt so much delight in prayer" that she forgot to eat,<sup>31</sup> and whenever she "heard anyone speak about God [she] would scream"<sup>32</sup> (*Blessed* 131). It can be seen that the narration of her spiritual journey is also Angela's narration of her personal life. As her steps progress closer and closer to God, Angela finds herself becoming more and more devoted, increasingly aware of her own perceptions of the world, and of her relation to God. For example, in the first chapter (after the sixteenth step), she reflects upon the difficulty of her journey:

At each of these previous steps, I lingered for a good while before I was able to move on to the next step. In some of the steps I lingered longer, and for a shorter time in others. At which point [probably at the point of dictation, and reported by Brother A.], Christ's faithful one also expressed her amazement: 'Oh! Nothing is written here about how sluggish the soul's progress is! How bound it is, how shackled are its feet, and how ill served it is by the world and the devil.'<sup>33</sup> (*Blessed* 129)

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<sup>30</sup> "silicet quia inspiratum est mihi quod si volebam ire ad crucem expoliarem me ut essem magis levis, et nuda irem ad crucem"; "*zioè ch'io mi spolgiàse e fosse più lizera, e nuda a la croxa andàse*" (*I'l Libro* 138-9).

<sup>31</sup> "postea habui sentimenta Dei, et habebam tantam delectationem in oratione quod non recordabar de comestione"; "*èbi sentimentì de Dio, et aveva tanta delectzione nel cuore che non me recordava da manzare*" (*I'l Libro* 152-3).

<sup>32</sup> "si audiebam loqui de Deo stridebam"; "*se oldiva parlare de Dio, io strideva*" (*I'l Libro* 152-3).

<sup>33</sup> "Et in quolibet praedictorum morata fui per bonum tempus antequam possem me movere ad alium passum; *sed* in aliquo passu *sum* plus et in aliquo minus. Unde dicebat illa anima, nihil hic scribitur! Ita habet

Using the literary form of devotional text, she reconstructs her past by imposing a pattern on her experiences. Each step is arduous, and Angela finds that she has to make a great effort to go on to the next step. This moment of introspection shows that Angela thought of these first twenty steps as part of her past that had to be related in chronological order, with her purpose in life, her triumphs and failings elaborated and her own actions in it explained, all as part of coherent sequence. In many instances too, her inner life correlates with events in her outer life. For example, when she considered surrendering all her possessions so as to devote her life to God, her mother, husband, and sons died, freeing her from family ties, and allowing her to do as she wished. The first chapter not only exemplifies the nature of Angela's book, but also sets out her method of composition. She shapes her life using the steps of her spiritual journey, her creative act in the writing of her autobiographical work.

Angela's creative act in narrating her life using the frame of the devotional text allows her to shape her personal life into a relatively complete account. This is of special importance, for the structure of the book--chapter one contains the first twenty steps, while chapters three to nine contains contain the next ten<sup>34</sup>--shows that Brother A. preferred to emphasise the steps of her spiritual journey that occurred after he met her, i.e., from the twenty-first step and beyond. As a result, only Angela's autobiographical account in the first chapter gives us a glimpse of the woman that she wishes us to see from the moment she began her spiritual life. If the aim of an autobiography is to reconstruct the life of a person according to his

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fortes pastoies, id est ligamina in pedibus; et ita malum adiutorium habet a mundo et a daemone!" (*Il Libro* 148).

"Et in zascuna de le predite demorai per molto tempo inanzi ch'io mi potesse muovere ad altro passo; et in alcuno paso sono dimorata più, et in alcuno meno. Onde essa fedelle di Cristo ameravelgiàndose dizeva: Cusi èbe forte lazi e ligami ne li piedi e si malez adiutorio ebe<sup>a</sup> dal mondo e dal demonio" (*Il Libro* 149).

<sup>34</sup> The third chapter gives Brother A.'s account of his meeting with Angela, and the next ten steps that Angela originally planned are rearranged and renamed by Brother A. as the first to seventh supplementary steps.

or her personal perception up to a present moment (Pascal 9), then I would argue that this chapter successfully gives an autobiographical account of Angela, up to the moment she meets Brother A.

But even the first chapter does not escape Brother A.'s attention. In his role as confessor-scribe, Brother A. had the opportunity to re-arrange Angela's *Book*. The structure of the *Memorial* reveals Brother A.'s hand. Angela's screaming fit at the church of St. Francis in Assisi (the twentieth step of her spiritual journey), which roused Brother A.'s attention, is described in chapter three, while chapters one and two are devoted to the first nineteen steps and Brother A.'s explanation for the book respectively. Her subsequent steps are present, in a longer and more detailed form, in chapters four to nine. This can be seen as one of Brother A.'s editorial decisions, for he "interpreted the Assisi event as a critical, central point" in Angela's journey (Mooney "Brother A." 55). His active role in re-arranging Angela's account can be seen in this move, especially after he "inadvertently exalts all of Angela's experiences subsequent to his entrance into the intimate details of her spiritual life" by re-naming the twenty-first to twenty-sixth steps as the second to seventh supplementary steps, replacing her designations with his own (Mooney "Brother A." 56). Brother A. explains, "[my] guiding principle was to divide the subject matter according to the state of divine grace I perceived Christ's faithful one to be in, or according to what I perceived and learned of her spiritual progress; and also according to what seemed to me most fitting and appropriate"<sup>35</sup> (*Blessed* 133). This could also serve as an explanation for his alteration of Angela's 'thirty steps to God' to only twenty-six steps. In addition, Brother A. also seems to have consciously directed the narrative: "throughout

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<sup>35</sup> "icut eam, Christi fidelem, vidi esse in donis divinae gratiae et sicut eam vidi et didici crescere in donis et charismatibus gratiarum, nec non et sicut cognitavi mihi esse convenientius et aptius faciendum"; "*si como la dita fedel de Cristo io vidi esser ne ne li dono de la grazie divina, e como vidi e sapi che cresea ne li doni e prezioxitade de le grazie, e como me pensai che me fosse più convenevole et aconzio a fare*" (*Il Libro* 160-1).

the *Memorial* we find him constantly questioning, pressing for clarity, and even at times using Scripture, reprimanding his penitent" (Lachance 51). We can see that he regards such questioning as part of his duty as her confessor and spiritual advisor, and these sessions are duly recorded in the *Memorial*. Hence, as Lachance further notes, "[even] if his intent is to report as faithfully as possible what she told him . . . he nonetheless is responsible for the internal organization of her account, often juxtaposing the material of his notes without a clear link among parts" (51).<sup>36</sup> Frequently, he is the one actively steering Angela towards certain topics through his questioning; for example, he often says, "I, brother scribe, interrupted at this point to ask her . . ." <sup>37</sup> (*Blessed* 158). As a result of his questioning, "[the] text that follows is sometimes so engrossing that the reader easily overlooks . . . the fact that the scribe recording her teachings and experiences instigated the discussion in the first place" (Mooney "Brother A." 51). His interest can be explained by the need to ensure that Angela was not misled into making heretical statements, but even then we find Brother A. to be heavily involved in the transmission process of Angela's revelations instead of acting merely as the scribe.

Mooney's argument for the deeply collaborative role that Brother A. played in the composition of *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno* (particularly in the *Memorial*)--an involvement that, according to her, has been ignored by many scholars when they take Brother A.'s protestations of sincerity at face value--is extremely convincing.<sup>38</sup> I

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<sup>36</sup> At one point, Brother A. reports that he had been forbidden from direct contact with Angela, and had to rely on notes taken by a young boy. The resultant account was so badly written that when it was read to Angela, she wanted it to be destroyed. Brother A., however, kept the account in the book--an example of the editorial power he had. (*Blessed* 179; *Il Libro* 288-9).

<sup>37</sup> "Et ego frater scriptor quæsi ab ea. . ."; "Et io, frate scriptore, adimandai da lei. . ." (*Il Libro* 226-7).

<sup>38</sup> Mooney cites seven grounds of suspicion for Brother A.'s interference in the text: one, his frequent confessions of inadequacy as a scribe contrasts with his assertions that he was not always able to articulate Angela's message; two, he translates her words (in the vernacular) to Latin; three, he mixes first and third person narratives; four, Brother A. may have composed part of the text from memory, not from dictation (the double redaction theory put forward by Thier and Calufetti, the

agree with her findings, though I want to emphasise a possible reason for this situation. While we accept that Brother A.'s interference in Angela's text is the result of expected factors such as his role as a priestly confessor to his penitent, and as the scribe to the relatively unlearned (in Latin) narrator, there is also the problem of expressing Angela's visions. This is a continual problem in the writings of medieval mystics, and should be considered in the study of their autobiographical mode. Angela, for example, worried about the best way to express her revelations, which were both personal and divine. On the one hand, she was the privileged recipient of unique and personal mystical visions, and relating these visions required her understanding and interpretation of them. On the other hand, Angela was aware that her human, imperfect mind might be inadequate for understanding the visions completely. Hence, while her autobiographical impulse--to make public what is known privately--motivated her to reveal what her inner visions showed her, the creative shaping of her personal experience was complicated by her difficulty in comprehending her inner visions. In fact, the difficulty of expressing the mystical was obvious to both Angela and Brother A. As the latter explains, "I understood some of the things she was telling me but she could not explain what she meant fully enough for me to totally understand her, nor could I grasp what she meant well enough to put it into writing"<sup>39</sup> (*Blessed* 207). On several occasions, he admits that despite his best intentions, he was unable to write down exactly what Angela meant, and was forced to present a "short and defective version" ("diminute et cum defectu scripseram"; "*scritto diminutivamente e con defeto*") (*Blessed* 133; *I Libro* 160-1). He also acknowledges his inadequacy in understanding

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editors of the critical edition); five, he first suggested writing the *Memorial* and is the one who directed the discussion in it; six, he influenced the subject matter; and seven, he re-arranged Angela's 'steps' in her spiritual journey ("Brother A" 40-57).

<sup>39</sup> "Sed nec ipsa poterat explicare, quamvis daret mihi intelligere aliquid per illa quae dicebat, nec ego etiam illa capere poteram ad scribendum"; "*Ma essa non lo poteva explicare, avegnaché ne daesse at intendere alguna cosa per quello che dicea, né io a scrivere prendere lo potea*" (*I Libro* 368-9).

Angela's words by imagining himself as "a sieve or sifter which does not retain the precious and refined flour but only the most coarse"<sup>40</sup> (*Blessed* 137). Once, after he has read his version to Angela, she is forced to concede that "what I had written was dry and condensed; nonetheless, she confirmed that what I had written was true"<sup>41</sup> (*Blessed* 156). These admissions contradict his other assertions that he always took care to record her words exactly as she had said them.

For her part, Angela frequently makes statements in the *Memorial* declaring that she herself is unable to express all that she experienced: "I cannot find words for it [her joy] nor do I believe that there is anyone who could express it properly,"<sup>42</sup> or that "I can provide no comparison nor give a name to what I see and feel in this experience"<sup>43</sup> (*Blessed* 157, 175). The inability of both of them to articulate the ineffable helps to explain Brother A.'s collaborative role. As her spiritual advisor, Brother A. took over the redaction of that which he did not fully understand. Hence, in the *Memorial* Angela's autobiographical mode must also include Brother A.'s contribution. Angela's privileged contact with the divine also reveals Brother A.'s shortcoming, or at least what lay beyond his control; while she does not directly challenge his authority, as a mystic she stands "as a powerful reminder of its limits and judge of its motives" (Coakley 454). Phyllis Culham also comments that mystics often used their mysticism to counter the religious authority of the confessor,

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<sup>40</sup> "ego cogitavi et intellexi quod eram sicut cribrum vel setaccio quae subtilem et preciosam farinam non reinet, sed setinet magis grossam"; "*ch'io me pensai e intixi che io ero come lo' crivolo over lo burato, lo qual la preziosa sotille farina non retinne, ma la grossa*" (*Il Libro* 170-1).

<sup>41</sup> "Unde quando ego relegi sibi, ipsa dixit quod ego non actatum sed e contrario succum et deactatum scripseram illud, quamvis confirmaverit quod verum scripseram"; "*Onde quando io le relèsi, essa disse che io non aperto, ma per contrario seco e ditroncato avèa scripto, avegnachè confermàse che vera avèa scripto*" (*Il Libro* 222-3).

<sup>42</sup> "quasi diceret mihi nova de maxima laetitia, tanta quod nescio eam dicere nec credo quod sit aliquis qui posset eam dicere"; "*quaxi me dicesse novella de grandissima letizia, tante ch'io non lo sazok dizere*" (*Il Libro* 226-7).

<sup>43</sup> "Et in illo videre et sentire nescio dare aliquam similitudinem nec etiam nominare"; "*E in quello vedere e sentire non so dare alcuna similitudine, né nominare*" (*Il Libro* 274-5).

implying the inadequacy of the confessor's knowledge when compared to the mystic's attainments (80-1). This allowed the mystic an independent voice within the mediating process. She says, "[by] continually asserting the inadequacy of words, they claimed to keep most of the truth locked within themselves, requiring anyone who wanted more of it to petition them repeatedly" (Culham 80). Hence, though it is clear that Brother A. played a significantly larger role in the composition of the *Memorial* than was previously thought, Angela's mystical status (and authority) and autobiographical presence in it are still notable. Brother A. acted as mediator of her words, but they still reveal her to be the author. Throughout the *Memorial*, Angela gives detailed and intimate recollections of her ecstasies and her experiences. Once, when she falls ill, Angela felt discouraged and admits, "I was in a state of great distress, for it seemed to me that I felt nothing of God, and I also had the impression that I was abandoned by him"<sup>44</sup> (*Blessed* 171). This admission of despair has a confidential tone, and we know of it only because Angela tells Brother A. On another occasion, Angela describes a 'game' that God plays with the soul:

For example, once my soul was lifted up in God and my joy was so great that if it lasted I believe that my body would immediately lose the use of all its senses and all its members. God often plays like this with and in the soul. When the soul tries to seize him, he immediately withdraws.<sup>45</sup> (*Blessed* 174)

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<sup>44</sup> "Et *tunc* in isto praedicto tempore *steteram* tribulata, et non videbatur mihi de Deo, et videbatur mihi quod essem quasi derelicta a Deo"; "E d'alora in questo predito tempo era stata tribulata, e non me parae de Dio; e parèame, ch'io fosse quaxi abandonata da Signore" (*I Libro* 264-7).

<sup>45</sup> "scilicet subito levatur anima in Deo in tanta laetitia, quod si duraret credo quod corpus perderet statim omnes sensus et perderet omnia membra. Sed facit Deus saepe istum ludum in anima et cum anima, quia statim recedit quando anima cupit eum tenere" (*I Libro* 274). "che subito se lieva l'anima in Dio e sente tante letizia, che se durasse, credo ch'el corpo incontineti perderia tuti li sentimenti e tute membre. Ma Dio spesce fiata ne l'anima e con l'anima fa questo zioco, che incontenente si desparte quando l'anima lo dexidera de tenere" (*I Libro* 275).

Angela confides her feelings and private knowledge to Brother A., and these accounts help make up the autobiographical quality of her text. Her descriptions of divine visions stimulate Brother A.'s curiosity and propel his line of questioning; he thus struggles to keep up with each stage of her spiritual journey towards God.

Given these contexts, a number of similarities between Margery and Angela appear. First, both of their mystical conversions begin with the need for confession--the confession of certain sins, which they had been too afraid to admit to before. The second step of Angela's spiritual journey required the confession of her sins and Angela revealed her desperation as she prayed for the right confessor: "She prayed to the blessed Francis to find her a confessor who knew sins well, someone she could fully confess herself to"<sup>46</sup> (*Blessed* 124). Second, both women expressed the need for order (though not necessarily chronological order) in their books. Angela needed to set her revelations out in the right order. Margery admitted twice at the beginning, in the proem, that her book was not written in order due to the failings of memory, which suggests that she was aware of a need for chronological order even though she was not successful at achieving it: "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 so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan things befellyn." Later she calls it "[A] schort tretys . . . not in ordyr as it fellyn but as the creatur coud han mend of hem when it wer wretyn, for it was twenty yer and mor fro tym this creatur had forsake the world" (Kempe 20, 21; 5, 6). The need for order, a sign of the compositional process, is reflected in Margery's awareness of the process of shaping life events into a coherent narrative, just as it is reflected in Angela's plan for a step-by-step journey towards God.

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<sup>46</sup> "Et cum rogasset beatum Franciscum ut inveniret ei confessorem qui cognosceret bene peccata et ipsa posset bene confiteri"; "*in questo*

Third, both their scribes were initially suspicious of their religious attainments--Margery's scribe was wary of her reputation as a madwoman, while Brother A. was initially worried that Angela might hold heretical views--and both made changes to the texts they were writing to conform to their notions of orthodoxy. This is despite the fact that as mystics, Margery and Angela were seen to have closer contact with the divine than the clergy did. This gave them authority that was supposed to be greater, but which they seldom exercised. Margery thwarts a few accusations of heresy by describing her visions, and Angela wrote the *Memorial* and the *Instructions*, but these hardly count as the exercise of authority. In his discussion of the reactions of Franciscans and Dominicans towards holy women in the thirteenth century, John Coakley comments, "[as] the women apparently submitted themselves to the authority that the friars did possess . . . . the friars could feel themselves free to give expression to the array of reactions that the women's reports of divine contact elicited in them" (459). Their reactions of doubt, curiosity or fascination were at the same time mixed with "a resolve to make use of the supernatural knowledge to which only the women had privileged access" (Coakley 459). For example, by spreading accounts of approved holy women, especially mystics, friars ensured that orthodox models of piety were available to the people. At the same time, they were able to exercise clerical authority over these women mystics and influence the revelations given by them. Of these women mystics, Mooney adds, "[the fear] of offending a Church or public opposed to feminine assertiveness likely influenced their choices, but other agendas, ranging from their unconsidered assumptions about women and female sanctity to their own self-interest, also played a part" ("Voice" 11). Though the suspicion (and fascination) of male clerics towards their female charges influenced the composition of mediated religious texts in the late medieval period, the women themselves also contributed to the situation.

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*pregava santo Francesco che li trovasse uno confesore, lo quale bene*

In the composition of mediated texts, the scribe often saw himself as the controller of the text, and sought to use the women's revelations to further spread religious doctrine. Angela and Margery had, in fact, "inherited a tradition whereby the female text . . . was mediated and thus verified by a male author or scribe" (Johnson "Trope" 827). Both of their texts include elements of clerical guidance. This points to certain characteristics in medieval autobiographical writing, especially in the mediated writings of religious women. For example, the need for confession--as discussed earlier--often drove the autobiographical impulse of these women. In addition, they were influenced by literary forms in this period--including those deemed befitting their sex, such as religious and devotional texts--and this appeared in their wish (as well as that of their scribes) to appear inspiring, orthodox, and orderly, all the better to justify the acts of composition by using their experiences to guide and teach other people. But a third aspect of the autobiographical mode includes the aesthetics, or art of composition, of shaping the autobiographical narrative, and it is in this area that the scribes of mediated texts were able to interfere.

For religious writers in particular, the aesthetics of the autobiographical work were influenced by the genres of religious instruction manuals and by hagiography. *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno* is a mediated autobiographical account in the form of a book of spiritual instructions to the pious. This genre exerted significant influence on Margery's text, the most obvious example being its excerpted form printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, *A shorte treatyse of contemplaycon*,<sup>47</sup> which was distributed as a book of religious instruction. However, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is also influenced by other genres, notably hagiography. At first glance, the obvious imitation of hagiographical themes and structure in Margery's book

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*acognsèse li peccati e potesse a lui ben confesare*" (*Il Libro* 132-3).

<sup>47</sup> Reprinted in Appendix II of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. Meech and Allen, pp. 351-57.

seems to weaken her autobiographical presence. Hagiography is a genre that allows certain creative license in the interpretation and narration of life events in order to present a coherent (if false) account of the subject's life and religious attainments, but it is written in the third person, unlike autobiographies. Stargardt points out, "[even] the simplest *vita* is a polemic tract," which "contorts the life of a real human being to fit the formulaic, abstract, and idealized mode of the saint's life for the glorification of God, Christianity, and the Church" ("Male" 212). Nonetheless, hagiography's influence on autobiographical texts, particularly medieval texts, is significant. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the scribe's hagiographical urges, or those of Margery, or both, directly alter the way narrative was composed. Margery's *Book*, like many other autobiographical religious texts by medieval women and men, can thus be regarded as an 'autohagiography,' from its literary model, the hagiography, and from the autobiographical impetus for its existence. This term was first used by Richard Kieckhefer to refer to hagiographical accounts that included the subject's own contributions.

These accounts "present their authors" as "such fervently devout souls" that the term autohagiography would not be out of place (Kieckhefer 6). This form appeared in the biographies of women mystics such as Dorothea of Montau and Bridget of Sweden, which were derived from "oral autohagiography." Their biographers "spent countless hours listening to saints tell of their spiritual lives," sharing their "privileged access to their subjects' perceptions of their lives" with their readers (Kieckhefer 6-7). Margery's *Book* certainly belongs to this category, as does the earlier *Of S. Theodora*. Kate Greenspan also explains that like hagiographies, autohagiographies "convey what their authors perceive to be a universal spiritual rather than a personal truth," and "reconstruct the lives of their subject to conform to cultural conceptions of holiness" (219). She adds, "[many] women's autohagiographies began as oral recitations: confessions to a priest,

revelations to an abbess or a friend, sermons to fellow nuns, words uttered in ecstasy." This description fits the texts of Margery Kempe, Angela of Foligno, and Christina of Markyate. In such cases, "autohagiography serves the purpose of the vita--a public, mythic purpose, not an individual one" (Greenspan 219). The text is no longer a private communication but a public text meant to be read by others. For women mystics, autohagiography is neither entirely factual nor entirely fictitious. As in autobiographical writing, an element of creativity is sometimes necessary. However, it is not as much creativity that permeates *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the *Memorial* as the desire (both the women's and their scribes') to have them conform to a certain cultural standard for hagiographical, mystical or inspirational works in the medieval age. Often, autohagiographical writing was a main component of medieval autobiographical writing. Margery's personal account was influenced by hagiographical accounts of other holy women, including Mary of Oignies, Birgitta of Sweden and Dorothea of Montau, whose lives resembled hers (Atkinson 167-82). For instance, Birgitta of Sweden was married and strove to live a chaste married life,<sup>48</sup> while Dorothea of Montau wept 'holy' tears. Angela's appearance and fame coincided with the rise of continental female mysticism in the thirteenth century, when accounts of other religious females circulated widely, and were used by the church to promote orthodox beliefs and fight heresy. As such, autohagiographies offered an organising pattern for personal and spiritual accounts, and allowed mystics like Margery Kempe to shape their autobiographical texts.

Unlike *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Christina of Markyate's account stands out among other autohagiographical accounts for its relative lack of hagiographical echoes. Written much earlier than either

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<sup>48</sup> Atkinson also draws attention to the similarity between the conversion accounts of Birgitta's and Margery's sons. She comments, "[the] coincidence of the two sons, dying earlier than their mothers and saved from eternal punishment by their mothers' prayers and tears, is too striking to be overlooked. Both sons, in the eyes of their mothers, were sexual sinners, and their mothers fought their sins--perhaps literally--to the death" (178).

Margery's or Angela's account, it was meant as a sacred biography--a hagiography--originally for the religious community at Markyate. Such a designation is seemingly the furthest removed from an autobiographical impulse, even more so than in the mediated *Book of Margery Kempe*. However, C. H. Talbot, the editor of *Of S. Theodora*, who finds in the narrative "a frankness, a vigour of expression, and an economy of words that must reflect direct contact with Christina herself" concludes that the account contains autobiographical assertions (6). The directness of the narration, the lack of imitation of other saintly accounts, and the un-sensational manner in which Christina's life was recorded suggest that whoever wrote the account must have had direct contact with her, and wrote down her words without much attempt to embellish them. Many passages in the biography, for example, read as direct reports given by Christina. Of her childhood, she reveals that "while she was still too young to see the difference between right and wrong, she beat her own tender body with rods whenever she thought she had done something that was not allowed"<sup>49</sup> (*S. Theodora* 37). This (fairly) commonplace detail--where hagiography is concerned--stands out for the lack of comparison with the actions of other saints. There is little hint that this anecdote derives from any other source (as in stories of saints spread by devotees), for there is little generic embellishment, and little praising or condemning of her actions. Other confidences, such as the fact that Christina "used to talk to Him [Christ] on her bed at night just as she were speaking to a man she could see; and this she did with a loud clear voice," are not necessarily meant to highlight her piety, but are included as a frank assertion of the direct connection she felt towards God: "She thought that if she were speaking to God, she could not be heard by man" <sup>50</sup> (*S. Theodora* 37). These descriptions point to an attempt to establish

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<sup>49</sup> "Inde fuit quod cum adhuc per etatem discernere nequiret inter rectum et iniquum suam tenellam carnem virgis cedebat quociens aliquod illicitum se fecisse putabat" (*S. Theodora* 36).

Christina's early religious devotion as a real, unexaggerated fact. At the same time, it should be remembered that the lack of hagiographical exaggeration in the account--a comment that this was the behaviour of a fledgling saint, for example--does not detract from the hagiographical intent of Christina's text. The biographer has to establish Christina's saintly credentials while giving a full account of her life. Subsequent incidents in Christina's life seldom contain miraculous occurrences. Possibly one reason for this is that Christina had a direct hand in the composition of her biography.

Most of the incidents in the biography are those that could have only come from Christina herself. Talbot says, "many of the incidents recorded in the biography could have originated only with Christina," and he calls the directness of description "both refreshing and convincing" (7). He cites the incident where, as a child, Christina signifies her desire for a religious life by scratching a cross with her fingernail on the church door of St. Albans, "as a token that she had placed her affection there"<sup>51</sup> (*S. Theodora* 39). This anecdote is clearly a confidential one, since it was an act known only to Christina herself; no one else seems to have noticed her doing it. Her recollection of the ordeals with her family is equally confidential: the harrowing account where her mother "took her out from a banquet, and out of sight of the guests, pulled her hair out and beat her until she was weary of it"<sup>52</sup> could have come only from Christina, for the beating left scars that were known only to her (*S. Theodora* 75). These incidents occurred before Christina herself settled at Markyate. The raw, confidential tone of these accounts suggests that her biographer must have heard about them directly from her, and was in a position to question her closely about these and other incidents. Christina's

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<sup>50</sup> "in noctibus et lectulo suo loquebatur ad ipsum quasi ad hominem quem videret. Et hoc alta voce et clara [. . . .] estimans cum Deo loquentem non posse audiri ab homine" (*S. Theodora* 36).

<sup>51</sup> "illa signum cruces uno unguim suorum scripsit in porta scilicet quod in illo specialiter monasterio suum recondidisset affectum" (*S. Theodora* 38).

biographer (though he is unknown to us) was apparently attached in an official capacity to Markyate, for he had the authority to question Christina about her visions and her gift of foreseeing future events, and had knowledge of her spiritual gifts (Talbot 7). He was thus able to verify and validate her words. The overall frankness and directness of the narrative, show that the biographer was, at many times, simply transcribing her words directly from her own recollection or from their discussions. Even embarrassing and intimate incidents of Christina's life, such as the sexual temptations she suffered, her sicknesses, and her devotion to Abbot Geoffrey, are related in a frank, candid manner. As far as we are able to determine, full disclosure was the *modus operandi*. For example, while hiding from her family, by day Christina was confined in a small, cramped space, and the prolonged fasting caused "her bowels [to become] contracted and dried up," while "her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils"<sup>53</sup> (*S. Theodora* 103). Once, when she was tempted with sexual desire for a cleric, Christina admits, "she used to be so inwardly inflamed that she thought the clothes which clung to her body might be set on fire"<sup>54</sup> (*S. Theodora* 117). Assuming they are true, these details are private and the biographer only knew of them through Christina's frank admission. The sensational aspects present in most hagiographies--which were usually written posthumously--are tempered here, perhaps, by the fact that her account was written while Christina was still alive, so that her biographer had no need to work from standard miraculous accounts or from legends passed down by devotees, but wrote from both his conversations with her, and from his own knowledge of the people and the places that she mentions. These

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<sup>52</sup> "Erat quando repente de convivio illam eduxit. et in secreciori loco crinibus arreptam quamdiu lassata est verberavit" (*S. Theodora* 74).

<sup>53</sup> "Longa inedia. contracta sunt et aruerunt sibi intestina. Erat quanda pre ardore sitis naribus ebullire{n}t frusta coagulati sanguinis" (*S. Theodora* 102).

<sup>54</sup> "ut de se p{uta} ret incendi posse vestimenta c{orpori} suo adherencia" (*S. Theodora* 116).

episodes give the impression of an unembellished and faithful narrative.

The account of Christina's life is notable precisely because it is unadorned with incredible events and its writer is determined to narrate her life in the most straightforward manner possible. At one point, as the biographer finds himself incapable of speculating on the close bond between Christina and the abbot Geoffrey, he declares,

For who shall describe the longings, the sighs, the tears they shed as they sat and discussed heavenly matters? Who shall put into words how they despised the transitory, how they yearned for the everlasting? Let this be left to someone else: my task is *to describe quite simply the simple life of the virgin*.<sup>55</sup> (*S. Theodora* 157, emphasis added)

This 'simple' task results in a remarkable account of an unusual woman. In addition, he seems to have witnessed some of Christina's miracles in person. Once, when the devil sent an apparition to frighten her and the other nuns, the biographer narrates, "You could see one [woman] trying to bury herself in [Christina's] bosom, another covering herself under her veil"<sup>56</sup> (*S. Theodora* 179). As in many other instances, this demonstration of Christina's holiness is narrated without exaggeration. Talbot also refers to the biographer's familiarity with Christina, citing his knowledge of the people known to her, his remark of having once taken a meal with her, and his precision in recording the dates (if not the year) in which various incidents took place (6-8). It can be seen that the sincerity of the biographer, the close description of the events and people in it, and the familiarity of the biographer's tone all point to the autobiographical veracity of the text.

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<sup>55</sup> Quos enim singultus. que suspiria [. . .] quos fletus. considentes et de supernis tranctantes effuderunt quis edisseret? Quantum quod transit vilipenderent. quantum quod permanet. appeterent. quis edicet? Aliorum ista sint. meum est *simplicem virginis vitam simpliciter describere*. (*S. Theodora* 156, emphasis added)

<sup>56</sup> "Videres aliam si posset sinum eius intrare conantem. aliam se illius pallio velantem" (*S. Theodora* 178).

with his avoidance of hagiographical clichés, his willingness to write the account with Christina, and his faithfulness to her version of the events (rather than resort to miracle stories), the writer of *S. Theodora, A Virgin who is Also Called Christina* retained much of what Christina herself said, thought and did, instead of distorting it to satisfy either his own perceptions or to imitate other hagiographical accounts so as to present a suitably miraculous account. In contrast to Angela's account, we do not need the scribe's continual protestations of sincerity to be convinced of the veracity of Christina's biography. Christina's own personality and character permeate the biography. Throughout, the incidents described not only come directly from her, but they also exemplify her own determination to lead a religious life, as well as her strength of devotion, which inspires the other nuns at St. Albans. To use a modern term, hers is an 'authorised biography,' written with her full co-operation and input. In this respect at least, Christina's text is very different from Margery Kempe's. However, my discussion of Christina's biography has shown that it is possible for a text written by a third party to retain its autobiographical assertions. When Christina agrees to reveal private details of her life in a form that will be made public, the autobiographical mode is still in effect. The biography throughout is a shaped narrative of her struggles, firstly, to live the holy life, and secondly, to become closer to God. Christina's biography thus helps us arrive at two separate, but equally significant conclusions. The first is that it is possible for a mediated autobiography to contain signs of the autobiographical mode. Karma Lochrie notes, "the act of composition was equated not with the physical act of writing, but with dictation" (103). Medieval culture depended on oral discourse, even among the literate: documents were dictated by the sender, and read to the recipient, and texts such as devotional works were read aloud. Ong points out that the study of rhetoric and dialectic (or logic) in the medieval period "most directly preserved

the polemic state of mind of heroic or oral culture" (*Presence* 209). Reading was linked as much to seeing as to listening, and writing was as much linked to speech as to the act of inscription. Writing, when used, was usually often "subordinated to the oral"; it is no wonder that "the art of structuring thought was taken to be dialectic, an art of discourse" (Ong *Presence* 59). Hence, neither the author nor the reader needed to be directly linked to the written text. Seen in this context, Margery's mediated account, as that of Angela of Foligno, can still be seen as having been written within the autobiographical mode. Like Christina, Margery and Angela maintained authorial control of their narratives and were able to shape the accounts of their personal lives.

The second conclusion is that the autobiographical mode of many woman mystics manifested itself in the form or pattern of autohagiography (especially autohagiography). This happened particularly when they wished to shape their narrative into a coherent whole. Hagiography was a genre, it must be noted, which placed the subject in the centre, with secular and religious authorities often deferring to the holy person in question. This genre must have been an attractive platform for medieval women customarily deprived of a public arena within which to speak. Directly or indirectly influenced, medieval women mystics made generous use of this form--whether they came forward independently, as Margery Kempe, or were urged to speak, as Christina and Angela were--when the opportunity presented itself to narrate personal events and incidents. However, Greenspan cautions, "[such autobiographical] incidents, though, are almost always altered in some way, reformed to serve the story's didactic purpose. Autobiographical, or rather historical truth appears remade, as allegory. Its chronology is disrupted, its dramatis personae disguised, its emotional charge directed away from its source toward a spiritual object" (226). Heffernan adds, "the goal of the [hagiographical] text is not authentication but persuasion," and the

narrative "must perforce be construed as a type of historical writing" (150). Women mystics avoided the restrictions on female preaching by presenting their mystical experiences in the form of hagiography and citing their direct contact with God. At the same time, they acknowledged their weakness in order to disarm critics as well as to validate their words through the use of traditional tropes of modesty. Greenspan notes, "[the topoi] of humility are proper to autohagiography, as they ensure that the author does not make claims of sanctity for himself or herself" (224). Often, medieval writing also subsumed the authors in order to draw attention to the 'truthfulness' of their teachings. As a literary form inspired by hagiography, autohagiography therefore provided a means of expressing these women's autobiographical impulse by letting them shape the narrative to assert their holiness and to relate the life-decisions that brought them to a certain stage in life. Hence, autohagiographical texts such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*, and *Of S. Theodora, A Virgin, who is Also Called Christina* allowed their subjects to compose autobiographical narratives.

The autobiographical mode of these texts manifests itself regardless of their mediated status. Even with Brother A.'s interference, Angela manages to give voice to her visions and reflect on what they have taught her, and how they have helped her along on her spiritual journey. Christina's biographer tries, with her contribution, to give an authorised version of her life. Even Margery's scribe is a collaborator in the shaping of her own life experiences. The interference or mediation of scribes, confessors, and biographers in the personal accounts of mystical women has not hampered the narration of an autobiographical account but in some ways, because of the genre chosen by them and the influences these genres exerted, has managed to highlight the contributions of these medieval women mystics in the autobiographical texts that bear their names. These contributions appear in the way Margery, Christina, and Angela are able

to give voice to their experiences despite the mediated nature of their texts. The genre of religious or mystical instructions, for example, brought the women's teachings into prominence, while the hagiography held the women's lives up as an exemplum for the public to learn from. Throughout, these texts--mediated though they might be--focus our attention on the lives and voices of these women.

## Chapter 3

## Spiritual treatises, spiritual autobiographies

*The Book of Margery Kempe* was not the only autobiographical work of the medieval period. Continental mystics, especially those in religious communities, such as convents, often had the advantage of education and were able to write, both in the vernacular and in Latin. They, too, produced autobiographical works. Two women in particular set out specifically to write about their inner lives, and both of them were connected with the monastery of St. Mary at Helfta in northern Saxony. The Helfta community was renowned for the learning of its nuns, and produced three famous mystics: Mechthild of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrude of Helfta (also known as Gertrude the Great). The first of them, Mechthild of Hackeborn (sister to the abbess, Gertrude of Hackeborn, and not to be confused with Gertrude of Helfta), was known as "the nightingale of Christ" for her musical gifts; she had a beautiful singing voice and served as chantress and director of the choir (Finnegan 27). Her mystical experiences were recorded when she was fifty and were popularly known as *Revelations of St. Mechthild*, also *Liber specialis gratiae* (*Book of Special Grace*). It was written at the order of Abbess Sophia (successor to Abbess Gertrude), by Gertrude of Helfta and another nun, and it contains descriptions of her visions as well as her counsel to other nuns (Finnegan 28). But notable as her book is, it is the books of mystical and devotional treatises by her good friend, Gertrude of Helfta, and her namesake, Mechthild of Magdeburg, that are of particular interest for examining the topic of medieval autobiographical writing. The treatises of these two women stand out for the authorial control they had over their texts, and the care each took, though in different ways, to relate their personal, inner lives, even as they recorded their revelations.

Mechthild of Magdeburg was not originally from Helfta, having lived as a Beguine for most of her life, and she only moved there in her old age, in 1270. Thus, while she is often regarded as a representative of the Helfta community, Mechthild also represents a group of unenclosed religious women, the Beguines. Petroff argues that her treatise, "in its blending of courtly and religious language and literary form, [represents] exactly that combination of spiritual and secular that the Beguines' life strove for" (*Medieval* 207). Gertrude of Helfta, however, entered the convent of Helfta as a young child in 1261, and received her education there. In her book Gertrude writes convincingly of the surprise and joy she felt at the special blessings she received. These expressions of delight are found in the writings of Mechthild and Margery as well; all their writings are remarkable in the ways they incorporate the autobiographical impulse into texts that purportedly only reveal what their writers know of God. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*) by Mechthild of Magdeburg, widely regarded as her spiritual autobiography, has been described as "a unique document with no obvious antecedents or descendents whose singularity defeats all attempts to categorize it" (Tobin 'Introduction' 9). This is because it contains not only Mechthild's recounting of her mystical experiences, but also conversations between allegorical figures like Love, the Soul and God, as well as poetry, religious advice and personal anecdotes.<sup>57</sup> Bernard McGinn finds that her book contains three main compositional strategies: one, the confessional mode, which turns the text into "a theological reflection . . . of the meaning of Mechthild's life and mystical experiences as a guide for all Christians"; two, the dialectic character of Mechthild's text, where God often speaks to her, and where

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<sup>57</sup> A more complete list includes (1) the religious genres of the vision, hymn, sermon, spiritual instruction and tract, prayer, liturgy, litany, and prophetic literature; (2) courtly genres of courtly-love poetry, allegorical dialogue, dialogue between the lovers, the messenger's song, and the exchange; (3) and other genres like autobiography, drama, epigrammatic poetry and wisdom literature, anecdote, letter, parody, nursery rhyme, and polemics (quoted in Tobin 'Introduction' 10).

a variety of voices address God, so that sometimes it is not even clear who is speaking; and three, the use of poetry, often to indicate "a moment of heightened emotion or closure" (226-30). These strategies not only describe the many forms of devotion practised--as follower, penitent, and beloved of God--and roles played--poet, advisor, and transmitter of divine blessings--by a woman mystic, but also express the totality of Mechthild's character, presenting her life to give an autobiographical cast to her treatise.

Book 4.2 is the main source of autobiographical writing in Mechthild's treatise, though passages of personal narrative also appear in the other books. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*<sup>58</sup> is an autobiographical treatise mainly preoccupied with her inner life, and in it Mechthild is deeply aware of God's presence. Without it, she would not have written the book; after giving a brief autobiographical account, she says, "And so this book has come lovingly from God and does not have its origins in human thought,"<sup>59</sup> asserting that the book did not actually come from her (*FL* 4.2, p.144). In the religious treatises of the late medieval period, such statements were often used to disavow authorial intention. This placed responsibility for the text upon someone other than the writer, i.e., God, and signalled to the reader that "there was divine justification for an innate truthfulness in her experiences and her writing," so that she might avoid charges of heresy and confrontation with the Church's male-dominated authority (Stoudt 163). In much the same way, Gertrude of Helfta in *The Herald of Divine Love*<sup>60</sup> tells the reader that only God's

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<sup>58</sup> Citations referring to *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*FL*) are from the English translation by Frank Tobin, while those referring to *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*Licht*) [volume I, text; volume II, notes] are from the critical edition prepared by Hans Neumann, (Munich: Artemis, 1990). Book and chapter numbers are same for both, but are noted only in the citation for *FL*.

<sup>59</sup> "Alust ist dis bûch minnenkilch von gotte har komen und ist us menschen sinnen nit genomen" (*Licht* I, p.114).

<sup>60</sup> Citations referring to *The Herald of Divine Love* (*Herald*) are from the English translation by Margaret Winkworth, while those referring to *Legatus Divinae Pietatis* (*Legatus*) are from the Latin critical edition, (Paris: Oudin, 1875). Book and chapter numbers are same for both, but are noted only in the citation for *Herald*.

command motivated her to write: "it is for love and of your love and for the increase of your glory that I am disclosing the precious secret in this writing . . . . for no other cause could I have been induced to speak of such things, were it not according to your will with the desire for your glory and zeal for souls"<sup>61</sup> (*Herald* 2.24, p.135).

Despite their avowals of divine intervention--seemingly a disinclination to take responsibility for their words--even a casual reading of the treatises of Mechthild and Gertrude reveals sophisticated levels of authorial control, particularly in the creative use of their learning (religious and secular), and of their literary skill, as seen in Gertrude's passionate descriptions of her mystical experiences of God and more obviously in Mechthild's use of poetic language, and the array of literary forms adopted in her treatise.

Gertrude does not make use of the same variety of forms that Mechthild does, but like *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, her text can also be read as her spiritual autobiography. Tobin calls it her "spiritual memorial" ("Notes" 136). Originally called "The Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Sweetness" ("Legatus Memorialis Abundantiae Divinae Pietatis"), it became the second book in *The Herald of Divine Love* (*Legatus Divinae Pietatis*). Books three to five contain descriptions of Gertrude's visions and revelations, written by other nuns (though probably on Gertrude's dictation), and the first book is a short biography written soon after her death. Though much shorter in length than Margery's *Book*, Gertrude's autobiographical presence in the second book is no less explicit. In fact, her text can be seen as strongest in its autobiographical quality among the texts of other women mystics; self-authored, contemplative, chronological, shaped by her education and intellect, and relatively free of the stylised protests of the female writer, it concentrates on the exchanges between her and God, including several of Gertrude's frank admissions of her

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<sup>61</sup> "amore amoris tui ad lucrum laudis tuae tam in praescriptis quam [. . .] ut certe spero, de gratia tua secure profiteri, audeo, quod numquam ulla causa me compulit talia scribere vel dicere" (*Legatus* p.113).

own shortcomings and passages of thanksgiving for her special favour from God. Her treatise is a spiritual memorial, and differs from Mechthild's in its compositional strategies, which are to write about her experiences using a variety of forms. Both women's treatises are shaped by their inner lives, but Gertrude's account has an explicitly temporal structure, and with it a greater sense of verisimilitude. For example, Gertrude often notes the dates of particular events; many passages in the second book begin with the observation that something happened "before Advent,"<sup>62</sup> "the Sunday before Lent,"<sup>63</sup> "one day between Easter and Ascension,"<sup>64</sup> "towards the middle of Lent,"<sup>65</sup> or on Christmas<sup>66</sup>; she is also careful to record the circumstances of her visions, which often occurred "when I was assisting at a Mass,"<sup>67</sup> "while I was devoutly mediating,"<sup>68</sup> "one day after washing my hands,"<sup>69</sup> or "as the procession was about to start (for Mass)."<sup>70</sup> By recording these dates and occasions, Gertrude is able to present her writing as a quasi-historical account of her mystical experiences, ordering the ineffable within an earthly timeline. This strategy lets her shape an autobiographical narrative into a whole that is more believable.

Margery Kempe also takes up this strategy. For example, she notes the day that she manages to persuade her husband to agree to a chaste marriage: "a Fryday on Mydsomyr Evyn in ryght hot wedyr" (Kempe 37; 23). Margery also seems to find it easier to note the more memorable dates, such as when she also had her mystical marriage to the Godhead "in the Postelys Cherch at Rome on Seynt Laterynes Day" (Kempe 91; 86). When Christ first assures her of entry into heaven, it is "on a Fryday befor Crystmes Day" (Kempe 30; 16). She had visions of

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<sup>62</sup> *Herald* 2.5, p.101; *Legatus* p.68.

<sup>63</sup> *Herald* 2.14, p.114; *Legatus* p.84.

<sup>64</sup> *Herald* 2.3, p.97; *Legatus* p.62.

<sup>65</sup> *Herald* 2.9, p.107; *Legatus* p.76.

<sup>66</sup> The phrase used is "day of your most holy nativity." *Herald* 2.16, p.115; *Legatus* p. 86.

<sup>67</sup> *Herald* 2.11, p.111; *Legatus* p.80. Also in *Herald* 2.15, p.114; *Legatus* p.85.

<sup>68</sup> *Herald* 2.4, p.100; *Legatus* p.67.

<sup>69</sup> *Herald* 2.17, p.118; *Legatus* p.90.

<sup>70</sup> *Herald* 2.21, p.125; *Legatus* p.100.

Christ and Mary on "the Purificacyon Day er ellys Candilmesse Day" (Kempe 188; 198). Usually, probably due to poor memory, she gives descriptions rather than exact dates, e.g., "on a day as this creatur was heryny hir Messe,"<sup>71</sup> "whan this creatur saw Jerusalem,"<sup>72</sup> "in the tyme that this creatur had revelacyons,"<sup>73</sup> "as this creatur lay in contemplaycon,"<sup>74</sup> and "whan this creatur with hir felawshep cam to the grave wher owyr Lord was beriid."<sup>75</sup> Other occasions, however, are marked with nothing more than expressions<sup>76</sup> such as "on a tyme," "on a day long before this tyme," "whan tyme cam," and "another tyme." When she first hears heavenly music, it is "on a nygth."<sup>77</sup> Like Gertrude, Margery uses these dates and descriptions to organise and shape her narrative. This strategy gives her account an autobiographical sequence, and provides signposts of her spiritual journey.

Unlike other mystics discussed earlier, Gertrude and Mechthild did not compose through a scribe, confessor, or biographer, but wrote down their experiences directly. This not only reveals the extent of authorial control in their books, but also provides a useful means of comparing the composition process with that used in Margery's *Book*. While Margery's account was written by a scribe, with signs of scribal interference, it is also clear that unlike Angela of Foligno and Christina of Markyate, she maintained a greater creative and authorial control over her text than the other two did, allowing us to read her text as an example of self-authored medieval autobiographical writing. In their texts, Gertrude and Mechthild attribute their mystical experiences to God, but these two women do not simply function as intermediaries to God; their own interpretation of the visions and events are no less important than the testimony of their experiences. Angela of Foligno's text gives the impression that her teachings are

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<sup>71</sup> Kempe 57; 47.

<sup>72</sup> Kempe 75; 67.

<sup>73</sup> Kempe 58; 48.

<sup>74</sup> Kempe 60; 50.

<sup>75</sup> Kempe 78; 71.

<sup>76</sup> Too many to list here.

<sup>77</sup> Kempe 26; 11.

passed directly from God to the reader (via Brother A.), but for Gertrude and Mechthild there was a measure of literary effort--and authorial intent--expended in the writing of their treatises, turning their spiritual texts into autobiographical ones.

Like many women mystics, Mechthild of Magdeburg attributes her book to God. Her treatise, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, starts with a brief dialogue that explains its provenance. The first speaker, presumably Mechthild, asks God who made the book, and God answers her, " 'I made it in my powerlessness, for I cannot restrain myself as to my gifts' "78 (FL 1.1, p.39). Perhaps ironically, this self-effacing declaration can be seen as a sign of Mechthild's deliberate literary activity, emphasising her personal input--despite the 'collaboration' with a supernatural presence--in what is often called the autobiography of her inner life. Tobin points out the use of wordplay above in the words 'gemachet' (made), 'maht' (might) and 'unmaht' ('un-might'); God was unable *not* to make the book ("Notes" 338). Using this statement as a starting point, Mechthild expresses what she feels as God's greatness with her own skill at words. From the beginning, it can be seen that the treatise has been thoughtfully crafted. It is also not wholly a book of mystical revelations, for in addition to such passages, it contains poetry, parables and axioms--more signs that Mechthild did not simply report her mystical experiences, but also took inspiration in them to compose other passages in other genres. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is distinguished by three main innovations in her book: the extensive use of lyrical poetry, the deliberate mix of religious and courtly-love language, and the presence of poetic language in describing her visions. These innovations point to her authorial control of the book, and her ability to combine her authorial voice with the need to report her mystical experiences, a capability further exhibited by her use of the language of erotic love and conversations between her and personae such as Love, the Soul and God.

Mechthild's extensive use of poetry is largely unprecedented in the writing of medieval mystics. We find her using poetry to describe her visions, write a hymn, celebrate the spiritual union between her and God, and to relate the conversations between Love and the Soul. Her poetry can be reverential, friendly or admonitory, and throughout the book Mechthild seems to have employed the form whenever she felt it to be right. Considering the fact that like many mystics who wrote, she was faced with the inadequacy of language when attempting to describe things that were out of this world, it is not surprising that poetry appears with such frequency in *The Light of the Flowing Godhead*.<sup>78</sup> She uses it in religious genres such as prayers, anecdotes, and spiritual instruction; in the courtly-love tradition in conversations between Love and the Soul; in anecdotal and autobiographical passages describing her state of mind and the process of writing. A few theories of women's writing work on the principle that women tend to leave vignettes instead of a whole, unified text, and that those vignettes are seldom linked but are piecemeal, reflecting the discontinuous writing process that many women are involved in.<sup>80</sup> In Mechthild's case, however, her passages do not reflect as much discontinuity as they do the intensity of her varied spiritual experiences. Her writings are unified by a single theme: her love for God. However, it cannot be denied that one of the most distinctive

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<sup>78</sup> " 'Ich han es gemacht an miner unmaht, wan ich mich an miner gabe nüt enthalten mag' " (*Licht* I, p.5).

<sup>79</sup> See also Frank Tobin's discussion on Mechthild's use of transitional forms between prose and verse. He notes that she also makes use of the colon rhyme to heighten the rhythm of her prose ("Introduction" 20-3).

<sup>79</sup> Examples of these, mainly from more recent works, are suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Eighty Years and More* (which includes many anecdotes on housekeeping), Lillian Hellman's *An Unfinished Woman* and *Pentimento* (humorous anecdotes and oblique dialogue), and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (many chapters are self-contained vignettes or short stories) (Jelinek "Introduction" 7-18).

<sup>79</sup> "Die richteit zergenglicher dinge ist ein ungertrüwe gast, / das heilige armute bringet vor gotte túren last" (*Licht* I, p.117).

<sup>80</sup> Examples of these, mainly from more recent works, are suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Eighty Years and More* (which includes many anecdotes on housekeeping), Lillian Hellman's *An Unfinished Woman* and *Pentimento* (humorous anecdotes and oblique dialogue), and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (many chapters are self-contained vignettes or short stories) (Jelinek "Introduction" 7-18).

features of her treatise is the variety of forms that can be found in it. I argue, however, that this hodgepodge of genres is not, as modern theorists speculate, a result of her discontinuous writing process, but a means of showing the varied, rich responses Mechthild had towards God and the spiritual knowledge that she was granted. While on one occasion she might write poetry in praise of God, on another occasion she might respond with pieces of spiritual advice, and on yet another occasion describe a vision. Mechthild's book is extraordinary among medieval texts for the diverse forms being employed. Book 4.4, for example, begins with, "Abundance of transitory things is a capricious guest; / Holy poverty offers before God a precious burden"<sup>81</sup> (poetry) and ends by telling the reader that "[after] our dear Lord has revealed this to me, he then said: 'He who considers how good I am always holds himself fast on me' " (anecdote and advice)<sup>82</sup> (FL 4.4, p.147-8). The array of religious tracts, confessions, hymns, songs, advice found throughout the book also advertises the range of her learning and her familiarity with the various literary forms both in the medieval world, and in the written religious tradition. All these features demonstrate the high level of technical and literary competence Mechthild attained in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, her personal treatise and spiritual autobiography.

Mechthild begins the main autobiographical passage of her book with an acknowledgment: "All the days of my life before I began this book and before a single word of it had ever come into my soul, I was one of the most naïve persons ever to be in religious life"<sup>83</sup> (FL 4.2, p.139). Later, she says, "This book was begun in love, it shall also end in love, for nothing is as wise or as holy or as beautiful or as

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<sup>81</sup> "die rîcheit zergenglicher dîngen ist ein ungertrûwe gast, / das heilige armuete bringet vor gotte tûren last" (*Licht* I, p.117).

<sup>82</sup> "Hie nach sprach unser lieber herre, do er mir dis *gezoget* hette, vil schier alsust: 'Der des gedenket, wie gût ich si, der haltet sich vaste ie an mich' " (*Licht* I, p.119).

<sup>83</sup> "*Alle mine lebtage* e ich dis bûches began und eb sin von gotte ein einig wort in min sele kam, do was ich der einvaltigosten menschen eines, das ie in geistlichem lebende erschein" (*Licht* I, p.109).

strong or as perfect as love,"<sup>84</sup> telling the reader about the most intense part of her identification with God (*FL* 2.26, p.176; *Licht* I, p.148). All that Mechthild has experienced, she declares, is the result of love. These interpretations reflect the state of her inner life and her personal thoughts, allowing the reader to read the book as an autobiographical account of her spiritual life. When she recalls her first mystical experience, she uses a mixture of devotional praise and personal narrative: "I, unworthy sinner, was greeted by the Holy Spirit in my twelfth year, while I was alone, with such an outpouring that I could never, ever after that endure letting myself be led into a clear venial sin . . . . God nowhere abandoned me and let me experience such delightful sweetness, such holy knowledge, and such incomprehensible wonders that I found little enjoyment in earthly things"<sup>85</sup> (*FL* 4.2, pp.139-40). It is clear that this was a definite turning point in her life, and as a result of the visit, she became determined to devote her life to God. While Mechthild describes the events of her life--the visit by God, and what she felt it had accomplished--she also reminds the reader of the immensity of the experience. It can be seen that in her recollection of past events, her autobiographical impetus is linked closely with her identification with the divine. Like many mystics, Mechthild is inspired to write because God's presence within her demands expression. At the same time, her mystical experiences unfold inside her, and become part of her most personal memories. Her spiritual self is part of her psychological self. When she writes, therefore, Mechthild responds not only to a wish to make her personal, inner life public, but also to divine command. Awareness of God reinforces her autobiographical urge.

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<sup>84</sup> "Dis bûch is begonnen in der mine, es sol ouch enden in der mine, wand es ist niht also wise noch also helig noch also schoene noch also stark also vollekomen als die mine" (*Licht* I, p.148).

<sup>85</sup> "Ich unwirdigú súnderin wart gegrússset von dem heligen geiste in meinem zwoelfen jare also vliessende sere, do ich was allein, das ich das niemer mere mochte erliden, das ich mich zú einer grossen teglichen sünde nie mocht er bieten [. . . .] Do lies mich got nieren eine und brachte mich in so minnenkliche sussesekteit, in so helige bekantheit und

Mechthild recorded many personal narratives that can be seen as part of her autobiographical writings. Her conversations with God, for example, are extremely personal, often coming across as intimate conversations between friends, or between husband and wife. This, too, is part of the bridal mysticism that many women mystics of the late medieval period were attracted to. The dialogues between her and Love are just as personal, even familiar; at one point, Mechthild ends an exchange with "Good night, Love. I'm off to bed, alleluia!"<sup>86</sup> (*FL* 4.19, p.164). At other times, Mechthild's use of courtly conventions in her conversations and addresses shows that she is consciously rewriting her mystical experiences to suit her own perceptions of having participated in a noble exchange of devotion with God in a courtly setting. When Knowledge speaks with the Soul, for example, the words sound oratorical and have a formal cadence, showing that Mechthild is drawing on the language and imagery from the Song of Songs:

O overwhelmed Soul, what is your honor like  
In the palace of the Holy Trinity, when you stand  
Before your Lord so attractively adorned?

Lady Knowledge, you are wiser than I am.  
Why are you asking me this?

Lady Soul, God has chosen you before all things.

You are my mistress and my queen.<sup>87</sup> (*FL* 2.19, p.81)

This exchange suggests a courtly setting, as if members of the nobility were conversing. The voices refer to each other as "Lady" and the Soul is finally honoured with the rank of queen. If at times Mechthild sees

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in so unbegriflich wunder, das ich irdenscher dingen wenig gebruchen konde" (*Licht* I, p.109-10).

<sup>86</sup> "Güte nacht, mine, als ich schlaffen welle, alleluia!" (*Licht* I, p.136).

<sup>87</sup> "Eya notlichú sele, an dinem palaste der heligen drivaltekeit, da du so minnecliche stast gezieret vor dinem herren, wielich ist din ere?" "Vro<sup>w</sup>e bekenntnisse, ir sint wiser denne ich si, warumbe vragent ir mich?"

herself only as a simple, humble penitent before God, such passages show that on other occasions, she also presents herself as a queen in heaven. Bynum feels that her spirituality has affinities with that of mystics of the twelfth century, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau--she is "[far] more lyrical, erotic and nuptial in her imagery, less pastoral in her concern . . . more apocalyptic and prophetic, more inclined (in part owing to her experience of persecution during her more than forty years in Magdeburg) to emphasize suffering" (*Jesus* 178). McGinn adds, "she often does not clearly distinguish between spiritual visions and purely intellectual ones," which "conforms to an essential characteristic of her style, that is, the way in which she fuses symbolization and conceptualization, personal mystical experiences and the objective events of salvation history into a seamless whole" (226). At the same time, her visionary experiences are not unfiltered accounts, but as Tobin argues, are "deeply embedded in a visionary tradition," or more strictly speaking, are written with "an awareness of the tradition of the prophetic vision, and she consciously identifies with this tradition by viewing herself as part of it and by using the conventions and traditions of thought which became attached" ("Medieval Thought" 48). Certainly, though Mechthild did not have a formal education, she showed herself to be familiar with the traditions not only of religious literature, but also of its secular counterparts, especially in the genres of love. Tobin speculates that Mechthild might have been gifted with "the highest kind of vision" (according to Augustine's definitions), the intellectual vision ("Medieval Thought" 53). Thus, even as she attempted to present her treatise as being only God's work, it can be seen that she was able to do more than that; Mechthild's literary skill ensured that her divine inspirations were used to glorify God even further. On one occasion, when she expressed her love for God, Mechthild wrote a song:

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"Vrowe sele, got hat úch erwelt ob allen dingen, ir sint min vrowe und

I would willingly die of love  
 If it could happen to me,  
 Him whom I love I have seen  
 With my beaming eyes  
 Present in my soul.  
 Any bride who has offered a dwelling place  
 To her love has no need to go far.<sup>88</sup> (FL 2.2, p.69)

This song is addressed to God the lover, one of the more common themes in Mechthild's book. Other passages celebrate God as deliverer, or as a teacher. And yet others are clearly meant for other readers, such as the passages of spiritual advice for her fellow Beguines or the nuns at Helfta (where she dictated the seventh book), or even for her confessor, Heinrich of Halle. Her literary efforts can also be seen in her visions of heaven, hell, purgatory, and paradise throughout the book, which Tobin says also put "upon a stage before us the drama of the end of time." He adds, "it is this cosmic dimension of many of her visions that distinguishes Mechthild from many the women visionaries to follow, who confine themselves to reporting visionary experiences of a personal and private world" (Tobin "Introduction" 11). Where the mystical passages are concerned, Mechthild does not only report her experiences--she "seems to consider the experience[s] as raw material that needs to be reflected upon, formed, and fashioned before it can become part of her book" (Tobin "Introduction" 10). All these point to the authorial role Mechthild plays in the writing--not merely reporting--of the events in her (inner) life. Her mystical experiences cannot be transmitted intact, since Mechthild herself does not fully

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min kúndeginne." (*Licht* I, p.50)

<sup>88</sup> Ich sturbe gerne von *mine*,  
 mochte es mir geschehen;  
 den jenden, den ich minnen,  
 den han ich gesehen  
 mit minen liechten ovgen  
 in miner sele stan.  
 Swelú brut iren lieben geherberget hat,  
 dú bedarf nit verre gan.  
 Dú mine mag nit wol vergan,  
 swa die *juncfrowe* dike nach dem jungeling gat. (*Licht* I, p.37-8)

understand what she has seen and felt, but must always be altered in some way by the time she writes them down. This too forms the aesthetic effort that Mechthild makes in her book. *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* overcomes the limitations placed upon spiritual treatises of the medieval period by combining passages of poetry--both of the courtly-love tradition, and in the language of erotic love--with religious tracts and revelations. Some of these passages are directed at God, some are merely conversations between Mechthild and various allegorical figures, some are songs of praise and celebration, while others are clearly revelations meant to guide the reader towards God. Mechthild makes use of these forms for autobiographical writing, adapting them for her personal use. This combination of literary forms makes her treatise one of the most unusual works among the medieval (and even modern) texts in existence.

But it is not merely the writings, or the variety of their forms, that give proof to Mechthild's autobiographical mode. Gabriele L. Strauch also comments on her "strategic" use of the vernacular in her text and speculates, "Mechthild acknowledges her inability to write in Latin, but this need not be interpreted as her having wanted to use this medium" (179). Instead, Mechthild may have other aims in mind: "the German vernacular was the only communicative means to reach that audience for whom her message was intended, and to whom she was closest, the beguines"; her use of it "can be read as an active choice in favor of the German language, a choice that reflects her sensitivity to the needs of a growing spiritual community" (Strauch 179). The consideration of the audience further confirms her authorial role.

Gertrude of Helfta's account was also written for an audience: the nuns in the Helfta community. Her spiritual conversion occurred in her twenty-sixth year, when she had a vision of a "handsome and gracious" youth (Christ) who held her hand "as though to plight a

troth"<sup>89</sup> and promised to deliver her (*Herald* 2.1, p.95). As she was filled with longing for God, the youth lifted her and placed her beside him; only then did she see the wounds – “those bright jewels . . . which have canceled all our debts”<sup>90</sup>--on him (*Herald* 2.1, p.95). From the detailed account, it can be seen that this first mystical experience impressed her deeply, and made her aware of “the interior of [her] heart”<sup>91</sup> (*Herald* 2.1, p.96). She became known for her spiritual knowledge among the nuns. However, Gertrude was often uncertain as to her role in the community. When she was commanded to write a book, her biographer tells us that “she asked herself wonderingly what good there could be in this,”<sup>92</sup> as she had previously decided to do so would only cause trouble (*Herald* 1.15, p.81). As she thanks God for appearing to her, Gertrude says, “I must confess in very truth that this was a grace freely given and in no way deserved” (“in vera veritae profiteor esse gratiam quae tam gratis et tam demeritae donata est”) (*Herald* 2.2, p.97; *Legatus* p.62). Gertrude seems to have been dismayed (if also honoured) by her status as a mystic. Consoled though she might have been at the thought that she had been singled out to receive God’s grace, at times Gertrude also seems to feel pressured by the attention. She tells God, “to tell the truth, had the whole of my life been passed in perfect rectitude instead of attaining to such perfection only for a moment or two, I could never have been worthy of a single one of your looks, even that severe one which I had to endure after committing a multitude of faults and, alas, grave sins”<sup>93</sup>; there is a sense that she felt unworthy of the attention altogether, and might have even been disinclined--if she were asked--to take up the burden of writing (*Herald* 2.3, p.98). This interpretation may explain why she

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<sup>89</sup> “amabilem et delicatum” and “quasi haec verba pollicitando fimaret” (*Legatus* p.59, 60).

<sup>90</sup> “recognoverim vulnerum illorum praeclara monilia quibus omium iritantur chirographa” (*Legatus* p.60).

<sup>91</sup> “interiora cordis mei” (*Legatus* p.61).

<sup>92</sup> “admirando revolvebat mente quae utilitas in hoc posset esse” (*Legatus* p.46).

continually expressed her sinful nature and unworthiness despite the fact that from her own and her biographer's accounts, Gertrude seems to have led a fairly virtuous and blameless life. There are no stories of sensational conversions, little serious illness (especially of the sort inflicted by God), no communication with popes, and few miracles. Nor did she actually convert from a life of luxury, as Angela of Foligno did. Perhaps her constant reiterations of unworthiness provided a means of escaping her heavy burden, even a guilty hope that God would lift the burden off her shoulders. This interpretation is not meant to lessen the impact of her revelations, or to cast doubt on the sincerity of her devotion and gratitude, but only to show that even knowing herself to be blessed, Gertrude experienced a measure of personal conflict that showed up in her prayers of thanksgiving to God.

Her reiterations of humility and outpourings regarding her undeserved status hint at her discomfort with the whole enterprise of writing a book. Constantly and almost with a questioning tone, Gertrude dwells on the immensity of God's grace upon her. Throughout her autobiographical treatise, she seems to be puzzled at the attention given to a person like her, for even when she wavers in her devotion, "you [God] looked at me with such sweetness and goodness, as though you never could have suspected me of the least guile and as though you took it for a mark of affection"<sup>94</sup> (*Herald* 2.13, p.113). God continued to welcome her back. Even after her first spiritual experience, she admitted that her mind continued to 'wander' away from contemplation of God--for hours and even days or weeks at a time--and lose itself in seeking pleasure in temporal things, or in worldly conversation (*Herald* 2.3). Gertrude was never obsessed with the presence of God, nor was she always satisfied with the contemplative life. Yet, there is no

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<sup>93</sup> "si durasset omne tempus vitae meae, nequaquam condigne obtinuisset mihi unicum vel severissimam exhibitionem, quam unquam post multiplicia crimina et heu!" (*Legatus* p.64).

<sup>94</sup> "videbar mihi hoc quasi dentibus tuis extrahendo rapere et inimico tuo praebere; et inter haec videbaris me tam benignam serenitate respicere, utpote omino doli inexpertus putares me hoc tibi blandiendo inferred" (*Legatus* p.84).

question that her spiritual conversion gave her a new life within the convent. Before her spiritual conversion, she was often an indifferent nun, with an "excessive attachment to secular studies,"<sup>95</sup> as her biographer puts it; Gertrude herself admits that she was vain and worldly: "in vain--bearing the name and wearing the habit of a religious,"<sup>96</sup> more interested in book learning than in fulfilling a holy vocation (*Herald* 1.1, p.53; 2.1, p.95). But even then, she was beginning to feel depressed and alienated from life: she realised that she was far from God, "in a land of unlikeness," and "exterior things began to lose their attraction for her" <sup>97</sup> (*Herald* 1.1, p.53). The biographer adds, "[by] attaching herself with such avid enjoyment to the pursuit of human wisdom, she was depriving herself of the sweet taste of true wisdom"<sup>98</sup> (*Herald* 1.1, p.53); luckily, God came to her and provided her with "true wisdom" in her visions. However, it can also be seen that while Gertrude depended, from the start, upon divine motivation for writing her treatise, her writings show clear evidence of her learning and authorial presence. I have already mentioned her care in noting the dates of the occasions when God visited her, but there are other clues as well. Throughout her autobiographical account in *The Herald of Divine Love*, it is specifically Gertude's inner world that is being described. Expressions such as "I became deeply aware of so much in my heart,"<sup>99</sup> "I asked myself,"<sup>100</sup> "I reflected,"<sup>101</sup> "I pondered these thoughts all day in my mind,"<sup>102</sup> "I complained within myself,"<sup>103</sup> "I began to consider within myself,"<sup>104</sup> "as I was thinking,"<sup>105</sup> "I passed

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<sup>95</sup> "studiis liberalibus nimis inhaerendo" (*Legatus* p.8).

<sup>96</sup> "inaniter nomen et vestem Religionis gestarem" (*Legatus* 59).

<sup>97</sup> "regione dissimilitudinis [. . . .] repente vilescere omnia exteriora" (*Legatus* p.8)

<sup>98</sup> "atque humanae sapientiae delectationi avidius adhaerendo, verae sapientiae gustu suavissimo se privasset" (*Legatus* p.8).

<sup>99</sup> *Herald* 2.2, p.96; *Legatus* p.61.

<sup>100</sup> *Herald* 2.3, p.97; *Legatus* p.63.

<sup>101</sup> *Herald* 2.3, p.97; *Legatu*, p.63. Also in *Herald* 2.10, p.109; *Legatus* p.78.

<sup>102</sup> *Herald* 2.3, p.97; *Legatus* p.63. Also in slightly modified form ("I pondered these thoughts all day long, turning them over in my mind") in *Herald* 2.13, p.113; *Legatus* p.83. See note 106 below.

<sup>103</sup> *Herald* 2.7, p.105; *Legatus* p.73.

<sup>104</sup> *Herald* 2.10, p.109; *Legatu*, p.79.

over in my mind,"<sup>106</sup> and "I was turning all these things over in my mind,"<sup>107</sup> show that Gertrude is conscious of reporting her interior world. She narrates not just her mystical revelations and the conclusions she draws from them, but those of her own thought processes as well. For all her frequent conversations with God, her fervent, lengthy prayers and thanksgiving to God, the text is engaged primarily with Gertrude's own thoughts and decisions.

The prologue to the second book begins with an account of the time she was suddenly inspired to write: "Moved by a most violent impulse of the Holy Spirit, she seized the tablets which hung at her side and in overflowing gratitude, she wrote the things which she had experienced in her heart in intimate converse with the Beloved, in her own hand and in his praise"<sup>108</sup> (*Herald* 2.prologue, p.94). This impulse pushed Gertrude to write about her own inner life, seven years after her first mystical experience. But though she began to write in the spring of 1289, Gertrude was often plagued by uncertainty. Once, she says, "I thought it so unseemly to write down all these things that I could not bring myself to listen to the voice of conscience and kept putting it off until the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross [in September],"<sup>109</sup> a sign of the hesitation she felt at involving herself in this crucial enterprise (*Herald* 2.10, p.109). This admission also reveals a couple of things: one, the "voice of conscience" that Gertrude hears can be seen as the recognition of her authorial responsibility. It is evidence of her autobiographical impulse, which she was reluctant to exercise due to her excessive modesty. She recognises that she has a responsibility in the writing of the book,

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<sup>105</sup> *Herald* 2.16, p.115; *Legatus* p.87. Also in *Herald* 2.16, p.118; *Legatus* p.89.

<sup>106</sup> *Herald* 2.18, p.119; *Legatus* p.91.

<sup>107</sup> *Herald* 2.20, p.124; *Legatus* p.98. Also in slightly modified form (see note 101 above), in *Herald* 2.13, p.113; *Legatus* p.83.

<sup>108</sup> "compulsa violentissimo impetu Spiritus Sancti, lateralem tabulam arripiens, quod corde sentiebat cum dilecto in secreto confabulans, haec ex superabundantia gratitudinis ad laudem ipsius et menu describebat" (*Legatus* p.58).

even though she chooses to procrastinate about the task. Gertrude adds, "I am compelled by a force which is external to me, and indeed against my will, to commit these things to writing"<sup>110</sup> (*Herald* 2.5, p.103). Two, this "voice of conscience" is a personal voice, not a divine one, even if it appears as a result of divine command. Probably this is why her efforts falter as she is reminded of her personal sinful nature, which is for her too great a failing in a person meant for an important task such as writing a book; she tells God that "[if] you had given me . . . no more than a thread of flax as a memento, I should have respected it and treated it more reverently"<sup>111</sup> (*Herald* 2.5, p.103). Gertrude is overwhelmed by the prospect of writing a book, even if the command to write comes from God. She feels herself unable to rise to the task and stops writing. At that point, she has written only five chapters. She changes her mind only when God tells her that her book could be used to inspire other people to greater piety; he even helps her, as Gertrude believes (in 2.10), by inspiring her to write a number of pages each morning.

From that point on, a more literary voice appears in her account. For example, she begins increasingly to couch her mystical experiences by using "similitude[s]" ("similitudine") (*Herald* 2.1, p.126; *Legatus* p.100)-- comparisons or analogies that she uses to explain spiritual truths, particularly in the interactions between Gertrude and God. When God comes to her, it is like "when the dew of divinity came down, shedding sweetness over the earth, and the heavens were melting, made sweet like honey"<sup>112</sup> (*Herald* 2.6, p.104); she compares her experience with that of the earth awash with dew. Images from nature reappear when Gertrude is reflecting on the image of the Sacred Heart--"O

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<sup>109</sup> "Haec scripta cum tam incongruum judicarem scribere, quod nullatenus conscientiae meae in hoc consentire possem, et ido usque ad exaltationem sanctae Crucis distulisse" (*Legatus* p.78).

<sup>110</sup> "hanc esse causam quae me tam nimis extra, imo contra placitum meum cogit haec scriptis commendare" (*Legatus* p.70).

<sup>111</sup> "si mihi tam indignae filum de stuppa in memoriam tui tradidisses, jure studiosiori reverential repexissem" (*Legatus* p.70).

<sup>112</sup> "quando dulcorante rore divinitatis per totum mundum melliflui facti sunt coeli, vellus" (*Legatus* p.72).

eternal solstice, happy fields where joy securely dwells"<sup>113</sup>--and when she compares herself to "a tiny flower which has been drawn up out of the mire by the sun's rays, so that it might shine with the sun's light!"<sup>114</sup> (*Herald* 2.8, p.107; 2.9, p.108). When God inspires her to write, Gertrude tells the reader that he seemed to send "a shower of drenching rain over my soul," so that like "a young and tender plant, I felt myself now beaten down to the ground by the violence of the downpour"<sup>115</sup> (*Herald* 2.10, p.109). These similitudes present God's blessings through images of the natural world, and they testify to the power and nature of her visions, and to her literary skill in depicting them. Gertrude also makes use of similitudes in her anecdotes, such as when she recalls an occasion when she had showed anger, and God appeared to her "in the form and guise of a pilgrim," "destitute and helpless."<sup>116</sup> It was a scene that filled her with such remorse at her behaviour that she said she would rather not have God present, but God tells her that like a sick man who endures a storm while he waits for good weather, he is willing to wait for her to mend her wrongs (*Herald* 2.12, p.112). Among the more striking images described is one where Gertrude compares God's love for her with that of "a father who takes pleasure in hearing his large family of children complimented by retainers and friends for their elegance and grace," but who "has a small child also, who has not yet attained to the elegance and perfection of the others, but for whom he feels a compassionate tenderness, pressing him more often to his breast, fondling and caressing him with more endearing words and little gifts than he gives to the others"<sup>117</sup> (*Herald* 2.18, p.119). This is an assurance to

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<sup>113</sup> "O aeternale solstitium, mansio segura, locus totum continens quod delectat" (*Legatus* p.75-6).

<sup>114</sup> "flosculi, quem ipse etiam solaris radius de locis palustribus sibi attrahit quasi ad collucdendum!" (*Legatus* p.77).

<sup>115</sup> "copiosissimum quemdam imbrem super animam meam effundere videbatur [. . .] ex cujus impetuoso descensu ego vilis humuncio, tam novella et tenera plantatio depressa succumbens" (*Legatus* p.79).

<sup>116</sup> "tam peregrina specie," "virium solatio penitus desitutum" (*Legatus* p.82).

<sup>117</sup> "in similitudine patrisfamilias, qui gauderet de gratiosa elegantia plurimorum natorum, quibus etiam applauderet numerosa turba

Gertrude that even the smallest and most imperfect of God's children (like her) will be blessed with special attention.

Sister Mary Jeremy classifies Gertrude's similitudes into six categories, 1) those taken from nature, such as fire, water, plants and animals; 2) from personal relationships, between parents and children, husbands and wives, and friends; 3) from social relationships, between sovereigns and subjects, between feudal and military associates; 4) from professions and crafts, such as teachers, physicians, artists, artisans, and entertainers; 5) from domestic activities like dyeing, washing, cooking, or sewing; 6) other miscellaneous objects such as musical instruments, gold, jewels, food and perfumes (50-1). An example of a similitude from the fourth category, for example, occurs on an occasion when Gertrude compares her devotion to God to that of "a singer who has not yet learned the melody and follows it carefully in the book"<sup>118</sup> (*Herald* 2.16, p.116; *Legatus* p.87). There is also the domestic image of the darkened soul "enveloped on all sides as if by a cloud . . . such as that given off by a boiling pot"<sup>119</sup> (*Herald* 2.15, p.114). These and other images, many taken from domestic and natural scenes, reveal Gertrude as "a sympathetic observer, a connoisseur of human experience" (Jeremy 54). That she was able to incorporate these observations into her writings is evidence of her descriptive power and her authorial intent, especially in autobiographical writing. She was not only able to use familiar images to describe her experiences with God, but chose this avenue as a way of helping her readers to understand her. In this sense, Gertrude is working in the autobiographical mode; the choice to use such descriptions represents the reshaping of her experiences into coherent narratives. When Gertrude wrote down her revelations, it was not with the idea of acting

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domesticorum et vicinorum, et inter quos parvulum haberet qui nondum ad elegantiam reliquorum pervenisset, quem paterno affectu miserans frequentis in sinum reciperet, verbis ac munusculis illi prae caeteris blandiretur" (*Legatus* p.91).

<sup>118</sup> "cantans quod usu non bene scit, diligenter respicit librum" (*Legatus* p. 87).

as God's channel--or not merely as God's channel--but with the idea of finding the best way of expressing herself so as to bring those episodes to her readers. For Gertrude, this way was to write about her revelations using a language (of similitude) that her readers would readily identify with. Aiming to both teach and perform an act of self-inscription, she asserts her authority by grounding her observations with personal tags--"I thought,"<sup>120</sup> "I felt"<sup>121</sup>--and tries to make her words more comprehensible and memorable to readers by couching them in familiar terms. Her literary presence thus makes itself felt in her spiritual autograph.

### spiritual sense, spiritual selves

As was common among the religious in the medieval period, especially among women mystics, the impulse to write of one's life and experiences was often the result of a divine command of some sort, or the urging of a religious advisor. Margery was urged by God to write a book, a command she delayed for over twenty years due to uncertainty, fear of disapproval, and her own feelings of inferiority. Once she took on the task, however, Margery was relentless in the pursuit of its completion. She all but hounds the second scribe to take on the task after the first scribe dies--when he tries to avoid the task upon hearing of rumours against her for nearly four years, Margery tells the reader that "the creatur cryed often on hym therfor" (Kempe 20; 4)--and even prays for him when he found the earlier sections by the first scribe too difficult to decipher. The tone of her book is self-confident, and firmly centered on her life events, her actions, her visions, and her wish to teach the readers about her experiences. More focused on her gratitude to God, Gertrude's text, *The Herald of Divine Love*, describes her friendship and spiritual union with God while also

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<sup>119</sup> "offuscatur ad instar unius... tam circa quam supra et inferuis [. . .] velut olla coquens vaporem emittit" (*Legatus* p.85).

<sup>120</sup> *Herald* 2.10, p.109; 2.12, p.112.

recounting events of her own life, including her thoughts and actions. Having been finally convinced by God on more than one occasion that her book would help her readers on their spiritual journeys, Gertrude felt that her qualms about writing had been reduced.

However, Gertrude continued to be overwhelmed by the realisation that she was not able to describe her experience adequately: "[with] a heavy heart, I began to consider within myself how difficult, not to say impossible, it would be for me to find the right expressions and words for all the things that were said to me, so as to make them intelligible on a human level, without danger of scandal"<sup>122</sup> (*Herald* 2.10, p.109). She thus uses similitudes, which allow her to present revelatory visions by using the images of ordinary life. For example, she compares herself to the colour black, contrasting it with the bright gold colour of God's divine splendour,<sup>123</sup> and later calls her writings "painted pictures"<sup>124</sup> with which to help others gain wisdom just as "students progress to logic by first knowing the alphabet"<sup>125</sup> (*Herald* 2.23, p.132; 2.24, p.135). This reminds the reader of the biographer's explanation that "as invisible and spiritual things cannot be understood by the human intellect except in visible and corporeal images it is necessary to clothe them in human and bodily forms"<sup>126</sup> (*Herald* 1.1, p.54-5). Gertrude uses similitudes to describe her personal impressions of her mystical experiences, and at the same time to overcome the difficulties of expressing the ineffable.

Like Angela of Foligno, Gertrude was frustrated by what she saw as her inadequacy in describing her mystical experiences. Both women

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<sup>121</sup> For example, in *Herald* 2.4, p.100.

<sup>122</sup> "gravata in memetispsa pertractare coepi quam difficile vel etiam impossibile mihi foret talem invenire sensum sive verba, quibus sine scandalo ad humanum intellectum saepe dicta produci possent" (*Legatus* p.79).

<sup>123</sup> "scilicet ingratisimae conversationis meae nigredinem contra tam divine splendentem" (*Legatus* p.110-111).

<sup>124</sup> "depictas imaginationes" (*Legatus* p.113).

<sup>125</sup> "sicut per alphabetum ad logicam perveniunt quandoque studentes" (*Legatus* p.113).

<sup>126</sup> "Et quia invisibilia et spiritualia nullatenus ad intellectum humanum aliter quam per rerum corporalium et visibilium similitudines

often asserted that there were no words that they could use to express their experiences in writing properly. Mechthild says, "ever since I, sinful woman, have been required to write, it has been a matter of great distress to me in my heart that I am able to describe this authentic knowledge and these holy sublime contemplations to no one except through these words . . . . [they seem] all too feeble"<sup>127</sup> (*FL* 5.12, p.190). Fear that the words they used would be inadequate to express all that they felt is a persistent theme in the writings of these mystics, since to them, the divine was experienced through more than the five senses; the ineffable was beyond what their human senses could take in. They saw visions where others did not, heard voices of saints and God, smelled mysterious fragrances, held conversations with incorporeal visions, fell into trances, or were struck by ecstasies in which they experienced the Passion.

Angela's revelations came to her "in [her] soul" (*Blessed* 146); other mystics likewise held silent conversations with God. In her treatise, Mechthild declares (in 4.13), "I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit"<sup>128</sup> (*FL* 4.13, p.156). At one point, Mechthild says, "I actually saw the soul of St. John the Evangelist with the eyes of my unworthy soul,"<sup>129</sup> denoting senses that do not have a corporeal existence (*Herald* 4.23, p.167). In a mystical vision at Christmas, Gertrude sees colours that do not exist: "And while I held [the infant Jesus] within my soul, suddenly I saw myself entirely transformed into the color of the heavenly babe--if it is possible to describe as color

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exprimi non possunt, oportet ea humanis et corporeis imaginationibus adumbere" (*Legatus* p.10).

<sup>127</sup> "mich jamert des von herzen sere sid dem male, das ich sündig wip schriben müß, das ich die ware bekantnisse und die heiligen erlichen anschowunge nieman mag gescriben sunder disú wort alleine; si dunken [. . .] alze kleine" (*Licht* I, p.166).

<sup>128</sup> "Ich enkan noch mag nit schriben, ich she es mit den oogen miner sele und hoere est mit den oren mines ewigen geistes und bevinde *in allen* liden mines lichamen die kraft des heiligen geistes" (*Licht* I, p.127).

<sup>129</sup> "Sant Johans ewangelistent lichamen han ich gesehen werlich mit den oogen miner unwirdigen sele" (*Licht* I, p.139).

that which cannot be compared with any visible form"<sup>130</sup> (*Herald* 104). Margery Kempe hears heavenly music, which was audible to her only--"a sownd of melodye so sweet and delectable, hir thowt, as sche had ben in paradyse" (Kempe 26; 11)--and which causes her to jump up and declare her intention of devoting her life to God. Later, she also describes hearing "a maner of sownde as it had ben a peyr of belwys blowing in hir ere," which she was told, was "the sownd of the Holy Ghost." Later, she tells the reader that God "turnyd that sownde into the voys of a dowe, and sithyn he turnyd it into the voys of a lityl bryd which is callyd a redbreast that song ful merily oftyntymes in hir ryght ere" (Kempe 95; 90-1). Margery was often accompanied by these sounds throughout her life and saw them as tokens of God's grace. These supernatural senses of sight and smell cannot be replicated, and this difficulty creates uncertainty within the mystic who is attempting to communicate them to others. Margery, for example, tells the reader of the resultant difficulty of separating what she saw to be real, divine blessings from those of her own imagination: "the drede that sche had of hir felyngs was the greatest scorge that sche had in erde and specially whan sche had of hir fyrst felyngys, and that drede made hir ful meke for sche had no joye in the felyng tyl sche knew be experiens whethyr it was trewe or not" (Kempe 206; 220). Finally, she ascertains the real experience by judging with her feelings. For many mystics, this seems to be the most direct way of determining their favoured status. While all of them attribute their blessings to God, in many cases they are also legitimised and authorised as mystics by their personal--and hence subjective--feelings. These feelings, like Gertrude's "voice of conscience" (*Herald* 2.10, p.109) contribute to the creation of an autobiographical impulse in these women; in a world where speakers derive their authority from the use of literary precedents, clerical rank, or status in a patriarchal society, women

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<sup>130</sup> "Quem cum intra se teneret anima mea, repente tota mutat videbatur cum ipso in eundem colorem, si tamen color dici posit quod nulli visibili speciei valet comparari" (*Legatus* p.72).

mystics have their inner conviction, and that only. Their self-acclaimed status as mystics, in fact, authorises them to use their feelings to assess the authenticity of their mystical experiences. Not so incidentally, the emphasis on personal narrative--which includes emotional, spiritual and intellectual self-reflection--is essential in the enterprise of autobiographical writing.

Mystical treatises and devotional works have tended to resist an autobiographical interpretation of their authors simply because the tradition of such texts often leaves out biographical and autobiographical references. However, this does not detract from the biographical information that contemplative writers include in their texts, whether as explication of the provenance of their texts or as a means to assure the reader of their orthodox teachings. Margery's methods are the most heavy-handed--by continually grounding her revelations in the incidents that occur to her--while Mechthild is the subtlest; with its variety of mystical revelations and visions, poetry, advice and religious instructions, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* can even be seen as a prototype of twentieth-century autobiographical texts that are created from montages of anecdotes, lyrics, photographs, and snatches of personal philosophy. Gertrude's autobiography, meanwhile, is remarkable for its warm, passionate descriptions of religious experiences and refreshing for the personal tone in her messages of piety, giving us a clue as to why she was later known as Gertrude the Great. By writing their spiritual selves into their spiritual treatises, both Mechthild of Magdeburg and Gertrude of Helfta manage to show a side of medieval autobiographical writing that has rarely been commented upon. Their writings reveal a strategy also found--if much diffused by constant repetition of her crying fits--in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and show that Margery Kempe, too, writes her spiritual self into her spiritual treatise.

## Chapter 4

### The Mystic as Autobiographical Writer

*The Book of Margery Kempe* stands as the autobiographical text of a medieval mystic. Certain parts of it are derivative; others show the influence of hagiography, travel accounts, devotional and spiritual treatises. Its dictated origin further obscures her authorship. However, by comparing it to the texts of other women mystics, it can be seen that Margery Kempe composed in the autobiographical mode; she wrote about her private life and spiritual experiences with the intention of letting the book be read by strangers (as proven by the publication of *A shorte treatyse of contemplacyon*); she made use of the hagiographical and biblical accounts she had heard about; and she made the attempt to deliberately shape her account so that it would be used as a mirror by her readers. Of the first two aspects of the autobiographical mode, an argument can be made for Margery's active role. The struggle she undergoes to have the book written, as explained in the proem and referred to throughout the book, shows that despite initial uncertainty, Margery was determined to carry out God's command to write about her life. Her use of hagiographic conventions--as in the similarity of her life to earlier saints' lives--shows that she was heavily influenced by such accounts and sought to use them to provide structure to her account, and to assert the orthodoxy of her beliefs. In addition, she composed her book as a devotional text for guiding other laywomen, creating a text not unlike the many spiritual and devotional treatises that were popular in the late medieval period.

Margery's autobiographical impulse and adaptation of literary forms can be read from her own account, but her creative effort in reshaping her account is less obvious. This last aspect is often disputed because of the book's dictated nature, and decisions about her authorship and creative control of the book often hinge on the extent of scribal interference. In addition, "those scholars who do ascribe

the book to Kempe's authorship often do so by way of criticism" (Lochrie *Translations* 9). Lochrie adds, "[its] lack of order, narrative repetition, digression, and general lack of spiritual depth are faults that some readers might attribute to Kempe's illiteracy and the oral production of her book" (*Translations* 9). It is more likely that readers who regard Margery's mysticism unfavourably do so by comparing her with other religious women (usually Julian of Norwich). Attributing Margery's lack of spiritual development to her illiteracy also seems rather suspect, given that many other women mystics were also illiterate. Thus, it does not automatically follow that if we do detect some form of organization in the *Book*, credit must be given to the scribe's efforts and not to Margery. For example, Margery's repeated mentions of the fact that her book was not written in strict chronological order can be read as signs of the authorial control she desired and did possess. In addition, whenever Margery makes a reference to an incident that has already been recorded, she often adds, "as is wretyn be-forn"<sup>131</sup> to show that she was aware of the progression of her narrative.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, her narrative digressions and repetitions may weaken the impact of her account for some readers, but they reveal her involvement in the text and give us a sense of her voice. These are important points to consider in studying the autobiographical quality of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. At the same time, it is crucial to remember that an acknowledgement of the *Book* as autobiography does not detract from the question regarding her mysticism. Margery's mysticism is as important to the make-up of the *Book* as the question of her literary authority and the role of the scribe. Like *Of S. Theodora, A Virgin who is Also Called Christina*, *The Blessed Book of Angela of Foligno*, *The Flowing Light of the*

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<sup>131</sup> For example, in Kempe 159; 165. Also see Kempe 161; 167, which has "as is befor wretyn."

<sup>132</sup> These words could have been added by the scribe, but I think that it is more likely that Margery, who narrates the account orally, would used a general tag like this to refer to prior events. The scribe would be more likely to make a specific reference since, being literate, he could refer to earlier pages.

*Godhead*, and *The Herald of Divine Love*, Margery's book is the account of a woman mystic, and as such her mystical status is one of the crucial aspects of her autobiographical text. Petroff advises us to regard the narratives of visionary women as "exemplifying an autobiographical impulse, that is, a desire to put into words the search for what we could call a self--to express not just a formed and discovered self but to put into language the process of discovering and locating the self in relation to God" (22). Thus, it might even be possible to see a connection, where *The Book of Margery Kempe* is concerned, between mysticism and the autobiographical mode. For medieval women mystics, in fact, autobiographical writing was closely connected with the wish to describe their visions. Their mystical experiences encourage them to use forms of literary expression with a religious dimension, such as hagiography, confessions and the spiritual treatise, while the wish to compose personal narratives--to tell of self (*auto*) and life (*bios*)--allows them to use such forms for autobiographical writing. Petroff adds, "to tell of one's spiritual history and to teach others about God" was the same, since "one's spiritual history was the discovery of the self made in the image of God, and to tell one's history was to teach about God" (44).

Autobiographical writing (and the self-discovery it entailed) thus became a natural form of expression for medieval women mystics who wanted to write an account of their spiritual (and personal) history. For mystics like Margery, the urge to write about God is also the urge to write about the self, since for them God dwells within them and is even regarded as a part of their souls, a part of their lives. Hence mysticism reinforces, and helps to focus their autobiographical mode.

The subject of Margery's mysticism has been difficult to deal with. Her mysticism is often regarded as shallow by students of mysticism, heavily tinged as Margery's accounts are with her sense of self-importance, and continual descriptions of her weeping and crying fits. Hope Emily Allen calls her a "minor mystic" (lxi). Such

conclusions characterise Margery as incapable of deeper mystical learning, unlike, say, Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich, but in doing so they dismiss her mystical experiences too quickly. Margery's mysticism was derived from the continent, which included a form of devotion that emphasised bridal mysticism and adoration of the Christ infant. Ute Stargardt, in her essay "The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Germany, and Margery Kempe" is critical of her mysticism. Stargardt suggests that Margery even "courts blasphemy" in the description of her nativity visions of the Virgin and Christ, for "[instead] of being a mere spectator, she becomes the main actor" ("Beguines" 294). For example, in a vision where Margery meets Mary as a child, she says, " 'Lady, ye shall schal be the modyr of God' " (Kempe 32; 18), revealing what would not be known for many years. Margery inserts herself into the nativity sequence. Of other mystics such as Mechthild of Magdeburg, Stargardt says that they were driven by love for the heavenly bridegroom, and their mysticism prominently "exhibits the major characteristics of Beguine spirituality . . . [which] included some of the embarrassingly pathological manifestations of faith which at times attended the religious careers of the *mulieres religiosae*" ("Beguines" 291). She adds, "[in turn,] this kind of mysticism, attended by an even more severe distortion of mystical concepts, is the most notable feature in *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (Stargardt "Beguines" 291). Margery, like continental mystics, "practiced a systematic *imitatio* of the Virgin Mary," which included identification with the motherhood of Mary and the adoration of the infant Christ, as well as *unio mystica*, the spiritual union of the soul with the Godhead, especially through "the metaphors of marriage and conjugal felicity," but again the spiritual context of these women is either blurred or missing (Stargardt "Beguines" 291, 296-7). McGinn describes it less critically: "Many of the visions found in late medieval mystical texts, especially by women, tend to collapse the Augustinian hierarchy, not only by merging the spiritual and

intellectual visions so that inner images become the immediate source of new insights into divine truths, but also in ways that meld all three modes of vision into direct forms of 'total' conscious experience of God realised as much in and through the body in a purely spiritual way" (155). Mechthild of Magdeburg experiences God in this fashion, as does Angela of Foligno and Margery Kempe.

Margery, in particular, takes delight in describing the homely and familiar conversations God has with her and it is clear that such closeness heightens her sense of self-reflection. Once, when Christ spoke to her in her soul, Margery relates, "Than was hir sowle so delectably fed wyth the swet dalyawns of owr Lorde and so fulfilled of hys lofe that as a drunkyn man sche turnyd hir fyrst on the o side and sithyn on the other syth gret wepyng and sobbyng" (Kempe 102; 98). She compares herself to a drunken man, revealing that she knew herself to be intoxicated (mentally and spiritually) by the experience. On another occasion, she describes her experience of the Passion to be so intense that even though she was ill, "sche felt not hir owyn sekenes but wept and sobbyd *in the mende* of owr Lordys Passyon" (Kempe 137; 138, emphasis added). In many ways, Margery's awareness of her unique blessings also allowed her to perceive the world differently, seeing past the hostile manner that her countrymen behaved towards her and letting her find allies among strangers on her journeys. For example, while waiting six weeks for a ship at Bristol, Margery faced the scorn of many people for her bouts of shrieking, but she prayed to God, " 'I beseche the, forgeve the pepyl al scorne and slawyndrys and al that thei han trespasyd, yyf if be thy wille, for I have deserved meche mor and meche more am I worthy' " (Kempe 110; 107). Her awareness of her special status only accentuates her sense of persecution and this, perversely, gives her even more self-confidence in the face of difficulty. When she faces the doubts and jeers of the people for her loud fits of crying, Margery is able maintain her self-possession: "Sum gret clerkys seyden owyr Lady cryed nevyr so ne no seynt in hevyn, but

thei knewyn ful lytyl what sche felt, ne thei wolde not beleyn but that sche myth an absteynnd hir fro crying yf sche had wold" (Kempe 76; 69). Her sense of self-possession, especially where these signs of God's attention are concerned (including her ability to hear heavenly music or smell mysterious fragrances), allows her to act independently and to compose with her own voice. Once, she even concludes, "al [of the jeers] sche toke pacyently for owr Lordys lofe, for sche wist wel that the Jewys seyde meche wers of hys owyn persone than men dede of hir" (Kempe 108; 105). Here, Margery compares her experience to that of Christ. Perhaps she sounds a little naïve to the modern reader, but the words show her reflecting upon her unusual actions and her mystical experiences. Soon after she comes to the description of her white clothing, Margery reflects on the trials that accompany this stage of her spiritual journey: "sche was howselyd al in white, and sithen hath she suffered meche despyte and meche schame in many dyvers cuntreys, cyteys, and townys, thankyd be God of alle" (107; 104). Near the end of the first book, Margery reflects again on her lengthy spiritual journey: "sche stably and stedfastly belevyd that it was God that spak in hir sowle and non evyl spiryt, for in hys speche sche had most strength and most comfort and most encresyng of vertu, blissyde be God" (202; 215). She was not simply a channel for God's revelations but (despite the alleged inferiority of her mysticism) was someone who thought hard and worried about the authenticity of her mystical experiences. These concerns appear in her autobiographical account.

One other concern plagues the autobiographical accounts of medieval mystics, and I find this to be one of the most distinctive characteristics in their writing. The difficulty (or impossibility) of clearly expressing the ineffable, the divine experience of God, appears in every narrative. There is always the need to resort to suggestion, allegory and figurative language to suggest experiences that lie beyond the reach of language (and then there is no certainty that the writer will even succeed). Hence Mechthild has her poetry, Gertrude her

similitudes, Angela her analogy of steps of a journey, and Margery her homely, familiar conversation partner (God). Even so, these mystics report that the impossibility of describing the ineffable still hampers them in giving an exact account of their visions. As a result, their descriptions are necessarily imperfect and incomplete. In Margery's case, she is often accused of being shallow: "God comes down to Margery's level; she does not rise to his" (Collis 256). This is something to be regretted if we look at the writings of these mystics as religious treatises, but not when we study them as autobiographical texts. Paradoxically, the difficulty of expressing the inexpressible seems to force mystics to search out and shape an autobiographical mode in their writing. Hence, even when they write texts modeled after established literary forms such as the devotional text or the hagiography, medieval mystics often adapt them to better describe their own experience. Their personal voices in their texts enable them to shape an autobiographical mode. The need to find their own voice so as to better describe mystical experiences also helped women religious writers to ignore the misogyny of the medieval period, at least in their writings. Bynum notes of medieval women mystics, "they did not assume that their religious progress involved 'becoming male' " (Bynum "Women" 269). Instead, they (like men) concentrated on imitating Christ. This was of primary importance, and while women mystics did make protestations of feminine inferiority, they concentrated more intently on their mystical experiences and personal identification with Christ than on the gender issue in their autobiographical texts.

I have tried to show the nature of autobiographical writing in the medieval period, mainly by using the earliest known autobiography written in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In addition to Margery's text, I chose the biography of Christina of Markyate, the texts of Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Gertrude of Helfta not because they were the only autobiographical texts in the medieval age--writings by Christine de Pisan, Hildegard of Bingen,

Thomas Hoccleve, Guibert of Nogent, and Peter Abelard, as well as numerous others, all contain autobiographical passages as well--but because each provided a cogent basis of comparison to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The accounts of Angela of Foligno and Christina of Markyate contain references to their scribes, an important consideration given that Margery's text was also dictated to two scribes. Between the relatively non-interfering biographer in Christina's account, and the more active Brother A. of Angela's text, lies the role of Margery's scribe (especially the second one), who was by turns un-intrusive and manipulative. Mechthild of Magdeburg was an unenclosed mystic for much of her life, and her mystical treatise served as her spiritual autobiography, an account of her inner life. Gertrude of Helfta actually came closest to writing a quasi-autobiography like Margery's. Thus, the autobiographical mode in *The Book of Margery Kempe* derives firstly from Margery's command from God to write a book (authorial impulse); secondly, from her dictation of an account which itself derives from traditions of hagiography, confession, devotional texts and spiritual treatise; and thirdly, from her conflation of the past and the literary devices she uses.

These texts by women mystics all help to determine the autobiographical mode as it worked in the medieval age for the religiously inclined, given the restrictions upon their autobiographical impulses (often first fired by commands from confessors, requests from God, or upon the urgings of followers), the ways they wrote (through dictation or by self-authorship, as well as the adaptation of literary traditions such as hagiography, devotional texts and spiritual treatises), and the creative process they worked through (expressing the mystical through metaphor and the use of chronological order). We classify *The Book of Margery Kempe* as an autobiography--for less convinced readers, as a quasi-autobiography--but little attempt to study its autobiographical mode has been made. This is not just a problem of women writers (though prominent in this

study because of the texts chosen) but also a particular problem of autobiographical study in general. Studies on the writings of Vibia Perpetua (later St. Perpetua), a Roman woman, reveal this.

Perpetua, from Carthage, was arrested, tried, imprisoned and later put to death in A.D. 203. Her crime had been to refuse to perform a compulsory Roman sacrifice because she was a Christian. While in prison she made notes describing not only her ordeal, but also the revelations she received from God. The author of *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, her hagiography, retained these notes in his work, and it is from this account that we know of Perpetua's writings, one of the earliest women mystics to have personally recorded her spiritual experiences. Peter Dronke tells us that because her writings were retained intact (so her hagiographer assures us), we are able to "envisage precisely her experiences" (1). More importantly, Dronke praises Perpetua's writing for being "colloquial and homely," and says, "this too is a special privilege for us: no emotion, no fantasy of Perpetua's appears disguised by stylistic ornaments." He adds, "[nothing] masks her tender--and determined--perceptions or her troubled dreams" (Dronke 1). Perpetua's writing is significant to Dronke not only because it allows us to read Perpetua's own account of her experiences, but also because to him, it presents her story without resorting to clichéd miracle stories. However, Heffernan accuses Dronke of "neoromanticism," saying that "implicit in Dronke's argument [that Perpetua's account is original] is the premium paid to the belief that the *Passio* is an authentic 'historical' document dictated by Perpetua and that because it can make a claim to authenticity--in language comparatively free from the idealizing tendencies of the genre [hagiography]--the scholar can confront the distinctive utterance of the individual Perpetua herself" (63). While not denying the individuality (and even veracity) of Perpetua's autobiographical account, Heffernan points out a tendency of modern readers to equate individualism (lack of generic clichés) with originality (uniqueness of

voice). It is this tendency, I think, that has led readers to be uneasy about the veracity of Margery's account, because it does contain influences--even clichés--from other genres. This uneasiness remains despite the fact that her text stands out among many others for, I think, its sheer *oddness*. This charge of neoromanticism is perhaps something we should all be aware of in the study of autobiography. Hence, when we look at the texts of women mystics, it is important to be careful that we do not to elevate or disapprove one of them solely on the basis of the rampant (or sparing) use of clichés in them.

One of the difficulties in determining the state of medieval autobiography, especially from the works of women mystics, comes from the very unusual requirements we have of autobiography today. The lack of consensus on the definition of the genre makes it impossible to decide what the autobiographical mode--the autobiographical impulse, the literary form used, and the creative effort--should entail. The autobiographical impulse must first exist--the urge for public, yet private disclosure--followed by a consideration of literary form--whether it is to read like a travel account, a checklist of professional and personal triumphs, or as a search for the meaning of life. Finally, the creative effort put into writing it--the aesthetic act of reading and constructing one's life as a unified whole or as a series of steps towards a definable goal--must also be considered. We seem to assign literary merit on the basis of originality: the type of life lived, the way it was recorded, the attempt (or lack thereof) to shape the record, but we also require the work to be more than an ego-booster, the opposite of ghostwritten celebrity autobiographies. The autobiographical mode has to be individual *and* original. This requirement obscures the underlying fact that the legitimacy of each autobiographical work is based not on its originality (for only the individual personalities, accomplishments, and failures differ) but on how well it engages with the autobiographical mode. The neoromantic

point of view causes readers to mistake the appearance of with the autobiographical mode as the definitive quality of an autobiography.

I have assumed that Margery Kempe, Angela of Foligno, Christina of Markyate, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Gertrude of Helfta all participated in the growing genre of autobiographical writing, and may have even participated in its development in the medieval period, a genre that began with Augustine and St. Perpetua. In doing so, I see autobiography as a distinct genre with traditions derived from both biography and hagiography. This is especially so of medieval texts, but it is evident of modern texts as well. I have also mentioned that one of the ongoing problems in the study of autobiography is its definition. For some readers it is the works of politicians and leaders; some include poetry, others photographs, interviews and letters, while a few assert that all writing with a first-person 'I' qualify. But by including all kinds of autobiographical writings--memoir, confession, apology--with non-autobiographical writings--letters, diaries, biographies, novels, and poetry--into a category blandly named 'life-writing,' we have lost sight of the complex route autobiography took into the modern era, and of the traditions it brings with it. Autobiographical writing has often maintained a thread of confessional narrative, sometimes with an autohagiographical tone, even in the most self-effacing and reticent of writings.

Despite this confusion, one of the assumptions of autobiography is that it is a journey of discovery, both for the writer, and the reader. The study of women's autobiography, however, presents a few distinct contradictions. Mary G. Mason finds no trace in the women's autobiographies she studies of the male patterns of self-discovery established by Augustine and Rousseau. The male archetypes, according to her, see the inner life as unfolding within the self or soul, and so are "quite inappropriate as a model for women's life-writing," for "the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of the 'other' " (Mason 210). The fact is that any casual examination of

self-authored texts by Gertrude of Helfta, or Mechthild of Magdeburg proves the reverse. Dependent though these women's *lives* are on God's special blessings, their *writings* are wholly about their inner lives unfolding within the self or soul. They and other mystics each spend much of their lives in inner contemplation, and their writings--especially their autobiographical writings--reflect that. John Eakin makes a telling observation: "As one follows the discussion of models of identity in the case of women's autobiography, it is interesting to note that the so-called Gursdorf model, which as originally formulated was distinctly open-ended in conception, becomes progressively reduced, closed, and masculinized until it seems to be roughly synonymous with the linear teleology of a public career, in order, presumably, to serve as a contrast with female experience, which is held to be essentially private and discontinuous in nature" (81 n.10). This situation points to the difficulty we have in examining the autobiographical mode of autobiographical writings--especially in *The Book of Margery Kempe*--that are so much removed from modern perceptions and expectations.

Modern readers often describe women's autobiographies (or even women's writing in general) as discontinuous, conflicted or even irrational, reflecting either women's inferior position in society or the difficulty they faced in overcoming that inferiority. This is, at the very least, an erroneous and unjust conclusion on the literary capabilities of women (and of human beings overall). While new, feminine forms of writing the self have appeared in the twentieth century, I would like to suggest that such developments (or experiments) are more in the nature of exploration of self-representation for the writer. Medieval writers, for example, did not often write of themselves as individuals, preferring to cast themselves as part of the community--the wife, the merchant, the scholar--or as participants in a religious journey--the Christian warrior, the sinner, the penitent. However, women mystics of this period were extraordinary

in that they were able to cast themselves as individuals<sup>133</sup> and compose their personal histories as such. The variety of writings that have been examined here testifies to the many methods these women explored in their self-representation. Indeed, given a growing literate population (both men and women), a growing knowledge of other cultures (hence other styles of self-representation), and an increasingly media-saturated society, it would be surprising if such explorations had not appeared. True, women's writings have been, and still continue to be ignored. The topos of 'weak woman' is still used, while its evil twin appears in defensive assertions of women's own sex and justifications for writing--even today--seeking to ghettoize their compositions and providing unnecessary complications for the reception of their own literary efforts. Better to take a leaf from the books of medieval women mystics, whose protestations of weakness never held them back from the act of writing, than to apologise for the writing's existence. Perhaps, like Mechthild or Margery, we all need a spiritual impetus for writing, an impetus that allows for us an affirmation of the self and the validity of personal experience and introspection.

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<sup>133</sup> Even though they often referred to themselves in allegorical terms, such as 'the faithful one' (Angela), or 'this creature' (Margery).

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